

**Understanding Disability from a Life Course Perspective: Lived  
experiences of education and work of visually impaired people in China**

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This research was born of personal experience and the desire for knowledge. Since disabled students always study in special schools in China, I have never had a classmate with disabilities from my preschool to university. During my first year of undergraduate study in China, I met two young boys who were wheelchair users – they had been forced to drop out of primary school in my hometown due to the inaccessible learning environment. It was the first time I realised that China's nine-year compulsory education might not work for every student. This prompted me to think about the stories of disabled people, who may have 'different' life experiences to my own and the dominant narrative of what it meant to study and work in China. I then explored the stories of disabled people's carers in my undergraduate dissertation – this, too, opened my eyes to the challenges and discrimination faced by disabled people in their lives. After graduation, I worked for an NGO that aimed to provide free services to visually impaired people in a large city in Henan province, China. It was also the first time I was able to get to know visually impaired people. Here, I learned that many of them worked in the massage industry. Some service users told me about their lived experience, and one message that came through loud and clear was that they thought 'blind people can do more things than massage work'. I then went on to explore the application of the medical model and the social model of disability, taking the case of visually impaired people in China in a master's dissertation. During the interview, one participant asked me why he had to do the massage work, as everyone told him to do that, even though he did not enjoy it. At that moment, I had no idea, but I kept this question in my mind, and this is where the idea for my PhD topic came from. I want to thank those people whom I met, both before and during the PhD, for sharing their stories with me.

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Finally, I declare this thesis is my original work and will be responsible for any errors.



## **Abstract**

The life course approach emphasises the importance of both a person's impairment and the social barriers that impact disabled people's lives. Currently, disabled people in China still face many barriers to their access to education and work. Chinese socialism requires disabled people to be economically productive so that they contribute to society like their non-disabled peers. Given this, the state proposes vocational training for disabled people. For people with visual impairments, the state particularly emphasises the massage industry. This vocational stereotype has affected their transition into education and work, and many of them are encouraged to take massage courses or subsequently work in massage parlours. Of the few current studies that investigate education and employment for disabled people, very few mention how people with visual impairments take up massage-related work and what barriers they face during their transitions into education and work. This study explores how visually impaired people transition into education and work, what barriers they face during this process, and, more importantly, how they use their agency when they encounter these barriers. Evidence was gathered from 26 visually impaired people through telephone interviews; the narrative and thematic approaches were used to analyse the data. Based on an understanding of the medical model and the social model of disability, this study applies the life course perspective to explore visually impaired people's transition into education and work; it then applies the PCS model to analyse the barriers they face at the Personal (P), Cultural (C) and Structural (S) levels. This study shows that visually impaired people are not passive victims of social barriers. Instead, it also indicates participants' different types of agency as they encounter social barriers.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that mainstream education and workplaces unrelated to massage often exclude visually impaired people. Mainstream educational systems often reject participants, particularly those with more significant levels of vision impairment, leading many of them to start formal education in special schools or transfer to special schools from mainstream education. However, the limited provision of special education and the influence of vocational stereotypes of the massage industry result in almost every participant receiving massage training and working in this industry. Some participants exercised their agency differently, attempting to get employed in fields unrelated to massage. However, their ability to act was affected by social constraints and cultural beliefs.

## List of Abbreviations

CDPF	China's Disabled Persons' Federation
CPC	Chinese Communist Party
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DPF	Disabled Person's Federation
DPI	Disabled People's International
PCS	Thompson's 'Personal, Cultural, Structural' model
UPIAS	Union of the Physical Impaired Against Segregation

## Glossaries

*Canfeiren*: This traditional Chinese word reflects the English 'cripple' or 'invalid', literally a 'sick and useless/ineffective' person.

*Canjiren*: This word has been commonly used more recently by disabled people to distance themselves from the negative connotations of *fei* (useless). The second word, 'ji', means 'sick, ill, or diseased', emphasising the idea that they are 'disabled but not useless' (Dauncey, 2020).

*Canzhang*: This word better reflects the social model by changing the second character from 'ji' ('sick or diseased') to 'zhang' ('barriers or impediment') (Dauncey, 2020). However, the word 'canzhang' has not yet replaced 'canji' in official discourse.

*Gaokao*: The national entrance exam for tertiary education in China, equivalent to A levels or BTEC qualifications in the system used in England and Wales.

*Tuina*: *Tuina* is related to traditional Chinese medicine. It is a general term for various manual activities in which the operator uses the hands or other parts of the limbs to apply a certain amount of force, purposefully and regularly, to certain parts of the human body (or acupoints) (Shao, 2009).

*Yijing*: it is related to the ancient Chinese divination text and the fortune-telling industry, one of the careers that visually impaired people used to do, especially in ancient times (Liu and Lei, 2017).

## Chapter 1 Introduction

*'It isn't that the blind people choose massage; it is the massage that chooses blind people.'* - Xiaogao (a participant in the study)

The 'life course' describes age-related and/or developmental life stages and the dynamic trajectories of a person's life (Elder, 1994). Historically, disabled people in China and elsewhere have faced many social barriers and oppression because of their impairments, including public policies, environment, social norms, attitudes, and practices; they have been denied access to education, the labour market, and decision-making, all of which isolate them from the mainstream society (Stone, 2003; Hyde and Shand, 2013). In the last few decades, key socioeconomic and political structures have changed in China as the country has shifted from a planned economy to a market economy (see more details in Chapter 2). Directly and indirectly, these have also had an impact on disabled people there too.

According to the Second National Sample Survey of Disabilities in China in 2006,<sup>1</sup> the total number of disabled people in the country is 82.96 million, accounting for 6.34% of the national population (The Leading Group for the Second National Sample Survey of Disabled People, 2006).<sup>2</sup> The number of disabled people and their proportions in the total number of disabled people are given in Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1: The number of disabled people and their proportions in the total number of disabled people with different types**

Types of Disability	The Number	The Proportions (in the total number of disabled people)
Physical disability	24.12 million	29.07%,
Hearing disability	20.04 million	24.16%
Multiple disabilities	13.52 million	16.30%
Visual disability	12.33 million	14.86%
Mental disability <sup>1</sup>	6.14 million	7.40%
Intellectual disability	5.54 million	6.68%
Speech disability	1.27 million	1.53%

<sup>1</sup> These are the figures still used by the State Council and the CDPF, and these data have not been updated since 2006, so essentially, we have no idea of the real scale of disability in China today.

<sup>2</sup> At the end of 2006, the total population of China was 1,314,480,000.

China's highest administrative authority, the State Council, recently claimed that significant achievements have been made in the cause of disabled people – this includes the claim that millions of them have been lifted out of poverty, more of them are in employment or receiving minimum living allowances (*dibao* 低保),<sup>3</sup> more accessible environments in urban and rural areas, etc. However, it also recognises the challenges that China faces in developing disability work, especially given that the disabled population in China is so large: there are low-income families with disabled members, low levels of social security and employment quality, insufficient public services (i.e., schooling, healthcare, and barrier-free environment), discrimination against disabled people, and low level of services in undeveloped areas (The State Council, 2021):

*'There are a large number of disabled people... [in China], and they need special care and help. The outstanding problems currently faced are: First, the risk of returning to poverty is high for disabled people, and a considerable number of low-income families with disabled members still have a difficult life. Second, the level of social security and employment quality for disabled people are still not high, and there is still a big gap between the per capita income of families with disabled members and the social average level. Third, the total amount of public services for disabled people is insufficient, the distribution is uneven, and the quality and efficiency of these services are not high. The diverse needs of disabled people, such as schooling, medical treatment, rehabilitation care, and a barrier-free environment, have not been met. Fourth, the equal rights of disabled people have not been fully guaranteed, and discrimination against disabled people and violations of their rights and interests still occur from time to time. Fifth, the cause of disabled people is still a shortcoming in economic and social development, and the ability of underdeveloped areas, rural areas, and grassroots organisations to serve disabled people is particularly weak'. (The State Council (Guowuyuan 国务院), 2021)*

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<sup>3</sup> The minimum living allowances (*dibao* 低保) is one of the main forms of social assistance from the social security system in China. Those eligible for such assistance generally include those (disabled) residents who fall under the following category of the 'three nos' (*san bu* 三不) at the same time – they are (disabled) people who are not able to work, have no source of livelihood, and have difficulties in life due to natural disasters or socio-economic reasons (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2021). The amount of subsistence allowance is determined based on local living standards (Zhang, 2015). See more details in Chapter 2.

In addition, there are still vocational stereotypes that exist for people with different types of disabilities. According to Sui and Liu (2021), the courses of most vocational schools, training institutions and higher education for disabled people in China are mainly based on the types of disability. These courses are extremely limited in choice and variety. Disabled people's personal preferences and employment needs are seldom considered. For example, hearing-impaired people are sometimes limited to studying painting and clothing design; visually impaired people are generally provided training in massage or piano playing; and mentally impaired people are assumed to be suitable to develop sewing skills (Kritzer, 2011).

According to the China Disabled Persons' Federation (hereafter CDPF) (1997), the state and the CDPF pay particular attention to visually impaired people's career training. They regard the development of 'the massage industry for the blind (*mangren anmo shiye* 盲人按摩事业)' as an important way to solve their employment problems (The CDPF, 1997). Such attention to the massage industry for visually impaired people is revealed in many official reports and related policies. For example, in the 2023 version of the Statistical Yearbook of the Development of Disabled People in China published annually by the CDPF, the massage industry has been emphasised as a particularly suitable career for visually impaired people (The CDPF, 2023). In addition, in this statistical yearbook, all local Disabled Person's Federations (hereafter DPF) in different provinces report the employment situation of disabled people in two sections. One section mentions the general situation of disabled people's employment; the other is about the employment situation of visually impaired people in the massage industry (The CDPF, 2023). This indicates that the DPFs do not offer information about careers followed by other types of disabled people. As a result, the vocational stereotype that visually impaired people should work in the massage industry is continually reinforced.

It is well known that many (or even most) visually impaired people work in the massage industry (Sui and Liu, 2021). However, it has been unclear what led them to the massage industry, what barriers they faced when they decided to take up massage training and massage jobs, and how they used their agency to encounter these barriers throughout their life course. These issues are yet to be uncovered in detail in current studies. In order to fill this knowledge gap, this study particularly looks to explore the lived experiences of visually impaired people in China across education and work and how those experiences affect their life course.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do visually impaired people in China transition into education, and then transition from education into work?
2. What social barriers do they face in education, work and as they transition between the two?
3. How can these social barriers they face be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?
4. How and to what extent do visually impaired people use their agency as they encounter these social barriers?

To answer these questions, this study collected life stories by interviewing 26 visually impaired participants; it then analysed the data by applying narrative and thematic data analysis. By using understandings from disability studies (i.e., the medical model and the social model understandings of disability) and drawing on Thompson's PCS (standing for 'Personal', 'Cultural' and 'Structural') model (2021), the research shows the ways in which visually impaired people's experiences of education and employment might be quite different from the paths expected of their non-disabled peers. These include how most visually impaired people are funnelled into special education, massage training and, subsequently, massage work or work unrelated to massage but still related to vocational stereotypes. It discusses the barriers participants have faced during this process and the discrimination and oppression they have experienced. It also shows that there may be gender differences (especially the findings from female participants' life stories) in certain ways. It reveals how policies have played a role in their transitions into education and work (or not, as the case may be). More importantly, it evidences that visually impaired people do not always play a passive role in facing social barriers and oppression; instead, they exercise agency to gain control of their lives when they have the opportunity.

This chapter provides important contextual background for the study, specifically an introduction to the relationship between visual impairment and the massage industry in China. It then discusses the key terms and ideas (i.e., the intersection of disablism, ableism and socialism) that underpin the research as it progresses through the thesis. Finally, it outlines the remaining structure of the thesis and provides a summary of the key findings and contributions of the research.

## Visually impaired people and massage work in China

In China, the definitions of disability and the criteria for assessment were introduced in the second national sample survey of disabled people (The CDPF, 2006). According to this survey, ‘visual disability (*shili canji* 视力残疾)’ refers to:

*‘People whose binocular vision is impaired or whose visual field is reduced for various reasons and whose visual function cannot be corrected through various medications, surgeries and other treatments (or whose visual function cannot be corrected temporarily through the above treatments)’.*<sup>4</sup> (The CDPF, 2006)

According to the CDPF (2008), ‘visual disability’ can, therefore, include both ‘blindness’ and ‘low vision’ (sometimes referred to as partial sightedness in other contexts):

*‘Blindness: level 1 - visual acuity from no light perception to 0.02, or field of view radius less than 5 degrees; level 2- presents visual acuity from 0.02 to 0.05, or visual field radius less than 10 degrees.*

*Low vision: level 3 - visual acuity from 0.05 to 0.1; level 4 – presents visual acuity from 0.1 to 0.3.’* (The CDPF, 2008)

However, the generic term ‘the blind’ or ‘blind people’ (*mangren* 盲人) is commonly used in official reports, related policies, and social media, to describe people who have impaired vision – i.e., ‘the school for the blind’ (*mangxiao* 盲校) and ‘the massage industry for the blind’ (*mangren anmo shiye* 盲人按摩). Many participants also used the word – ‘the blind/blind people’ to describe themselves. In this study, however, I will normally use the term ‘visual impairment’ in order to reflect their varying levels of vision and the fact that, for many of them, their level of vision changes over time. I only use the terms ‘the blind’ or ‘blind people’, ‘the school for the blind’, or ‘the massage industry for the blind’ when citing official reports or

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<sup>4</sup> In China, a person with only one visually impaired eye cannot be assessed as having a ‘visual disability’.



participants' narratives when they themselves have used the term.

According to previous studies, most visually impaired people work in the massage industry (The CDPF, 2023). The massage skills they learn are mainly related to traditional Chinese medicine, called '*Tuina*' (推拿) in Chinese. *Tuina* is a unique healthcare method of the Chinese nation; it is a general term for various manual activities in which the operator uses the hands or other parts of the limbs to apply a certain amount of force, purposefully and regularly, to certain parts of the human body (or acupoints) (Shao, 2009). In official reports, social media or participants' narratives, the generic term 'massage' (*anmo* 按摩) is commonly used to replace *Tuina*. I also use the word 'massage work or the massage industry' to describe their work area. I only mention *Tuina*, when I cite directly from participant narratives - i.e., *Tuina* vocational school.

After the economic reforms in 1978, disabled groups were regarded as having equal opportunity to take part in society; disabled people 'are expected to actively participate in the country's development, which is economically oriented and competitive' on an equal basis with non-disabled people (Qu, 2020, p.750). Guided by the common belief that 'the blind people have a keen sense of touch and concentration and are very suitable for massage work' (The CDPF, 1997), the state has been promoting the development of massage industry to provide employment for visually impaired people through relevant policy documents (see more details in Chapter 2). Following the related policies, many 'massage vocational schools for the blind', 'massage parlours for the blind', and 'massage training for the blind' have been developing to increase the employment rate of visually impaired people in the last few decades. This results in most visually impaired people's working experience in this industry. For example, the CDPF (2023) particularly states that 21,363 visually impaired people received massage training in 2023 in the report on the employment situation of disabled people; however, the CDPF does not provide the figures or details for other types of disabled people's working situation. Thus, 'the massage industry for the blind' has gradually become the leading employment channel for visually impaired people in China.

### **The intersection of disablism, ableism and socialism**

This section explains three important terms related to disability in the Chinese context – disablism, ablism and socialism. These three terms are related to the ideologies that deeply influence disabled people's life

course at the personal, cultural, and structural levels in China. They are mentioned frequently in the application of the PCS model in the rest of the thesis, especially in Chapters 5, 6, and 7:

**Disablism** is related to discrimination or prejudice against disabled people (Goodley, 2014). It refers to a combination of social forces, cultural values, and personal biases that oppress disabled people by marginalising them and portraying them in a negative light (Goodley, 2014). The effect of disablism is to deny disabled people the right to participate in mainstream social life (Thompson, 2021). In China, this manifests as prejudice against disabled people (e.g. as a pitiful group), presenting disabled people as either misfits or pathetic victims of personal tragedy, or not considering the accessibility of disabled people in public services and buildings.

**Ableism** is defined as a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people with mental, emotional, and physical disabilities...deeply held beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, promoted by public and private media, combine to create an often hostile environment (Rauscher and McClintock, 1997). It holds that impairments, regardless of their 'type', are inherently negative and should be improved, cured, or even eliminated if given the opportunity (Campbell, 2009). Disability in ableism is defined by its deviation from ability, suggesting that disabled people as a group are inferior to those non-disabled (Henderson and Bryan, 2004). Additionally, it refers to that non-disabled people have more systematic advantages than disabled people (Campbell, 2009). In China, this manifests as disability being considered preventable through eugenics practices; it is the society's responsibility to prevent disability; additionally, disabled people are constructed as lacking the ability to contribute to societal development and are marginalised (compared to most non-disabled people); they are encouraged to meet social expectations of 'able-bodied people' through a spirit of self-improvement (Lin *et al.*, 2024).

**Socialism** is an economic and political philosophy characterised by social ownership of the means of production – namely, assets are considered to belong to society as a whole rather than private ownership - assets belong to individual members or groups within it (Brus, 2013). 'To each according to his contribution' is a distributive principle of socialism, referring to the arrangement in which each worker in a socialist society receives pay and benefits based on the amount and value of the labour he or she contributes (Gregory and Stuart, 2004, p.118). Applying socialism in China is called 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. It is a set of political theories and policies of the Chinese Communist Party

(hereafter CPC); the theory holds that since China has a low level of material wealth and is in the primary stage of socialism, it needs first to achieve economic growth and then pursue equal socialism to achieve a communist society (The State Council, 2009).<sup>5</sup> Given this, highly productive workers, especially economically productive, receive more wages and benefits than average and lower productivity workers. By contrast, those who are less economically productive may be marginalised by society.

Disabled people's lives are affected by the interaction of these three ideologies in China. On the one hand, affected by disablism and ableism, disabled people experience discrimination and oppression and have fewer advantages than most non-disabled people. They are particularly marginalised in political and market participation (Qu, 2019). For example, there is a lack of representation of disability in politics as the CDPF is only a social organisation for disabled people recognised by the government; disabled people are excluded from the job market – i.e., the employment rate of disabled people only accounted for 27% in 2017 (Qu, 2019) as compared to 96.1% in the general population (The State Council, 2018). On the other hand, after the economic reform of 1978, people's labour force was highlighted as a tool for competition and individual economic production.<sup>6</sup> Socialism requires every individual to be economically productive and contribute to the economy; disabled people are also expected to contribute economically to society equally (Qu, 2019). In this context, disabled people must overcome their difficulties (their impairments and social barriers) through cure, rehabilitation, and sheer personal will to rescue themselves from their own 'personal tragedy' (Dauncey, 2020). Thus, they can return to a 'normal' state as 'able-bodied' citizens, participate in socialism and be economically productive (Dauncey, 2020). All this impacts disabled people's transition into education and work.

## **The structure of the thesis**

This introduction chapter already shows the general situation of disabled people in China, highlighting visually impaired people's connection with the massage industry and some essential terms related to this study. To further understand disability through the life course perspective in the

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<sup>5</sup> Socialism with Chinese characteristics in China could be slightly different from the original definition of socialism. The latter's fundamental goal is to achieve an advanced level of material production. Its idea is that expanding human productive capacity is the basis for developing social freedom and equality (Boettke, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> The production in the Chinese context mainly refers to economic productivity.

Chinese context, the thesis consists of eight more chapters, which are outlined as follows:

**Chapter 2** is a literature review of current disability studies relevant to this thesis as well as the theoretical frameworks that inform this study. It starts with two important models of disability - the medical model and the social model (Oliver, 1996).<sup>7</sup> Then, it focuses on disability-related studies undertaken in and of the Chinese socio-economic and cultural context. The two theoretical frameworks used to guide the analysis in the study—the life course approach (Elder, 1994) and the PCS model (Thompson, 2021)—and their connections with disability studies are explained.

**Chapter 3** outlines the study's methodology. It first introduces the research approach (interpretivist), which enables me to understand people's perspectives on their own experiences. It then shows the data collection process - recruiting 26 visually impaired participants and gathering their life stories through telephone interviews. Then, the choice of narrative and thematic analysis used to analyse the data is explained. After the section on research ethics, the researcher's reflexivity from the personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual dimensions is highlighted.

**Chapter 4** focuses on how visually impaired people transition into education and into work in China. It draws on the life course approach (Elder, 1994) and addresses the first research question – *'How do visually impaired people in China transition into education, and then transition from education into work?'* Five patterns are identified. The first three patterns encapsulate how visually impaired people enter formal education – i.e., starting from special or mainstream education and not entering formal education. The other two patterns relate to participants' exit from education and into their career pathways – a 'typical' pathway and three 'atypical' pathways. A typical pathway is taken by those who attend non-mainstream education, get massage training and have work experience in the massage industry. By contrast, three atypical pathways reflect the paths taken by (a) those who mostly attend non-mainstream education, get massage training but do not engage in the massage industry; (b) those who mainly study in mainstream education but attend massage training and later take up massage-related work; or (c) those who have no formal education but get massage training and work in the massage industry.

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<sup>7</sup> The medical model and the social model in this study mainly refer to the ideas that I mentioned in Chapter 2.

Drawing on these five patterns, **Chapters 5, 6, and 7** explore the barriers that participants faced during the transition into education (Chapter 5), the start of massage training (Chapter 6), and the transition into work (Chapter 7), respectively. The discussion across these three chapters addresses the second research question – ‘*What social barriers do they face in education, work and as they transition between the two?*’. **Chapter 5** first discusses the barriers that participants faced before formal education. Then, it explores the barriers participants faced during formal education, following the first two patterns identified in Chapter 4 – participants starting in special schools and participants starting in mainstream schools. **Chapter 6** analyses the barriers that funnelled participants into massage training through formal education (i.e., *Tuina* vocational secondary schools or tertiary education) or informal education (i.e., short-term massage training projects or apprenticeships in massage parlours). **Chapter 7** discusses the barriers participants faced in the massage industry and workplaces unrelated to massage. Across all three of these chapters, the discrimination and oppression behind these barriers are analysed through the lens of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021). This addresses the third research question – ‘*How can these social barriers they face be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?*’. Moreover, gender-related findings (specifically the challenges revealed by female participants) and the influence of policies are also highlighted across these chapters.

The final findings section is in **Chapter 8**, which looks at agency across the life course. It addresses the final research question – ‘*How and to what extent do visually impaired people use their agency as they encounter these social barriers?*’. Following the ideas of human agency from the life course approach (Elder, 1994), the analysis applies the four types of agency (existential agency, pragmatic agency, Identity agency, and life course agency) from Hitlin and Elder (2007b) to discuss how participants exercise their agency to face the social constraints mentioned in previous chapters. It particularly discusses the flexible approaches they took during the lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022.

In the **Conclusion**, I argue that mainstream education and workplaces (i.e., areas unrelated to massage) continue to exclude visually impaired people. This rejection by mainstream schools and limited special education provision results in visually impaired people’s delayed entry into formal education, which further affects their educational and career trajectories; and, in some cases, they never even get to go to school at all. In addition, I argue that this special education system (especially at secondary and tertiary levels) is mainly intended to develop

them into massage workers and thus build economic productivity for the state and society. Gaining employment in the massage industry means they can be seen as economically productive, rather than being viewed as 'useless' or a 'burden' for society. More importantly, this study shows that in China, regardless of the differences among visually impaired people (e.g. in terms of gender, educational levels, and family backgrounds), almost everyone gets massage training voluntarily or involuntarily; in other words, massage training is inevitable for visually impaired people. Although many disability-related policies propose social inclusion, they are rarely put into full practice. By contrast, policies aimed at enhancing the economic productivity of disabled people receive much more attention at all administrative levels. Furthermore, the agency exercised by people with visual impairment is also influenced by structural constraints (inaccessible learning/working environment) and cultural beliefs (i.e., discrimination against disabled people and vocational stereotypes). All the above shows the strong influence of the vocational stereotype – the massage industry is the best (if not the only) choice for visually impaired people – on these people's life course.

This study has two crucial theoretical framework contributions to disability studies in and of China. The life course approach has been applied to disability studies in the Western countries over the last two decades. It emphasises the importance of personal impairment and social barriers to disabled people's lives (Priestley, 2010) and the multiple role pathways in their life course (Macmillan and Eliason, 2003). However, current research about the life course of people with disability is absent in China; only a few studies mention disability from the life course perspective.<sup>8</sup> As a result, it is still not known what the lived experiences of disabled people (i.e., transition to education and work) have been like in China's changing economic and political context, especially since the establishment of the CDPF in 1988.

Another contribution of the study is applying the PCS model (Thompson, 2021) to explore the barriers experienced by disabled people in China. The PCS focuses on revealing points and practices of discrimination and oppression from the personal (i.e., personal prejudice), cultural (i.e., social norms and stereotypes), and structural (power distribution) levels. Thompson (2021) only mentions the usefulness of applying the PCS to disability, but no other research, to my knowledge, has yet applied this theory to disability research systematically in the

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Guo (2017) discusses the living conditions of the disabled youth in rural areas from the life course approach. Xie and Zhou (2016) mention the social motivation of disabled people's participation in sports during their life courses. Liu (2017) conducted research on the life course of social workers disabled by the earthquake.

same way as this study. Through the application of these two theoretical approaches to the study of disability in China, this study not only shows the lives of visually impaired people as an ongoing process (Levy *et al.*, 2005), but also further analyses the discrimination and oppression that disabled people faced during this process. Additionally, the medical model that proposes disability as a personal tragedy (Oliver, 1996) and the social model that focuses on the social barriers and inequality in the social environment (Barton, 2013) are also applied to this study to explore the influence of physical impairment and social barriers on visually impaired people across their education, work and as they transition between the two.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive and critical review of the empirical literature and theoretical frameworks that inform this study. The specific questions guiding my review are as follows:

- What are the medical model and the social model of disability, and why are they important in this study?
- What has recent research revealed about the situation of disabled people in China?
- What has research revealed about the situation of visually impaired people in China?
- What is the life course, and how does it relate to disability studies?
- What is the PCS model, and how can it be used in disability studies?

In order to answer these questions, I will first introduce disability studies - the medical model and the social model of disability - to provide logical development on how to understand disability in this study. I then explore what is currently understood about disability in China, in particular the social and cultural contexts after the economic reform in 1978, and the ways in which visually impaired people's education and work have been affected under Chinese contexts. This will enable me to illustrate the research gap for the thesis. I will then move on to introduce the other two major theoretical frameworks that guide the subsequent analysis, namely the life course approach (Elder, 1994) and the PCS model (Thompson, 2021). Giele and Elder (1998, p.22) defined life course as '*A sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time*', especially emphasising the link between personal perspective and the historical and socioeconomic environments where these people live. Additionally, Thompson's (2021) model has been developed to challenge potentially oppressive and discriminatory structures and practices by examining three levels of societal interactions – personal, cultural, and structural (PCS). It shows the ways in which these two



frameworks can be applied to disability studies – the medical model and the social model. Finally, a conclusion section is given to answer all the questions above and shows a coherent framework that draws all ideas together. It further indicates the connection between the life course approach and the PCS model, in disability studies - by applying the PCS model to disability studies to explore the barriers disabled people face in their life course. It also highlights that disabled people are able to exercise their agency to influence their own lives in the life course, and more agency-related theories and discussion will be given in Chapter 8.

## **2.2 The medical model and the social model of disability studies**

### **2.2.1 The medical model**

The medical model defines disability as a medical problem and medical defects linked to clinical diagnoses and ignores the social exclusion and oppression faced by disabled people (Llewellyn and Hogan, 2000). The medical model means disability is a failure of the body system that is inherently abnormal and pathological (Oliver, 1996; Goodley, 2014; Olkin, 2003; Fisher and Goodley, 2007). It is considered that disability results from impaired physical function and structure and is caused by illness, injury, or other health situations (Forhan, 2009). The medical model assumes that disability can reduce a person's life quality, aiming to diminish or correct disability through medical intervention (Fisher and Goodley, 2007; Bingham *et al.*, 2013). This model has affected the way that disabled people access society and also has excluded them from society and the 'able-bodied' majority (Goodley, 2016).

The medical model has been criticised by many scholars, as it focuses on personal limitations and 'fails to capture the complexity of life; individualisation shrinks the socially, historically, economically and culturally constituted human being' (Goodley, 2016, p. 8). This model also embeds the negative impression of disabled people (Brittain, 2004). Mitra (2006) argues that the medical model associates disabled people with patients, and therefore, there are many stereotypes about disabled people in society, such as being ill and cared for. Tronto (1993) also pointed out that disabled people are considered to be pitiful and useless because they need help from others, while non-disabled people seem to have difficulty recognising that disabled people should also enjoy equal rights and dignity. According to Liddiard (2014), disabled people are viewed as a naive, helpless group and are cast as genderless, which means that their physical and emotional needs are widely ignored.

### 2.2.2 The social model

By contrast, the social model (also known as the British social model) distinguishes between impairment and disability, recommending the elimination of barriers in the social, economic, political, cultural, relational, and psychological fields (Barton, 2013), which emphasises the cultural or social oppression and barriers beyond the person. The beginning of the social model can be traced back to the 1970s when the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (hereafter UPIAS) published the Fundamental Principles of Disability in the UK, which divided the definition of disability into two parts - impairment and disability (Goodley, 2016). According to UPIAS (1976), disability is imposed by excluding and isolating disabled people from a society that is beyond their own physical conditions. This completely changes the understanding of disability as a cause of social exclusion, from individual impairments to negative societal responses towards them (Oliver, 2006). This approach was first presented at a Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation conference in 1982 (Oliver, 2006). In the same year, Disabled People's International (hereafter DPI) also redefined disability in this way (DPI, 1982):

***'Impairment** is the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental, or sensory impairment.*

***Disability** is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers'. (DPI, 1982)*

Subsequently, Oliver proposed the 'social model' of disability (Oliver, 1983; Oliver, 2009); he began to focus on the medical model that emphasised personal tragedy and the social model that emphasised external limitations (Oliver, 2006). In addition, Abberley (1987) links the concept of disability to oppression, which leads almost directly to the development of the social model. The link between disability and oppression allows people to organise hitherto isolated and fragmented areas of social research into a coherent conceptual whole (Abberley, 1987). The social model then developed as a way of thinking about the social barriers and oppression disabled people face and became the 'mainstream thinking' of the disability movement (Oliver, 2006). In this

model, it is not individual impairments and functional limitations that cause disability but rather social barriers and constraints that do not meet the needs of the disabled person. Oliver (2006) stressed that the social model does not deny the impact of medicine (both negative and positive), charity and welfare on the lives of disabled people. However, these cannot provide a sufficient basis for building an equal and just model of disability. Goodley (2016) argues that one of the strengths of the social model is that it can be a viable framework for rethinking the material barriers faced by disabled people and the means to counter the dominance of the medical model. Furthermore, the social model advocates that constructive solutions should not be targeted at individuals but at society (Haeghele and Hodge, 2016). Therefore, improvements for disabled people require political action and social change rather than changes to their physical condition (Bingham *et al.*, 2013).

Boxall (2018) points out that the social model of disability is itself a critical approach, as it criticises the ways of understanding disability through grand narratives of defect and pathology that trap those identified and defined as disabled within deference to professional knowledge and power. However, there are some critiques of the social model. One is that the social model is viewed to eliminate the causal relationship between impairment and disability (Boxall, 2018). In addition, some disabled people have criticised the social model as formulaic and simplistic (Boxall, 2018), viewing impairments as insignificant. For example, Shakespeare (2013) admits the important role impairments play in disabled people's lives and indicates the value of medical interventions to cure or alleviate the impairments of disabled people. He argues (2013) that getting medical treatment may not be 'wrong' for disabled people because disabled people cannot ignore their impairments. This provides an important new way of thinking about the relationship between the social model and the medical model, as both personal impairments and social barriers are acknowledged as affecting disabled people's lives.

### **2.2.3 Summary**

While it must be acknowledged that there is not just one understanding of the medical model or social model as they are interpreted and applied in empirical research, this study is based on the above mainstream viewpoints. The medical model emphasises medical defects and personal tragedy, and disabled people are considered pitiful and useless under this model. In contrast, the social model focuses on the barriers and oppression - the external limitations beyond the person. However, as Shakespeare (2013) mentioned, both personal impairment and social

barriers have an impact on disabled people's lives. Thus, this study also agrees that the social model cannot deny the role of personal impairment. These two models provide the theoretical understanding for the second research question – '*What social barriers do they face in education, work and as they transition between the two?*'. They also provide the logical development of the ideas for this study's other two theoretical frameworks – the life course approach (Elder, 1994) and the PCS model (Thompson, 2021). How these two models are applied to understand disability in China and what barriers disabled people in China experience, according to the empirical studies, will be given in the next section. Then, how these two models link with the life course approach and the PCS model will be discussed in sections 4 and 5, respectively.

## **2.3 Disability in China**

This section first gives an overview of China's social and cultural context in the post-1978 period, paying particular attention to those factors that have impacted the lives of disabled people. It begins with Chinese economic reforms and the establishment of the CDPF in 1988; then, it looks at welfare and population policies. Research has shown that all these factors have dramatically impacted life chances for disabled people. More broadly, I will explore the ways in which research done by many people and made public has uncovered the role of cultural contexts and social attitudes and the ways in which these have been affected by socialism; I will also explore other significant social changes that have impacted the lives of disabled people, such as digital technology and COVID-19. I then focus on visually impaired people, specifically, to discuss their strong link with the massage industry and what is currently understood about their education and work opportunities.

### **2.3.1 Social and cultural contexts**

This section discusses (a) the socioeconomic and political structures that changed after 1978 (i.e., Chinese economic reform and the establishment of the CDPF) and (b) the policy dimensions related to disability (population policies, disability overarching legislation and policies, and policies in education, employment, and social security systems). It then explores (c) the cultural contexts and social attitudes around disability and (d) other important social changes (i.e., digital advancement and COVID-19) in recent years.

## **(a) The socio-economic and political structures**

### **Chinese economic reform**

Chinese economic reform has made a huge difference to the Chinese economy and, as a result, influenced people's lives regardless of whether they are disabled or not. Before 1978, the economy was dominated by state ownership and central planning. Deng Xiaoping, a Chinese revolutionary and politician who served as the supreme leader of China from 1978 to 1989, initiated the reforms to gradually lead China from a planned economy to a market economy in order to save what was then seen as a failing economy (Brandt and Rawski, 2008). The reforms encouraged opening up to foreign investment and technology, the de-collectivization of agriculture, and entrepreneurs to start their businesses; it also introduced its huge labour force into the global market and encouraged privatisation and contracting out of many state-owned industries, with only important sectors such as banking and the oil industry remaining state monopolies (Gittings, 2006). Under these circumstances, China has become one of the fastest-growing economies in the world (Denmark, 2018).

Following the distributive principle of socialism, the economic reform and opening-up policy, as it has become known, refers to 'to each according to his contribution', and resource allocation based on the contribution of each individual (Gregory and Stuart, 2004, p.118) it encourages more hard-working individuals to gain more (which also means contributing more to the collective economy); if not, they would get no gains. Such an arrangement in the marketing economy has pushed disabled individuals into a disadvantaged situation in an increasingly competitive job market since they are often not considered able to work with the same efficiency as non-disabled staff; the employers may see them as not sufficiently 'profitable' and refuse to take them on (Shi, 2022). This shows how the social barriers from the economy and politics affect disabled people's employment. More discussions about the exclusion of disabled people from employment opportunities in China are given in the following sections – 'the policy dimensions related to disabled people' and 'visually impaired people in China'.

## **The establishment of the CDPF**

After 1978, China also began to open up to the outside world by actively participating in a series of international legislative and policy advocacy activities related to the protection of the rights and interests of children, disabled people, and women, and at the same time actively promoted the development of the rights and welfare of domestic vulnerable groups (Zhang and Guan, 2009). In 1983, the United Nations declared 1983 to 1993 as 'the UN decade for the Disabled Persons', and the Chinese government participated in this event. One of the most obvious direct impacts at this stage was that the CDPF was established in 1988 (Feng and Yu, 2017). Deng Pufang, the son of Deng Xiaoping, a wheelchair user, was the first chairman of the CDPF. He recognised the role of medical care for disabled persons. He emphasised the importance of rehabilitation at all levels of DPF in the country (Tao *et al.*, 2018), which has become one of the essential duties of the current DPFs in China.

As a national umbrella organisation for diverse disabled people, the mission of the CDPF is to 'promote the full participation of disabled people in society equally with others, ensure that disabled people share in the material and cultural achievements of society, and foster humanitarianism across society as a whole' (The CDPF, 2016). However, drawing on the challenges China currently faces in the cause of disabled people from Chapter 1 (i.e., low income, low equality of employment, insufficient public services, and the vocational stereotype of disabled people, etc.), the CDPF may not have done much to promote the equal opportunity for disabled people to participate in society. By contrast, the CDPF mainly pays attention to promoting the participation of disabled people in employment and economic development (more empirical research findings on this point are given in the following sections). Additionally, the CDPF's mission does not mention any support for disabled people. This means that providing support for disabled people may not be a priority in the CDPF, which could lead to barriers to their participation in society.

The CDPF is designed to perform three key functions: 'represent the common interests and safeguard the rights of disabled people; provide comprehensive services to disabled people; and, as commissioned by the central government, supervise the administration of disability-related affairs' (The CDPF, 2016). Additionally, the CDPF represents disabled people and works directly and closely with the government to formulate public policies and provide services for disabled people (Zhao and Grotz, 2019). In this way, the CDPF represents the interests of the government

and disabled people simultaneously, which is called the 'half government-half public' approach (Zhao and Grotz, 2019).

However, this approach might limit its capacity to serve disabled people's interests (Kohrman, 2005). It has been argued that the CDPF and the local DPFs represent the government's interests more often than those of disabled people (Zhao and Grotz, 2019). Not only that, but research has also suggested that the CDPF could not offer appropriate services to disabled persons with special or personal needs (Zhao and Grotz, 2019). For example, according to a survey in two cities undertaken in 2004, about 60% of the disabled persons sampled are not satisfied with the work of the DPFs; it shows that the DPFs have historically not been seen to function as well as they might and have not truly empowered disabled people (Zhou, 2009). Additionally, according to Liu (2021), the local DPFs still face many problems in protecting the rights and interests of disabled people. For example, their information is not open and transparent enough to disabled people, relief measures are relatively temporary, there is a lack of communication with other relevant departments, and the status of DPFs is considered relatively weak compared with other organisations and departments.<sup>9</sup> All these indicate a gap between the functions advocated by the CDPF and the services provided by local DPFs in practice. Such gaps, as well as the weak position of the DPFs, may make it more challenging to protect the rights of disabled people in China, resulting in barriers and oppression to them.

## **b) The policy dimensions related to disabled people**

### **Population policies**

China introduced the strict one-child policy in 1979, restricting most families to only one child (Hesketh *et al.*, 2005). Although the one-child policy was replaced by the two-child policy at the end of 2015 included permitting families in both urban and rural areas to have another child (Attané, 2016), and then the third-child policy was introduced on 31 May 2021, allowing a couple to have three children (BBC, 2021), it is likely to have had impacts on the life experiences of disabled people and their families.

First, the one-child policy may have increased discrimination, as eugenicist practices have been encouraged by the state according to this

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<sup>9</sup> According to Liu (2021), since disabled people, who are the service objects of the DPF, are a vulnerable group with relatively low social status in China, the DPF is in a relatively weak position among various organisations and departments.

policy, aiming to keep the unborn children so-called 'normal' and enhance the quality of the population (Jiang, 2009).<sup>10</sup> In this way, disability is strongly connected with medical defects and 'non-normative' conditions (Rubeis and Steger, 2019). According to the Maternal and Child Health Care Law, pregnant women who may have disabled children should even be encouraged by the physician to terminate the pregnancy, to contribute to 'a happy family and have a healthy generation' (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1994).

Additionally, the one-child policy may have also increased the rate of abandoning disabled children (Shang and Fisher, 2016). The family is expected to be primarily responsible for supporting their (disabled) children. Some families that are not able to afford medical treatment and health care may choose to abandon their disabled children to the local State Children's Welfare Institution, with the consideration that the State will offer full support to children whose parents are dead or not identifiable (Shang and Fisher, 2016).

Moreover, sibling relationships of disabled people could be very different under the one-child policy in China – they were one of the few groups of children to be permitted siblings, as parents whose first child has disabilities were allowed to have a second child (McCabe and Barnes, 2012). Due to this, the second non-disabled child is now expected by their parents to support the first disabled child after the parents die (Shang and Fisher, 2016). Usually, siblings with disabilities are seen as vulnerable and in need of care, which is considered a shared responsibility of other family members (Xun *et al.*, 2023). However, having a sibling with a disability and unilateral caregiving is often perceived as unrewarding and negatively impacts the siblings' lives, i.e., the sibling without a disability experiences a sense of affiliate stigma (Liang, 2023).

All these show that the population policies which highlight the eugenicist practices further put disabled people in a disadvantageous position both within and beyond the family circle.

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<sup>10</sup> Eugenics is a set of beliefs and practices designed to improve the quality of human genetics. Historically, eugenicists have altered various human gene frequencies by suppressing fertility in people and groups considered inferior or enhancing fertility in those considered superior (Spektorowski and Ireni-Saban, 2013).



## **Disability overarching legislation and policies**

There are some paradoxes in policies and regulations related to disabled people in China. The definition of disability in China's Law of the Protection of Disabled People of 2008 reflects the medical model - 'A person with disabilities refers to one who has abnormalities of loss of a certain organ or function, psychologically or physiologically, or in anatomical structure and has lost wholly or in part the ability to perform an activity in the way considered normal' (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2008, ch.1). By contrast, building an accessible society - following the social model - has also been promoted by the Chinese government since the signing of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (hereafter CRPD) proposed by the UN in 2008 (The UN, 2008; Qu, 2013). For example, the Regulations on Education of Disabled People in 2017 states to protect the rights of disabled people to education, including the encouragement of inclusive education and giving priority to building classrooms with special education resources in some mainstream schools (The State Council, 2017); the Regulations on the Barrier-free Environment Construction in 2023, proposes to ensure that disabled people participate in social life on an equal basis (The State Council, 2023). As Ruan (2019) emphasises, such social inclusion of disabled people is based on their inability to participate in society; the proposal of building a barrier-free society on this basis is more likely to make a massive difference to disabled groups. This means the unequal status of disabled people and non-disabled people, and both the medical model (personal tragedy) and the social model (social barriers) affect the lives of disabled people in China.

## **Education policies**

China's Law of the Protection of Disabled People (2008) stipulate that 'the state guarantees that disabled people have the equal right to receive education'. After the economic reforms began, the state started to re-emphasise the importance of education, claiming 'that education is the foundation of national development in the long run' to improve the quality of labour to contribute to society (The Ministry of Education, 2019). Given this context, two important policies have laid the foundation for educating disabled people in China. One is the Compulsory Education Law, which introduces compulsory education for students aged six (or seven in some areas) - including six years in primary education and three years in junior high school education (The Standing Committee of the National People's

Congress, 1986).<sup>11</sup> The other is the Regulations on Education of Disabled People, first introduced in 1994, which further proposes that it is necessary to focus on the development of compulsory education and vocational education for disabled people, actively carry out preschool education, and gradually develop secondary and tertiary education for them (The State Council, 1994).<sup>12</sup>

In addition to this piece of legislation, the Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan from 2010 to 2020 (The State Council, 2010, ch.10) also points out that it is necessary to develop the awareness of disabled students to face life with 'a positive attitude' and fully participate in society, as well as 'a spirit of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement'; this plan also strengthens the development of disabled students' vocational skills and employment ability. This shows that developing disabled people's productivity is important in this education-related plan.

In recent years, with the effective implementation of the one-child policy, the number of school-age children has gradually decreased. Many governments have removed and merged smaller primary and secondary schools to concentrate educational resources and improve efficiency (Li, 2014). While this has been shown to have little impact on the schooling of disabled children and adolescents in cities with well-developed transportation (Yin, 2012), it has had a significant impact on the schooling of rural disabled students who are far away from the new schools, decreasing their enrolment rate in compulsory education. According to the most recent national survey of disabled people in 2006, nearly half of the respondents had primary and junior high school education; those who graduated from senior high school and vocational school only accounted for 3.77% and 1.21%, respectively (The Leading Group for the Second National Sample Survey of Disabled People, 2006). This suggests that many disabled people would not have received compulsory education up to this time, although, as noted above, it would have been a right protected by law for all children in China. The situation had not improved significantly by 2011. At this point, it was reported that only 72.1% of

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<sup>11</sup> Thus, six years old or seven is the school age to attend compulsory education.

<sup>12</sup> Secondary education follows the nine-year compulsory education; it includes three years of senior high school for regular curricula or three years of vocational secondary school for vocational courses. Secondary education does not belong to compulsory education. Tertiary education in China - including junior colleges (*Dazhuang* 大专) and universities (*daxue* 大学). In addition, people usually access tertiary education by attending and passing the competitive *Gaokao*. Junior colleges mainly focus on vocational training, and their academic levels are usually inferior to those of a bachelor's degree from a university. Students who obtain a junior college diploma can take the college-to-undergraduate entrance exam (*zhuanshengben* 专升本) and then pursue an undergraduate diploma after passing the course through self-study or attending the course there. Tertiary education does not belong to compulsory education.

disabled children completed compulsory education, compared to 97% of non-disabled people (Peng, 2013).

However, according to the '14th Five-Year Plan of Special Education Development and Improvement Action' issued by China's Ministry of Education (2022), special education has achieved remarkable achievement, with a more than 95% enrolment rate in compulsory education in the previous five years (from 2017 to 2022); additionally, the Ministry of Education (2022) proposed '*the main goal of initially establishing a high-quality special education system by 2025*' and expects '*the compulsory education enrolment rate of school-age disabled children will reach 97% nationwide by 2025*'. Meanwhile, it also reports that special education is still in its early stages of development and needs further work in economically underdeveloped areas:

*However, special education is still in the early stages of development, and the foundation for expansion is still relatively weak. The level of compulsory education for disabled children and adolescents in the central and western regions, and remote or rural areas, is still relatively low.'* (The Ministry of Education, 2022)

The high enrolment rate of disabled people attending special schools and the early-stage development of special education shows another paradoxical situation in China. The Ministry of Education only emphasises the enrolment rate in compulsory education from a special education perspective, while it has not mentioned the rate of disabled people *completing* compulsory education or enrolling/completing higher stages of education; additionally, it has not provided data on the situation of disabled people studying in mainstream education. All these demonstrate that the state pays particular attention to special education for disabled people and, especially, the nine years of compulsory education. The learning experiences of disabled people in mainstream schools or higher educational stages in special schools are unclear; this study will further explore these in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, based on the participants' narratives.

## **Employment policies**

China's Law of the Protection of Disabled People (2008) stipulates that the state protects the right of disabled people to work and requires local governments at all levels to make overall plans for employment and create employment conditions for them (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2008). However, since the economic reform of 1978, general graduates and employers have more freedom to make choices of employment, and the market-oriented graduate employment system has been established (Zhang, 2012). Due to the expansion of enrolment in universities, more and more employees who graduated from higher education have increased competition in the labour market, resulting in difficulty for graduates finding suitable jobs (Li, 2014). As a result, employers have more options to hire the most highly educated employees. As Guo (2015) has shown, many disabled people do not have the opportunity to receive tertiary education and so may not be capable of competing equally with non-disabled peers in the labour market (Guo, 2015).

In addition, the Regulations on the Employment of Disabled People (The State Council, 2007) reports that disabled employees should be at least 1.5% of the workforce to protect the equal rights of disabled employees. However, Liao (2015) points out that there is no significant promoting effect on the income and employment rate before and after introducing the employment regulations. Many companies would rather pay a fine than employ disabled people (Guo, 2015). This shows that even the regulations for protecting disabled people's employment rights may not be implemented in practice and increase barriers such that disabled people find it extremely difficult to participate in the job market.

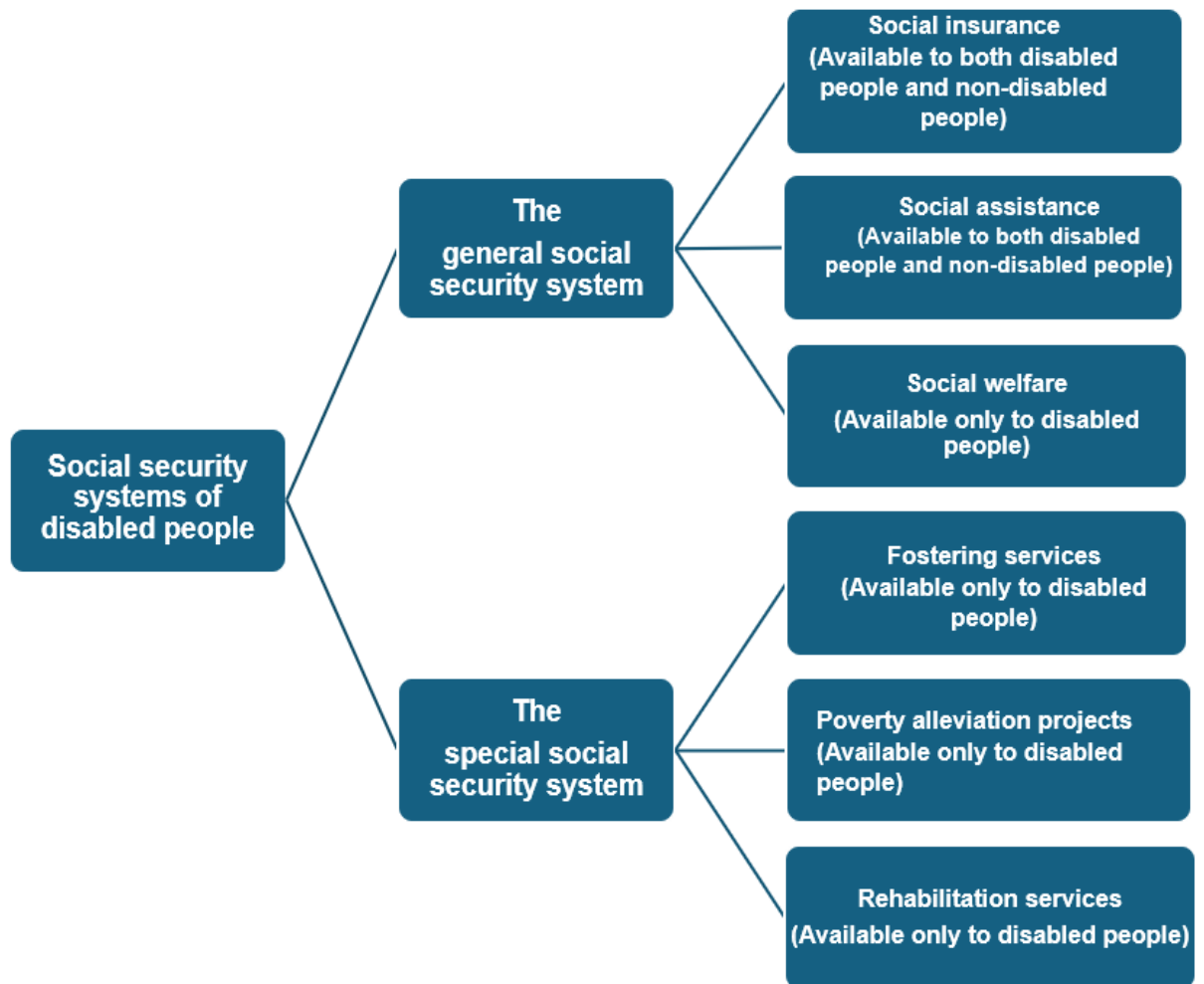
## **Social security systems for disabled people**

The social security systems for disabled people in China are divided into the general social security system,<sup>13</sup> which involves the income security of disabled people to ensure that their basic living standards are maintained; by contrast, the special social security system involves services and measures related to the life security of disabled people (Zhang, 2015). Figure 2 shows the different types of these two systems.

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<sup>13</sup> The social security systems for disabled people in China differ from those in the UK, which mainly refer to income transfer programs.

**Figure 2: Social security systems for disabled people**



The general social security system for disabled people comprises social insurance, social assistance, and social welfare (Zhang, 2019). The first two types are available to disabled and non-disabled people, while the latter is only for disabled people. Social insurance is known collectively as the five basic [social] insurance and housing funding (*Wuxian yijin* 五险一金). The five forms of basic social insurance include pension insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, work-related injury insurance, and maternity insurance; the housing accumulation fund works to pay the mortgage when people buy a house (Zhang, 2019). Social insurance is aimed at people who are able to work and participate in employment – those who are employed in enterprises or institutions or engaged in self-employment. However, the current insurance system has not yet formed a special insurance system for

disabled people who are *not* employed; only some pilot areas provide coverage for disabled people (Zhang, 2015).

The main forms of social assistance include, among other things, minimum living allowances (*dibao* 低保) and temporary special subsidies in some areas. Those eligible for such assistance generally include those (disabled) residents who fall under the following category of the '*three nos*' (*san bu* 三不) at the same time - 'those (disabled) people who are not able to work, have no source of livelihood, and have difficulties in life due to natural disasters or socio-economic reasons' (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2021). During certain periods of the year (such as during the Spring Festival), some regions will also give local disabled people additional financial or in-kind assistance to improve their living conditions, such as cash, food, and warm clothes (The CDPF, 2012).

Social welfare includes social allowances and a cash transfer payment project, divided into two categories: subsidies for living costs and subsidies for nursing care of disabled people (Guo, 2019). However, these social allowances are much lower and cannot cover the cost of living and nursing care. For example, subsidies for living costs are from 290 to 410 RMB (about £32 to £46) per month, and subsidies for nursing care are from 150 to 300 RMB (about £16 to £33) per month in Shanghai, one of the most developed areas in China (The Shanghai government, 2024). In addition, there is another important institutional arrangement in social welfare – social preferential treatment, which refers to a series of public service discounts or exemptions implemented by the state or society for disabled people, such as the free use of city buses and other transportation (Zhang, 2015).

For disabled people, particularly, there is a special social security system for disabled people, which includes fostering services, poverty alleviation projects, and rehabilitation services (Zhang, 2019). In the cities, social welfare institutions established by governments, such as boarding fostering service institutions and day-care fostering service centres, provide support for disabled people falling into the '*three nos*' category. However, in rural areas, families and kinship networks may bear the primary support responsibility (Zhang, 2015). Poverty alleviation projects include house renovations for disabled people in rural areas with low incomes, poverty alleviation funds and loans, and constructing poverty alleviation bases for disabled people in rural areas, mainly providing jobs for local disabled persons to guarantee their income (The CDPF, 2018). Rehabilitation services for disabled people refer to the treatment, training, and assistance through traditional medicine,

enhancing their abilities and promoting their adaptation or re-adaptation to social life (Zhang, 2015).

However, scholars have identified some issues with these current social security systems. First, poverty alleviation projects designed for disabled people face problems such as a lack of projects, insufficient funds, and lack of services (Cheng, 2010). Poverty alleviation services may not have fundamentally solved the employment problem of rural disabled people, resulting in the phenomenon of rural disabled people falling back into poverty (Zhang, 2015). This situation of disabled people frequently returning to poverty has received further attention from the State Council (2021). Moreover, the proportion of disabled people who have received medical services and rehabilitation services is relatively low. According to the second national sample survey of disabled people (Leading Group for the Second National Sample Survey of the Disabled People, 2006), 75.1% of disabled people have not received rehabilitation services at all; in terms of the composition of rehabilitation personnel, there are fewer professionals, and some employees also lack professional training and qualifications (Zhang, 2015).

According to the social security systems for disabled people in China, a stable job guarantees social insurance schemes and caring responsibility relies on the family (Liu, 2014). By contrast, the other social security systems for disabled people still have many issues, and some or many disabled people may not have a chance to receive all these services (Zhang, 2015). All these may indicate the importance of having a stable job for a disabled person to support themselves, as the current social security systems are conditionally able to provide limited support. The ways in which the social security systems affect disabled people's lives, especially work choices, have not been discussed widely in the current studies. Given that, the influence of the social security systems on visually impaired people's career pathways will be further explored in Chapter 7 – Transition to work.

### **(c) Cultural contexts and social attitude**

Historically, disabled people in China were commonly referred to as *canfeiren* (残废人), a traditional Chinese word that reflects the English 'cripple' or 'invalid', literally a 'sick and useless/ineffective' person. However, the sympathy and compassion for these groups reflected by Confucianism shaped the response of communities, families, and individuals to providing service provisions of welfare and charity for these people in later imperial times, too (Smith, 2009). It has also negatively

impacted personal, cultural, and governmental attitudes towards physical and mental non-normativity in more recent times (Dauncey, 2020). Since the 1950s, a new term, '*canjiren*' (残疾人), has been commonly used by disabled people to distance themselves from the negative connotations of '*fei*', emphasising 'disabled but not useless' (Dauncey, 2020). '*can*' and '*ji*' in Chinese contexts are related to 'defective' and 'diseased' respectively, still two negative terms for disabled people, so the medical model still dominates Chinese culture (Qu, 2013). Since the 1980s, China has also been actively integrating international norms and values. After signing the CRPD in 2008 and introducing the global human rights discourse, disability terminology has also changed – from '*canji*' to '*canzhang*' (残障) more recently (Dauncey, 2020). Disability activists argue that this term better reflects the social model by changing the second character from '*ji*' ('sick or diseased') to '*zhang*' ('barriers or impediment') (Dauncey, 2020). However, the word '*canzhang*' has not yet replaced '*canji*' in official discourse (Dauncey, 2020).

Currently, influenced by socialism, in addition to directly supporting vulnerable groups through the provision of welfare and charity work, the state and society also 'encourage' disabled people to 'overcome' difficulties to transform themselves into 'productive' and 'valued' individuals rather than remain or become a burden for the state (Xi, 2017). From her research on disability in China, Dauncey (2020) has coined the term 'para-citizenship' to capture the various ways in which disabled people are isolated and marginalised, seen as different rather than 'normal', and viewed as subordinate to the 'mainstream', at the same time they are often actively incorporated into discourses of social value and economic productivity. As Dauncey (2020) has shown, while this forms a way for disabled people to 'payback' society for offering care and support, it is highly problematic. Based on this, slogans such as the 'disabled but not useless' mentioned above, as well as 'tireless self-improvement' and 'broken in body but not in spirit' are promoted by the state, the CDPF and society to remind the disabled people of the ways to become valued participants of society (Dauncey, 2020, p.78). Additionally, the State Council emphasises that disabled people 'need special care and help'; the CDPF designed a series of annual national days to draw the attention of the public to helping disabled people, while the CDPF and the media also stress the help and care given by the state and society to disabled persons (People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报), 2021). This further confirms the notion that disabled people are 'victims' of their own personal tragedy. All of this reinforces the idea of deserving disabled people and undeserving disabled people. The former are those who are determined to overcome all the adversity to contribute



to society and the economy, whereas the latter are those who are unwilling or unable (Dauncey, 2020).

Under this context and the historical influence of eugenicist practices mentioned above, discrimination and oppression are rife (Zhu, 2016). Disability is treated negatively, and disabled people are frequently treated as objects of charity and pity (Zhou, 2009). Research has shown that non-disabled children and young people, from primary to tertiary levels of education, generally do not hold a positive impression of disability and disabled people (see, for example, Zhu, 2016; Liu, 2014). Not only that, parents of disabled children, especially in rural areas in less developed areas, may not have high expectations of their disabled children, so some of them do not even send their children to school (Zhou, 2012).

In the Chinese context, the medical model of disability still dominates the Chinese culture. Disabled people are viewed as something to be 'pitied' and 'victims' due to their impairment and are considered to need help and care. At the same time, they also need to improve their productivity to prove their value and repay society. All these indicate the influence of cultural beliefs (especially socialism) on disabled people's lives. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 further discuss the ways in which culture influences visually impaired people's life choices across education and work, as well as the transition between these two.

#### **(d) Other important social changes**

##### **Digital technology**

With the opening up to technology since the economic reform, digital technology in China has developed rapidly in the last two decades. At the same time, the state plays a very important role in guiding the actions of the technology companies (Kim and Chen, 2018). Chinese political leaders and companies see digital technology and digital economy as new areas of economic growth; they try to use digital technology to solve the long-standing problems in employment services for disabled people and digital inclusion (Goggin *et al.*, 2019).

Online solutions to disability employment, such as running e-stores on the online retail platform, create more opportunities for disabled people to access the job market, increase family income, and improve their life quality (Bao *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, digital technologies provide a platform for disabled people and their families to exercise their

agency and voice, advocate for their rights and contribute to disability policies (Goggin *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, the emergence of smartphones, the popularisation of mobile Internet, and the continuous improvement of the accessibility of mobile phones and social media have been widely disseminated and have had a profound impact on disabled people (Ling *et al.*, 2018). Many social applications have also become important channels for visually impaired people to communicate with the outside world (Li, 2017). Through mobile phone and computer screen reading software, visually impaired people can easily access applications for chatting, navigation, reading and other functions. By contrast, Liu (2021) points out that before the digital technology time without social media, visually impaired people could only be confined to the social network they lived in; because of the inaccessibility and inconvenience of travel, they may have less contact with relatives and friends, less contact with the public, and less information obtained, so they may not participate into society well. All of the above show the importance of digital technology to disabled people's career development and social life. What digital technology further influences visually impaired people's life experiences is discussed in Chapter 8.

## **COVID-19**

Since the end of 2019, the outbreak of COVID-19 has had a global impact on many countries. To control and prevent the further spread of the COVID-19 virus, China announced the activation of the highest emergency response level and implemented containment measures under the Law on the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases (Qi and Hu, 2020). With the third year of the pandemic outbreak, more and more countries relaxed restrictions related to COVID-19. They began to treat COVID-19 like other common infectious diseases, especially for those where the majority of their populations were fully vaccinated (VOA, 2022). However, the Chinese government still adopted the dynamic zero-COVID policy through very high economic costs and almost became the only country to strictly insist on zero tolerance for the virus (Liu, 2022) until the end of 2022. Also, when COVID-19 cases surged, local governments may have resorted to static management of the whole city and conducted city-wide nucleic acid testing (WION, 2022). If necessary, these governments even sealed the entire city, like Wuhan in January 2020 (Huang, 2022) and Xian in January 2022. Ren (2020) points out that while reducing the flow of people and curbing the epidemic, these radical

measures following the sealing off of a city have also 'created a logistics nightmare' - residents had difficulty accessing food, medicine and other supplies, the transportation was blocked, and it was difficult for doctors and patients to commute to the hospital.

Disabled people, as a group experiencing a heightened risk of poverty and social barriers, have been shown to be more likely to have been ignored by public policy in China during this period (Qi and Hu, 2020). As with many non-disabled people, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns may result in a loss of education and employment opportunities for disabled people. However, they may also have increased education or employment opportunities through digital technologies (i.e. remote learning/working). The relevant discussion of the COVID-19 influence is given in Chapter 8.

### **2.3.2 Visually impaired people in China**

Visually impaired people in China are strongly connected with the vocational stereotype of massage work. Research, in general, has shown that this is encouraged by the state and related policies and embedded in their educational and career choices. This section first introduces the ways in which the policies have affected the development of the link between massage work and visually impaired people. It then gives more details on visually impaired people's education and employment situation.

#### **Strong link to the massage industry through policy**

Since the 1980s, China has introduced a series of policies aimed at increasing the employment rate of visually impaired people, which has profoundly impacted their career choices (Tie and Guo, 2011). In 1985, the China Association of '*the Blind, Deaf and Dumb (mang long ya 盲聋哑)*' held the first national meeting on the massage industry for the blind in Luoyang; it summarised the experience of visually impaired people in the massage industry and then promoted the massage industry for the blind across the country. In 1986, China Massage Centre for the Blind and the China Massage Society for the Blind were established in Beijing (Wang, 1986). Two years later, the China Massage Centre for the Blind joined the CDPF as a new institution and was officially named the Department of Massage for the Blind, marking the official recognition of the massage industry for the blind as a profession for visually impaired people (Tie and Guo, 2011).

In 1988, the government included the development of the massage industry for the blind as a particular task in the first Five-Year Work Outline for China's Disabled Persons from 1988 to 1992 (The State Council, 1998). It states that:

*'Among the disabled groups, it is particularly difficult for blind people to be employed. It is necessary to consolidate the existing massage institutions for blind people, build a new batch of massage institutions for them, develop [the] massage [industry] for them through various channels, run massage schools and training courses for blind people, and evaluate professional and technical positions for qualified personnel engaged in the massage area'.* (The State Council, 1998)

Since then, massage training courses for visually impaired people have been gradually established in schools across the country, and a large number of visually impaired people have entered the massage industry. However, the massage industry may limit the career choices of visually impaired groups due to the promotion of national policies (Xiong and Zheng, 2021).

## **Education**

Special education is still the most dominant way for visually impaired students to attend school. While in school, visually impaired children receive not only regular courses, but also vocational training – the Chinese medicine massage courses (*Tuina*), based on their particular impairment (Liu, 2018).

In the mid-1980s, the state comprehensively expanded vocational education for disabled people, increased the coverage of vocational education for visually impaired students and was committed to improving teaching effectiveness and teaching quality (Hua, 2021). However, there are some issues associated with vocational education for visually impaired people. First, Liao and Chen (2018) and Han (2020) highlight that the biggest issue in vocational education is its single *Tuina* subject (with no other subject options), which is based on its target job, the massage industry. According to Liao and Chen (2018), vocational education provides two options for visually impaired people. For short-term massage training sessions (e.g., three to six months), the admission

threshold is very lax - registering with a disability certificate without restricting age and education level. Therefore, the session contents are basic; these sessions only provide completion certificates at the end, which the Ministry of Education does not recognise. On the other hand, Liao and Chen (2018) indicate that vocational secondary schools offer three-year *Tuina* courses, including two-year theoretical courses and one-year internships. However, the admission threshold is very lax as well, only requiring students to be boarding and have so-called 'normal' self-care ability and intelligence. Thus, there are huge individual differences among students in vocational secondary schools, such as academic level differences and age differences (16 to 24 years old). Additionally, courses other than *Tuina*, like Chinese, music, and English, are marginalised and are not paid much attention by teachers and students (Liao and Chen, 2018). Irrespective of the qualifications or identity of the teachers or students there, almost all of them think the only career pathway is to work in the massage areas, while other pathways (e.g., going on to tertiary education or working in other areas) are not encouraged or are even ignored, labelling as 'unrealistic' (Liao and Chen, 2018, p.154). Moreover, Liao and Chen (2018) point out that many teachers in vocational schools are not qualified, and volunteers from local colleges teach some courses.

With the rise of the Learning in the Regular Classroom (*suiban jiudu* 随班就读) movement in the early 1990s (Ellsworth and Zhang, 2007), some visually impaired students whose homes were too far away (e.g., those living in rural areas) to attend special schools were allowed to study in local mainstream schools alongside their non-disabled peers (Deng and Harries, 2008). However, according to Guo (2017), students who come to classes sit alone and are excluded from class activities. Some may also not attend classes; instead, they only register at the beginning of the semester to follow the compulsory educational system (Guo, 2017), and there is usually no punishment for them or their families.

In addition, Zhang (2021) mentions that the registration process in the regular preschool needs to check the children's physical conditions, so most of these schools are unwilling to accept disabled students. Not only that, but some teachers in mainstream schools may also not have enough expertise and time to help disabled students meet their needs even if they are enrolled (Deng *et al.*, 2001). Additionally, some parents of visually impaired children are reluctant to send them to school because they think their children do not need to go to school. And thus, this will increase the burden on the entire family (Guo, 2017).

For those that do graduate from special schools, some visually impaired students will take the national entrance exam for tertiary

education - *Gaokao* (高考). *Gaokao* allows them to enter junior colleges (*dazhuan* 大专) or universities (*daxue* 大学) if they pass (Guo, 2017). *Gaokao* is considered one of the most important exams for Chinese students, but it only became available in Braille in 2014 (Chen *et al.*, 2017). In addition to access to tertiary education through *Gaokao*, the specialised college/university entrance exam (*dankao danzhao* 单考单招), set by the college/university itself, is another way for them to study in the university/college (Ma, 2014). However, only several mixed junior colleges and universities offer this special exam and limit subjects to massage and piano courses for visually impaired students.

However, only 15 visually impaired candidates registered for the *Gaokao* among the 13.42 million other students who took the test in 2024 (China Daily, 2024):

*'A total of 13.42 million students have registered for China's 2024 national college entrance examination, known as the Gaokao, the Ministry of Education announced Friday... Special provisions are also in place for students with disabilities and other special needs, according to authorities. These include the creation of Braille exam papers for 15 visually impaired candidates across 11 provincial-level regions and the provision of support for over 11,000 candidates with disabilities.'* (China Daily, 2024)

This reflects that the majority of visually impaired people or many disabled people generally are 'invisible' in *Gaokao*, which may further affect their access to tertiary education as well as subsequent life choices such as careers. In addition to *Gaokao*, the Adult Self-Study Exams are essential supplements for visually impaired or disabled people more generally to access tertiary education (Ma, 2014).<sup>14</sup>

The encouragement to enrol in vocational education and the barriers to involvement in mainstream schools and tertiary education mentioned above may influence visually impaired people's transition to education and then transition from education to work. Following these studies,

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<sup>14</sup> The Adult Self-Study Exam includes access to pursue a junior college or university diploma. This exam means candidates do not need to attend courses in person. Instead, they can take them by self-studying. Then, after passing all the courses through the exam, they can get a junior college/ university diploma.

Chapters 5 and 6 will further explore the barriers participants experienced during the education journey and massage training separately.

## **Work**

In terms of employment, although visually impaired people are engaged in a wide range of jobs, such as psychological counsellors, translators, writers, computer software developers, etc., their employment is mainly concentrated in the massage industry in China (Liu and Lei, 2017). According to Guo (2017), the working conditions in the massage industry are very poor – i.e., they work long hours every day, with irregular working hours and high labour intensity (10 hours a day); their accommodation conditions are poor, and most of them live in massage parlours because they cannot afford the housing rent; although they work hard in this industry, their wages are lower than those of their non-disabled colleagues; those who cannot receive special education or mainstream education may not be able to find a job to support themselves and need care from their parents or other siblings.

Although working in the massage field can enable visually impaired people to make a living, visually impaired women with identities of ‘disability’ and ‘female’ suffer more employment restrictions. On the one hand, Xiong and Zheng (2021) mention that this job is physical labour that requires a certain amount of body strength. For some visually impaired women with thin stature and less physical strength, the work of massage technicians cannot become their lifelong career. On the other hand, visually impaired women who work in small massage parlours have been shown to be more likely to experience sexual harassment (Xiong and Zheng, 2021). Additionally, Xiong and Zheng (2021) suggest that visually impaired women cannot escape traditional social divisions based on gender roles, and many young female massage workers see marriage as a turning point in their careers. They realise that their current jobs are not long-term solutions, so the ideal life in the future is to find a suitable partner and go back to their hometown to open a massage parlour with this partner.

Another vocational stereotype related to visually impaired people is the creative industries, particularly music, i.e., piano tuner, which also holds known challenges for visually impaired females. For example, Xiong and Zheng (2021) point out that employers are more inclined to hire visually impaired men due to the travel difficulties of visually impaired women. Tuners often need to go to the client's home to tune the piano,

but employers are reluctant to provide support that enables a female employee to go to the client's home to avoid potential risks.

Current empirical research points out visually impaired people's working situation in the massage industry and the difficulties visually impaired females have experienced. All these findings are strongly connected with the barriers that visually impaired people have faced in their career pathways. Chapter 7 explains how these barriers affect their transition to work.

### **2.3.3 Summary**

Overall, the economic reforms of 1978 have had a significant impact on China's socio-economic and cultural contexts and (welfare) policies over the past few decades. Even though the related policies state education and work rights for disabled people, there is still a big gap that exists between policies and practice, which could result in barriers for disabled people to participate in society. In addition, the state encourages vocational education for disabled people and, in combination with targeted employment, provides massage courses/training for the visually impaired to reinforce further the vocational stereotype of visually impaired people in the massage industry. It is only known that massage courses are provided for visually impaired people; many visually impaired people work in massage parlours. However, the ways in which visually impaired people transition to education and from education to work (and to massage training), and the barriers and oppression that they face under the social and cultural contexts (especially under the gap between policies and practice) during this journey, are still not straightforward. Given this, the first research question – *'How do visually impaired people in China transition into education, and then transition from education into work?'*, will be discussed in Chapter 4; the second research question – *'What social barriers do they face in education, work and as they transition between the two?'*, will be further discussed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

## **2.4 The life course**

A life course approach is a theoretical and interdisciplinary model developed in the 1960s for locating the development of individuals and families in the cultural, social, and historical contexts and for recognising



the influence of chronological age, social relationships, common life transitions, and historical changes on a person's behaviour from birth to death (Hutchison, 2011). Here I first focus on the link between the life course approach and disability studies - introduce the life course to disability through the basic concepts of the life course approach and the importance of a life course for disability and its limitations. Then, I point out three important themes related to the life course to understand disability – family, human agency, and intersectionality.

## **2.4.1 The link between the life course and disability**

### **The life course perspective**

Giele and Elder (1998, p.22) defined life course as 'A sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time,' with a particular emphasis on the link between personal perspective and the historical and socioeconomic environments where these people live. The life course perspective examines people's life histories and investigates how future life events, like work and marriage, are influenced by their early life experience (Klein and White, 1996).

To clarify how dynamic environments affect people's life course and life trajectories, Elder (1994) identified four dominant factors that affect personal development in the life course. First is *historical and geographic location*, which stresses the time and place when/where people were born. The cohorts with particular historical experiences depend on their geographic location and emphasise the multi-layers of human experiences, such as social hierarchies, cultural and spatial changes, and individual social/biological attributes. *Linked lives* focus on the interdependence of human lives. *Human agency* means that individuals can use their personal power to make choices and achieve their goals through the life course. *The timing of lives* focuses on the variations in the timing of certain life events, transitions, and social roles. Each of these factors places the lives of individuals and cohorts in the sociocultural conditions and discusses how these contexts shape and influence individual lives at each stage, how the individuals and families respond to the social changes, and how the early life events are connected to the later choices (Hutchison, 2011), which translates into an understanding of personal life experiences (Heller and Harris, 2011).

Additionally, the life course usually unfolds in the ways expected by institutions and culture (Shanahan, 2000). Individuals are likely expected to complete some life transitions through the life course in some cultures

and countries, typical roles such as leaving home, completing school, engaging in full-time and career-type work, getting married, acquiring parental status and retiring (Furstenberg *et al.*, 2004). The key questions in the life course revolve around the interrelationship of transitions, their sequence and timing, and how these experiences show distinct pathways in the life stages (Macmillan, 2005). Based on this, disability may be particularly significant in determining an individual's life course. Tisdall (2001) claims that if disability undermines an individual's ability to make a particular transition, it may also have an impact on the subsequent transitions in their life stages. However, the life course for individuals may not be a linear process; disability may not only influence the subsequent transitions, but also the simultaneous transitions for disabled people (McGrath and Yeowart, 2009).

Moreover, there are two more important aspects of the life course. The first of these focuses on *trajectories and transitions*, which are closely connected. Transitions are embedded in trajectories, involving multiple transitions (Hutchison, 2019). Trajectories refer to a series of events within the life span, such as marriage trajectories, work trajectories, and retirement trajectories, involving long-term stability and change patterns in a person's life (Elder and Johnson, 2003). Concerning transitions, it is known that everyone experiences various transitions in their roles and statuses in the life course, marked by particular life events (Elder and Johnson, 2003), such as starting to attend education, getting married, the first time to work and retiring. Hutchison (2019) argues that many transitions, like birth, marriage, divorce, remarriage, and death, are all related to family life. The occurrence of these events means the old life stage ends, and the new stage starts. Each transition will change the family's roles and statuses, usually involving family members' entry and exit (Hutchison, 2011).

The other important aspect relates to *turning points*. The interaction of trajectories and transitions can produce turning points, which may add twists and turns to the life course and could even change the direction of life trajectories (Li, 1999). Turning points usually refer to the major changes in life trajectories, such as the important life events related to opportunities and lasting changes in the person's environment and personal beliefs or expectations (Rutter, 1996). Some life events may deviate from the original track of life trajectory, while others may bring the life trajectory back to the track (Hutchison, 2011). Additionally, the same type of life event may become the turning point for some families and individuals but may not for others (Hutchison, 2011).

## Understanding disability through the life course

Traditional studies on disability have tended to separate disabled people's lives into discrete stages (Janus, 2009). These studies only emphasise a slice of life rather than treating ageing as a continuous, dynamic process that occurs through life stages (Elder and Giele, 2009), which may lead to a limited view of humanity (Settersen, 2003). Additionally, some prior disability research has tended to focus on the collective experience of disabled people as an oppressed group in society. However, the oversimplification of the collective experience is dangerous as the institution and culture affect different disabled people in different ways across place and time (Priestley, 2013). Moreover, both personal impairments *and* social barriers play important roles in a disabled person's life course (Priestley, 2010). Both two factors are embedded in disabled people's life course, and separate discussions may not help understand the developmental pathways of disabled people (Erickson and Macmillan, 2018).

By contrast, the life course perspective can be understood by multiple role pathways, including simultaneous or sequential negotiation of different social institutions (Macmillan and Eliason, 2003). A person must adopt the role-specific behaviours of a given institution, and entering a new role means adopting corresponding behaviours related to the new social institution and exiting the old role, if necessary (Erickson and Macmillan, 2018), or continuing the old role(s) sometimes. For example, some young people may play the role of students and then completing their studies can introduce the possibility of entering various other roles and institutions (such as employment, parenthood, or military). In contrast, some young people, even at school or in higher education, have jobs, are caregivers to siblings or parents, or are even parents themselves. Whether they are a student and/or moving into full-time/part-time work, and/or carers and/or parents, all need the related set of role-specific behaviours and their corresponding expectations and responsibilities and currently or further require balancing multiple roles sequentially and simultaneously. Ultimately, the combination of roles, timing, and sequencing define specific and differentiated pathways throughout the life course (Erickson and Macmillan, 2018). From the life course perspective, the life trajectories of an individual are the result of the complex interplay between human agency and generational and social forces (Elder *et al.*, 2003).

Applying the life course to disability can reconceptualise the life of disabled people as an ongoing process that cannot be fully captured by a singular 'snapshot' view from each age group (Levy *et al.*, 2005); it can

track their development while understanding the various historical and social impact (Elder and Giele, 2009). Thus, this may be the best-suited approach to understand disability through their lifetime and challenge the traditional approaches of dividing the lives of disabled persons into separate stages (Heller and Harris, 2011).

#### **2.4.2 Major themes for understanding disability through the life course**

When considering a life course approach for disabled people, many interrelated areas provide useful contextualisation on the key issues faced by disabled individuals in their life stages. A person's life course does not stand alone; people live interdependent lives. It is closely related to the past and present generations of individuals and is affected by the social and historical contexts in which life is embedded (Vikström *et al.*, 2020). This section discusses the major themes of the life course approach – family, human agency, and identity and intersectionality, to better understand disability.

##### **Family**

As I have already pointed out earlier in the Chinese case, disabled family member, especially a disabled child, may change the life trajectories of their parents and other siblings (Houle and Berger, 2017). Family members' subjective views and interactions form a network of 'linked lives' (Elder and Giele, 2009) and help explain the meaning of life with disabilities from childhood to old age (Aviel *et al.*, 2019). Parents of adult children with impairments are essential in providing help and care, often characterised by lifelong care (Jeppsson Grassman *et al.*, 2012). Parents are also troubled by their own poor health and decreased nursing ability when they get older, and they hope to create the best conditions for ageing disabled children before they become frail and die (Jeppsson Grassman *et al.*, 2012).

Additionally, siblings' relationships are unique and affect each other's development throughout their lives (Stoneman, 2005). Siblings act as physical and emotional bonds at key life stages, usually longer than the relationships between their parents and partners (Campbell *et al.*, 1999). When a sibling has an impairment, the amount and type of support provided by other sibling(s) may far exceed the range of support usually shown in other sibling relationships (Dew *et al.*, 2008). Many siblings, including young children, assume the role of caregivers for disabled

siblings (Meltzer and Kramer, 2016). In adulthood, as parents age, siblings usually expect to increase the needs for siblings with impairments (Arnold *et al.*, 2012), and even some of them will play the role of primary caregiver once the parents are no longer able to fulfil this (Wofford and Carlson, 2017).

The life course approach emphasises how early life events could affect later life through longitudinal research (Elder and Giele, 2009). Some life course researchers have applied cumulative advantage/cumulative disadvantage (Merton, 1968) to study inequality within cohorts. In this perspective, disadvantages could accumulate risk exposure, especially for vulnerable and marginalised people/families with multiple oppressions. At the same time, advantage increases exposure to opportunity, and both advantage and the following opportunity cause cumulative inequality (Ferraro and Shippee, 2009). In this way, the cumulative advantages in the family can be transferred to disabled members, which means these disabled members have more opportunities to access high-quality education, like personal tutors and the labour market, than disabled people in families with cumulative disadvantages. On the other hand, a disability could also be a condition that may accumulate disadvantages in a deprived family or even in a middle-class family in some countries.

## **Human agency**

Human agency is about the self-determination to achieve life goals related to the individual experience, personal characteristics, and the given cultural conditions (Elder, 1994). Although historical contexts and interpersonal relationships play important roles in daily life experiences, the agency of human beings must be considered in constructing people's daily lives and connecting these personal lives with the wider social environment (Elder and Giele, 2009). Elder *et al.* (2003) claim that individuals, as the active subject, are not passive recipients of their environment, constructing their own lives under the constraints of social and historical backgrounds, which have significant impacts on their short-term daily experiences and long-term future life trajectories (Ong *et al.*, 2005).

The considerable differences in time and sequence of life events experienced by cohorts can reflect the significance of human agency, especially events like getting a job, getting married, or giving birth, which are the main life events during the transition to adulthood (Li, 1999). However, these things disabled people are likely to be denied. Through

human agency, we can learn how disabled people try their best to make changes under constraints and build their lives. On the contrary, the limitation of human agency is that structural and cultural arrangements could restrict human options, and some individuals may have more choices than other members of society, which may refer to inequality (Hutchison, 2019).

In the last few decades, promoting self-determination has become an essential goal for disabled people and has laid the foundation for many legislations and practices in this field (Heller and Harris, 2011).<sup>15</sup> This is further described in the CRPD (The UN, 2008), which upholds the overarching principle of 'respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy, including the freedom to make one's own choice and independence of person'. Wehmeyer (2005, p.117) proposes that the construction of self-determination can be viewed as 'volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one's life and to maintain or improve one's quality of life'. It quickly becomes the central structure of the burgeoning independent living among disabled people, in which advocates strive for greater autonomy, social opportunities and personal control over their life course (Heller and Harris, 2011).

## **Intersectionality**

Identity responds to the question of how people define themselves. For disabled groups, as with many other marginalised groups, the issue of identity formation is critical, which is constructed by the interaction between the micro, meso, and macro levels throughout the life course (Yu and Tao, 2017). Their identity is affected by many factors, such as the type and degree of disability, social and cultural contexts, the individual's understanding of disability, etc. (Yu and Tao, 2017). Discussing disability identity can help us understand the complex relationships between individuals, society, and body characteristics (Yu and Tao, 2017).

However, disabled people may not only have one identity. Incorporating intersectionality theory may help understand diversity in life course trajectories (Warner and Brown, 2011). Intersectionality resolves feminists' concerns about multiple social identities and focuses on the differences between social groups (Davis, 2008). The development of

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<sup>15</sup> For example, California's Self-Determination Program (SDP) supports people with developmental impairments in California to have more control and freedom to choose the services and supports they need (The California Department of Developmental Services, 2013); Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 to create and extend civil rights of disabled people in the USA, and the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 in the UK (Fleischer and Zames, 2001).

intersectionality theory is strongly connected with the American feminist theory and practice, especially the Black feminist movement. Crenshaw (1989) argued that race and gender as two social identities which interact with each other frequently for a black woman should be reinforced as a consideration, rather than being understood as these two terms separately. She used intersection (a road junction) as a simple analogy to explain how the discriminations based on both race and gender intertwined and influenced each other, which finally shaped the life experience of black women.

Intersectionality recognises multiple oppressions in the life experience from multiple social identities like gender, race, class, age, disability, and sexual orientation, and focuses on the differences between social groups (Davis, 2008). Multiple identities for disabled people could change with time and place in their different life trajectories. They also impact opportunities related to the roles, social resources, and relationships that constitute their personhood in the socio-cultural contexts (Stone, 2003).

### **2.4.3 Summary**

The life course connects personal lives and the broad historical and socioeconomic environments. Using the life course to analyse disability can provide a continuous and dynamic process for understanding disabled people's lives. Since the life course is not isolated and people are interdependent, the interaction of family, human agency, and intersectionality is vital in influencing disabled people's life course. The current empirical studies barely use the life course to explore disabled lives in China. Understanding disability through the life course approach in China is one of the theoretical originalities of this study. The life course provides the theoretical framework for the first research question addressed in Chapter 4 – *'How do visually impaired people in China transition into education, and then transition from education into work?'*, and develops the finding structures throughout the thesis. Following the life course, the first four findings chapters focus on participants' five education-to-work patterns (Chapter 4), transition into education (Chapter 5), the start of massage training (Chapter 6), and then transition into work (Chapter 7). In addition, the final finding chapter relates to the agency perspective. It shows how participants encounter social barriers and oppression from the structural constraints and cultural beliefs during the journeys of education and work (Chapter 8), then addresses the fourth research question – *'How and to what extent do visually impaired people use their agency as they encounter these social barriers?'*. In addition to

the theme 'human agency' mentioned in Chapter 8, the other two important themes – 'intersectionality' (i.e., gender-related issues) and 'Family' and related cumulative (dis)advantage will be featured in the Conclusion chapter.

## **2.5 The PCS model**

Although the life course can show how the life experiences of disabled people are influenced by their personal lives and socio-cultural contexts through an ongoing process, it fails to provide a further theoretical framework to analyse the barriers that disabled people face in their life course. Given this, I applied Thompson's (2021). Here, I explain the concepts of discrimination and oppression before moving on to the PCS model. I then connect this model to disability study, identifying two main terms of disability and oppression - disablism and ableism, and indicating how disabled people are oppressed through the personal, cultural, and structural levels under these two terms. I also highlight the multiple oppressions suffered by disabled females and the intersectionality of the PCS model. After that, I will show the advantages and disadvantages of PCS and confirm its importance in this study.

### **2.5.1 Discrimination and oppression**

All societies are made up of a variety of people and are, therefore, characterised by differentiation - people are classified through complex rituals, beliefs and assumptions that are often taken for granted according to social divisions, i.e., class, race, gender, age, disability, religion, and so on (Payne, 2013). Each category has distinctive material and cultural characteristics. However, one category is usually in a better position to have a larger share of resources than another because it has more power over how our society is organised (Payne, 2013). Wherever differences exist, there is potential for unfair discrimination and oppression as it risks causing a particular individual or group to be seen as 'different' and, therefore, treated unfavourably (Thompson, 2021). Thompson (2021) highlights that the definition of 'discrimination' is a person, or group experiences a disadvantage because they are perceived as 'different' in socially and/or politically significant ways in terms of disability, gender, race, class, age, etc. When the basis for unfair discrimination and disadvantage for certain groups already exists due to differences between people, this kind of discrimination can become a source of



oppression. However, Thompson (2021) also indicates that most discrimination is unintentional - it arises due to institutionalised patterns of actions, assumptions, and use of language, rather than actions that deliberately disadvantage specific individuals or groups, although the latter is not uncommon. Following this argument, Young (1999) claims that the disadvantages and injustices suffered by some people are not due to the coercion of tyranny but to the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society.

In other words, oppression results from unfair treatment, which refers to the negative and degrading exercise of power (Thompson, 2021). Power is a fundamental part of how people interact, like the power of men over women, the power of white people over non-white people, the power of young people over old people, the power of non-disabled people over disabled people, and so on. In addition, oppression has important implications for understanding identity formation (Parekh, 2008). Identity is formed by marking differences, which occurs through symbolic systems of representation and social exclusion (Woodward, 1997). According to Thompson (2021, p. 20), various forms of oppression—whether disablism, sexism, racism, etc.—can potentially impact identity in the following ways: *‘alienation, isolation, marginalisation; economic position and life chances; confidence and self-esteem; and social expectations, career opportunities and so on’*. Thompson (2021) also points out that the connections between identity and oppression are important when considering the various sources of oppression. In addition, Taylor (2016) claims that oppression is a form of injustice that occurs when one social group is subordinated, and another is privileged. It is maintained through various mechanisms, including social norms, stereotypes, and institutional rules. A key feature of oppression is that it is perpetrated by and affects social groups (Taylor, 2016). Taylor (2016) further mentioned that oppression refers to the unfair subordination of a particular social group, which is not necessarily intentional but is caused by a complex network of social constraints, ranging from laws and institutions to implicit biases and stereotypes. In this case, there may be no deliberate attempt to subject the group in question, but the group is still unfairly subjected to this network of social constraints (Taylor, 2016).

Furthermore, discrimination and the oppression it generates are represented as aspects of the divisive nature of social structures—reflections of social divisions (Thompson, 2019). These divisions, like gender, class, age, and disability, not only occur simultaneously and affect people together, but can intersect and combine, and the ways in which they do so vary greatly (Leonard, 2015). Thompson (2021, p. 22) indicates that these intersections have profound implications for a

person's life chances. He thus claims that an integrated approach is needed. This holistic perspective acknowledges the reality of multiple oppressions and seeks to focus on the commonalities and common aspects of '*alienation, marginalisation, and discrimination*'.

### 2.5.2 The PCS analysis model

To challenge potentially oppressive and discriminatory structures and practices, Thompson (2021, p. 35-36) proposes the PCS model, highlighting that inequality and discrimination operate on three independent and interrelated levels – Personal (**P**), cultural (**C**) and structural (**S**) levels:

*'P refers to the personal or psychological; it is the individual level of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and actions. It also refers to practice, individual workers interacting with individual clients, and prejudice, the inflexibility of mind which stands in the way of fair and non-judgemental practice. Our thoughts, feelings and attitudes about particular groups in society will, to a certain degree at least, be shaped by our experiences at a personal level.'*

*C refers to the cultural level of shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing. It relates to the commonalities – values and patterns of thought and behaviour, an assumed consensus about what is right and what is normal; it produces conformity to social norms, and comic humour acts as a vehicle for transmitting and reinforcing this culture. It is therefore primarily a matter of shared meanings. It includes conventional notions of culture, such as religion, belief systems and nationality, but goes beyond these. The cultural level is a complex web of taken-for-granted assumptions or 'unwritten rules'. Culture is very influential in determining what is perceived as 'normal' in any given set of circumstances.*

*S refers to the structural level, the network of social divisions and the power relations that are so closely associated with them; it also relates to the ways in which oppression and discrimination are 'institutionalised' (firmly established through patterns of thought, language and behaviour) and thus 'sewn in' to the fabric of society. It denotes the wider level of social forces, the sociopolitical dimension of interlocking patterns of power and influence.'* (Thompson, 2021, p.35-36)

According to Thompson (2021), oppression and discrimination cannot simply be explained by personal prejudice but are also related to 'institutional discrimination'. Discrimination is a reflection and reinforcement of structural inequality. Current society is highly stratified, which means inequality is an essential part of the social order – inevitably existing winners and losers. In other words, such inequalities are woven into the fabric of society and then underpin social order. In addition, oppression does not just stem from individual actions or 'practices', and it is often incorporated into institutionalised patterns and organisational policies. To some extent, people's thoughts, behaviour, attitudes, and feelings are unique and personalised. However, we must also recognise that culture plays a decisive role in shaping our opinions and guiding our actions. PCS analysis is not deterministic. It does not mean that culture results in our behaviour, but rather that personal behaviour must be understood in the broader cultural context. More importantly, even this cultural context needs to be understood within a broader context—the structural level.

Additionally, Thompson (2021) also mentions the importance of ideology, referring to the '*power of ideas to maintain existing structures and social relations*' (p. 43). Ideology can operate in many ways—many 'ideological devices.' The establishment of 'norms' is an important part of this. Leonard (2015, p. 26) mentions that 'norms and ideas about what is normal and desirable' are what ideology is all about. In this way, ideology will determine what is 'normal' and further decide what is 'abnormal'. Thus, ideology can define deviation (Thompson, 2021). Another related term is 'natural'. It is used to present specific goals or values as right and proper via a form of legitimation by the powerful groups which become dominant (e.g., the ruling class), so any deviation from this is considered as 'abnormal'; The words 'normal' and 'natural' tend to link with strong ideological overtones, while 'the logic of discrimination is perpetuated by ideology' (Thompson, 2021, p. 45). On the other hand, an important component of ideology is the process of 'stereotyping'. Stereotypes are powerful tools of ideology, as well as a significant obstacle to the development of anti-discrimination practices.

### **2.5.3 Connection with Disability**

According to the medical model, the traditional concept of 'disability' is defined to distinguish people with a certain degree of impairment from the 'able-bodied' majority. In contrast, the social model highlights the

externally imposed restrictions on disabled people (Oliver, 2006). By identifying disability primarily as a medical issue, it becomes individualised and medicalised, which means that the social and political dimensions are ignored (Barnes *et al.*, 2010). Oliver (2009) points out that this approach to disability obscures the marginalisation and dehumanisation inherent in attitudes and policies related to disabled people, resulting in unequal power relations at the socio-political level. Additionally, such unequal power relations may further discriminate against and oppress disabled people.

Defining disability purely or predominantly through a medical lens means that social and cultural dimensions are ignored while linking oppression beyond the person with disability studies can develop the social model. Following these two models, two disability-related terms can be used to describe the discrimination and oppression that disabled people face at the personal, cultural, and structural levels. One is disablism - a concept related to discrimination against disabled people and the oppression due to preventing disabled people from participating in society; the other is ableism – emphasising the discrimination in favour of non-disabled people and the negativity of disability (Cambell, 2009).

## **Disablism**

Goodley (2014) indicates that disablism refers to a combination of social forces, cultural values, and personal biases that oppress disabled people by marginalising them and portraying them in a negative light. This combination embodies a powerful ideology whose effect is to deny disabled people to participate in mainstream social life. For example, Oliver (2009, p. 47) points out that specific barriers that prevent disabled people from participating in mainstream social life include '*inaccessible education systems, working environments, inadequate disability benefits, discriminatory health and social support services, inaccessible transport, houses and public buildings and amenities, and the devaluing of disabled people through negative images in the media films, television and newspapers.*' Thompson (2021) claims that this has significant implications for citizenship and rights; the citizenship of disabled people is undermined by this process, which also shows that it is not the impairment itself that causes disability, but the social forces of exclusion, marginalisation and oppression – disability is society's response to the impairment. In this way, as disablism can be seen to function on all three levels (**P**, **C**, and **S**), it can connect with the PCS analysis model, which

focuses on discrimination and oppression proposed by Thompson (2021, p.131):

***P** – Personal prejudice against disabled people is relatively commonplace and manifests itself in attitudes of revulsion, dismissiveness, and – paradoxically – also in misplaced charitable concern in which dignity and human rights are exchanged for patronage and good deeds. (This argument will be pursued more fully below.)*

***C** – Cultural values reflect various responses to disability and disabled people, but they are primarily negative in their orientation. Dominant cultural norms are geared towards the non-disabled majority and popular notions present disabled people as either misfits or pathetic victims of personal tragedy. They are also subject to abusive and derogatory treatment in jokes and other forms of humour.*

***S** – Disability is rarely recognized in sociology texts as a dimension of social stratification, and yet it very clearly acts as a social division. This is manifested in the way public services and buildings are provided for the ‘general public’ but often without due regard for their appropriateness for disabled people, for example, in terms of access or other facilities.’ (Thompson, 2021, p.131)*

Under this analytical framework, Thompson (2021) emphasises that disabled people are, therefore, structurally/institutionally defined as a marginalised social group, which means that they are not considered part of the ‘public’. Oliver and Barnes (2012) relate disablism to structural factors, like the workings of capitalism, the pursuit of profit, and the role of wage labour, which underpin the cultural and personal dimensions of disablism and maintain their ideologies. Therefore, PCS analysis applies equally to disablism and other forms of discrimination and oppression. One form of disablism is seeing disability as a personal tragedy and focusing on the individual level, like the perspective of the medical model, rather than considering the broader problems of how current social arrangements marginalise and disenfranchise disabled people systematically. This has become an example of ‘blaming the victim’, still focusing on a narrow and individualistic level (Ryan, 1988).

## Ableism

Disablism focuses on the production of disability, while ableism focuses on the production of ability (Jun, 2009). Ableism is the belief that impairment (regardless of 'type') is inherently negative and should be improved, cured, or even eliminated if given the opportunity (Campbell, 2009). Disability in ableism is defined by its deviation from ability, suggesting that disabled people as a group are inferior to those non-disabled (Henderson and Bryan, 2004). In addition, ableism is more than discrimination and prejudice against these individuals. It refers to the systematic advantage that non-disabled individuals have over disabled individuals (Jun, 2009). Campbell (2009, p.5) defines ableism as:

*'a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability is cast as a diminished state of being human'. (Campbell, 2009)*

The impact of ableism on disabled people leads to the unconscious internalisation of dominant values, which affects how individuals relate to themselves and others, whether at an interpersonal, institutional, or cultural level (Campbell, 2008). Although Thompson (2021) does not mention how we might use the concept of ableism directly through the PCS model, Jun (2009) mentions how ableism is deeply embedded in social construction, including the social structure/environment, culture, and interpersonal levels. On the personal level, valuing non-disability standards begins in early childhood through socialisation by parents, teachers, peers, other adults, the media, and siblings (Jun, 2009). Individuals learn to value dominant cultural beliefs at a very early age (Jun, 2009). Physical beauty and health norms, internalised oppression/privileges, systemic oppression/privileges related to impairment and disability, and ableism are all learned throughout the socialisation process. They are deeply embedded in the individual psyche (Jun, 2009). Such stereotypes, prejudice, and beliefs are often the result of implicit learning, which automatically activates without the person realising it (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995). At the cultural level, ableism is based on hierarchical thinking, which favours the values, beliefs, and attitudes of non-disabled people (McClintock and Rauscher, 2007).

Deeply held beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, promoted by public and private media, combine to create an environment that is often hostile to disabled individuals (McClintock and Rauscher, 2007). This results in ableism being deeply and subtly embedded in the culture (Campbell, 2008). From the structural level, ableism is a systematic problem. It results from systems and social structures that give advantages to non-disabled individuals over those disabled (Jun, 2009). Government policies, laws and rules, and even buildings' physical structure and design give advantages to privileged groups of most non-disabled individuals (Jun, 2009).

Identifying both disablism and ableism through the PCS model can help us explore the discrimination and oppression that disabled people experience at the personal, cultural, and structural levels. This approach is used in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, to analyse the barriers that visually impaired people face during their transition into education and then transition from education into work.

#### **2.5.4 Multiple oppressions and intersectionality**

As highlighted earlier, gender is also an essential dimension of the experience of disabled people. Within the constraints of patriarchy, social expectations of dependence generally apply to women. However, for disabled women, the stereotype of disability and dependence further reinforces the image of disabled women as people who need to be 'cared for' (Deegan and Brooks, 2017). Deegan and Brooks (2017) argued that women are 'invisible' in most disability studies, and therefore, issues of gender and sexism do not receive enough attention. Therefore, from a disability perspective, gender roles take on additional importance and place additional pressures and restrictions on disabled women in particular. However, on the other hand, Robertson and Smith (2014) point out that the study of gender and disability should not only focus on disabled women, but we should also note that sexism can oppress disabled men, too, putting them under pressure to live up to traditional expectations of masculinity. More information on intersectionality (oppression, disability, and gender) has been given in section 2.4.2 above. To explore the experience of visually impaired people, this study collected data from both men and women with visual impairments. The gender differences, especially the female-related findings, are discussed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 and highlighted in the conclusion chapter.

### 2.5.5 Advantages and limitations

The PCS analysis provides an essential understanding of discrimination and oppression from the personal, cultural, and structural levels. However, as an oppression model, it has some critiques. For example, Dominelli (1998) argues for a more flexible analysis that considers the changing nature of multiple social divisions and their meanings and the importance of a deep understanding of the importance and significance of power. In Dominelli's (pp. 128-129) view, a more comprehensive and integrated model must also take religion more fully into account, an issue that has been seriously neglected in social work discussions over the past few decades, but which is becoming increasingly important in a nation-state that is beginning to have multiple cultural identities and a diversity of religious composition. However, if the PCS model is used in China's context, religion may not play an essential role as China is not a religion-based country.

On the other hand, although few disability scholars have drawn on this model, I feel it is important because the PCS analysis can help us understand why people behave in certain ways or the way they do. It can also provide people with a basis for challenging inequality. It fully identifies what drives people to hold 'prejudices', 'norms', and 'natural.' It reminds us that society enforces many of our beliefs — helping us understand how certain things become 'the norm' and 'normality' and how we can best explain and challenge discrimination and oppression.

### 2.5.6 Summary

Wherever there is a difference, there is the potential for unfair discrimination and oppression as it has the potential to result in particular individuals or groups being seen as 'different' and, therefore, treated unfavourably. Focusing on the oppression can further analyse the barriers that disabled people face from external limitations – i.e., the personal, cultural, and structural levels. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, following the barriers participants faced, this theoretical framework provides the ways in which the visually impaired are oppressed during their transition into education, the start of massage training and then transition into work separately, and then addresses the third research question – *'How can these social barriers they face be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?'*. Additionally, except for Thompson (2021), no current research has used the PCS model to explore the barriers faced by disabled people in China or elsewhere, which is another critical originality in this study. More importantly, the link between ableism and the PCS is



also an original contribution to the application of the PCS model to disability studies.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Referring to the disability studies, the social model criticises that the medical model only focuses on personal impairments but ignores the barriers and oppression from the social and cultural contexts. These two models provide a theoretical perspective on how to understand disability and the ways in which personal impairments and social barriers affect disabled lives in their life course.

China's economic reform since 1978 has significantly impacted the socio-economic environment and related policies and affected the establishment of the CDPF. However, socialism at the cultural level still plays an important role in the social attitude toward disabled people. It proposes that disabled people be productive and valued in society. As for disabled people's situation regarding education and employment, the enrolment rate for disabled students is lower than that of non-disabled students. Especially as the school level increases (e.g., from secondary schools to universities), the enrolment rates of disabled students decrease. This low educational level results in a low employment rate. Additionally, the advancement of digital technology provides potential career and social opportunities for disabled people.

Due to the strong link with the vocational stereotype - the massage industry for the blind - visually impaired people's educational and career experiences are deeply influenced by targeted employment proposed by the state and the CDPF. In addition to the big gap between policy and practice, how visually impaired people transition into education and then transition from education into work, what barriers they have faced during this process, and how they encounter these barriers are still unknown.

To understand disability through the life course, I first use the life course approach to analyse visually impaired participants' different pathways of transition into education and then transition from education into work (see Chapter 4). This answers the study's first overarching research question:

1) *'How do visually impaired people in China transition into education, and then transition from education into work?'*

Based on the understanding of the medical model and the social model, the findings in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 discuss the barriers that visually impaired people faced during their transition into education, transition away from mainstream curricula into vocational massage training, and transition into formal work, and address the second research question:

2) *'What social barriers do they face in education, work and as they transition between the two?'*

As one of the oppressed groups, participants have experienced many social barriers – discrimination and oppression from multiple levels. Although the PCS model was developed to support anti-oppressive practice in social work, according to the current studies applying the PCS, it is also an excellent theoretical framework for analysing the interrelationship of the personal, cultural, and structural levels to see how oppression operates in society and particular relation to disability regardless of social context. The PCS can relate to disablism and ableism, the medical and social model, and multiple oppression for different genders of participants. Whatever oppression these participants experienced may have determined what was internalised and thus defined what it meant to be different (Chouhan, 2014). These life experiences and knowledge are then applied in interrelationships with others, affecting their life course. Participants from oppressed groups can choose to accept the values of their oppressors or challenge and fight back (Ward and Mullender, 1991). In this way, following the barriers identified in their journeys of education and work, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explore these barriers and further analyse the discrimination and oppression that participants have faced through the PCS model. After this, the third research question of this paper is answered:

3) *'How can these social barriers they face be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?'*

However, these participants are not just the victims of the social and cultural environments. They also have their own agency to influence their life course. Thus, Chapter 8 focuses on the ways in which participants exercise their agency to encounter social barriers or even challenge oppression and fight back, to answer the fourth research question:

4) *'How and to what extent do visually impaired people use their agency as they encounter these social barriers?'*

It returns to the life course approach and agency-related theoretical framework (see Chapter 8), discussing the ways in which participants exercise their agency under the four types of agency.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research and philosophical approach and discusses the data collection and analysis methods. Then, it moves on to the ethical approach, exploring how this study conducted the fieldwork and considering the related ethical issues. The last section discusses the researcher's positionality and reflexivity, showing how to minimise the effect of potential bias in understanding and interpreting data.

### 3.2 Research approach

The research questions in this study emphasise visually impaired people's lived experience of their transition into education and transition from education into work. These questions follow an interpretivist, qualitative approach that respects the uniqueness of every participant (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014). In the interpretivist worldview, although people believe that external reality exists, they do not expect scientific research to capture this reality objectively (Willis, 2007). In contrast, the goal of the interpretivist approach is to understand the complex world of lived experience from the perspective of those who live it (Schwandt, 1998). Thus, the interpretivist approach is a socially constructed activity, and following it, the ontological basis of this study is that the social reality is socially constructed (Willis, 2007). This is consistent with the research questions, which focus on the lived experiences of visually impaired people and then create their social realities from life transitions that may differ from each other as much as possible.

The epistemological stance of the study is that understanding people's perspectives on their experiences is central to understanding social phenomena (Della and Keating, 2008). Since the subjective meaning is 'socially and historically negotiated' (Creswell, 2013), interpretations need to include perspectives on the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which people live. This research is based on the life course perspective to understand disability, exploring the ways in which personal lives are affected by historical and socio-cultural contexts and how people encounter social barriers. This study emphasises the lived experiences of visually impaired participants and recognises the epistemic authority of these experiences, especially those that may not traditionally be represented in research. The knowledge generated by interpretivist research is inseparable from the participants and the

research context, which means that the output of interpretivist research is not universally applicable theories or laws but rich, contextualised understandings (McChesney and Aldridge, 2019). However, this study also acknowledges that making sense of experience is a process of interpretation and synthesis that links experience to understanding (Maynard, 1994). This approach supported the decision of myself (who had no defined visual impairment in this study) to research the experiences of visually impaired people. It also supports using secondary data from current empirical research and first-hand data from visually impaired participants.

To reduce potential bias toward visually impaired people (particularly important as I am a non-disabled researcher), the fundamental value of the study is the belief that visual impairments and disabilities, in general, are dimensions of human differences with socially constructed meanings instead of deficits (Creswell, 2013). This means that visually impaired people or disabled people generally have the same right as anyone else to live a good life, no matter how this is defined (Johnson *et al.*, 2010). However, there could still be the possibility of absences in the research data due to the limitations of the researcher, who has yet to experience visual impairments. The ways people use cognition are still restricted by society, and it cannot be broken just by wanting to (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994). To enhance credibility, this study directly cites the primary data to support the interpretations and compares these with other empirical literature to make connections with current studies.

Following the interpretivist, qualitative approach, this research uses a narrative approach to interviewing visually impaired men and women. The narrative approach is characterised by the life story method, in which people describe their life experiences through storytelling (Suter *et al.*, 2014). Narratives provide an ethnographic approach that allows long-term and in-depth interaction with participants to reflect and share important events in their lives, especially emphasising the events they consider most influential - usually related to later results or life events, and to explain why (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, storytelling is often seen as an effective way to provide participants with voices, especially for members of vulnerable or stigmatised groups (Sprague *et al.*, 2016), like disabled people. By capturing the voices of disabled participants, storytelling allows a researcher to collect a series of stories and understand the phenomenon under investigation. This focus reflects the principle of interpretivist, which states that understanding (rather than explanation, generalisation, or criticism) is the fundamental purpose of research (Willis, 2007). Moreover, I carried out the semi-structured interviews, giving participants more space and opportunities to express

themselves fully and allowing new ideas to be raised during the interview process based on their narratives (Knott *et al.*, 2022).

### **3.3 Data collection**

This section includes participants, recruitment procedures, and the interview process. It discusses the criteria for participants, issues in the recruitment process affected by COVID-19, and solutions to address these issues. It also explains the changes in the interview process and interview questions.

#### **3.3.1 Participants**

I aimed to recruit 25-30 participants for the study. My criteria included the fact that they had to have some form of visual impairment, they could be either male or female, they had to be born from the 1980s to the early 2000s in China, and they had to have some working experience. I decided to recruit those born from the 1980s to the early 2000s because this can ensure that their lived experiences during the transition into education and transition into education from work were all broadly taking place under similar socio-political and cultural contexts (i.e., after the economic reform in 1978 and following the establishment of the CDPF in 1988) and following critical pieces of pro-disability legislation and guidance had been put in place. I also felt it was essential to maintain gender balance among participants, as female participants may experience things differently than male participants. Moreover, given that this research explores visually impaired people's transition into education and work, working experience was an essential criterion. However, this will have excluded potentially many participants who have yet to have any form of employment, which is an acknowledged limitation of the study. According to my former work experience in an NGO that provided free services to visually impaired people, many service users had working experience, whether they wanted to or not. This would establish a joint base between participants to enable me to see how other elements of their life course panned out and why, as well as to understand better how vocational stereotypes around massage might play a role in the life course of this particular impairment group in China.

### 3.3.2 Recruitment procedures

I initially attempted to access participants through the NGO where I had work experience. Based in a large city in Henan province,<sup>16</sup> the NGO creates social networking opportunities for visually impaired people, providing free social events and digital technology training. The service users there mainly include several nearby small cities besides this large city; the NGO's online social community also covers visually impaired people in other cities of Henan province. Since leaving the organisations, I had kept in touch with the head and other employees. They agreed to act as facilitators to help me gain access to potential participants.

However, there were issues in recruiting sufficient participants when I started conducting the fieldwork. One challenge came from the COVID-19 restrictions. During this time, the NGO had only offered face-to-face services a few times due to the strict COVID restrictions since the outbreak of COVID-19. Meanwhile, I also had travel restrictions to go to this NGO and reach more potential participants. In this way, I could not conduct my fieldwork in person and could not just depend on this NGO's services to access all possible participants. Instead, I contacted the employees in the NGO and left my information about my research and contact details for them, asking them to circulate my research information. Then, they provided me with contacts who met my recruitment criteria and were interested in the interview. I had also kept some contact with previous service users I knew during work time, so I contacted them again with the NGO's permission. Then, following the snowball sampling (Noy, 2008), these service users helped me approach more participants.

The second recruitment issue is about the gender balance of participants. The ideal recruitment result should be half of the participants male and half female, or at least one-third of the participants female. However, recruiting visually impaired women was proving difficult, mainly because the percentage of working disabled women was far lower than that of disabled men due to discrimination in the labour market (Kang *et al.*, 2019). Given this, I used purposive recruitment through contacts (i.e., asking existing visually impaired participants to give my contact information to their potential peers) (Silver, 2019) and snowball sampling to recruit eligible visually impaired females. However, it was still challenging to find enough female interviewees to keep gender equally balanced. According to the existing participants, one reason is that of visually impaired people, a much lower proportion of women have received an education. This disparity starts from a young age. This

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<sup>16</sup> I only state a large city in Henan province here, rather than the city's name, to preserve anonymity for the NGO and participants.

started with (special) compulsory education because they could be more devalued by their family members due to the labels of being 'disabled' and 'a female', especially in the patriarchal family. Another is that some educated visually impaired women could be more cautious when facing a stranger/researcher who was going to collect their data, so they were quite reticent about engaging with an interviewer. As a result, I recruited 19 male and seven female participants, with a male-to-female ratio close to three to one.

The final issue is related to the initial participant recruitment criteria. I removed one initial criterion, 'those who self-identified as having finished education for at least three years', as I quickly realised that visually impaired people's life course transitions into their education and then from education into work could be more complicated than the current literature suggested. From my early interviews, it was clear that factors such as sociocultural background, the negative associations of the vocational stereotype of the massage industry, family financial circumstances, current policies, and the influence of peers and teachers, etc., have affected their life course choices. Some may drop out of primary school and then learn massage and work in the massage industry; they may return to vocational school after several years to learn massage systematically and remain students. Some of them finished their education in less than one year or are college students, but they already have many internship experiences and part-time work experiences. It became clear that it might provide insights into visually impaired students' latest educational situation and work experience. Due to this, I decided not to place a limit on the number of years since finishing their education and only keep the criteria of having working experience.

### **3.3.3 Interviewing process**

To protect the participants' privacy and reduce the risk posed to my own personal safety by conducting interviews on private premises, my initial plan was to perform as many of the interviews at the NGO as possible, as most participants would be users of the service centre and their friends; otherwise, I planned to use telephone interviews. However, due to the strict COVID-19 restrictions in 2022 and travelling restrictions in China, I interviewed the 26 participants in Chinese by telephone, and the average interview time was about two hours.

Using a narrative approach, the semi-structured interview format allows participants to tell their life stories and to further reflect on the contexts of their education and career decisions, behaviours, and experiences. The interviews were designed to explore the participants' life



experiences related to their education and work. The participants were encouraged to share their life stories since childhood, adding value to the life experiences and events they consider significant (Altan and Lane, 2018). The participants were asked to describe their entry into the education and workforce and then to tell me the life stories about their education and career trajectories, highlighting professional and personal transitions, such as changes in different stages of education, family composition, the field of work, residential relocations, and health-related events. Then, there was the follow-up discussion about the reflections on how these previous life stories link to the current pathway. I also discussed with participants how they became who/what they are now and how they reached the current point – topics such as the turn points and social barriers which affected their later life experiences would be explored.

However, with the processing of fieldwork in my second year, I made some changes during the interview. In my original outline of interview questions, I would ask them to tell me about their work situation directly at the start. However, I found this would create tension and make them nervous, as they may not know how to start to share stories and how much they should say. The first interviewee was a former colleague in the service centre where I used to work. After I interviewed him for the first time, he told me that he felt a little awkward at the start when I asked him about the work situation directly without any ice-breaking conversation. He suggested that this way of opening could have been more purposeful for visually impaired people, which would make them cautious and reluctant to talk. I did not know how to change it immediately, so I still used the same way to interview my second/third participants (whom I did not know before). During the interviews, I felt they were nervous initially but relaxed after about half an hour. After I used the first three as a test run and adjusted the interview schedule by referring to the interviewees' feedback, I found I needed to use some daily conversation as an opening to break the ice in the interview (i.e., 'How is everything going?', or 'how is your work going?'); and then use their answers as entry points to discuss their work situation, especially for those people I did not know before. After using this method, the other interviewees were less nervous at the start and willing to share more stories earlier, saving time and resulting in richer data.

In addition, my interview questions include these sections – 'recent incidents, work experience, school life, participants themselves and their families, welfare and benefits, and social barriers/challenges'. However, I did not follow the order of interview questions as I wanted the interview process to be more like a daily conversation rather than a Q&A session. I

also found that these interview questions' sections were strongly connected, and their deliberate divisions could limit interviewees' consistent story sharing. This meant I should give my participants more power and space to talk about what they wanted to share and let them co-lead the interview process if necessary. In this way, they would share life stories in their own ways, providing more realistic life experiences for me. When they stopped talking, I would join the conversation and give them feedback to encourage them to provide more details or move to another question. In the end, I would make sure we discussed all interview sections.

One advantage of this method is that the interview process was relaxing, and they were happy to share more life stories, including lots of evaluation and opinions on the incidents, as they felt this model was just like an everyday conversation. Additionally, with more freedom and space, they had many surprising findings that I had never read in any extant literature. However, the length of the interview also became unmanageable, following this way, and it could be a very time-consuming interview process. As I decided not to interrupt them, many of them took this interview as an opportunity to talk and share a lot of their experiences and stories, as well as their views on some social issues. Most of them hoped that I, as a researcher, could make their opinions known. Moreover, I have found that when I give more power to participants, I may receive some irrelevant data. When some of them spent a long time discussing unrelated things, I would respond and ask them the following question soon to keep the interview on the right track.

As the interviews progressed, I also updated subsequent interview schedules with some new questions based on the common narratives of the previous interviewees. For example, one added interview question was, 'How do you feel about massage, from when you started to learn massage to now?'. This was after I had conducted about 15 interviews, and I found that some people who work in the massage industry mentioned how their thoughts had changed about this work field. Some participants may not enjoy this industry any more after working for several years, while some could be grateful for this job opportunity. The other newly added interview questions were 'When did you realise your vision was different, or you were different?', and 'How has the pandemic affected you?'. The whole research interview questions are given in Appendix 5.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Qualitative data analysis relates to a general process of becoming familiar with, labelling, and sorting collected data (i.e., identifying codes and concepts, linking them to categories, identifying patterns from the categories, and creating themes linking similar patterns) (Kim, 2016). This section includes discussion of transcription, narrative data analysis and thematic data analysis. It explains the ways in which the narrative analysis is essential to the narrative approach in this study; it also discusses the importance of thematic analysis in better providing explanations.

#### **3.4.1 Transcription**

I interviewed each participant until all the topics in the guide were discussed and saturated; this resulted in a sample of 26 interviews. All interviews were recorded. After that, I completed the Chinese transcription and analysed data based on the Chinese transcription (simplified Chinese transcription based on Mandarin). Then, I picked their common narratives and key excerpts related to themes and translated them into English. The translation process was challenging because bilingual transcription was time-consuming, and the translation from Chinese to English might have some errors due to the differences between the two sociocultural contexts. However, I planned to leave plenty of time to complete it; I was very careful when translating Chinese terms into English and asked professional bilingual scholars to check whether the translated terms met the British context. I also did reverse translating of a small sample of the transcripts to reduce the possibility of errors in the final English translation.

#### **3.4.2 Narrative data analysis**

Following narrative interviews, this research applied narrative analysis to analyse data. Narrative analysis is an analytical framework by which researchers interpret stories told in the context of research and/or shared in daily life (Allen, 2016). It uses field texts like stories, autobiographies, journals, dialogues, interviews, and photos as analytical units to study and understand how individuals create meaning in their lives through narratives (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). From the paradigm of interpretation, the focus is on understanding how people interpret their daily life experiences (Rodriguez, 2016). Moreover, it is about identifying similar stories that emerge from different people and exploring how their

lives have been shaped by common factors (i.e., their visual impairment). Narrative analysis is suitable to use in my project as it is about understanding the life experiences of visually impaired people, and the narrative analysis can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the way visually impaired individuals obtain meaning from their life events and make sense of their previous life experiences (Riessman, 2008). Then, it helps us to link their past lives to their current lives during their life course.

After producing the raw data through verbatim transcripts, I checked the accuracy of the transcriptions by listening to the recordings again while checking the written narrative. The narrative analysis approach addressed the first research question about how participants transition into education and work. Riessman (2008) describes two aspects of narrative analysis: structural analysis and performative analysis. The former analysis explores how participants tell their stories, recognising the importance of stories as people use various forms of language to persuade audiences. The analysis explores how participants' stories are constructed to emphasise or deny agency and examine issues of reception and resistance. Applying this analysis to the research can identify how participants connect with the solid vocational stereotype - message (i.e., accept or challenge). From the performative aspect, the analysis refers to how stories are constructed, the influence of the researcher, and the 'social contexts' in which the stories are created (Riessman, 2008, p.105). Such an analysis can explore how participants' narratives are socially constructed. These data analysis methods enable researchers to trace unique plots or construct plots from different sources for each participant, valuing their uniqueness (Freeman, 2017, p.40). This is also important because it shows that participants actively defend their own personhood through storytelling and are competent storytellers (Hyden and Antellius, 2011, p.595) instead of simply the sources of data (Booth and Booth, 1996, p.56) narrated by the researcher.

Riessman (2008, p.74) argues that narrative thematic coding is guided by prior theory while seeking new theoretical insights, retaining sequences and stories for interpretation, focusing on contextual factors such as time and place, and remaining committed to a 'case-centred' approach. Since the narrative analysis is used in the first findings chapter (Chapter 4), focusing on the life course approach and participants' common narratives in their different patterns of education-to-work transition, I first reflected on the theories and concepts related to the life course discussed in the literature review. Following the existing themes from my literature review, such as the variations in the timing of certain life events and transitions and social roles, and linked lives related to the

interdependence of human lives and so on, I expanded and generated codes associated with specific stages, sequences, and movements in the stories. For example, 'being rejected by the preschool', 'attending special schools/mainstream schools', 'having no formal schooling', 'getting massage training', 'working in the massage/non-massage industry', and so on. During this process, I mainly focused on the key terms the participants used, why things happened, how they understood their stories and their comments/attitudes to the events concerned.

### 3.4.3 Thematic data analysis

The thematic analysis is applied to qualitative research, focusing on themes or patterns of meaning in the research data (Daly *et al.*, 1997). This analysis emphasises the organisation, detailed descriptions of the data set, and theoretically sound interpretations of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Additionally, thematic analysis is not only counting phrases or words in texts but also exploring explicit/implicit meanings of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). According to Clarke and Braun (2013), thematic analysis can be used to explore research questions about a) the lived experiences, opinions, behaviours, and practices of participants; b) the factors and social processes affecting and shaping particular phenomena; c) the explicit/ implicit norms and 'rules' that are dominant in the particular practices; and d) the social construction of meaning and representations of social objects in particular texts and contexts. Applying the thematic analysis in this research can explore more implicit details of visually impaired people's familiar narratives (i.e., learning massage) and their distinct life experiences (i.e., challenging the social norms as a visually impaired person).

Given that, Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 applied the thematic analysis, exploring the explicit and implicit meanings of the barriers that participants faced during their transition into education and transition from education into work (Chapters 5, 6, and 7), and the agency that participants exercised to encounter social barriers (Chapter 8). After the thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the other three research questions are addressed: '*What social barriers do they face in education, work and as they transition between the two?*', '*How can these social barriers they face be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?*' and '*How and to what extent do visually impaired people use their agency as they encounter these social barriers?*'.

Coding is the primary process of developing themes by identifying items of analytical interest in the data and labelling those items with coding labels (Braun and Clarke, 2013). According to Braun and Clarke

(2006), I applied two approaches to thematic analysis, including codebook approaches - coding following theme development, a deductive process of assigning data to predetermined themes, and reflexive approach - coding precedes theme development and themes are constructed from the codes. I first followed the themes related to the pre-existing theories (i.e., the social model and the medical model, the PCS model, and the agency-related framework) to generate the coding after becoming familiar with what the data entails. For example, I focused on the themes related to oppression and discrimination, like 'being treated differently' and 'unfavourable treatment', as well as themes related to the three levels (the personal, cultural, and structural levels) of disablism and ableism, like 'personal prejudice', 'social norm', 'stereotype' and 'inaccessible environment'. On the other hand, as I received such complicated and rich data, the themes developed from pre-existing theories were not enough to generate all the coding themes. Thus, I combined the reflexive approach and generated coding about themes that came up frequently in different interviews; based on similar coding, I constructed themes which capture a common meaning organised around a central concept or idea (Braun and Clarke, 2014). For example, in the raw data, I identified many participants with experience in complicated feelings of massage and working in the massage industry, so I generated the coding, like 'sense of accomplishment', 'feel useful', 'stable life', 'tired', 'no options', 'grateful', etc.; all these codes gave rise to the theme of 'feelings about massage'.

### **3.5 Ethics**

This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Nottingham University School of Sociology and Social Policy. How to collect data and ensure safety under COVID-19, participant information forms and informed consent, managing and storing data, confidentiality, and anonymity were all considered. The relevant documentation can be found in the appendices: ethics application (Appendix 1), participant information sheet (Appendix 2), and consent form (Appendix 3).

The ethical application form discussed the data collection plan during COVID-19 in China – interviewing visually impaired people face-to-face and/or by telephone. However, all interviews were conducted in 2022 by telephone due to COVID-19 travelling restrictions. However, there are several benefits of conducting telephone interviews. This suits participants for whom in-person meetings are inconvenient or who feel nervous or uncomfortable meeting me in person at their workplaces or other public places to tell their life stories, as I am a stranger to some of

them. Additionally, visually impaired people are used to recognising people's voices. Voice chat may be the most convenient way for them to keep in touch with other people. Moreover, telephone interviews are safe and convenient for both the researcher and the participants. They can be conducted remotely (i.e., at home), which will avoid potential risks when travelling or meeting in unfamiliar venues, especially during the pandemic.

Signing the informed consent form was done in several ways, depending on their technology use, preferences, and the conditions of the pandemic. One way for visually impaired participants who can access the technology and have an email account to receive this form (translated into Chinese) is to sign electronically, as they can proficiently use the built-in screen reading mode of the system on the computer or the phone. The second way suits people with low vision who have received regular education and recognise Chinese characters but need access to digital technology. They could sign their names on the written materials in person with lighting and magnification; otherwise, I would get their audio-recorded oral consent by incorporating the information sheet into the interview schedule. In this case, I read the documents in full to them at the beginning of the interviews. During this process, I ensured they understood and agreed to participate in the study voluntarily. Such procedures were recorded and shown in the interview transcripts. I also let them know that if they decided to participate, they could withdraw at any time and without a reason. This would not affect their rights.

This research involves visually impaired people, but I noted in the ethics form that being visually impaired does not necessarily mean being vulnerable. As in my previous interview experience with visually impaired people, my participants were all over 18 and were capable of giving informed consent and voluntary participation by themselves; I did not think a visual impairment of my participants should affect their capacity in these two respects. Additionally, the interviews were not planned to touch on sensitive issues. I did not plan to put any participants at risk. Instead, I tried to avoid arousing psychological stress or anxiety. All participants were told they could withdraw from the study or refuse to discuss topics. After the interview, I also showed that I could provide information on available online services, telephone hotlines or other consulting services if the participants felt they had been affected by anything raised in the interviews.

For research data management, I first recorded the interview process on my phone. After each interview, I transferred the voice file to my University OneDrive folder. Once I uploaded a recording to OneDrive, I deleted the original recordings from my phone. For more security, I

renamed the recording files with sequence numbers, like No.1 to No.7. After the transcriptions process on my personal laptop using Microsoft Word, I deleted the recordings in those folders. In the transcription, the recording data, including the name, were anonymised, and identifying information was stripped to respect the privacy of my participants. No one is able to access my laptop because the password is showing on the computer. The files were password protected again and named with a number for double security. The data will be kept securely for seven years. After this time, the data is disposed of securely (at the end of September 2029). To prevent data loss due to personal laptop damage, these verbatim transcripts were uploaded and stored securely using log-in OneDrive, and only I can open them. The deletion dates of verbatim transcripts are the same as above. Once I updated the transcripts in OneDrive, I deleted the original transcripts on my laptop.

### **3.6 Positionality and reflexivity**

As a non-disabled researcher, I can be affected by my subjective experience, prior experiences, assumptions, and beliefs. I have used reflexivity in the research process to minimise the effect of my potential bias in understanding and interpreting the data. According to Dowling (2006), reflexivity in qualitative research refers to an analytical focus on the researcher's role in qualitative research; the researcher engages in ongoing self-criticism and self-evaluation, explaining how their own experiences have (not) influenced each stage of the research process. Walsh (2003) defines reflexivity as looking back (or considering) itself or a person's self. Olmos-Vega *et al.* (2022) argue that reflection is a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices rooted in respect for and valuing subjectivity; through these practices, researchers consciously critique, evaluate, and assess how their subjectivity and context influence the research process. Reflection involves engaging participants in reflective dialogue with the researcher throughout the life of the project; this prompts the researcher to confront, revise, and hone their interpretations of the data (Smith, 1994). According to Walsh (2003), the reflective process has four overlapping and interacting dimensions – personal reflexivity, interpersonal reflexivity, methodological reflexivity, and contextual reflexivity (see more details in the following paragraphs). Applying Walsh's reflective process, this section mainly focuses on the most influential decisions and dynamics in the research process, highlighting the personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual dimensions.



### **3.6.1 Personal reflexivity**

Personal reflection refers to researchers reflecting on and clarifying their expectations, assumptions, and (un)conscious responses to the context, participants, and data (Walsh, 2003). It should occur continuously throughout the entire investigation process and be intertwined with all aspects of the project, from its conception to its research output (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2022).

Before the research, I realised that many visually impaired people had strong connections with their vocational stereotype – massage, whether they were male or female, born in an urban or rural area. I came across some of them in my previous job, which provided a good observation ground of the challenges they faced. For example, I was aware that they faced difficulties in attending mainstream and lacked vocational choices; I was also aware of the different life experiences of men and women. I understood that most of them learned massage in vocational schools or colleges and then worked in the industry. Based on these initial observations, the initial research proposal and related research questions focused on visually impaired people's transition into education and work, the barriers they experience and how they use their agency to deal with them.

In addition, I often felt emotional for a while myself after I collected participants' narratives, as their stories were often difficult to hear, particularly for someone with no direct experience of disability. During the interview, participants shared their life experiences related to loss and grief; for example, continually being rejected by mainstream schools, continually seeing doctors and getting eye treatment, dropping out of schooling, being considered to be pitiful by many non-disabled peers, learning massage at an early age, experiencing sexual harassment, etc. These conversations helped me to understand their frustrations and stimulated me to take a more critical approach to the topic. At the same time, I started to think about why visually impaired people experience many barriers and unfair treatment during their life course.

### **3.6.2 Interpersonal reflexivity**

Interpersonal reflection is related to how relationships in the research process influence the context, the people involved, and the results, especially the relationships between researchers and participants; a thoughtful approach to this reflection involves recognising and appreciating the unique knowledge and perspectives of participants and focusing on their influence on the research process, such as how they

interpret research questions (Walsh, 2003). In addition, it also reflects on and documents disagreements among researchers on key research questions (i.e., differences in researchers' paradigms and perspectives) (Leggatt-Cook *et al.*, 2011).

Although researchers often occupy positions of power relative to participants as interpreters of their perspectives and arbiters of valid information (Vega *et al.*, 2022), I always attempted to maintain an equal position of power towards the interviewees. Before the interview, I told participants it was like a daily conversation and story sharing; my role was listening to their stories. During the interview, I only started the topic related to education and work. Then, as mentioned in section 3.3, I often gave more space to participants and let them share their experiences in their own way. After hearing their stories, I joined the conversation and showed them my feedback to smooth the conversation. I was also incredibly impressed by a female participant who said I was the only non-disabled peer willing to listen to her stories for a long time, and she felt happy about the conversation. Conversely, I appreciated her unreserved sincerity in sharing her detailed feelings and life experiences.

### **3.6.3 Methodological reflexivity**

Methodological reflexivity requires researchers to critically consider the nuances and implications of their methodological decisions (Walsh, 2003). Researchers must reflect on how their methodological choices mesh with their paradigm and theoretical or conceptual framework, continually making decisions and reacting to their data or unforeseen circumstances (Varpio *et al.*, 2020).

The initial theoretical framework was simply a life course approach, focusing on the participants' transition from education to work, the barriers they faced, and their different agencies to these social constraints. However, by working on data analysis in year three and writing the findings chapter following the life course framework and narrative analysis, I struggled with trying different approaches to structure the findings chapters in a critical way. It became clear that one theoretical framework was insufficient to explain further the common discrimination and unfavourable treatment participants faced. Thus, with the recommendation of my internal examiner, I explored the potential of integrating the PCS model. As discussed earlier, I believe that this model has enabled me to better explore social barriers, further discrimination, and the oppression that participants experienced during the transition into education and work. In addition, thematic analysis was applied to identify more explicit/implicit meanings of the data.

### **3.6.4 Contextual reflexivity**

Contextual reflexivity refers to situating a particular project within its cultural and historical context (Walsh, 2003), highlighting how research questions and their answers are embedded in and influenced by social assumptions and fields of practice (Naidu and Sliep, 2011). I understood the importance of culture and social structure during my data collection and analysis. All the participants were born after the economic reform in 1978, grew up with the establishment of the CDPF, the introduction of the one-child policy, and the development of digital technology, and were affected by the vocational stereotypes of massage and COVID-19. All of these were considered in the research questions, and their answers showed the impact of these contexts on their life courses. In addition, according to the PCS model, participants' life courses are not only influenced at the structural and cultural levels but also by the personal level of people around them - i.e., personal prejudice that is affected by the culture and structure). Locating participants' life experiences within a broader structural and cultural context allowed me to understand better their life choices (i.e., why did they end up in massage?) and further interpret the answers from their perspectives, which also fit with the social model of disability.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Through telephone interviews, this study collected the life stories of 26 visually impaired people born between the 1980s and the early 2000s and who have working experience. Half are from the same province where the NGO is located, and the other half are from different provinces across China. Taking interpretivism as the epistemological assumption, I decided that the life course approach with narrative data analysis would best understand how participants transitioned into education and from education into work (see Chapter 4). To explore the barriers participants experienced during the transition into education, the start of massage training, and the transition into work, I applied thematic analysis in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Finally, applying thematic analysis under the four types of agency framework, Chapter 8 explores how participants used their personal agency to encounter barriers differently under similar social constraints and cultural beliefs.

## Chapter 4 Five Patterns of education-to-work transition

### 4.1 Introduction

Compared with most non-disabled people, the transitions into education and work of visually impaired people (and disabled people more generally) around the world are more challenging (Tschanz and Powell, 2020). My analysis of the narratives collected from 26 participants has confirmed this to be equally true of China. In this chapter, I show how the education received by the study participants is significantly different from that received by most non-disabled people. This means that visually impaired people are treated differently during their education journey (more details are given in Chapters 5 and 6). Of the 26 participants, some left school during the primary level, some went on to higher education, and one never went to school at all. Their points of entrance to formal education also varied – of the 25 that went to school, some started in special schools, while others started in mainstream schools. Even those who began in mainstream school rarely managed to stay the course there – some transitioned into special education, while others left education altogether. What my analysis also shows, however, is that, whatever their path, the vast majority were introduced to massage training during their school years or through short-term training projects and then worked in the massage industry at some point in their lives. This chapter focuses on the first overarching research question – *‘How do visually impaired people in China transition into education, and then transition from education into work?’*. By reporting the participants' experiences, it sheds light on how people with visual impairments in China transition from education to work. The chapter is driven by the following sub-questions:

- How and when did the participants start receiving formal education?
- Did they study under the regular curricula or vocational curricula?
- Did all participants get massage training through special education?
- What were the main pathways that led to massage work or other careers unrelated to massage?

The first part of the chapter contains demographic information as well as details of their access to education and work training. This is followed by some exemplar cases to illustrate five patterns of their education-to-

work transition identified from the analysis. The analysis demonstrates that massage training is inevitable for most visually impaired people, whether as a skill of learning or as a job. Although existing literature shows that many visually impaired people in China have few career choices but to work in the massage industry (Tie and Guo, 2011; Xiong and Zheng, 2021), there is little discussion about how they decide to, or in many cases have no option but to, take this particular career path. This chapter shows in stark detail the processes that make this happen.

## **4.2 The participants – an overview**

### **4.2.1 Demographic characteristics**

Figure 3 shows the participants' age, gender, levels of visual impairment before preschool age and at the time of the study, levels of education, types of work, and marital status. To protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms are used. According to participants, being fully blind or partially sighted was the main reason that they were rejected by the local mainstream preschool/primary school. For some, vision deterioration and gradual sight loss were key features that impacted their education and work journeys. Given this, the visual impairment levels presented here include both the levels before their preschool age (usually before the age of three and five), compared with their current levels during this study. According to the CDPF (2006), people's visual impairment is assessed by hospitals to be at a certain level in categories such as 'low vision' or 'blind'. However, only one participant mentioned his 'disability level' is level 2; the others did not give the details of it. Mostly, they used the words 'born with no vision' or 'not sighted' to describe their visual impairments; some used the words 'partially sighted (*banmang* 半盲). Given this, I used 'no vision' and 'partially sighted' to describe participants' visual impairments in Figure 3.

All the participants were born after the economic reforms were introduced in 1978: half of the 26 participants were born in the 1990s, ten were born in the 1980s, and the rest in the early 2000s. They all grew up in school age when services for disabled people were gradually developed after the establishment of the CDPF in 1988. As will be shown later, despite these similarities, their life experiences and transition pathways from education to work differ in some respects but also retain similar features.

**Figure 3: Participants' basic information**

Case	Age range	Gender	Visual impairment levels before preschool age	Current visual impairment levels	Education level completed	Type of work	Marital status
Ouwen	20-30	Male	No vision	No vision	Bachelor's degree in massage course	IT	Single
Dong	30-40	Male	Partially sighted	Partially sighted	Undergraduate student in massage course (part-time)	Massage	Married
Duo	30-40	Male	Partially sighted	No vision	Bachelor's degree in massage course	Massage	Single
Lougen	20-30	Male	Partially sighted	No vision	Current junior college student in massage course	Massage (part-time)	Single
Hagang	30-40	Male	No vision	No vision	Tuina vocational secondary school	Massage	Married
Han	20-30	Male	No vision	No vision	Bachelor's degree in piano course	Art; English tutor (part-time)	Single
Jianshan	40-50	Male	Partially sighted	No vision	Drop out during primary school	Massage	Married
Haidi	30-40	Female	No vision	No vision	Tuina vocational secondary school	Massage	Married
Kun	20-30	Male	No visually impaired	No vision	Drop out during the primary school	Massage	Single
Le	20-30	Female	No vision	No vision	No formal education experience	Massage	Married
Lili	20-30	Female	No vision	No vision	Bachelor's degree in piano course	Piano tuning	Single
Ling	30-40	Female	Partially sighted	No vision	Tuina vocational secondary school	Massage	Partner
Lee	20-30	Male	Partially sighted	No vision	Tuina vocational secondary school	Massage	Single
Mao	20-30	Male	No vision	No vision	Drop out during the Tuina vocational secondary school	Massage; NGO	Single
Zhou	30-40	Male	No vision	No vision	Tuina vocational secondary school	Massage	Single
Lisha	30-40	Female	No vision	No vision	Drop out during the special primary school	Massage	Married
Tina	30-40	Female	Partially sighted	No vision	Bachelor's degree in massage course	Teaching massage	Single
Shiwen	30-40	Male	No vision	No vision	Drop out during primary school	Art	Single
Dan	30-40	Male	No vision	No vision	Junior high school	Massage	Married
Jack	20-30	Male	Partially sighted	Partially sighted	Tuina vocational secondary school	Massage	Single
Wei	20-30	Male	Partially sighted	No vision	Tuina vocational secondary school	Massage	Single
Wenqiang	20-30	Male	Partially sighted	No vision	Current undergraduate student in massage course	Customer service/massage (part-time)	Single
Xian	20-30	Male	No vision	No vision	Tuina vocational secondary school	Art	Single
Xiaogao	20-30	Male	Partially sighted	Partially sighted	Drop out of the junior high school	Massage; NGO	Single
Xiaolei	20-30	Male	No vision	No vision	Tuina vocational secondary school	Massage	Single
Kaili	20-30	Female	No vision	No vision	Junior college in piano course	Library	Single

The ratio of males to females is close to three to one: 19 participants were male, while seven were female. However, according to the Second National Sample Survey of Disabilities in China (The Leading Group for the Second National Sample Survey of Disabled People, 2006), among the disabled population in China, men account for 51.55%, and women account for 48.45%. There is not much difference in the proportion of disabled men and women. The imbalanced ratio of male-to-female participants could align with the generally low participation rate of female students or workers with visual impairment in schools and workplaces. For example, Xiaogao said that while there were 14 students in his class in the primary special school, only two were girls. Liao and Chen (2018) also mention the gender imbalance in special vocational schools (e.g., three girls and 23 boys in year one). Additionally, many male participants said that there were limited visually impaired females or even no females working in their massage parlours.

In terms of their levels of visual impairment, 14 participants had no vision at all before preschool age, 11 participants described themselves as being partially sighted, and one – Kun – had no visual impairment at all before the age of eight. By contrast, only three participants describe themselves as being partially sighted currently. The level of visual impairment directly affects their chance of being accepted by mainstream schools and how well they can adapt to the learning environment that may not provide the support they require. This suggests that the differences in participants' visual impairment *before or during* their formal education trajectories might lead to different life pathways. For example, Lili said the local mainstream preschool rejected her as she had no vision; Dong, who is partially sighted, dropped out of the mainstream university because he could not adapt to the learning environment there (no support for students with special needs).

Nine people finished schooling after *Tuina* vocational secondary school, nine other participants had a chance to access tertiary education, including seven graduates and two current students, and some left schools during compulsory education. Their different levels of education through various education trajectories mean that their transition from education to work can vary greatly.

Regarding their marital status, six had married, one had a stable partner, and three had experienced divorce. The other 19 participants were still single at the time of the interview. The marriage rate overall is 23.07%. This is far lower than the overall marriage rate of Chinese people born in the 1980s and 1990s (56.4%) (Global Times, 2017). However,

there are more single males (84.21%) than female participants (42.86%). It suggests that visually impaired people, especially males, may find it more challenging to enter long-term relationships and marriage. Family formation may even be absent in the life course of most visually impaired people. This situation can connect to the findings reported by Xie (2014) and Liu (2017) that disabled men may not be able to take the role of raising the whole family, and they may find it challenging to get married, especially in rural areas, when they do not have a stable job or are unemployed. However, this argument is slightly different from that of this study. Most male participants were engaged in the massage industry and had relatively stable jobs; however, they still faced difficulties finding a partner and getting married. More importantly, this study identifies that those visually impaired participants who were married were all married to partners with visual impairment. This is absent in the current empirical research.

#### 4.2.2 Participants' education and work trajectories

Due to the participants' diverse life courses, it has been a very complex task to organise all 26 participants' transition information at a glance. Figure 4 is designed to provide an overview of participants' transitions, starting from entering education and then moving from education to work. It shows where they start formal education, what paths they (sometimes) twist and turn through, and where they eventually end up. The use of colour coding helps to illustrate the differences between mainstream, mixed, and special forms of education and between massage work and other forms of work:

- **Green cells:** Special schooling
- **Orange cells:** Mixed education<sup>17</sup>
- **Blue cells:** Mainstream schooling
- **Purple cells:** Massage industry work
- **Yellow cells:** Work unrelated to massage
- **Grey cells:** These participants were massage students who had no formal jobs at the time of the interview
- **Shaded cells:** Participants dropped out from school education or training (those cells without shading indicate completion of this stage of education)

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<sup>17</sup> Disabled and non-disabled students together



**Figure 4: Participants' transitions from education to work**

Name	Preschool	Primary school		Junior high school		Secondary education					Tertiary education					Work		
	Minstream preschool	Special primary schools	Mainstream primary schools	Special junior high schools	Mainstream junior high schools	Special senior high schools	Special Tuina vocational schools	Mixed Tuina vocational schools	Mainstream senior high schools	Mainstream vocational schools	Special junior college (piano)	Mixed Junior college (massage)	Mixed university		Mainstream university	Massage	Unrelated to massage	No formal job
													Massage	Piano				
Ouwen																		
Tina																		
Ling																		
Mao																		
Xian																		
Haidi																		
Hagang																		
Dan																		
Xiaogao																		
Lili																		
Xiaolei																		
Zhou																		
Jack																		
Kali																		
Lisha																		
Shiwen																		
Wei																		
Han																		
Lougen																		
Wenqiang																		
Duo																		
Lee																		
Dong																		
Kun																		
Jianshan																		
Le																		

In this way, the data's organisation reflects the participants' life trajectories as they move through the expected stages of education and onto work. Five stages are presented in participants' educational trajectories: preschool, primary school, junior high school, secondary education, and tertiary education.<sup>18</sup> Only some participants experienced all these stages.

Different types of education provisions have been identified, including special education, mixed education, and mainstream education. For example, in primary and junior high school education, there are 'special primary schools' and 'mainstream primary schools', 'special junior high school' and 'mainstream junior high school'; for secondary education, there are schools with the regular curricula in the senior high school and those teaching vocational curricula in the vocational schools, including the 'special senior high school', 'special *Tuina* vocational schools', 'mainstream senior high school', 'mainstream vocational schools', and a mixed education choice – 'mixed *Tuina* vocational senior high school'. The findings show that participants often switched between the various types of provision. As will be discussed later in this and the following Chapters 5 and 6, the choice of which school to attend depended on many factors, such as the attitude of the school, the connections of parents, the levels of visual impairment of the participants, and massage training being the only available option, etc.

Regarding tertiary education, some participants attended junior colleges (*dazhuan* 大专) or universities; these might be special junior colleges, mixed junior colleges, mixed universities, and mainstream universities). However, the options for special or mixed tertiary education courses were limited to piano or massage courses for these participants (the barriers to attending tertiary education are discussed in Chapter 6).

For the working trajectories, this figure shows three options: massage work, to which almost every participant has a connection; careers unrelated to massage, such as piano tuner and online customer service; and no formal job yet (the two participants with part-time working experience in the massage industry here are currently taking massage courses in tertiary education during this study). However, as shown in Figure 4 (the shaded cells), not all participants who started in an educational stage could complete the courses and some drop out.

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<sup>18</sup> In China, the usual age for starting preschool education is three or four years old; primary school is six or seven years old; junior high school is 12 or 13 years old; secondary school is 15 or 16 years old; and higher education is 18 or 19 years old.

To analyse the participants' diverse and complex experiences, I identified distinct pathways in their transitions into education and transition from education into work by looking at their entry into education and by looking at their career trajectories.

In terms of participants' *entry* into education, there are three main pathways: starting in special education, starting in mainstream education, and having no formal education at all. Figure 4 shows that the majority (16 participants) started their formal education in special primary education directly without preschool training. In comparison, nine participants began formal education in mainstream schools, and one participant never enrolled in formal education. However, regardless of where they started school, most participants (22 of 26) got massage training and had work experience in the massage industry.

Due to this, the second way to identify their patterns from education to work is by career trajectories: a typical pathway and three atypical pathways. The former pathway involves the way that most people have working experience in the massage industry, following a predominantly non-mainstream form of education. 19 participants with working experience in the massage industry follow the typical pathway, including two current full-time tertiary-education massage students during the study. The three atypical pathways cover those participants whose transitions are less straightforward, like studying in special education but working in an area unrelated to massage, those mainly studying in mainstream education but working in the massage area finally, or those having no formal education but working in the massage industry. Xian, Lili, Kaili, and Han all avoided massage work in the end despite having had their entire/most education in special institutions; Duo and Dong ended up working in massage area despite having the entire/most education in mainstream education; Le had no formal education but worked in the massage industry. However, regardless of typical or atypical pathways, almost every participant received massage training either through formal education (e.g., vocational courses) or informal education—e.g., a short-term massage training program or apprenticeships in a massage parlour.

Figure 4 also reveals the very low preschool training rate, especially for participants starting in special education. Only four participants (Lougen, Wenqiang, Duo, and Han) had formal education experience in preschool. Another occurrence of note is that the dropout rate for participants is high (see shaded boxes). 13 participants (50% of them) dropped out of school. This situation happened more frequently in the

compulsory education stage – primary and junior high school. Due to this high rate of dropouts, their attendance rate in tertiary education is subsequently lower than that of other educational stages. More discussions are given in the conclusion section.

While this figure is extremely useful in showing the broader patterns, it does not reveal their age of starting education, when they dropped out of formal education or went back into it, or how some of them changed work areas over time. Understanding the timeline and the sequence of each life choice is equally important. Due to this, the following section gives more details to illustrate how some participants went through these five different patterns: three are related to their entry point to education and two concern whether they have a typical or atypical career trajectory.

### **4.3 Five patterns of education-to-work transition**

This section explores three patterns of participants' transition into education and two patterns of their transition into careers. Under each pattern, a figure reminds readers of the participants' paths into education and work. The colour coding is the same as in the last section. The meaning of colour can also be easily identified through the texts in those figures.

#### **4.3.1 Pattern One - Participants starting in special education**

Sixteen participants started their education in the special school system—the special primary school. However, none of them had formal preschool education experience. Preschool education in China targets children aged 3 to 6 years and is usually provided in three-year stand-alone kindergartens or one-year pre-primary classes in primary schools (Su *et al.*, 2021). No attendance at preschool for many visually impaired participants means that they are excluded from preschool education, compared with expectations more generally. Additionally, the ages of these participants entering and leaving the school system varied. Five participants (Jack, Hagang, Lisha, Zhou, and Ling) entered Grade 1 at or after 11 years old. This is *much* later than most non-disabled peers, as children usually enter primary school at six or seven in China (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1986). After graduation or dropping out of school, 13 participants in this pattern worked in the massage industry; the only exceptions were Xian, Lili, and Kaili, who worked in the creative industries, especially music, or the library. However, some of these 13 participants attempted to switch

careers from the massage industry. For example, Ouwen got to work in the IT area to design online games for visually impaired people; Tina first changed her jobs at a mainstream hospital as a *Tuina* Physician and then at a special *Tuina* vocational school as a teacher.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 5: Pattern one – Participants starting in special education**

Name	Preschool	Primary school		Junior high school		Secondary education					Tertiary education					Work		
	Mainstream preschool	Special primary schools	Mainstream primary schools	Special junior high schools	Mainstream junior high schools	Special senior high schools	Special <i>Tuina</i> vocational schools	Mixed <i>Tuina</i> vocational schools	Mainstream senior high schools	Mainstream vocational schools	Special junior college (piano)	Mixed Junior college (massage)	Mixed university		Mainstream university	Massage	Unrelated to massage	No formal job
													Massage	Piano				
Ouwen																		
Tina																		
Ling																		
Mao																		
Xian																		
Haidi																		
Hagang																		
Dan																		
Xiaogao																		
Lili																		
Xiaolei																		
Zhou																		
Jack																		
Kaili																		
Lisha																		
Shiwen																		

<sup>19</sup> The *Tuina* physician is related to a Chinese medicine physician in the Chinese medicine hospital, providing professional treatment like *Tuina* (massage), bone setting and focusing on rehabilitation work.

Although they share a common entry point to education, their educational transitions to work differ: Nine participants' education process was continuous, and they worked directly after graduation; by contrast, four participants dropped out of school, finished their formal education and started to work, while the other three participants experienced dropping out but returned to schooling after working for a while. The following paragraphs give details of their different transitions.

Nine participants (Ouwen, Tina, Ling, Xian, Haidi, Hagang, Lili, Kaili, and Jack) worked immediately after completing formal education at a *Tuina* vocational secondary school or completing tertiary education by taking massage courses. However, Ouwen, Tina, Ling, and Jack differed slightly from the other five participants. Ouwen and Tina attended special senior high school and followed regular courses, whereas the majority of participants took massage courses at vocational school at the same educational stage. Tina also had the experience of studying in a mainstream primary school after one year of studying (Chinese) Braille at a special school.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, Jack and Ling dropped out of primary school at Grade 4 at 15 and junior high school at Grade 9 at age 20, respectively (typically, people would complete Grade 4 between nine and 11, and Grade 9 between 14 and 16). Then, they were still able to go directly to the special vocational school to attend massage training. This reinforces the findings of Liao and Chen (2018) that the admission requirements of *Tuina* vocational school for the blind are low – i.e., registering with a disability certificate without restricting age and education level.

Four participants (Lisha, Xiaogao, Mao, and Shiwen) dropped out of schooling at various points and never returned to the formal education system. Instead, Lisha, Xiaogao, and Mao received massage training outside of formal education and then worked in the massage industry, or like Shiwen, received homeschooling and then worked in a career unrelated to massage. Lisha started special school at 12 (typically, people would attend primary school at six or seven) and dropped out of primary school at Grade 2 (i.e., earlier than would normally be expected) when she was 14 years old (i.e., earlier than would normally be expected); Xiaogao dropped out of junior high school at Grade 9 at 16, while Mao dropped out in his final year at the *Tuina* vocational school at 19. After leaving schooling, Lisha and Xiaogao attended short-term massage training programs and then worked in this industry, while Mao chose to

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<sup>20</sup> Braille is named after its creator, Louis Braille. Braille characters are made up of six raised dots arranged in a 3×2 matrix called a Braille cell. Chinese Braille is based on these Braille characters and raised dots and combined with Chinese Mandarin (Beijing Daily (*Beijing Ribao* 北京日报), 2020). All Braille participants mentioned in this study refer to Chinese Braille.

work at a massage parlour as an apprentice. However, after many years of working in the massage industry, Xiaogao and Mao changed jobs to other working areas, like NGOs. On the other hand, Shiwen received long-term home education and had different private tutors to teach him skills in art, massage, and fortune telling. Shiwen went on to work in the creative industries but also did part-time jobs, like massage work.

Three other participants (Xiaolei, Zhou, and Dan) chose to return to the special school system after working in the massage industry for a while. Xiaolei and Dan first dropped out of primary school at Grade 3 at 13 and Grade 1 at eight, respectively (typically, people would complete Grade 3 between eight and 10, and Grade 1 between six and eight). Xiaolei then started to learn massage skills for a year at 13, while Dan got massage training until he stayed home for four years from 12 years old (i.e., earlier than would normally be expected). However, after working in massage for several years, Xiaolei went to a free special vocational secondary school funded by the local DPF to learn massage.<sup>21</sup> Dan returned to a special primary school to start his Grade 4 and then finished compulsory education. Dan then worked in the creative industries but finally ended up in the massage industry. By contrast, Zhou first attended a one-year massage training program at the age of 15 rather than attending compulsory education. Then, he went to a special primary school when he was 16 (typically, people would attend primary school at six or seven). After three years, he dropped out of this school and went directly to a mixed vocational secondary school to take massage courses. Then, he worked in the massage industry after graduating from this vocational school.

Two examples of Jack and Xiaolei are given below to show their life stories, from starting in special education to ending up working in the massage area.

**Jack**, partially sighted, was born in a small village and raised by his grandparents. He described his family's financial circumstances as 'not strong', and for this reason, he never thought about having the chance to go to a mainstream school or the school for the blind. At 12, the local DPF contacted him by chance and said they had found someone to fund him to go to a specialist primary school for the blind in another city. This school was the *only* special school for the blind in his province. He needed to take the train to get to school. Once there, he showed his

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<sup>21</sup> In China, only the nine-year compulsory education (e.g. primary and junior high schools) is free. Other stages of education, such as preschool, secondary education and tertiary education, are all charged.

talent in piano and music. He took the initiative to contact a music teacher to teach him the piano at this school. The teacher encouraged and trained him, and he was not allowed to give up easily. His love of music can also be traced to his childhood experience of simply learning the piano from his neighbour. He mentioned he was not satisfied with the poor facilities and lack of psychological counselling in the school for the blind. Later, he felt as if he was getting old (16 years old), and that it was a waste of time to attend junior high school. So, he went directly to a technical secondary school for the blind to take massage courses, which included two years of theoretical studies and one year of internship. Since graduating, he has worked in the massage industry all the time and, for a time, used to also work part-time as an electronic piano player in a band. However, the band later disbanded because they could not make ends meet. Jack tried to run his massage parlour, but it eventually closed down. He said that not many people had approved of the massage industry then, so he could not have enough clients. He now works for other visually impaired employers during this study and plans to open his massage parlour when more people approve of the massage work.

He said he was a little tired of massage work because he had to work around the massage bed most of the year. However, there have been improvements in accommodation over time. He and his colleagues used to live in the massage parlour and slept directly on the massage bed at night, but now he says that the living conditions are better, with a dedicated staff dormitory and a single room. He said that he persisted in staying in the massage industry because of his family. He is an orphan and was raised by his grandparents. Now that his grandfather has passed away, he hopes he 'can make more money in the massage business, buy a house, and marry a wife', hoping that his 'grandmother can see all this in her lifetime'.

**Xiaolei**, born with no vision, was born in the early 2000s to a poor, rural family. He was keen to go to the local mainstream school but was not allowed to enrol. He finally went to a special school at 10 in another city but dropped out involuntarily in Grade 3 at 13. His father said the family needed Xiaolei to provide financial support, so they asked him to learn massage skills instead. And so, at his father's request, he took a year of private training to learn massage. Although Xiaolei did not enjoy the massage training initially, he could not avoid it as he needed to earn money. At the same time, he knew there were already some visually impaired apprentices of similar age, or even younger than him, who were learning massage skills there, so he thought if these people could persist in attending massage training, so could he. After working for about five years in the massage industry, he went to a free special vocational



secondary school funded by the local DPF to get massage training more systematically at 18. He chose to work in the massage industry after graduation. When considering the relationship between visually impaired people and most non-disabled people, he said '*Blind people do not need compassion, and (non-disabled people) need to help blind people with understanding*'.

The stories of Jack and Xiaolei reveal that for visually impaired children who were born in rural areas, it could be challenging to enrol in formal special education, especially when mainstream education was reluctant to accept them. While they both had experiences of dropping out of school, Jack did so to enter a formal vocational school to take massage courses, and Xiaolei did so to learn massage skills at a private training session. More importantly, they both needed to support their family, so choosing to get massage training and then work in the massage industry (which is open to them) became the most common way for visually impaired people. More details about the relationship between the strong massage culture and visually impaired people will be developed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

#### **4.3.2 Pattern Two – Participants starting in mainstream education**

Nine participants started in mainstream education, including eight participants who were partially sighted (Wei, Jianshan, Lee, Dong, Lougen, Wenqiang, and Duo) or who used to have some vision (Kun), and one participant who was born with no vision (Han). They are all males. Apart from Han, all had working experience in the massage industry. Four (Han, Lougen, Wenqiang, and Duo) had preschool experience. However, compared with those who entered special education late (discussed above), their age of admission to preschool or primary school was almost the same as commonly expected. Additionally, what appears to have affected their educational trajectories, however, is the deterioration of vision, which may become a major turning point (Rutter, 1996) for most of them to change their education/work trajectories. This is discussed further in Chapter 5.

**Figure 6: Pattern Two – Participants starting in mainstream education**

Name	Preschool	Primary school		Junior high school		Secondary education					Tertiary education					Work		
	Mainstream preschool	Special primary schools	Mainstream primary schools	Special junior high schools	Mainstream junior high schools	Special senior high schools	Special <i>Tuina</i> vocational schools	Mixed <i>Tuina</i> vocational schools	Mainstream senior high schools	Mainstream vocational schools	Special junior college (piano)	Mixed Junior college (massage)	Mixed university		Mainstream university	Massage	Unrelated to massage	No formal job
													Massage	Piano				
Wei																		
Han																		
Lougen																		
Wenqiang																		
Duo																		
Lee																		
Dong																		
Kun																		
Jianshan																		

Among these nine participants, five (Wei, Han, Lougen, Wenqiang, and Duo) experienced transferring to special/mixed schools at different educational stages when they were not able to adapt to the learning environment in the mainstream schools or experienced severe vision deterioration. With the exception of Wei, the others all had preschool training experience. Wei transferred to a special school in Grade 5 at the age of 14 and 15 (typically, people would complete Grade 5 between 11 and 13). Then, he worked in the massage industry after finishing his secondary education at *Tuina* Vocational School. By contrast, Han went to preschool and transferred to a special primary school after he finished preschool training. Then, he continued studying in the special educational system and finished his nine-year compulsory education and vocational

secondary education. He then studied piano performance at a mixed university. Lougen and Wenqiang were still students with several part-time work experiences (e.g., in the massage industry and customer service) before/during tertiary education when I interviewed them in 2022. After finishing compulsory education, Lougen and Wenqiang transferred to a special *Tuina* vocational secondary school to take massage courses and a special senior high school for regular courses separately. By contrast, Duo, who was partially sighted, went to a mainstream vocational secondary school to learn Chinese medicine after compulsory education. However, he still then went to a mixed vocational college to take massage courses. Several years after graduation from that college, he obtained an undergraduate diploma through the college-to-undergraduate entrance exam (*zhuanshengben* 专升本) and self-study. He first worked in massage parlours and then in a hospital as a *Tuina* physician for several years. After he left the hospital, he became a part-time masseur and worked for just one client.

Two participants (Kun and Jianshan) dropped out of school in Grade 1 (aged eight) and Grade 5 (aged 12), respectively. Kun left his school due to a vision loss. After staying home for five years, He started to learn massage skills at age 13. Jianshan first worked in the creative industries, but finally, he began to get massage training in a short-term program and is currently working in this industry.

The other two (Lee and Dong) returned to school after initially dropping out. Lee dropped out during junior high school but returned later and attended the mixed vocational secondary school to attend massage training after several years working in the construction area with his elder brother. Dong, partially sighted, dropped out in the first month of the mainstream university but returned later to study via a short-term project to learn massage skills. Despite this, he obtained a junior college diploma in massage after working in the massage parlour for several years, and he was a part-time undergraduate student of massage when I interviewed him.

Below are two exemplar cases of Wei and Jianshan to illustrate how participants starting in mainstream education transitioned from education to work.

**Wei** was not born with a visual impairment. His vision was damaged by an accident at age three. He was then partially sighted and did not get the chance to go to preschool. He said the days staying at home before schooling were boring. He then attended the local mainstream primary school at eight, as his aunt taught there. However, he said he was not

able to adapt to the mainstream school as his classmates always made fun of his visual impairment, and he always fought with them for this reason. He transferred to a special primary school at Grade 5, aged 14 or 15. Wei said the days in the special school made him find a 'sense of belonging', and he felt respected there. Then, he went to a mixed *Tuina* vocational secondary school after he finished compulsory education at the special school. When he graduated, he worked in different massage parlours. During COVID-19, business was affected in the massage parlour, so he had more break time during the lockdown.

Although Wei's description of mainstream schooling was not positive, he said he still thought it was necessary to let disabled students learn with non-disabled peers in the same school. Wei said he did not like the massage work. He had no other way, though, as he needed income to support himself. He said he would try to find other interests, and if he got the chance, he would give up massage work and do some job he enjoyed.

**Jianshan** quit primary school education at Grade 5 at the age of 12. In addition to congenital blindness in the left eye, he could not keep up with class progress after he lost all sight in his right eye after injury. After that, he just stayed home for three years and felt bored, so he chose to be an auditor in his younger brother's class in the same primary school for two years.<sup>22</sup> During this time, he first sat outside the classroom and listened to lectures, and then he sat in the corner of the classroom as the weather got colder. However, other classmates initially enjoyed making fun of him, as he said, 'They are looking at me as though I am a monkey in a zoo', and several students even threw tiny stones at him. Luckily, the lecturer stopped all of these. Soon, the lecturer knew he was good at singing and storytelling, so she asked Jianshan to be a teacher's assistant to teach students from Grades 1 to 5 to sing. Then, he had a chance to work for the local Art Troupe for Disabled People at 17 and worked in this area for about 15 years. However, this job meant Jianshan had to travel frequently to perform, which his wife could not accept. They eventually divorced. Then he decided to move on and have a stable life, so he chose to get massage training in a three-month training program and then officially work in this industry. At first, he worked for other employers. In the last few years, he has opened his massage parlour and has married again.

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<sup>22</sup> The auditor here means a student who is present in a learning setting but does not expect the teacher to interact with them. The student basically 'listens' to what is going on.

The stories of Wei and Jianshan highlight their experiences in mainstream education as visually impaired students. They both experienced bullying from some non-disabled peers and found it challenging to continue in the mainstream educational system when there was no assistance. The difference was that Wei had a chance to transfer to special education and then get massage training in formal education. At the same time, Jianshan stopped formally accessing school and worked in the creative industries. However, he finally worked in the massage industry for a steady income/life.

### 4.3.3 Pattern Three – Participant with no formal education

Name	Preschool		Primary school		Junior high school		Secondary education					Higher education					Work		
	Minstream preschool	Special primary schools	Mainstream primary schools	Special junior high schools	Mainstream junior high schools	Special senior high schools	Special Tuina vocational schools	Mixed Tuina vocational schools	Mainstream senior high schools	Mainstream vocational schools	Special junior college (piano)	Mixed Junior college (massage)	Mixed university		Mainstream university	Massage	Unrelated to massage	No formal job	
													Massage	Piano					
Le																			

**Figure 7 Pattern Three – Participant with no formal education**

**Le** was the only participant who never attended any form of formal education in a school setting. She was born in a village and born with no vision. Instead, she stayed home until she was 13, when she became an apprentice in a massage parlour recommended by a local villager. Afterwards, she went to different massage parlours to learn massage skills and work in this industry. Finally, she married and opened a massage parlour with her husband. She is now a mother with a preschool child. Although she missed out on education and opportunities, this did not stop her from meeting other important roles in her community, such as employee, wife, and mother.

#### 4.3.4 Pattern Four– Participants in the typical pathway

Figure 8 Pattern Four– Participants in the typical pathway

Name	Preschool	Primary school		Junior high school		Secondary education					Tertiary education					Work		
	Minstream preschool	Special primary schools	Mainstream primary schools	Special junior high schools	Mainstream junior high schools	Special senior high schools	Special <i>Tuina</i> vocational schools	Mixed <i>Tuina</i> vocational schools	Mainstream senior high schools	Mainstream vocational schools	Special junior college (piano)	Mixed Junior college (massage)	Mixed university		Mainstream university	Massage	Unrelated to massage	No formal job
													Massage	Piano				
Ouwen																		
Tina																		
Ling																		
Mao																		
Haidi																		
Hagang																		
Dan																		
Xiaogao																		
Xiaolei																		
Zhou																		
Jack																		
Lisha																		
Shiwen																		
Wei																		
Lougen																		
Wenqiang																		
Lee																		
Kun																		
Jianshan																		

Most participants (19) are from the typical pathway, meaning they followed a predominantly non-mainstream form of formal education, and then they all had career connections with the massage industry. There are two broad channels through which they get massage training – through formal education or informal education. The former is getting massage training at formal educational systems and then working in the massage industry after graduation from vocational schools or tertiary education institutions - 10 participants (Ouwen, Tina, Ling, Haidi, Hagang, Xiaolei, Zhou, Jack, Wei, and Lee) followed this way. The informal education is related to attending massage training through a short-term massage training project, such as Xiaolei, Lisha, Xioagao, and Jianshan, or working as an apprentice in massage parlours like Mao, Dan, and Kun. Under these two channels, participants' educational backgrounds appear unimportant, as they all joined the same industry but in different ways. More explanation and analysis of the role of education are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

Two exemplar cases of **Ouwen** and **Lee** are given below to show how they have connections with massage training and then worked in this industry:

**Ouwen** was born with no vision in Beijing, the capital of China. He went to the local school for the blind at eight. He said his parents did not even know about this special school's existence at the start; it was far from the city centre. He then finished his compulsory education (from Grade 1 to 9) and secondary education (special senior high school) there. He then attended the specialised college/university admission exam prepared for visually impaired people (*dankao danzhao kaoshi* 单考单招考试). He went to a mixed university to take massage courses for five years, including a one-year internship in the hospital. He also gained computer skills during this period. After graduating, he went to work in a massage parlour for a year, but he thought he could not enjoy working in this industry. Then, he had a chance to work in the IT field, aimed at developing phone games for visually impaired people.

Ouwen said he would like to participate in the interview because he hopes for 'better integration between visually impaired people and ordinary [non-disabled] people'. He wants to work in an area unrelated to massage to 'eliminate the stereotype' that visually impaired people can only work in the massage area. He does not like following a life pathway where everything is already arranged for visually impaired people since their childhood, like getting massage training and working in that industry after graduation.

**Lee**, born with partial sightedness, went to mainstream primary and junior high schools. However, he dropped out of junior high school due to the deterioration of his vision. Then, he worked in the fields (i.e., planting crops) with his parent for a while. He followed his elder brother and worked for him in construction for about six years. After that, he returned to a mixed vocational secondary school to take massage courses as his eyesight could not handle construction details. When he graduated, he went to different massage parlours across cities for almost seven years. After COVID-19, the massage industry became unstable, so he returned to his hometown and lived with his parents. At the same time, he planned to open his massage parlour there, but he was still worried that the lockdown would influence the massage again. He just worked part-time for other employers and tried to accumulate more customers when I interviewed him in 2022. After one year (in 2023), he successfully opened his massage parlour.

At the end of the interview, Lee expressed his worries about marriage problems. He said there was a great demand for marriage among disabled people, and support was needed. He hoped social events aimed at disabled people could improve their marriage rate. His parents also worried that if he could not get married and then have children, his elder life would be a big problem as no family members would be around to take care of him.

Ouwen and Lee's stories showed the channels of access to the massage industry through different educational stages. Ouwen was born in the capital city (Beijing) and, thus, appeared to have more chances to access the formal educational system, including the special senior high school, to learn the regular curricula instead of attending vocational courses like most participants. However, Ouwen still took massage training in higher education and worked in this industry for a while, although he also prepared for other skills and finally worked in the IT area. By contrast, Lee experienced a dropout and then came back to school to attend massage training. As mentioned above, the massage industry is one of the limited choices open to visually impaired people, whether during their schooling or career pathways, so Lee also chose to get massage training. More details about the barriers of limited choices they faced during the educational and career trajectories are given in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.



#### 4.3.5 Pattern Five – Participants in the atypical pathways

**Figure 9 Pattern Five – Participants in the atypical pathways**

Name	Preschool	Primary school		Junior high school		Secondary education					Tertiary education					Work		
	Minstream preschool	Special primary schools	Mainstream primary schools	Special junior high schools	Mainstream junior high schools	Special senior high schools	Special <i>Tuina</i> vocational schools	Mixed <i>Tuina</i> vocational schools	Mainstream senior high schools	Mainstream vocational schools	Special junior college (piano)	Mixed Junior college (massage)	Mixed university		Mainstream university	Massage	Unrelated to massage	No formal job
													Massage	Piano				
Xian																		
Lili																		
Kaili																		
Han																		
Duo																		
Dong																		
Le																		

There are three atypical pathways. Xian, Lili, Kaili, and Han are the few participants who did not end up working in the massage industry. However, they still mainly attended non-mainstream schools, and three attended massage training during their secondary education. They all learned at least one musical instrument and other skills, such as English, for a substantial period when they were young. Lili, Kaili, and Han also had home education - practising their musical instrument skills and getting other literacy skills from their parents/tutors or online. Lili, Kaili, and Han went through the college admission exam specially prepared for visually impaired people and then learned piano there.

By contrast, Duo and Dong mainly studied in mainstream schools but eventually received massage training through formal education and short-term massage training programs separately. They then had work experience in this industry. Duo mainly studied in mainstream schools before his tertiary education, while Dong studied there until he dropped out of a mainstream university. On the other hand, Le had no formal education experience, but she worked as an apprentice in a massage parlour when she was 13.

Two exemplar cases of **Xian** and **Kaili** are given below to illustrate how they could avoid working in the massage industry despite attending special education:

**Xian** was born in a city. According to his interview, he lost his sight due to hospital malpractice shortly after birth. He went to the special education systems all the time, from special primary school to the special *Tuina* vocational training school. Meanwhile, his parents sent him to learn different musical instruments for many years in a private music training school when he showed interest in music under the influence of his family. After he graduated from *Tuina* vocational school at 18, his father disagreed with him working in the massage parlour. He said, 'Doing massage [work] will not be respected by others, and I suggest you learn *Yijing* (易经)'. His father also thought that music could only be a hobby and that learning *Yijing* was a better way for him to get respect. Learning *Yijing* is related to the ancient Chinese divination area and the fortune-telling industry, one of the careers that visually impaired people used to do, especially in ancient times (Liu and Lei, 2017). This means that both skills Xian learned are still related to the vocational stereotype of visually impaired people under his father's suggestion. Due to this, he started to learn *Yijing* and then worked in the divination area for a while, but he may not have a sufficient understanding of *Yijing* at a young age (around 20), so he preferred to work in the music area. After trying several jobs, such as a musical assistant in the music training school, opening an online store, and being an online anchor, he finally worked in a private Art Troupe for Disabled Persons in Beijing. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, musical performances were suspended for a long time, so he returned to his hometown and took a short-term massage course under the organisation of the local DPF. While staying in his hometown, he tried live online streaming of musical performances via TikTok with the assistance of his mother during the time I interviewed him. He also took advantage of the skill of fortune-telling to earn extra money online. After COVID-19, Xian went back to working with music.

Xian said he 'is very happy compared with other blind people'. His parents felt guilty about his hospital accident, so they paid more attention to him. He is good at musical instruments and said he does not like massage work, as he thinks it is tiring and boring. He said doing massage work means people must stay at the massage parlour all day, and working in this place would be isolated; this job could not support him enough when he is too old to do massage work. He said, '*In the views of*

*my parents, I am a not very obedient child, but I think I am very assertive; many people think that the road of art is not easy to take, but I insist on taking it until now'.*

**Kaili** is Lili's friend and classmate in the same special college. She was born in a small city and born with no vision. She said there was no special school in her city, so her mother spent several years across different cities in the same province, trying to find a school for the blind to accept a visually impaired girl from another city. Finally, when she was almost nine, she entered a school for the blind in another city. After graduating from primary education at 14, she studied at home during junior and senior high school. Her family also hired a private piano tutor to teach her piano; at the same time, she attended a private English training class with non-disabled students. Then, she went to a special college to learn music by attending the college admission exam specially prepared for visually impaired people. She had internship experience as a piano tuner in her final year. She then came back to her hometown to be a librarian in the Braille Book Reading Room (*mangwen yuelan shi* 盲文阅览室) of the local library. She said this job was 'so boring' and she was just like a 'housekeeper'. There were barely any visually impaired people coming to borrow Braille books. She complained, 'My duty should serve my clients, but where are my clients?'.

Kaili said her mother always supported her every choice. She said, 'I'm my mother's pride, and my mother's my pride as well'. She did not like working in the library and still wanted to work in the piano area, but finding that kind of work in her small city was not easy. As a visually impaired girl, her family also worried about her if she worked in other cities, like how to deal with accommodation and travel issues by herself. Due to this, she has tried part-time jobs online, like writing advertising copy. She also hoped to use her English skills to do some part-time jobs.

Xian and Kaili may have similar backgrounds. They were both born in a city, and each family had a good financial situation, so their family could provide them with private tutoring or extracurricular training to learn skills unrelated to massage. Furthermore, their families seemed to give them a safety net that enabled them to develop skills unrelated to massage without immediately working in the massage industry to support the entire family. This reflects the ways in which families affect disabled people's life course (Aviel *et al.*, 2019). More details on learning skills unrelated to massage and family influence are given in Chapter 8.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

Whether these 26 participants' educational experiences started in the special or mainstream school, most had a strong connection with massage training and/or work. Their paths often take twists and turns regarding their educational trajectories, career trajectories, and the transition from education to work. Some characteristics help answer the research questions posed in the first section.

First, most participants were deprived of the opportunity of starting education at pre-school age like many of their non-disabled peers. Many participants experienced a long delay in their admission to primary education, and one participant was completely excluded from formal education. Their low rate of attendance at preschool can be potentially explained by the absence of pre-school training or special education in the *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1986), which states that every child in China has the right to attend free education in the public schools, including six-year primary school education and three-year junior high school education. It was only with the introduction of the *Law of the Protection of Disabled People* (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1990) that the right of being educated for disabled children was formally introduced and protected under law. Under this background, China's special schools mainly serve the nine-year (special) compulsory education funded by the government (from Grade 1 to 9 across the primary and junior high school), so there are few opportunities for visually impaired children, and disabled children generally, to attend a preschool in advance of this formal, compulsory period of education. The only other option is to attend a mainstream preschool, but this too is fraught with challenges, not the least getting enrolled in the first place. As will be explained in Chapter 5 in more detail, most participants barely had any preschool experience. This means their entry into formal educational training may be delayed by at least three years or even much longer than their typical peers, which also directly/indirectly influences their learning experience and other educational and work choices. This indicates that their timing of transitions from home to school differs from commonly expected, suggesting that core life changes throughout what might be described as a 'normal' life may not be taken for granted by disabled people (Tschanz and Powell, 2020).

In addition, their subsequent movements between schooling and work also varied. For example, the ways in which five participants (Xiaolei, Zhou, Dan, Lee, and Dong) came back to schooling at different educational levels after they worked for a while means that we should pay attention, as Macmillan (2005) suggests, to the differences in sequence and timing that influence their further life choices and show distinct pathways in their life stages. More details are discussed in the following chapters.

The dropout rate among participants is also high, especially in compulsory education stages. The overall dropout rate of participants mentioned above is as high as 52%. Their dropout rate in the compulsory education stage is 44%; by contrast, the participants' completion rate of compulsory education is just 53.8%. This figure is much lower than the number reported by Peng (2013), which states that 72.1% of disabled children in China completed compulsory education in 2011. This figure is also far lower than the completion rate (99.27%) of mainstream primary schools and 97% in junior high schools in 2011, respectively, among national students. Additionally, the current figure reported in 2022 by the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (The Ministry of Education, 2022), only states that the compulsory education enrolment rate of disabled children has reached more than 95% in the last five years (from 2017 to 2022). However, it does not mention their rate of completion of compulsory education. As suggested by the findings of this study, the current completion rate of compulsory education for disabled students may actually be lower than their enrolment rate; moreover, as suggested by Guo's study (2017), disabled students may register for compulsory education at the beginning of the term (in mainstream schools) rather than attending classes in mainstream schools.

As far as the curricula they studied are concerned, the participants here mainly followed the regular curricula (i.e., Chinese, Maths, English, History, etc.) as part of the nine years of compulsory education. The vocational curricula (related to *Tuina*) participants studied were primarily in secondary and tertiary education. Half the participants (13) followed vocational curricula to take massage courses in the special/mixed vocational senior high school; nine participants got massage training or learned piano in their tertiary education. This supports the findings of Kritzer (2011) that visually impaired students in China are generally provided with massage or piano courses in tertiary education. In addition, the rate of higher education enrolment is just 34.6% (nine out of 26), which is lower than the national average of 57.8%, reported by People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报) (2023). The newspaper report also claims

that 'higher education has entered the stage of popularisation', which may not apply to disabled people.

Regarding the channels for obtaining massage training, in addition to receiving formal education in massage training, the participants accessed the massage training through informal education, including taking the private short-term massage training project and being an apprentice in the massage workplace. However, all participants who started in mainstream education studies worked in the massage industry; this means that those mainstream educational settings can offer them a limited range of career choices. Chapters 5 and 6 will discuss more details.

No matter how their life experience and transitions differed, almost every participant has learning/working experience in the massage area. Most (17 out of 26) had massage work as their main career. A few ventured into other areas due to their additional skills, such as IT and music. Some even experimented with different jobs before returning to the massage industry, a testament to the industry's appeal and challenges in other fields. This result also showed that it is difficult for the visually impaired to break the culture of vocational stereotypes, and they usually do not have many career development choices. More details related to the barriers to vocational stereotypes are discussed in the following chapters.

This chapter has shown five patterns in participants' transition from education to work, including their educational and career trajectories and how they transitioned between the two. The following three chapters will explore the barriers that participants faced during their transition into education (Chapter 5), the start of massage training (Chapter 6), and the transition into work (Chapter 7), respectively. Additionally, these chapters will further analyse the discrimination and oppression participants faced through Thompson's (2021) PCS model. Then, Chapter 8 will discuss the participants' agency to encounter these barriers.

## Chapter 5 Transition into education

### 5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, my research showed five 'patterns' for visually impaired people as they transition into education and work – these include three distinct patterns into education and two patterns as they progress into a career. My analysis also showed that, compared with what is expected for most non-disabled people, their pathways and transitions were different, complicated, and not as smooth. Thompson (2021) states that wherever differences exist, there is potential for unfair discrimination and oppression, as it risks causing disabled people themselves to be seen as 'different' and, therefore, treated unfavourably. However, although my analysis has uncovered those different and complex 'pathways' and started to understand why they exist, I still need to uncover the social barriers (the forms of discrimination and oppression behind these barriers) that participants experienced through their life course that influenced those transitions; and how, potentially, they used their personal agency to work against any oppression they experienced. Therefore, the following three chapters explore how particular barriers have influenced their transitions into education and work and why these barriers exist in the first place.

Given this, the following three chapters present the barriers that visually impaired people faced through their transition into education (Chapter 5), the start of massage training (Chapter 6), and the transition into work (Chapter 7), with an accompanying analysis of the forms of discrimination and oppression they experienced at the personal, cultural, and structural levels (Thompson, 2021).

By examining three levels of societal interactions – personal, cultural, and structural - Thompson's PCS model was developed to challenge potentially oppressive and discriminatory structures and practices in social work. However, it is now also used in other current studies outside of social work. This suggests that it is also an excellent theoretical framework for analysing the interrelationship of the personal, cultural, and structural levels to see how oppression operates in society more generally (Patrick *et al.*, 2008). Application of this model to a study of disability can, I argue, help us better understand how social barriers, inequality and discrimination occur at different levels and life stages, specifically for disabled people who are highly likely to have experienced such discrimination and oppression, both directly and indirectly. Thus, based on the understanding of the medical model and the social model,

this chapter first focuses on the barriers that participants faced in the first two patterns of the entry point into education (identified in Chapter 4) – ‘participants starting in special education’ and ‘participants starting in mainstream education’. It also analyses the discrimination and oppression that these barriers bring. The third pattern—participants without formal education—is more related to career development (as the participant(s) enter the workplace directly), which will be covered in the next chapter. From this, the chapter provides some much-needed answers to the second and the third overarching research questions – *‘What social barriers do they face in education, work and as they transition between the two?’* and *‘How can these social barriers they face be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?’*. To guide the analysis, the chapter poses the following sub-sections:

- What social barriers have participants faced before education, and how can these barriers be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?
- What social barriers have participants starting in special education faced, and how can these barriers be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?
- What social barriers have participants starting in mainstream education faced, and how can these barriers be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?

The chapter is divided into three main sections: before formal education, transition into special education, and transition into mainstream education. In the conclusion, I summarise the barriers for participants starting in special schools and those starting in mainstream schools. My discussion shows how the mainstream educational systems prevent visually impaired children (and potentially disabled children more generally) from entering mainstream schools. Those regarded as ‘different’ are ‘arranged’ to study in special schools and begin to be guided towards massaged as a, if not the only, vocational choice.



## 5.2 Social barriers before formal education

Only four of the 26 participants in this study mentioned that they went to preschool. For the other participants who did not go to preschool, the first time they were able to access the education system was at the primary level. Before this point, most of them just stayed at home and received no formal educational training. Wei, who was partially sighted, started school at the age of nine and recalled that the days spent at home before school were highly boring. Xiaolei, born with no vision, showed his jealousy of peers who could attend nearby schools. He said he could only walk to the village entrance to take his friends to school and then walk over to accompany them home after school. During this time, they were continually seeing doctors seeking treatment for their eyes; some experienced parental neglect or abandonment.

### 5.2.1 Being treated as a patient

Whilst some remained at home with little to do, others, especially those from families who were in better shape financially (this includes Lili, Tina, Duo, Xian, and Kaili), spent much of this time on frequent trips to the doctors to treat their visual impairment, showing that the medical model still plays an essential role in China. Disability continues to be treated firmly as a medical defect and a medical problem linked to clinical diagnoses (Llewellyn and Hogan, 2000). Here are two cases (Tina and Lili) that show how medical model thinking influenced their own and other's understanding of disability and, as a consequence, influenced their childhood experiences.

Tina, who was partially sighted, said she seemed to live in the hospital when she was a kid. When talking about her experiences with eye treatments at that age, Tina kept repeating, 'I had no childhood':

*When I was young, I actually had a rough life before I went to school. I had my eyes checked every day, and I went to the hospital every day. I felt that I lived in the hospital when I was a kid. I felt that when I saw the current children, I didn't have a childhood. That's true. I didn't have a childhood when I was a child. I think I was 3 or 4 years old. Ever since I can remember, I have felt that I was very precocious... I knew that my family [pause] worked hard to earn money, and then after making money, they took me to the hospital. Then after going to*

*the hospital, they started to work hard to earn money again, and then after this, I went to the hospital again. It went on and on like this until I went to [primary] school. - Tina*

Lili was also frequently taken to see doctors across China while she was young. Once, after checking her eyes, a doctor even said that ‘this kid should never have been born in this world’. This implies that the views of the medical model, whereby disability is treated as a failure of the body system leading to a reduced quality of life (Goodley, 2016), still occupy an important position in the medical field. A disabled child should not have been born in this world, from this doctor’s perspective. However, Lili said that she understood that doctor after so many years, and she gave her further clarification for the doctor’s words:

*I was very angry at first and felt that what he said was irresponsible. Later, I thought that he [the doctor] might be a professional, so he was not very good at expressing himself [bu tai hui shuohua 不太会说话]. This may not be what he meant... 'In such an environment, if you chose to let her live, what would it bring to her and your family? Do you know or understand? Do you know what it means to her and you? How difficult would it be for her to survive this life?'... - Lili*

According to the personal level of Thompson’s (2021) PCS model, the doctor’s words and the clarification from Lili all show the attitudes of prejudice toward disabled people, as disability means a ‘burden’ for a family as well as a personal tragedy for the individual concerned. The regular eye treatments only ceased when she and her family met an ophthalmologist in Beijing who suggested that there was ‘no need to spend time in treating her eyes as her condition was irreversible, and the kid should better receive education and then live well’. Most of the participants in this study shared a similar experience of seeing doctors to treat their eyes during their childhood. The only differences between the narratives are the time they say they underwent treatment and the size of the hospitals they visited.

Drawing on the cultural level of Thompson’s (2021) model of oppression, the behaviour of taking visually impaired children to the hospital shows that their parents tried ways to eliminate their visual impairment to make their children’s eyes become ‘normal’. This behaviour

can be explained by the findings from Dauncey (2020), who argues that, at the beginning of China's reform and opening up, socialist influences continued to see the individual level of the body's usefulness to society used to measure the performance of its citizens; as a result, Chinese citizens were encouraged to work hard to eliminate any impairments through medical treatment, rehabilitation, or superhuman efforts, to turn their 'useless' bodies and minds into 'useful' ones to society. While social model proponents have widely rounded on such behaviours (and political or social encouragement to such behaviours), Shakespeare (2013, p.138) argues that accepting such treatment, however, may not be 'wrong' for disabled people as disabled people cannot ignore their impairments. He suggests that it is valuable to cure or reduce the impairments through medical interventions for disabled people when we think about disability solutions, as the impairment plays an essential role in the lives of disabled people. In the case of Tina and Shiwen, we can see how eye treatment made a difference in their lives. After receiving eye acupuncture treatments for three years, for example, Tina said her eyes went from having no vision to being able to see partially, which she suggested became a favourable condition for her future academic performance. Shiwen also recently received a similar eye treatment and said his eyes have got a little bit better as he can see a little bit, compared to the born with no vision. He said he felt better when he could see something even though it was still not yet full vision.

### 5.2.2 Parental negligence

Several participants experienced parental neglect and abandonment; many were taken care of by their grandparents, as their parents were unwilling to 'have' them. Xiaogao's parents planned to abandon him due to his visual impairment after he was born, but his grandfather stopped this. His father thought he was of no value and did not care about him, so he was mainly raised by his grandfather before he started school:

*My parents once considered abandoning me. They had already bought a small quilt with milk bottles inside and were ready to throw me away in it. My grandpa came back and didn't want to [seeing that I was abandoned]. At that time, my grandma was ill and passed away when I was just over three months old... No one took care of me when I was sick. My family [parents] would only care for me when they came to see my grandma. My father thought I was useless and refused to treat my illness. My illness was cured only by giving me the*

*medicine my grandma used. I didn't go out for the first time until I was six months old, and no one cared about me. Only grandpa loved me the most and kept me. - Xiaogao*

Likewise, Zhou, born with no vision, also mentioned that his family wanted to abandon him initially due to his 'uselessness'. Jack did not give details about his parents; he just said he was an orphan raised by his grandparents. Lisha said she was sent to her grandparents, who lived in the village by her parents after they found she had no vision. Then, her parents chose to have another child – her younger brother (who has no impairment). As Shang and Fisher (2016) have shown, the one-child policy potentially increased the rate of disabled children being abandoned (or left in the care of relatives) in China. Drawing on the personal and cultural levels of Thompson's (2021) oppression model, we can understand why these experiences might occur. Some parents have a negative attitude toward disability, so they may not be able to imagine raising a child with a disability. They may worry that life for a child with a disability may be filled with pain and limitations (Mackenzie and Scully, 2008). This negative view also reflects the argument of ableism that the lives of disabled people are viewed as less valuable, or sometimes even expendable, in ableist societies (Campbell, 2009). In addition, the negative cultural stereotypes and information about the benefits of genetic research and prenatal screening, especially under the one-child policy, which promoted eugenics, may have exacerbated these fears and affected parents to have another 'healthy' child, as the policy allowed the parents to have another born if the firstborn was disabled (Shang and Fisher, 2016). From the structural level, disabled children are considered 'useless', unable to contribute to the economy and, even when they do so, less productive, so some parents are less inclined to pay attention to them. Due to this, neglect or handing children to elderly relatives becomes a legitimised choice for the parents. All the behaviours related to parental neglect and the negative view of disabled children may affect disabled people's subsequent life course (see more details in the following sections/chapters of their transition).

### **5.3 Transition into a special school**

After the economic reforms of 1978, special education started to develop in a more systematic manner. In the previous chapter, my analysis showed that 16 participants started their education in special schools.

However, they faced some barriers to accessing formal education (both types of education – mainstream and special schools), including rejection by the mainstream educational system, poor access to suitable special schools, and different admissions criteria. In addition, they had to face negative views around education for disabled children - from families, school teachers, and people around them; these views also show how the social norms and personal prejudice against visually impaired people affected their life choices.

### **5.3.1 Barriers to accessing special education**

Of the 16 participants starting education in the special school system, many failed to access formal education within the expected range of school age (i.e., from three to five years old for preschool and from six to eight years old for primary school); five (Jack, Hagang, Lisha, Zhou, and Ling) did not enter primary school until they were at least 11. Here are some barriers they faced that affected their admission to formal education at the expected age.

#### **Rejection by the mainstream educational system**

As the special schools for visually impaired people mainly focus on nine-year compulsory education in China (from Grade 1 to 9 across primary and junior high), gaining access to mainstream preschool becomes a big challenge for visually impaired children and disabled children generally (Lu, 2023). As discussed in the last chapter, most participants did not attend preschool. Lili, who was born with no vision, said, ‘There was no preschool which was willing to accept a blind kid’. Dan, who was born with no vision and grew up in a poor village, told me he did not even know that there was such a thing as ‘preschool’ then. Mao, born with no vision, perhaps had an advantage over the other participants. His mother taught in the local preschool, so at first, he was only allowed there for a few days with his younger brother, who also studied there. However, even he was unable to attend this preschool in the end since he is visually impaired, too.

Some of them explained to me the challenges they faced when trying to enter mainstream preschool. The biggest reason for their exclusion from mainstream education was their visual impairments. Ling, who was partially sighted before preschool, shared how she tried to enter the mainstream preschool but was constantly rejected. Even though her

parents tried to contact the schools, the mainstream schools, without a special entry test, rejected them because visually impaired children were not able to identify words in the mainstream textbooks. The absence of special entrance tests for children with special needs suggests that the mainstream kindergarten registration process is designed for the non-disabled majority; thus, disabled children face barriers to accessing mainstream preschool. The following excerpt describes this situation in Ling's own words:

*Children went to kindergarten when they were older in our village, maybe five years old, to go to kindergarten. And so, I thought I was the same as them at first because at that time I had no problem seeing big objects. Wherever they went, I followed them, and whatever they did, I followed them, too. As a result, they all went to kindergarten at the preschool age. At the time, I wondered why. I said, 'Why don't I go to school, they all go to school?'. Then my mother said, 'You can't, your vision is not good. 'Why my vision is not good? They can run and jump, and so can I'. And then my mother said, 'There are words in that book, you can't read it'. I didn't believe it. At that time, just in order to go to school, I fought with them [parents], saying 'I must go to school! I must be like them [peers]'. Then my family had no way but to take me to a nearby school. The principal, because the teacher at that time couldn't make the decision, so he found the principal. The principal wrote a few words on the blackboard. At that time, I could see clearly, because he wrote big, and his written words had colour [like rainbow writing]. Because of this, I could see clearly. Then he handed me a book, and he said, 'Can you read the writing on it?' When I read it, oh no (wan le 完了), I couldn't see it totally (quan kan bu qingchu 全看不清楚). He said, 'That won't work, you can't read the words in the book clearly, that won't work'. Then we had no way. I didn't believe the result, but there was no way. - Ling*

Ling's rejection from mainstream preschool is also reflected in the findings of Zhang (2021),<sup>23</sup> who also notes that Chinese preschools are often not willing to accept disabled students as the registration process

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<sup>23</sup> In China, there is no formal mechanism for disabled students or their parents to appeal to a higher authority. There might be a slight chance for them to report to the local Education Bureau, but none of the interviewees had done so.

includes checking students' physical condition, which means that disabled children cannot 'qualify' for entrance to mainstream education.

Ling did not initially understand why she could not go to the local school like her peers, as she did not think there was any difference between her and her most non-disabled peers. Due to this, rejection of schooling also raises another important identity issue – how they define themselves (Yu and Tao, 2017) - being 'different' or realising that they are 'different' from what is commonly expected:

*... Anyway, they [mainstream school] didn't accept me. Then I argued [with my parents] every day, 'I want to go to school! I want to go to school! (Wo yao shang xue 我要上学)'. I asked my mother to buy me a stationery box, pens, books, and a school bag. I just hung around in front of our home with my school bag every day. That's when I realised, 'So I'm different from everyone else'. - Ling*

Ling tried to act like her peers who studied in the mainstream school, even though others did not tell her to do this. Drawing on the cultural and structural levels of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021) helps to explain what is happening here. Entering education at the 'normal' school age is legitimatised by the Compulsory Education Law (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1986),<sup>24</sup> so her peers all started school. Under this circumstance, any deviation from this could be considered 'different' or even 'abnormal'. For Ling, behaving like her non-disabled peers and pretending to go to school reflected the ways in which she tried to live up to the normative expectations of her peers and reduce the differences between her and them.

Xiaogao, who is partially sighted, felt the same way. He said, 'I did not know there were differences between me and my neighbour's kids until they went to a local preschool, but I could not.'

When Ling was at the age of primary school, her family tried to get her admitted to the local mainstream primary schools again, but they still failed:

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<sup>24</sup> According to the Compulsory Education Law in 1986, children should start compulsory education at the age of six, or seven in some developing areas.

*...I couldn't enter mainstream primary school. The school said no; they also rejected my request to just be an auditor and only listen to the class. I just couldn't go [to the mainstream school] ... - Ling*

According to Ling's story, constant rejection due to her visual impairment, is the main reason that prevented her from attending the local mainstream schools. This may also be the critical reason other participants who started in special education were unable to get into mainstream education too. It suggests that the mainstream education system excludes most disabled children, resulting in them not having the equal exercise of power to access local education as their most non-disabled peers. However, rejection from the mainstream educational system is more than just being denied an education. According to Stone (2003), this also means that they are denied equal opportunities and support to acquire full civil rights and responsibilities. This also proves that when certain groups are seen as 'different' and treated unfavourably, there is the potential for unfair discrimination and thus become the source of oppression (Thompson, 2021).

### **Poor access to suitable special schools**

For participants who started in special schools, even attending special education may also be difficult due to the poor access to suitable special schools. Shiwen suggested that, because there are relatively few visually impaired people (when compared to the number of people without visual impairments), schools exclusively for blind students are required to be set up only at the higher provincial level; in contrast, combined specialist schools for the 'blind, deaf, and dumb' are required to be set up at the lower district and county levels.<sup>25</sup> These requirements were initially set out by the State Council in 1992 (The State Council, 1992) and built upon the Compulsory Education Law (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1986), which required that 'Local governments at all levels organise special education schools (classes) for the 'blind (*mang* 盲), deaf-mute (*longya* 聋哑) and mentally retarded (*ruozhi* 弱智) children and teenagers'. This way, drawing on the structural level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), the mindset and behaviour pattern of arranging disabled students with different types of impairment to study in special schools that focus on various types was established.

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<sup>25</sup> The school for the 'blind, deaf, and dumb' is a translation from Chinese 'mang long ya [盲聋哑]':



Poor access to suitable special schools is also manifested in the long-distance travel to attend specialist schools for the blind. Following the policy above, schools that are only for the blind do not exist in every city. For example, Jack and Lili mentioned that there was only one school for the blind set up to serve their entire province. This means that special education resources are limited in their province and city, and special schools' locations are located far away from many visually impaired people's homes. Even though the 'Learning in the Regular Classroom' model (The Ministry of Education, 1994) claimed that disabled children could study nearby in mainstream schools if there is no local special school, more than half of the participants (Lisha, Kaili, Mao, Ling, Jack, Lili, Xiaolei, Dan, and Tina) had no choice but travelling a long way to access the suitable special schools (which mainly were in another city or another province) because the local mainstream schools excluded them for the reasons mentioned above. For example, Lisha's primary school was in another city 500 kilometres away – it would take an entire day and a night for her to get there by bus. Jack said he needed to go to school in another city by train. Dan and Tina had no choice but to attend a junior high school for the blind in a completely different province.

All this indicates how difficult and inconvenient it is for a disabled child to attend even formal special education, and this is particularly true for those who live in a small, remote village. The current literature (Ellsworth and Zhang, 2007; Deng and Harries, 2008) only mentions the 'Learning in the Regular Classroom' model and mentions that some of the disabled children who live far away from special schools are allowed to enter the local mainstream school; there is very little exploration of those who get rejected and then have no way but to travel for a long time/distance to attend special education from primary. Travelling miles to attend school is not just a disabled student issue; however, it may also happen to some non-disabled students who live in rural areas. Due to the influence of the one-child policy in the last few decades, lots of smaller mainstream schools, especially in the compulsory stage, have been removed or merged by the local government because of the decreased number of school-age children (Li, 2014), but they are still able to attend the other local mainstream schools. By contrast, although Yin (2012) claims that the decrease in mainstream schools may not influence the disabled students who live in the city, only influencing disabled students in rural areas, it just assumes that visually impaired students have a chance to enter mainstream education; this is inconsistent with the experience of the participants in this study. For the 17 participants who attended special schools, their schooling experience was not affected by this mainstream education reform. Whether they grew up in the city, like Kaili, Lili, and Tina, or in the village, like Xiaogao, Hagang, Dan, Ling, Jack, Xiaolei, and

Lisha, they *all* faced similar long-distance travelling to attend formal education. Rejected by the mainstream schools and without local special schools were vital reasons that prevented them from entering the formal educational system at the 'normal' primary school age (i.e., six to eight years old) as their peers. For example, Lisha and Ling started special school at 12, and Xiaolei was 10. Even participants, like Ouwen, who lived in the capital city Beijing and went to the local special school, also experienced long-distance travelling as the school for the blind was built in the suburbs far away from the city centre where he lived. Ouwen said the school for the blind was hard to find due to its small size. Xiaogao also mentioned that his school was small, the facilities were outdated, and some were not accessible, especially compared to a 'fancy' mainstream primary school next door.

In addition to the distance, whether public transport is accessible and affordable would add another barrier to access to special education. Moreover, the long travelling distance also explains why all special schools that participants attended offer boarding, which means that disabled children must leave their families at a young age and study away from home (for example, Xiaogao was aged seven, Lili was aged six, and Kaili was aged nine).

Overall, using the structural level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), we can better see how the provision of special education results in more unfavourable treatment for visually impaired people, like the limited setting of special schools, the long-distance travelling and remote geographical location of special schools. All these further marginalise disabled students, resulting in unequal power relations at the educational level (Oliver, 2009) and removing those children from natural familial support networks.

### **Variations in admission systems**

Shiwen, Kaili, Ling, and Ouwen, all told me that admission to special education was also challenging and resulted in them starting school later than they should. One challenge is the 'admission waiting system'. According to their narratives, there are at least three different systems. For Shiwen, the special primary school he attended was unable to enrol visually impaired students every year because of limited availability. It only recruited students of varying age groups every six years, until the former cohort of blind students graduated from Grade 6:

*There were only ten blind students in our school, so there was only one class [aimed at visually impaired students in the school itself, with all grades combined]. That is to say, if you want to enrol at Grade 1, you have to wait for six years for the current cohort to graduate before new Grade 1 students are admitted...*<sup>26</sup>

*...Schools for the blind do not distinguish between age groups. There are nine-year-olds like me or 15-year-olds who go into Grade 1. It [the system] does not follow the concept of age. You can't transfer or skip a grade because there is only one class [aimed at blind students every six years in the whole special school]. – Shiwen*

For Ling, the 'admission waiting system' meant that she had to wait for enough visually impaired students to form a new class. Since the local mainstream primary schools repeatedly rejected her request for enrolment, her family contacted the local special school. When Ling was ten years old, a county school for the 'blind, deaf and dumb' finally opened to accept students with visual impairments, but the majority types of students in this school were hearing and speech impaired students. As a visually impaired student, Ling had to wait until there were at least four other visually impaired classmates to form a new class specially aimed at them. After waiting for two years, she successfully enrolled in this school to start her primary education at the age of 12:

*...Then I would only wait to go to the special school. But our local school for the 'blind, deaf and dumb', didn't enrol visually impaired students every year. It said that there were too few [visually impaired] people [enrolling for the school] to form a class that year. Then I needed to wait for the [admission] notice from the school [after there were enough visually impaired students to register to form a class]. When I was 12 years old, I finally entered Grade 1 of primary school. – Ling*

Having to wait for enough visually impaired students to form a new class also happened to Ouwen when he tried to enter a special senior high school. He said the school said at least four students registered that year, then the school could start the course, or that would be a

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<sup>26</sup> There are usually six grades in the primary education.

'waste of [special education] resources' for the school; if not, he also needed to wait for the next year's enrolment.

Kaili's admission experience indicated another challenge – household registration restrictions (*hukou xianzhi* 户口限制) – which means that some special schools only accept disabled students who are permanent residents of the area. According to her, there were no local schools for the blind, but special schools in nearby cities like Beijing and Tianjin did not admit students without a local registered permanent residence. However, her mother insisted on waiting for admission opportunities from these schools. After two years, she finally waited for an available place to attend formal education in another city:

*There was no school for the blind in my hometown. When I was of primary school age, my family began to ask around (which special school I could go to) ... Then we found out about the school in Tianjin. But at first, the school for the blind in Tianjin didn't accept students from other cities. Then my mother told the school to let her know when they started to recruit students from other cities as her kid really wanted to go to school. The school finally accepted students from other cities after I waited for two years, so I went to [this school]. I was almost nine years old at that time - Kaili*

Household registration is widely known as a requirement for restricting schooling in China (whether for disabled children or non-disabled children), but waiting for several years to be allowed to enter a school has not been reported before in other academic studies. In addition to the limited number of special schools, this admission waiting system becomes another important reason they formally went to school at a relatively older age. Furthermore, waiting for a place to become available adds further stress and burden onto the families as they try to make up for the lost schooling time of their children. Compared with many non-disabled peers, their experience of receiving education is full of differences and challenges, no matter whether they are accessing the mainstream school or the special school.

### **5.3.2 Negative social attitudes**

In addition to the structural barriers that affect their school admission, negative views from families and teachers also influenced their transition to education. The findings here show that visually impaired participants have to bear the stereotypes of visually impaired people or disabled people generally in society and face the negative views such stereotypes bring, including that attending formal education to learn regular curriculum wastes time, massage training is the most suitable choice for visually impaired people, and other choices unrelated to massage may not work on visually impaired people.

#### **Education is a ‘waste of time’**

Some participants mentioned that their families thought attending formal (compulsory) education in schools was not as important/necessary for visually impaired children as compared to learning a more vocational skill. The families of Zhou, Jack, and Hagang did not think about sending their visually impaired children to attend education at first. Zhou said, ‘At the start, we [families and himself] did not think education is important’. Thus, Zhou started a one-year massage training programme at 15, accompanied by his mother. Hagang’s parents even did not know that a visually impaired child could have the right to access education.

The parents of Xiaolei, Lisha and Mao asked them to drop out of school to learn massage skills quickly rather than ‘waste time’ in formal education. As this relates to the transition to work, more details of why their parents did not think education was less useful than learning a career skill are given in Chapter 7. From the personal level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), the personal prejudice of attending education as useless/unnecessary for disabled children was common among families with disabled members. This attitude, influenced by cultural stereotypes, hinders the equal rights of disabled students to access education, showing the way of standing in the way of fair and non-judgemental practice.

### **‘Massage is the only job blind people can do’<sup>27</sup>**

According to most participants who attended special education, their teachers in special schools would intimate that ‘blind people should learn massage skills or work in this field in the future’. Mao’s teacher indicated that learning basic literacy skills (*wenhuake zhishi* 文化课知识) was not crucial for them as they would work in the massage industry in the end. When asked about aspirations at the start of Grade 1 in primary school, Xiaogao’s teacher encouraged students to learn massage skills so that they could become *Tuina* physicians in the future. This indicates the solid vocational stereotype of connecting visually impaired students with the massage industry (Kritzer, 2011; Xiong and Zheng, 2021).

Some participants (Xiaogao and Hagang) mentioned that the teachers who taught them regular courses during compulsory education also got massage training and graduated from massage vocational schools. This means that their teachers not only told visually impaired students to learn massage skills in the future, but some teachers, who are also visually impaired, themselves had already followed this path.

*...Our teachers basically all took massage courses [in elementary and junior high schools] ...The Chinese teacher graduated from a massage vocational school... He [first] graduated from a [mainstream] technical secondary school (zhongzhuan 中专) and came to teach in our school. Then he lost sight and was sent to learn massage skills by the school... The second teacher was half-blind, which is hereditary in the family. He is also a massage school graduate... - Xiaogao*

In this way, it seemed that the things that most visually impaired students could learn from special education were related to the massage industry, which provided limited options for their career development. Such a message that visually impaired people should learn massage skills was repeatedly passed to the students by different staff members.

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<sup>27</sup> China practices internet censorship, including blanket blocking of various (international) websites, applications, and video games (Guo and Feng, 2012). This policy inspired its nickname, ‘the Great Firewall of China (*Zhongguo fanghuoqiang* 中国防火墙)’. Thus, regular people in China usually do not have direct access to international information through international websites or apps (e.g., Google, Twitter, or Facebook). Given that, it is difficult for many of them to see the range of careers taken up by visually impaired people or disabled people generally in other parts of the world.

However, not all participants took this message for granted. For example, Xiaogao was tired of the massage industry because of this repeated message. Additionally, Ouwen described this situation as a 'terrible (*yaoming de* 要命的)' thing, as it would make visually impaired students think they only had one vocational choice – the massage work, and nothing else.

*I can just make a little complaint about this... the education of schools for the blind. Many times, including when teachers and parents mentioned this - 'What is your employment pathway in the future?', even from the beginning of primary school, they would mention you could go for a massage work in the future. This is terrible, letting them [students] not know that blind people can make decisions, and they thought the massage work was the only way... - Ouwen*

According to Ouwen, many visually impaired people may not have much autonomy and control over their career paths, because of the influence of parents and teachers telling them from early school age that visually impaired people should do massage work. Additionally, Shiwen further emphasised that the imposing teaching method in the school for blind people yielded opposite results and became the main reason for his dropping out of schooling during the primary stage:

*There is a kind of negative education in schools... On my first day of school, the teacher told us, 'You should learn massage skills in the future, then you can make a living and work in society'. It is very negative... not every blind person needs to learn massage skills, right? - Shiwen*

However, this does not mean all teachers encourage visually impaired students to enter the massage industry. Wenqiang, who started his education at a mainstream school, mentioned that his lecturer at the mixed university encouraged them to work in other areas. However, he took massage courses in higher education.

*Many teachers also encouraged us to 'go out' (zou chuqu 走出去) [exploring other vocational fields other than massage] and try other types of jobs. One teacher said, 'Although I teach massage courses, in fact, if you have a better choice, you should choose a better career'. It cannot be said that this [massage industry] is not good; it is only not suitable for some people. Blind people can not only [be limited] to the massage area. - Wenqiang*

### **Massage curricula in the primary school stage**

Some participants (Xiaogao, Hagang, Ling and Haidi) mentioned having massage courses as early as Grade 5 or 6 in their special primary schools.

*...We learned almost the same courses as normal people [elementary school and junior high school], except for one more course on massage... We started getting to know and understand massage skills in Grade 6 [of elementary school] ... The teacher would also mention going for a massage in the future. - Haidi*

*... [The second teacher] also opened a massage parlour in school, and then senior-year students went to work as interns at the massage parlour... - Xiaogao*

The current academic literature discusses little about when visually impaired students are expected to engage in massage-related activities, but Ling explained this situation:

*When I was in primary school, because [the school] first considered the fact that many of us were older students, [the school] also wanted us to enter society [get employed in the labour market] as soon as possible. So, the school hired a teacher. He was not a teacher from our school. He was a part-time teacher from outside. He gave us two classes a week, and taught us things, such as the basics of massage, then the basics of Chinese medicine, and then anatomy, etc. I especially liked the anatomy [laughter]. – Ling*



According to Ling, different admission ages have affected their course settings, which provided them with vocational training – essentially massage training - during the compulsory education stage. This is also related to the law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled People (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1990), which emphasised the importance of learning a regular curriculum and developing vocational education. In addition, Ling's explanation can be further related to the argument of Dauncey (2020), who argued that activities, like massage training, have been seen as ways to help students overcome their perceived inherent 'inferiority' and 'worthlessness', develop into more engaged and productive para-citizens and then receive respect from society (Dauncey, 2020).

Therefore, from the personal level of Thompson's (2021) model, we see how the teachers and school authorities in the special educational system show their career expectations of massage work for visually impaired students, which is strongly influenced by the structural level—targeted employment related to the institutionalisation of massage for visually impaired people. More details about this career are given in the next chapter.

### **Being discouraged from trying skills unrelated to massage**

According to Lili, visually impaired students who tried different skills unrelated to massage in the school for the blind would receive criticism and judgement from people around them – i.e., classmates, friends, teachers, and even families:

*At that time, you see, many people thought it was not a good thing for blind people to learn other skills for leisure hobbies (xingqu aihao 兴趣爱好). When we do so, we were said to be deviant [li jing pan dao 离经叛道] and being unrealistic [hao gao wu yuan 好高骛远]...*

*When I was learning piano at that time [in special primary school], a lot of rumours came out, 'it said that you are a blind person, how can you learn to play the piano? Even if you can learn to play the piano, you can't become a pianist and support yourself by doing this. What's the point of learning this thing...' Some people think, 'She is not able to learn it [piano]... Even able-bodied people can't learn it well. She can't learn it. Does she know what the music score is? How can she find the keyboard?... With her [such] energy, it would be good (bucuo le 不错了)*

*if she could only study [regular course] hard (xuexi neng xue de hao 学习能学得好)...’ - Lili*

Those judgments around Lili appear to be related to pragmatic considerations. It shows that people may have negative views of visually impaired people learning other things unrelated to massage. Many people around Lili also thought she should follow the traditional routine of visually impaired people or visually impaired females – her life should revolve around massage work and being a wife and mother:

*...So, they thought in the future, I [should] learn massage [skills] and then work around the massage bed. After getting employed, [I should] save enough money to open a [massage] parlour, then find a husband, get married and have children, and that's it. Why are you learning piano?... Lili*

Lili's experience shows how difficult it is to break the stereotype of the massage industry for visually impaired people. Their life course was seemingly determined from the beginning of formal education – around massage work. The view of these people, including most visually impaired people themselves, can reflect the social expectations for a visually impaired person. Moreover, many participants (such as Haidi, Hagang, Ling, Lisha, Le, Dan, Dong, and Jianshan), have already followed this social expectation; some other participants said their life goal is to fulfil these expectations (Jack, Lee, Zhou, and Wei).

Drawing on the personal and cultural levels of the PCS oppression model (Thompson, 2021), Lili's experience also shows the 'social norms' for people with visual impairments—get massage training and work in this industry to meet the needs of 'targeted employment' and then contribute to society; other people's reactions indicate that visually impaired people must conform to the norms, or any 'deviation', like learning piano, from this is seen as 'abnormal'.

## 5.4 Transition into a mainstream school

This section is related to the second pattern mentioned in Chapter Four – participants starting in mainstream school. Nine participants began in the mainstream educational system. Han attended a special school after graduating from preschool, while the other eight subsequently studied in mainstream primary schools. However, none of them were able to stay for the full-term in the mainstream system (i.e., all the way from preschool to higher education). In addition, some of them experienced being treated differently by their non-disabled classmates due to their visual impairment.

### 5.4.1 Barriers in the mainstream school

As shown in the last chapter, nine participants left mainstream schooling at different educational stages due to the deterioration of their vision or loss of sight. This shows that the learning environment in mainstream schools, regardless of level, is often not accessible for students with visual impairments. This section shows the barriers they faced across those different mainstream educational stages.

#### Compulsory education

When Duo, partially sighted, was in compulsory education (primary and junior high stages), he mentioned his school did not provide any special learning aids for him, and all the teacher offered as an accommodation was to arrange for him to sit in the front row. He was expected to fix any problems with learning problems by himself and adapt to the learning environment; he was given the same mainstream exam paper as his classmates. When he had difficulties in reading the questions, he just gave up:

*At that time, some of the exam papers were not printed by regular printers...the words] were very unclear. Once, when I was sitting at an exam... I couldn't see the printed words clearly... But I was young; I was embarrassed to tell the teacher. Well, I was in school then, and it was impossible to ask my parents for help. My solution was to write [my] name on the paper, then [only] write down 'cannot see it clearly*

*(kan buqing 看不清)' [as the answers to the exam], and then hand in the exam paper. - Duo*

After that, Duo gained more experience in taking exams and asked his parents to buy a desk lamp for him to bring to the school. Not only that, when he could not see the blackboard clearly in class, he would also run to the blackboard during break time to check the details. Five other participants adopted similar strategies, mentioning that they needed to bring their own devices (i.e., magnifying glasses, rulers, and glasses for high myopia) to adapt to the learning environment in mainstream school. For Kun and Jianshan, however, the barriers were too significant, and they dropped out of primary school altogether after losing their vision completely.

Even getting to and from school could be a significant barrier for the participants. Duo said, for example, that he needed his parents to pick him up every night at the front of the classroom in junior high school. By contrast, Lee could not identify the way school dormitory at night due to his visual impairment, especially in places without streetlamps, so he just chose to drop out of junior high school.

*I had night blindness. I had to go to town for junior high school and had to live in the school dormitory at night, and there was also evening self-study at night. Because of this, this inconvenience [no streetlamps], and then I left school involuntarily. – Lee*

According to the structural level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), their experiences of studying in or leaving mainstream schools' evidence the inaccessible learning environment in mainstream educational systems—they lack sufficient consideration of the suitability for disabled people. Adapting themselves to this learning environment was also a process of recognising that they are 'different' from many of my non-disabled peers.

## **Beyond compulsory education**

According to the four participants who graduated from compulsory education, there were two choices if they wanted to access secondary

education - senior high school to learn the regular curriculum or vocational secondary school to learn vocational skills. Wenqiang and Lougen enrolled in special schooling in a special senior high school and a special *Tuina* vocational school, respectively. In contrast, Duo and Dong continued to study in the mainstream schools - a mainstream vocational school and a mainstream senior high school, respectively.

Weiqliang and Lougen both mentioned that they thought their vision condition was not suitable for studying in mainstream secondary schools due to the demanding curriculum. For Wenqiang, the special senior high schools for the blind provided students with suitable support. All the facilities and courses there consider students' special needs, especially as the regular courses in high school become more challenging. Lougen used to be partially sighted. However, he lost his vision after junior high school, so he could not continue mainstream schooling. He chose the special *Tuina* vocational school to take massage courses as this could be his only choice to access secondary education due to no local senior high school for the blind:

*I became completely blind [after the junior high school]. Although I was visually impaired before, it was only a little worse... That is, it was slightly worse than the normal vision of a person with discerning eyes, equivalent to a high degree of myopia. Then I had no way [after becoming blind] other than to go to a [vocational] school for the blind... – Lougen*

Duo's academic performance worsened after primary school as there were no reasonable adjustments (i.e., support/accessible facilities) provided by the school. This was made even more problematic, and his vision deteriorated at the same time. He was not able to pass the mainstream senior high school entrance exam, so he went to a mainstream vocational school to learn Chinese medicine. However, he could not keep up with the course for the same reasons, so he barely learned anything. In addition, he faced barriers travelling to school due to his visual impairment:

*I was far away from home [to school] at that time. I needed to take a bus... [Once] I took the bus by myself. After getting on the bus, it was getting dark, and there was little light on it. I [accidentally] sat on*

*another passenger... I was relatively young then, only seventeen or eighteen years old. The female passenger saw that I was a teen and didn't care too much because I was also carrying a school bag. If I were in my 20s, she would probably think I am rude and offensive (shua liumang 耍流氓)... At that time, there wasn't much embarrassment, but I felt shameful, but it hadn't caused too much of a problem... - Duo*

Duo also faced many obstacles during his travelling by himself:

*When the weather was nice and sunny, I went to school, and I was able to do it. However, when it's cloudy and rainy, I started to feel a little worried (tuisuo 退缩) and didn't want to go to school. During some journeys to the school by following the tactile paving (mangdao 盲道), I bumped into a telephone pole... I tripped over a wire and fell, and then there was something else... Some sanitation workers put brooms next to the wall or somewhere where I was not able to see them, and I just tripped over them... These [experiences] were common (changshi 常事). Sometimes, I would fall, and my pants were torn. There are all of them. There have been such things [happened]. There are many of those things. There are too many such things... - Duo*

According to the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), Duo's experiences of travelling alone relate to inaccessible environments from the structural level (i.e., institutions, transport systems, tactile paving, etc.). The barriers he faced reflect the way public services may not consider the suitability for visually impaired people, which is consistent with the research of Zhang (2014) that some built barrier-free facilities are not standardised and systematic; a considerable number of built facilities in cities have not undergone barrier-free renovations. More importantly, these experiences affect Duo's confidence – fear of going out alone and his subsequent career choices (discussed in the following chapters).

## Tertiary education

Among these nine participants, Dong is the only one who attended mainstream education throughout primary to higher education, but he said that he had to drop out of university as he faced lots of barriers there. Before higher education, he suggested that his academic performance at senior high school was 'average'. He also received lots of informal support from classmates and teachers there (i.e., travelling with classmates and extra private tutoring from teachers). However, when he was in the mainstream university, the learning environment was different. He found he needed 'help' everywhere, or doing everything was not convenient:

*But when I went to university, one thing I felt was that some of my peers had already been able to make money. Then, when I was in university, I felt that the environment was unsuitable. ...how to put it, I felt that the university differed from the high school. People [classmates and teachers] inside [of the university], the feeling was that completely, they were almost the same as those kinds of outside people [in society] ...*

*It just felt that there, everywhere [in the university], if I was not helped by others, I would be inconvenienced everywhere. Then, if I was helped by others, I felt why they should help [me]. It just felt like it [this kind of help] would make myself a burden to others [tuolei bieren 拖累别人]. So, I went to [university] for a month and then left to learn massage [skills]. - Dong*

According to him, the mainstream university he attended did not have accessible facilities to meet the special needs of disabled students. Dong then gave his explanation of this situation:

*...because [people in] the university must be normal people (zhengchang de 正常的) [non-disabled people]. It recruited normal people (zhengchang ren 正常人) from society, so they basically didn't consider this kind of barrier-free [environment]. - Dong*

His words show the dominant cultural norms (Thompson, 2021). Mainstream education is seen as the 'norm' in the educational system, and non-disabled people are seen as the 'norm' too. These views can be tracked to the definition of disabled people in the Law of the Protection of Disabled People (The National People's Congress Standing Committee, 2008), which emphasises the abnormalities of impairments for disabled people and the loss of their ability to perform normally, following the medical model and view disability as a physical problem and 'abnormal' (Goodley, 2016). Seeing disability as a personal issue means that the barriers that disabled students face mainly need to be overcome by their efforts. However, this goes against the proposals from the 'Learning in the Regular Classroom' model (The Ministry of Education, 1994) and other regulations and policies related to building an accessible environment for disabled people, such as the Compulsory Education Law (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1986) which mentioned the right to nine years of education for all children generally of school age, and the Regulations on the Education of Disabled People in 1994 (The State Council, 1994) which promoted access to education for disabled people.

Additionally, the lack of an accessible environment, no consideration of their special needs, and no assistance offered officially in the mainstream university may also relate to the issues proposed by Peng (2003), namely that there are not enough funds, resources, and staff to cater to the special educational needs of disabled students in mainstream schools. This may relate to an issue of priority, and the needs of disabled people are not the school's main concern. This situation was also suggested by Zhu (2016), who argued that the financial support from the central and local governments for the accessible facilities/services in the mainstream is far less than the funding for special education. These indicate that the mainstream education systems are designed for the 'general public' – non-disabled people or the 'normal' people in the Chinese context, without due regard for their suitability for disabled people. All these 'norms' embody the application of a powerful ideology – disablism, which works to deny disabled people the right to participate in mainstream social life fully. (Thompson, 2021), while all the efforts they have to make to adapt to the mainstream learning environment reflect ableist attitudes (Campbell, 2009). Only by working harder will they deserve the same privileges as their non-disabled peers.

More importantly, many of these participants who had mainstream schooling experiences demonstrate the instability of their visual impairment. The empirical studies have yet to explore this finding. Many visually impaired people did not have stable vision — for most, it



deteriorated over time, making their experiences more challenging because the school systems (particularly the mainstream system) were not prepared for them. Thus, they either dropped out of school or transferred to special schools. This also reflects the influence of both personal impairment and social barriers on their life choices (Priestley, 2010).

#### **5.4.2 Being treated differently**

As mentioned in the last chapter, four out of 26 participants (Han, Lougen, Wenqiang, and Duo) had experience with formal preschools, compared with the majority who had just started their formal education in primary schools. Among those four participants, Han, who was born with no vision, is the only participant who attended formal mainstream preschool training but then went on to his compulsory education in a special school. However, he told me that his preschool classmates did not want to interact with him when there, so he just slept in class every day. Lougen used to be partially sighted but now has no vision. He experienced similar exclusion by his classmates. He said he could only run slowly, so he could not catch their classmates' steps while playing games after class. Thus, his classmates did not want to take him with them. It seems that even though students with visual impairments could enter the preschool, their classmates may still be able to tell the 'difference' between impaired students and themselves and then choose to exclude them. This reflects the findings proposed by Kritzer (2011) and Guo (2017), who indicate that in mainstream schools, disabled students have been observed sitting alone and excluded from classroom activities. Compared with these, Duo mentioned that everything was 'normal' around his preschool life, and he was not different from his non-disabled classmates, as his vision had not experienced severe deterioration at that stage.

During primary school, Wei, Jianshan, and Duo all experienced being teased by their classmates because of their visual impairment. When Wei's classmates made fun of him, he fought with them sometimes. That is why Wei said his memories of mainstream school were 'unpleasant', and he did not learn much there. In addition, he admitted the fighting behaviour was very childish during the interview:

*...However, that life [in mainstream school] was, so to speak, not very [pause] pleasant. Put another way, they [classmates] may not have*

*known me well then. Maybe I knew less about society and had less contact with people then. Studying in a mainstream school, I felt inferior to others. Maybe I was not willing to socialise with them [classmates]. They just laughed at me directly sometimes. Sometimes, I may not say anything, but sometimes, I may get angry and argue with them. Looking back, it was childish., I didn't think they should make a joke about my disability. I was still not strong enough then, and I was too inferior. - Wei*

Wei's experience showed his anger when he was laughed at and his feeling of inferiority due to his visual impairment. In addition, his teacher did not handle the relationship well between a visually impaired student and other non-disabled students, something that Deng *et al.* (2001) also observed and suggested that some teachers in mainstream schools may not have enough expertise and time to help disabled students (Deng *et al.*, 2001). All of these contributed to his decision to leave mainstream schooling. Although the 'Learning in the Regular Classroom' model (The Ministry of Education, 1994) mentions the detailed teaching requirements for disabled students, such as strengthening individual tutoring for disabled students, teachers' responsibility to deal with the relationship between students, and ways to increase the confidence to disabled students, it seemed that the school and the teachers of Wei failed to meet all these requirements.

Duo also experienced bullying as he was mocked and called 'four eyes (*siyan* 四眼)' by a boy.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Duo fought with that boy. In the end, the teacher criticised both him and that boy. Jianshan also had similar experiences, though he did not fight his bullies:

*...When I was in Grade 5 of elementary school, I lost sight in my right eye completely because of an injury, so I dropped out of school... Later, I followed my younger brother to the classroom [in the same elementary school] ... I sat in the corner in the winter to listen to the teacher. [At that time], the students looked at me like watching monkeys. They didn't speak nice words to me. Some classmates even threw stones at me... - Jianshan*

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<sup>28</sup> 'Four eyes' is a negative description that means a person wears glasses.

From Thompson's (2021) cultural level of the PCS model, we can understand that their experiences show that disabled people suffer abuse and degradation in-jokes and other forms of 'humour'. It could also be common and happen at a younger age according to Xiaogao and Jack, as well as resulting in a fight frequently due to these 'jokes' (i.e., being called 'blindy' (*xiazi* 瞎子). Xiaogao got used to it and did not take 'jokes' seriously, while Jack just chose to fight with them as well. More importantly, jokes or other forms of humor may not only be between non-disabled people to disabled people, but they also exist within disabled groups. Jack said students in his school for the blind had fought frequently and mostly it started from 'the jokes':

*Because there were many fighting incidents there, many students were irritable (yinu 易怒). They have been insulted by their peers' language or behaviour since childhood, and their psychological state is easily distorted (niuqu 扭曲) ... Once, a student was kidding another and said, 'You, blindy (ni ge xiazi 你个瞎子), see how fast you can run (paode hai tingkuai 跑的还挺快)'... That student being made fun of later brought a knife from the dorm room and stabbed him.... - Jack*

All of this shows that the abuse and degradation through the jokes are used as a tool for spreading and reinforcing the social norm that views disabled people as misfits or poor victims of personal tragedy. More importantly, disabled people themselves are also widely affected by these jokes. On the one hand, they could be more sensitive and thus have lower self-esteem due to the jokes and defend themselves radically, sometimes through fights and other forms of violence. On the other hand, they may also apply these jokes to their disabled peers, consistent with the concept of internalised ableism that occurs when disabled people discriminate against themselves and other disabled people, believing disability is something to be ashamed of (Campbell, 2009).

For Duo, being treated differently was also reflected in the teacher's attitude. He mentioned that he was not allowed to attend group activities by his teacher, and he realised he was 'special':

*At that time, uh, there was a sports event... we practised marching. The teacher] didn't want to interrupt the lesson during the day and*

*asked students to practice during self-study time in the evening. In fact, at this time, it was already dark. I was not able to see and couldn't keep up with the others. The teacher then asked me not to participate. These things may seem quite minor, but they had a huge impact on me then. Because I knew I was different (teshu de 特殊的). Everyone could participate [in the formation practice], but I couldn't.*

Not being allowed to participate in group activities shows disabled people are excluded, while making jokes demonstrates disabled people are negatively portrayed. This may affect their confidence, self-esteem, and also the notion of what it meant to 'be disabled' through realising the difference from many non-disabled peers. These findings are consistent with Thompson (2021, p.20), who mentioned that various forms of oppression can influence identity through 'alienation, isolation, marginalisation' and 'confidence and self-esteem'. Additionally, some participants' teachers in mainstream schools may not have the professional knowledge and time to meet the special needs of disabled students, something that the early research of Deng *et al.* (2001) and the latest research of Zhao and Dong (2023) have highlighted, meaning this situation has been existing for more than 20 years and have not been handled appropriately yet.

#### **5.4.3 Oppression continues to exist**

All the participants had pretty much left the education system at the time of the study. So, have things changed in recent years? According to the stories Dong told about his visually impaired child (who faced barriers in accessing mainstream primary school during the interview in 2022), the answer is no. The oppression that continues to exist means that the discrimination and oppression that some participants faced will also happen or have similarly happened to their children with inherited visual impairments, especially when two visually impaired persons get married and have children.

Dong is partially sighted. His following narratives indicate how his daughter, who was born with partial sightedness, faced the challenge of entering mainstream education. According to Dong, his daughter has experienced the same barriers as many participants born from the 1980s to the 2000s. This may mean that the policy related to integrated/inclusive education, or the accessible environment may not have been improved in the last thirty years. Much of the recent literature in China mainly focuses

on special education achievements (Lu, 2023) or the current situation (i.e. disabled students having trouble adapting to the learning environment) of the 'Learning in the Regular Classroom' model in mainstream education (Zhao and Dong, 2023) in the last few years. However, they barely mention the challenges of disabled students, especially visually impaired children's admission situation in mainstream schools.

Similarly, Lili was born with no vision, having inherited it from her mother, who was also born with no vision. Her mother learned massage skills and currently has a massage parlour. She always encouraged Lili to get massage training and inherited her massage parlour in the future, although Lili persisted in learning piano and did not enjoy doing massage work. This means that Lili's mother 'pushed' Lili to develop the stereotyped career she had experienced before. Lili said the possibility of visual impairment inheritance was one of the concerns that prevented her from getting married and having children.

On the other hand, Dong insists on sending his daughter to the mainstream school as he thinks learning in the mainstream school with non-disabled peers is beneficial for the disabled child based on his learning experience:

*I also know inclusive education [ronghe jiaoyu 融合教育], [wanting] to guide the kid to get in touch with most of their [same-age peers]. After all, as she grows up, she must be in contact with this society. That is to say, let her go earlier [to the mainstream school] so that she can study with normal children. If she can adapt to this [mainstream education] environment [in advance], it may be easier for her to adapt to society at that time [in the future]. - Dong*

He further indicated the disadvantages of special education:

*However, it's true, some [visually impaired students] graduated from special education schools. When they meet such normal people, their views can be very different [from those of non-disabled people], having big deviations, so [they] are not easy to get along with [non-disabled people]. – Dong*

Dong's opinions of the benefits and disadvantages of mainstream and special schools are similar to Wei's. Wei also experienced studying in these two different educational systems and thinks disabled students should study in the mainstream schools, although his experience there was 'unpleasant'. Their perspectives are consistent with the experiences of Lisha and Xiaolei, who only learned in a special system and did not know how to get along with their non-disabled colleagues in the massage parlours. In addition, Lili, who only studied in the special education system, agreed to provide equal educational opportunities for visually impaired children, allowing them more promising career development.

Overall, through Dong's daughter and Lili's stories, this study indicates that mainstream education accessibility for visually impaired people and the limited career choices—vocational stereotypes of the massage industry—have not necessarily improved over time in China. This argument has yet to be discussed in current empirical research.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

Discrimination and oppression are the two key themes in the PCS models. Wherever there is a difference, there is the potential for unfair discrimination, as it has the potential to cause specific individuals or groups to be seen as 'different' and thus treated unfavourably and then oppressed. Drawing on the three levels of the PCS model, it can be seen that while people's thoughts, behaviours, attitudes, and feelings are unique and individual, we cannot deny the importance of culture in shaping people's perspectives and influencing their behaviour; more importantly, this cultural context also needs to be understood at the structural level.

The first question guiding this chapter related to the social barriers participants faced before the start of compulsory education. The findings show that some participants spent most of their time seeking medical treatment, showing the efforts their parents made for them to follow the 'norm' of their children having 'normal' vision. In addition, being rejected and being refused support by parents demonstrates some disabled people are seen as 'useless' or 'no value' from the negative attitude. This can further relate to the influence of the one-child policy at the time and its eugenics thinking, which emphasises the importance of having a 'healthy' child and reinforces the oppression of disabled children (Zhu, 2016). The influence of cultural level (Thompson 2020) is obvious in how the social norm guides parents to treat their disabled children. More

importantly, deep-seated beliefs about health and the value of human life, promoted by the cultural context, create an environment that is often hostile to disabled people.

Referring to the second question, the social barriers that participants starting special education faced were that many were rejected from attending the mainstream educational system, and this exclusion began at preschool age. Some special schools are usually far away from their homes (i.e., 500 kilometres away). Some of these schools do not consistently recruit visually impaired students every year, so visually impaired students need to wait for the admission chance. In addition, their connection with 'massage' also starts from the entrance of special primary schools, including the encouragement from the teachers and the school.

Additionally, drawing on the PCS model, we can see the way in which structural oppression works to result in exclusion from mainstream schools and the establishment of special schools. All of these prevent visually impaired students from accessing formal education at school age; the limited teaching resources and the different admission systems delay their school entry age. Then, the cultural values and personal biases about the vocational stereotype of the massage industry further negatively portray visually impaired people. All of this shows how disablism (Lightfoot, 2015) oppresses people with visual impairments and potentially disabled people more generally, too.

The third question relates to the barriers participants who started mainstream education faced when transitioning into education. The findings show that all the barriers, especially the inaccessible learning environment in the school, need to be overcome through the participants' efforts; they were treated differently in mainstream educational systems as visually impaired students, and many teachers in mainstream schools are not trained to teach students with special needs. As a result, none of these participants could consistently complete mainstream schooling all the way from compulsory to higher education. This means that visually impaired students or disabled students generally may not be able to rely solely on their ability to complete studies as they do need assistance and reasonable adjustments provided by schools, teachers and even classmates to remove/minimise the barriers they face. This finding can be supported by Shakespeare (2013), who admitted that disabled people may lack some form of capacity due to their impairments, so they need support and assistance to ensure equity of access and outcome. More importantly, even though many policies that are beneficial to the integration of disabled people into mainstream society have been

introduced,<sup>29</sup> dominant cultural norms are directed toward the non-disabled majority, and popular perceptions view disabled people as a personal tragedy. Combined with the impact of disablism, relevant policies may not be implemented in practice (Ruan, 2019). Hence, stereotypes and discrimination against disabled people still exist currently, causing the younger generation to experience similar oppression to the previous generation.

Additionally, referring to the PCS mode and connecting with the notion of disablism, from the personal level, participants' experiences of being treated differently in the mainstream educational system highlight that disabled people are viewed as 'victims' of their tragedy (Dauncey, 2020) by teachers and schools. Hence, they need to overcome barriers through their efforts. From the cultural level, such experiences suggest that disabled people are abused and degraded in jokes (i.e., making fun of their visual impairment) and other forms of 'humour', affecting their confidence and self-esteem, as well as identity. From the structural level, all the buildings and facilities in the mainstream schools or access to the schools are designed for non-disabled students, usually with no formal provision for disabled students. On the other hand, connecting the PCS model with ableism, these designs of buildings are all beneficial to non-disabled groups and indicate they can have more privileges than disabled groups.

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<sup>29</sup> Policies include the Regulations on Education of Disabled People in 2017 and the Regulations on Barrier-free Environment Construction in 2023.



## Chapter 6 The start of massage training

### 6.1 Introduction

According to Chapter 4, three patterns of entry into education (participants starting in special schools/mainstream schools, participants without formal education) and two other patterns of the transition from education to work (typical/atypical pathways) are identified. Chapter 5 has already discussed their entry into education; it demonstrated that China's mainstream educational systems, from preschool to tertiary education, are not fully accessible for visually impaired students. Of the nine participants who managed to get into early years mainstream education, all were eventually and reluctantly transferred to special/mixed education or dropped out of the school system altogether and got massage training at different life stages. From that point on, their learning/working trajectory resembled that of the other participants who had started their learning journeys in special education. However, the analysis also showed that, no matter how and where participants entered the education system (whether that be mainstream or special/mixed provision), their transition from education into work had a lot of commonalities. Almost every participant had some form of massage training experience – through formal education or informal education (i.e., short-term projects or as an apprentice in the massage parlour) – regardless of whether they were in the typical or atypical pathway identified in Chapter 4. Such common experience with massage training meant that they potentially experienced similar barriers (i.e., forms of discrimination and oppression, whether that was at the personal, cultural or structural level) that led or encouraged them eventually into the massage training, even though their different levels of agency enabled some of them to work in the areas unrelated to massage in the end.

Given their common massage training experience, this chapter focuses on the barriers and common forms of discrimination and oppression experienced by participants while transitioning from mainstream curricula to vocational massage training. From this, this chapter begins to build answers to the second and the third overarching research questions – *'What social barriers do they face in education, work and as they transition between the two?'* and *'How can these social barriers they face be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?'*. In doing so, it aims to find answers to the following specific questions:

- What social barriers have they faced when transitioning from mainstream curricula into massage training?
- How can these barriers be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?

Regardless of how participants started schooling and whether they took the typical or atypical pathways into their careers, almost every participant got massage training experience during the transition from mainstream curricula into work. Given this, this chapter discusses the ways in which participants start their massage training. It focuses on two channels of massage training - formal education and informal education - and the barriers that visually impaired participants faced during this process. It further explores these barriers through the lens of Thompson's PCS model (2021), identifying related discrimination and oppression. During the discussion, the influence of gender issues and relevant policies is also highlighted. Finally, my analysis will critically examine the normative principles underpinning special education in China and how they contribute to the discrimination and oppression faced by disabled people.

## **6.2 The start of massage training through formal education**

Despite their different pathways, most participants had the common experience of undertaking formal massage course training during secondary vocational school/ tertiary education. This includes 13 participants from the typical pathway, and five from the atypical path. Although most of these experienced continuous learning during formal education years, four participants dropped out of schooling for a while. Then, they attended massage training when they returned to formal education later (to be discussed in detail in Section 6.3 here). Many participants without experience in tertiary education mentioned that their childhood aspiration was to go to university. However, the chance of doing so was eliminated by the disadvantages and injustices they faced during their school years. This section discusses the barriers they faced during formal secondary and tertiary education and the further discrimination and oppression they suffered there. It further explains how inequality in special education is embedded into the fabric of society and leads many visually impaired students to attend massage training regardless of whether they want to or not.

### 6.2.1 The role of vocational schools

Chapter 4 showed that only three of the 26 participants progressed to a special senior high school. When it came time to do so, 13 others chose to attend a *Tuina* vocational school instead. *Tuina* vocational education was, therefore, the most common option compared with attending special senior high schools or dropping out for participants. According to their narratives, this choice can be explained by three reasons.

#### Limited provision of special senior high school education

Some participants mentioned there were too few special senior high schools specifically for the blind offering regular courses (meaning the curricula typically offered in mainstream establishments); moreover, the admission standards for these specialised senior high schools were more competitive than those for primary and junior high schools for the blind. Lougen, for example, told me that there were very few special senior high schools in China that could accept visually impaired people and that he had heard of very few visually impaired students being accepted by mainstream senior high schools. Recent research by Ma and Ni (2020) supports Lougen's impression that there was of a dearth of provision. Their study noted that only 15 special senior high schools are providing regular courses for visually impaired students in China at present. When talking about these special high schools, many participants referred, in particular, to the Qingdao School for the Blind in Shandong province in northeast China. For Jack, this school was in another province, 1500 kilometres from home, and it would take about 15 hours by train if he attended. Xiaogao mentioned one graduate from his school who went to the Qingdao school, while most went to take massage courses in one of the most famous vocational schools in Henan province. He was very jealous of that student who did not have to take massage courses:

*When I was in Grades 8/9, there were many graduates who went to the Luoyang Massage Institute [Henan province] to take massage [course], but three people in our class [including me] swore never to go to the massage school, which our tutor supported... One of our graduates attended the [senior high school in] Qingdao School for the Blind. I was so jealous of him, and argued with my family that I*

*wanted to go to this school, too...[However], this couldn't come true finally... - Xiaogao*

Dan came from a small village in Guizhou province in the far southwest of China and wanted to transfer to the junior high section of the Qingdao School for the Blind (which would take him about 48 hours of travelling by different trains and coaches, with a distance of more than 3000 kilometres). He transferred successfully into the junior high section through a competitive application with a lot of paperwork for a further chance to be referred to its senior high section:

*... [When I was in the second year of junior high school] I planned to focus on my regular courses, go to university and take massage [courses]. If I went this way, the better school for the blind at that time was the School for the Blind in Qingdao, and then there was another blind school in Shanghai. At that time, I chose the Qingdao School for the Blind. I also had to pass the assessment if I transferred to that school. It also depended on my previous experience. At that time, I sent some of my awards and certificates to compete with another classmate for admission qualifications... Finally, I was accepted [my classmate was not] ... - Dan*

Only those who passed the highly competitive admission assessment were accepted into this prestigious institution. Qingdao School for the Blind is famous because it opened what would be China's first special senior high school department for visually impaired students in 1996 – here they could learn the same regular courses as many non-disabled peers in mainstream senior high schools (Today's Headlines (*Jinri Toutiao* 今日头条), 2022). Since 1947, it has also been offering compulsory education, and in 1987, it opened its *Tuina* Vocational Secondary School. Before 1996, special secondary education only comprised vocational courses in massage for visually impaired students. Over the last few decades, there have been only a handful of schools across China, like the Shanghai, Beijing and Zhejiang Schools for the Blind, which have started offering regular senior high curricula similar to that offered elsewhere in mainstream establishments. However, at the time of the interview, Dan and Lougen mentioned that, in their experience, only the Qingdao School for the Blind was open to admission to the whole country; others required local household registration or a residence

permit as one of the admission qualifications (see Kaili's experience of being delayed in admission to a school for the blind in another city discussed in Chapter 5). The Zhenjiang School for the Blind (2023) and Shanghai School for the Blind (2023), for example, all state household registration or residence certificates as a threshold condition. However, the admissions criteria for the Qingdao School for the Blind slightly changed in 2022 after the time interviews were conducted with participants. While it used to be open to visually impaired students across the country, it has prioritised students with Qingdao household registration after 2022.

As a result, there is now just one other special school for the blind – the Chongqing Special Education Centre (2023) – advertising that its special senior high school is still open to all students regardless of household registration locality. None of the participants in this study mentioned this school. This might have been because it is located in the southwest of China, while most participants were from the north, and thus, it was possibly less well-known to them than the nationally famous Qingdao. What is also noteworthy is the fact that the number of places available at these schools is also minimal. Wenqing, a former student at Qingdao School, said his school only offered two classes at the senior high school department every year, each of which could only recruit 12 students. Similarly, Zhejiang School for the Blind (2023) advertised that it was able to offer 15 placements in one class for regular curricula in 2023. Limited placements in senior high school mean that aspiring students face fierce competition to gain a place.

Of the three participants who were able to get into a special senior high school, both Wenqiang and Tina gained access to Qingdao School for the Blind through the entrance exams. Wenqing was a Qingdao resident, but Tina was from Henan province, which is about 800 kilometres away, and she travelled 14 hours by train. Ouwen told me he had a chance to study at Beijing School for the Blind because he lives in Beijing, and special education in the capital is equipped with the qualifications to run a high school for the blind (i.e., being equipped with the necessary resources and employing staff with appropriate qualifications). Even so, he still had to wait for at least another three classmates to register and then form a new class to start the course. He said the school struggled to recruit four people that year, as one of the prospective student's parents was hesitant to send their child to learn the regular curricula.

Participants' narratives suggest that the provision of special education is uneven across the country. A few senior high schools for the

blind offer regular curricula, but the long travel times, strict household registration and limited placements available in these schools make access to the special senior high schools for the blind challenging. Although their non-disabled peers may also have similar experiences, especially for students living in rural areas who often have to travel long daily distances or board, at least mainstream high schools exist in every city/county in every province, so they do not have to travel day and night to follow the regular curricula. From the structural level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), this imbalanced provision means visually impaired people face unfavourable conditions when it comes to secondary education when compared to non-disabled students or visually impaired students from developed areas who have privileged access to local high schools. Thus, it can be seen how systemic oppression occurs when there is no equity of access (Taylor, 2016).

More importantly, in China, an important purpose of the provision of regular curricula in senior high school is to lay the foundation for the entrance exam to tertiary education – *Gaokao* (高考). The *Gaokao* is considered the most important and life-changing exam for Chinese residents, as it guarantees equality to the greatest extent possible to access tertiary education (Howlett, 2017). However, the scarcity of special senior high schools and lack of chance to access the regular curricula further keep visually impaired students or disabled students generally from accessing tertiary education. The majority of visually impaired people have no chance of reaching the requirements for attending the *Gaokao*, not to say tertiary education. From Thompson's cultural level, the limited number of special high schools shows a negative attitude toward visually impaired students as most institutional rules may not assume or expect visually impaired students to continue to follow the regular curricula in special schools after the compulsory education stage; this is particularly problematic given the fact that mainstream schools usually refuse to accept them too.

### **The prioritisation of massage courses in vocational schools**

In contrast, interviews with the participants who came to vocational schools directly suggested that the provision of *Tuina* vocational secondary schools (the only type of vocational school open to visually impaired students) was relatively large. Due to this, vocational secondary schools became the only choice for some participants where they took massage courses. Five participants mentioned that their special schools comprised elementary and junior high schools and a *Tuina* vocational

secondary school that would enable them to specialise in massage training. Lougen mentioned that these special/mixed vocational secondary schools open to visually impaired students *only* offered massage courses, so he could only choose this major whether he liked it or not. Jack said he would have no school to attend if he did not go to the vocational secondary school to take massage courses. This explains why *all* the participants with vocational school experience attended massage training. In this way, according to Lili, Xian, and Han's experience, they *had* to attend the *Tuina* vocational school, even though massage courses were not relevant to their future career pathway, as secondary education is one of the important conditions for access to tertiary education later.

Xiaogao is an exception here. He did not want to take massage courses in vocational secondary school like his classmates; as a result, since he did not have a chance to progress to the special senior high school in Qingdao, he left schooling in the final year of junior high school. Additionally, through the interviews with the other four participants – Lili, Han, Kaili, and Shiwen, who studied at home for a long time – I identified another route which appears to be absent in current academic literature – namely homeschooling. In the cases of Lili and Han, they did not have the chance to access the senior high school to learn regular courses, nor were they not willing to take massage courses at the vocational schools; in the cases of Kaili and Shiwen, their families/mentors did not trust the teaching quality in the special schools. In this way, Shiwen dropped out of primary school, and Kaili studied at home after finishing primary school. Han and Lili registered for vocational schooling but then studied at home instead. They all received homeschooling from parents or personal tutors known to their families.<sup>30</sup> With the exception of Shiwen, all three went on to successfully access special/mixed tertiary education, and all learned piano. More details are given in section 6.3 in this chapter and Chapter 8 when discussing participants' different levels of agency.

On the other hand, participants' experiences show that studying nine years of compulsory education followed by three years of a *Tuina* vocational course in one special school is a common route for visually impaired people. This is consistent with the research from Ma and Ni (2023) and Zhang (2021), who have shown that most special schools for the blind provide primary and junior high followed by vocational education rather than senior high. Zhang (2021) further explains this institutional provision by suggesting that the task of schools for the blind is to fulfil the requirements of nine-year compulsory education in China – the provision of special senior high schools is not actually compulsory, therefore.

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<sup>30</sup> However, there is no evidence of quality assurance mechanisms for assessing these personal tutors' abilities/experience/suitability.

Additionally, this system was proposed by the Disabled Persons Protection Law issued in 1990 (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1990), stating that special education should focus on developing compulsory education and vocational education and only then gradually develop senior secondary education and tertiary education. In this way, special education emphasising vocational training has become ingrained into their educational pathway, which has become a legitimate option in the special educational system. However, this statement also provides no real political push to develop higher-level secondary education, although this provision reflects that the government is not obliged to offer regular courses in secondary education to disabled people.

Moreover, the prioritisation of massage courses since the 1980s in vocational schools can be traced to the point when the government started to connect the massage industry with the employment rate of visually impaired people in 1985 and subsequently established a new massage centre for 'the blind department' in the CDPF in 1988 (Tie and Guo, 2011). After that time, special education for the blind started to develop targeted (*dingxiang de* 定向的) vocational training in the form of massage courses.<sup>31</sup> As mentioned, 1987 was the year when the Qingdao School for the Blind (Today's headlines (*Jinri Toutiao* 今日头条), 2022) opened a secondary education section.

Drawing on the structural and cultural levels of Thompson's (2021) PCS model, it can be seen that the vocational stereotype of visually impaired people taking massage courses has been established through the focus on vocational education, the links between massage training and visually impaired people, and its incorporation into institutionalised patterns and organisational policies. The emergence of such a vocational stereotype is also related to how the ideology of socialism and ableism has impacted disabled groups after the market economy was introduced in 1978. Following the distributive principle of socialism, the market economy refers to 'each according to his contribution'; employers are more likely to reject employing disabled people (who may not work with the same efficiency as the body-abled staff) for more profit (Shi, 2022). Under this context, disabled people now need, even more than before, to use their labour force as tools to get employed and participate in economic development (Qu, 2020); thus, they can show that they can perform the same as a 'normal person' to contribute to society under these new economic conditions. According to the State Council (1998),

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<sup>31</sup> Targeted vocational training means specialised vocational training that is aimed at visually impaired people.



visually impaired people were considered to be a 'particularly difficult' group' among disabled people to find employment:

*'Among the disabled groups, it is particularly difficult for blind people to be employed. It is necessary to consolidate the existing massage institutions for blind people, build a new batch of massage institutions for them, develop massage training for them through various channels, run massage schools and training courses for blind people, and evaluate professional and technical positions for qualified personnel engaged in the massage area'. (The State Council, 1998)*

Thus, developing massage training through various channels became necessary for visually impaired people to increase their employment rate, and engaging in the massage industry allowed visually impaired people to demonstrate that they were economically productive. These created a new social norm: 'The blind should learn massage' to become 'useful' citizens.

### **The subsequent problems of delayed admissions**

According to some participants, getting massage training in a vocational school is related to their late entry into the formal education system. As mentioned in Chapter 5, some participants' comparatively late admission to special schools had knock-on effects on their admission to other higher levels of education. This urged them to learn vocational skills (massage) during schooling as soon as possible to save time and then work in this area to earn money, rather than spending three years of senior high school and four years of tertiary education. This is the route taken by six participants. Among them, Ling, Jack, and Zhou decided not to finish the nine-year compulsory education. To save time, they dropped out of school and entered the special/mixed *Tuina* vocational school directly:

*You see, I went to elementary school when I was 12. After four years, I got older too. At that time, I thought, that if I went to junior high school for three years, high school for three years, and then went to university [for four years], I would graduate by nearly 30. We [visually impaired students] could go to our vocational secondary school directly if we paid all tuition fees, so I went there. - Jack*

This shows that the differences in sequence and timing in their early stage of schooling have influenced their further educational choices and show distinct pathways in their life stages. Such a phenomenon has also been identified elsewhere by Macmillan (2005) who mentions the impact of early experience on subsequent life choices. Delaying admission for a few years left these students less time to devote to long-term academic learning and the education for them did not match their development needs. Instead, they needed to quickly learn a skill in vocational schools and then earn money before they could become like their peers and start supporting themselves. Understood through Thompson's (2021) PCS model, this also reflects the discrimination and oppression from the unfair admission system of special education since school age will limit their future life choices, which also further compounds their disadvantages and inequality. The phenomenon of directly registering for *Tuina* vocational schools, with no requirement of finishing compulsory education, also reflects the lower threshold of entering special *Tuina* vocational education for visually impaired students (Liao and Chen, 2018), which is in sharp contrast to the competitive admission threshold of special senior high schools for the blind.

Although most participants had no choice but to learn at the *Tuina* vocational schools, Lougen did not think learning massage skills was wrong. Lougen thought there were some benefits of going to a vocational school, which he thought could not be achieved in senior high school.

*I thought that after three years of staying in a high school, it would be a waste of time if you didn't take the Gaokao. I could learn a [massage] skill in the vocational secondary school, and I could work part-time during the summer holiday. And I had more time to develop my personal hobbies. If I went to senior high school, I wouldn't have had that much time; I would have been taking regular classes. Isn't it still learning [massage] skills in college after graduating high school? Since I could learn [massage] skills in vocational secondary school, and I could also learn [massage] skills when I went to university, but I just learned a little deeper, why did I have to keep taking regular classes [in senior high school]? - Lougen*

On the one hand, Lougen's words show how such institutional discrimination is internalised (Thompson, 2021) as he (and society more

broadly) had already assumed that visually impaired students usually take massage courses in tertiary education. On the other hand, his thoughts also reflect how structural inequalities affect personal feelings and thoughts. What Lougen mentioned is related to the ways visually impaired students receive tertiary education. The regular courses in senior high school are there to prepare students for the *Gaokao* and mainstream universities. By contrast, taking vocational massage courses in vocational school means that they are substantially disadvantaged in terms of being able to pass the exam even if they wanted to take it. In this way, most visually impaired students just chose to take the specialised college/university entrance exam (*dankao danzhao* 单考单招) - limited colleges/universities specifically prepared exams for visually impaired students.

### 6.2.2 Limited choices of tertiary education

According to Chapter 4, nine participants had experience with tertiary education. Some participants provided what they understood to be the way visually impaired students get into college. Tina and Wei said that, before 2014, there was no Braille test paper for visually impaired students in the *Gaokao*, so most of them could only access tertiary education by participating in the specialised college/university entrance exam aimed at students with visual impairments. Such opportunities were limited to a few specific colleges/universities. Lili mentioned that a small number of students who were partially sighted chose to take the *Gaokao* and conceal their visual impairment from the mainstream university; if they did not do that, they feared that they might not be accepted by mainstream colleges/universities. Their narratives reflect the research done by Ma and Ni (2020), who also mention the dilemma of attending the *Gaokao* for visually impaired students before 2014. While not directly stated as such, their research suggests that such barriers reflect the influence of ableism – students needed to pass as sighted in order to access mainstream universities; those who cannot (or would not) do this needed to apply to the few universities that provide access through special admission exams (Ma and Ni, 2020). This means that most participants who finished their secondary education before 2014 had little chance to attend the *Gaokao* and study the general subjects. Although the *Gaokao* started to offer the Braille test paper for visually impaired students in 2014, Wenqiang and Lougen, who were undergraduate/college students at the time of the interview, still chose to take part in the specialised college/university entrance exam and take massage courses. These exams were, they said, easier than the *Gaokao* to pass:

*If you [visually impaired students] took the Gaokao and wanted to be admitted to a better university, just like the university I am studying at now, there would be a 99% chance that you would not be admitted to this university. – Lougen*

Additionally, their experience is consistent with the research reported by Ma and Ni (2020), who argue that most visually impaired students have to adjust their educational and career expectations and take specialised college/university entrance exams because of insufficient policy information (i.e., the related policy of the Learning in the Regular Classroom (*suiban jiudu* 随班就读), dissuasion from teachers and even parents, and inconvenience in mainstream education and workplaces.

Wenqiang suggested that the *Gaokao* is still challenging for visually impaired students, as evidenced by the small number of visually impaired candidates who have taken it every year since 2014. Wenqiang's words can also be reflected in relevant news reports. For example, according to CCTV News (2021), only 11 participants across the country took the *Gaokao* in 2021, the highest number of visually impaired students to take this exam since 2014; China Daily (2024) reports that only 15 visually impaired candidates took the *Gaokao* among 13.42 million students in 2024. The words from Lougen that passing the *Gaokao* is still a big challenge for visually impaired people, can explain this situation why only a small number of visually impaired candidates attend it. Given this, Lougen did not think the regular courses in senior high schools were necessary for visually impaired students, as '*it would be a waste of time if you didn't take the Gaokao*'.

In this way, with the exception of Dong, who took the *Gaokao* before 2014 because he had sufficient vision to do so at the time, all the other participants who accessed tertiary education took the specialised college/university entrance exams specifically for students with visual impairments rather than the *Gaokao*. It is worth noting that, however, Dong mentioned that he dropped out of the mainstream university soon due to the inaccessible environment. For example, it was not convenient for him to identify the buildings and attend the lecture. Then, he started to get massage training (see Chapter 5). Dong's dropping out of mainstream universities also reflects the barriers for disabled students studying in mainstream universities, as those with different learning needs are required to overcome the difficulties by themselves.

Four participants who entered tertiary education mentioned that the number of colleges or universities in China that can accept visually impaired students is very limited. At their estimation, there were about five institutions that did so. This situation also emerges in a study by Ma (2014), who mentions several mixed colleges/universities offering this special exam. More importantly, compared with choosing the general subjects in the mainstream universities through the *Gaokao*, there are usually only two options for majors open to visually impaired students – massage or piano courses. Yet, as pointed out by Sui and Liu (2021), disabled students can only choose the course based on their different types of disability. Since selecting the piano requires some prior basic piano skills, while massage courses do not, five out of the eight participants chose to take massage courses, and the other three chose piano. More details about why they had more agency in their decision to study piano systematically in tertiary education are given in Chapter 8.

Referring to the structural and cultural levels of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), continuing to take massage courses in tertiary education has been taken for granted; visually impaired people getting vocational massage training is deeply embedded in the education systems. Mainstream universities are difficult to access, and learning other vocational skills (such as piano) is only affordable for some visually impaired students. This involves the family's financial ability and cumulative (dis)advantages to support their disabled family member, which is explored in depth in Chapter 9. Additionally, studying in tertiary education will make no difference because they would be taking massage courses anyway; this becomes an important reason that some participants give up preparing for tertiary education. Many participants referred to their friends who went to college but still took massage courses, and they also worked in the massage area after graduation, so going to college/universities may make little sense for some of them.

*When I was working in [the] massage [industry], one of my friends who took massage [courses] graduated from college, and he worked in the massage industry, too! So, what's the point of going to college?*  
–Wei

In addition, there is a limited quota of places available in tertiary education through the special entrance exam for admission. According to Wenqiang, who studied at a mixed university, the Special Education School at Changchun University only recruits 60 visually impaired

students to take massage courses yearly. Han graduated from the same university in the piano course and said only six visually impaired students are recruited each year to learn piano in a combined class. According to Gan and Yu (2014), Changchun University was the first mainstream university to recruit visually impaired students, offering training in massage and piano and having its annual special entrance exam since 1987. For most participants, Changchun University's role at the tertiary education level is as important as Qingdao School for the Blind's role at the secondary education level. Many participants (i.e., Dan, Ling, Xiaogao, Wenqiang, Tina, and Lisha) aspired to study at these educational institutions. However, their limited quota and chance of being admitted have become the other reason why some people gave up going to senior high school and tertiary education; instead, they just went to vocational secondary school:

*There were too many people who prepared to take college/university special college entrance exams in our school [junior high school], and [these universities] admitted limited students every year. Plus, my studies were not the best, so I totally had no self-confidence [to get the offer from the college]. – Ling*

In addition to these two ways, some participants obtain a degree of tertiary education by taking the Adult Self-Study Exams (*Chengren zixue kaoshi* 成人自学考试) (Ma, 2014).<sup>32</sup> This exam means candidates do not need to attend lectures in person. Instead, they can take this exam by self-studying the course. After the candidates pass all the courses, then they can obtain a college or university diploma. This is open to every student. However, the popular subjects for visually impaired people still focus on massage and piano courses. Dong is an example of this way of accessing tertiary education after he dropped out of a mainstream university and worked in the massage industry for a while. After acquiring a college diploma (*dazhuan* 大专) in massage, he was going to obtain a bachelor's degree in massage through the college-to-undergraduate entrance exam (*zhuanshengben kaoshi* 专升本考试) and doing some form of self-study. Xian, Duo, and Lili are similar examples of 'improving' their qualifications by getting a bachelor's degree after junior college

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<sup>32</sup> This exam for pursuing a junior college diploma usually does not require any registration requirements. However, this exam for pursuing a university diploma requires first acquiring a junior college diploma and then registering. This process is one pattern of the college-to-undergraduate entrance exam (*zhuanshengben kaoshi* 专升本考试).

graduation.<sup>33</sup> Except for Lili, who continued to learn piano, the other participants kept taking massage courses—the same subject as their former degrees.

Drawing on the analysis at the structural level of Thompson's (2021) oppression model, the limited choice of courses and the competitive places through the special college entrance exam to access tertiary education, the challenging of the *Gaokao*, and the inaccessible environment in the mainstream university, all show the structural inequality in education systems; this results in the existence of institutionalised oppression and discrimination against visually impaired people. As mentioned in section 6.2.1, like the special senior high schools, tertiary educational institutions may not expect many visually impaired students (or those with other impairments more generally) to attend their programmes. This may explain why such mainstream educational institutions do not plan well for students with special needs. They give little attention to the inaccessible learning environment and leave the individual students to adapt or drop out if they cannot do so.

### 6.2.3 Discrimination and oppression during secondary and tertiary education

Many participants experienced discrimination and oppression during their time in secondary and tertiary education. This section highlights the experiences of Wenqiang and Han. Wenqiang, a visually impaired student who studied in the most famous special higher school in China - Qingdao School for the Blind and then went to the most famous university for visually impaired students (Changchun University) to take massage courses, almost took the 'educational path' that many visually impaired people expect. Despite this, he was frequently put into a situation of 'selling [his] misfortune (*maican* 卖惨)' during his high school years.<sup>34</sup>

*When we were in high school, [we] went out [as a group] to participate in some activities, but some people felt that [we were] going out to sell our misfortune. How should I put it? We didn't go out to sell our misfortune. When we travelled, because of this kind of group activity, we had to gather in a group when we went out. Then wearing uniforms... A group of people led each other forward... It was*

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<sup>33</sup> In China, a junior college degree is inferior to a university degree, so many people are trying to improve their college degrees to university degrees.

<sup>34</sup> This is also translated as 'sad fishing' (like catfishing) or 'pity porn.'

*a drama organised by Qingdao City for the whole city to watch. We should also go to see it... But when I entered the venue, I heard some people seeing us; they said, wow, these are a group of blind people. Then there was a sigh, oh, so pitiful. In fact, I think we were just watching a drama, and we are not as miserable as you [those people] think. . . In fact, I think this aspect... how should I put it, there are still some problems in China. – Wenqiang*

Wenqing also told me of his experience of giving a speech organised by his high school, in which he was required to sell his misfortune and 'beautify' his experience – he was not allowed to say what he wanted to say – all to attract sponsorship. Lili, who studied piano in a special college, also said that her stories had been modified and overly embellished by a former news interview, being described as an inspirational role model who was 'broken in body but not in spirit', meaning being disabled but having strong ambitions (*shen can zhi jian* 身残志坚). Lili did not like to be reported like this, so she worried about the authenticity of participating in my interview at the start. This is consistent with the research of Dauncey (2020) who shows that, across all forms of media, slogans like 'broken in body but not in spirit' are promoted by society to remind disabled people of the need to visibly demonstrate that they can 'overcome' their disability so that they can garner pity (either for their own direct benefit and/or for the benefit of those supporting them as it demonstrates *their* good citizenship). Influenced by ableism and socialism (the cultural level of Thompson's PCS, 2021), the values imposed by mainstream media on visually impaired people – 'emphasis on being disabled and pity first but then self-inspiring and valuable' – become a normalised role expectation for disabled people.

As Wenqiang said, 'People just think that blind people sell misfortune'. At the personal level of Thompson's PCS model, therefore, this shows the personal prejudice against visually impaired people; 'Showing misery to get more patronage' also reflects the misplaced charitable concerns that trade human dignity and human rights for patronage and benevolence. Conversely, the stress of needing help and care from society for visually impaired people or disabled people generally further confirms the prejudice that disabled people are 'victims' of their personal tragedy (Dauncey, 2020) and views disability through the lens of the medical model (Oliver, 2009).

In addition, Wenqiang also mentioned that 'people do not know about visually impaired people, and they do not know what they can do [in their



daily life]'. When he was walking on the road, some passers-by would say to him in surprise 'You are so amazing (*lihai a* 厉害啊), you can actually walk (*juran neng zou* 居然能走)!'. When he ate with non-disabled people, they always tried to help, but he rejected them, and they were surprised that he was able to open the food packaging bag by himself. Wenqiang clarified that 'visual impairment is a characteristic (*tedian* 特点), but it is not a defect (*quexian* 缺陷)'. Due to the lack of understanding of visually impaired people, Wenqiang feels like he always draws other people's attention when he goes out. Xiaogao also suggested that he was habitually 'attracting attention when going out'. He said many non-disabled people did not reach out to disabled people because they were afraid of how people around them would react.

Considering the personal and cultural levels of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), it can be seen how the separated education system between disabled and non-disabled people leads to non-disabled people's lack of understanding and even fear of visually impaired people. Since non-disabled people may not have a chance to know visually impaired people in person during educational stages, all their understanding is influenced by the dominant social norms and negative cultural values of visually impaired people or disabled people generally, resulting in their prejudice that manifests itself in attitudes of contempt toward visually impaired people. This is why Wenqiang always calls on visually impaired people to go out more often so that non-disabled people can have more chances to know them.

More importantly, Wenqiang provided important information that even Changchun University, the first mixed university in China to admit visually impaired students, does not fully integrate disabled students and non-disabled students. According to him, the university always says more than it indeed does. Instead, restrictions on visually impaired students exist in many places, showing what he describes as the university's lack of belief in them. Here is an example of taking part in watching the flag-raising ceremony:

*How to actually [watch the ceremony of] raising the national flag [shengguoqi 升国旗], was [a matter] for the whole school... thousands of people gathered in the playground [to watch the flag raiser raise the national flag and sing together in the playground] ... Then maybe [the university] was afraid of trouble, so it required us [the visually impaired students], 'You don't have to enter the playground [to watch this ceremony] ... [Instead], you are outside [the playground to watch*

*it]. Just stay wherever you can watch [the ceremony of raising] the national flag'. In fact, I think that scene was quite bad [after implementing that requirement] ... We didn't call it [watching] the flag-raising ceremony... We called it watching others who were watching the flag-raising ceremony. Right? In fact, this aspect was very bad... I said to the teacher, 'You can actually go [to the outside the playground] and have a look. Standing outside the playground and watching others watching the flag-raising ceremony.' ... [Then] the result [after reporting it to the teacher] was unreasonable. My original intention was, I wanted to say that we [visually impaired students] went into the playground to watch the flag-raising ceremony together [with other students] ... but then the matter was dropped. Later, [the school] simply said forget it and said that you [visually impaired students] should not take part in [watching] the flag-raising ceremony anymore. In fact, I find this incident very interesting. I think that you [the school] simply cannot understand the feedback [I gave]. - Wenqiang*

Wenqiang's narratives show that visually impaired students are not allowed to take part in some group activities in the mixed university. Additionally, Wenqiang further explained this restriction:

*You could not entirely blame the university. Some activities [we are not allowed to attend], [as] the university is to avoid trouble. The university does not recommend visually impaired students to participate [the ceremony of raising the national flag and singing the national song] as it is afraid that something might happen [to them] if there are too many people [haipa renduo chushi 害怕人多出事]. But I think since it [the university] is integrated, we should have participated. - Wenqiang*

Interestingly, even a mixed university with the longest history of recruiting visually impaired students appears not to be able to achieve the integration of disabled students into regular school activities. Instead, it treats them differently, as they face more restrictions than non-disabled students, resulting in inequality, which then reinforces oppression, something that Taylor (2016) argues is typical.

Han (who studied in the special *Tuina* vocational school and then went to Changchun University to study piano playing) also encountered varying degrees of discrimination during his studies. Compared with Wenqiang whose massage classmates are all visually impaired, Han studied with predominantly non-disabled students in a combined class. For him, the most profound discrimination actually came from his piano lecturer. He said he learned slowly at first and could not keep up with the unexpected progress. When he was learning complicated theory in the class, the lecturer wrote knowledge points on the blackboard and asked students to have a look. Then, the lecturer would erase the blackboard and rewrite new knowledge points. Han was not able to see it, so he just took pictures slowly with his mobile phone. After class, he asked the teacher what he did not understand in the lecture. Then the lecturer just complained, 'You blind people have a hard life (*nimen mangren zhen bu rongyi* 你们盲人真不容易). Don't learn it [piano] anymore (*bie xuele yihou* 别学习了以后)'. Additionally, the lecturer also asked other students to watch him play the piano in the class and scolded him in front of the students and said, 'After you have learned like this [badly] (*ni xuecheng le zheyang* 你学成了这样), why do you still learn piano playing (*weishenmo haiyao xuexi gangqin* 为什么还要学习钢琴)?'. His lecturer's attitude and words show the views of ableism about the preference for non-disabled bodies and the negative attitude towards disability (Shew, 2020).

He reacted to the lecturer's criticism by working harder and studying on his own in private, proving to the lecturer that he could do well as non-disabled students, or even have better academic performance than the latter. Han's reaction shows the influence of ableism as he needed to make more efforts to show himself that he could achieve good academic performance just like non-disabled students and be treated with respect by the lecturer. This shows how disabled people 'overcome' their difficulties to transform themselves into 'productive' and gain respect (Dauncey, 2020).

However, Han still felt that the lecturer treated him differently right up to the last day of the graduation piano performance. He said the lecturer took pictures with everyone after the performance. But when she came to him, she just sighed heavily and said, 'Well... let me take a photo with you too'. The negative attitude of his lecturer made Han begin to hate playing the piano he had been learning since childhood. During the interview, he said he was upset about being contemplated by the lecturer. He did not think learning music was a process of being despised. It was not the right way if the lecturer hoped he could learn better. Han started to doubt if he truly enjoyed playing the piano and participating in piano performances.

However, he did not like working in the massage industry. He did not know what else he could do if he did not like piano either. As he said, for visually impaired people, their life choices are only limited to ‘the bad (*cha* 差)’ and ‘the worse (*gengchang* 更差)’ and they just have to pick one:

*Changchun University is also worse, but at least it's what a university should be like [rather than separating disabled students from their non-disabled peers]. I can enter and exit the school at will [rather than being restricted in the special school like before], but I really do not have any other choice. - Han*

Drawing on the personal level of PCS (Thompson, 2021), it can be seen that his lecturer's prejudice and devaluing comments show revulsion and disrespect toward visually impaired people. The lecturer did not believe that a visually impaired student was able to play the piano. Additionally, from the cultural level, Han is trapped in two vocational stereotypes for visually impaired people—either massage work or piano playing. These vocational stereotypes define what a visually impaired person should do for a living, leaving him no other choice.

Overall, combined with the previous sections, all these settings of vocational/massage courses from primary school to tertiary education ‘push’ visually impaired students with no other options but to take massage courses. This ‘push’ factor is embedded in all aspects of the education system from start to finish. In other words, the setting of special education for visually impaired people is to *train* or *prepare* them for working in the massage industry. From the perspectives of disablism and the structural level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), it can be seen that the education-to-massage pathway of visually impaired people is pre-arranged under this separate educational system, successfully isolating and marginalising them from mainstream society and then oppressing them. This is consistent with social models of disability, which refer to social barriers caused when society does not provide equitable social and structural support to disabled people based on their structural needs; it argues that disability is not only a personal issue (Oliver, 2009). However, on the other hand, from the cultural level of PCS (Thompson, 2021), the influence of ableism and socialism (i.e., proposing to be productive and useful) sets the expectations on (or even requires) visually impaired people to behave like non-disabled people - i.e., gaining independence (or avoiding relying on social support) through paid work and contribute to the economy or society like a ‘normal person’. The interaction of these

three ideologies - disablism, ableism, and socialism, results in not only isolating visually impaired people from mainstream society but also urging and arranging them to take massage courses in such a marginalised system for fulfilling socialist modernisation construction (*shehui zhuyi xiandai hua jianshe* 社会主义现代化建设).<sup>35</sup>

This has led to many participants' beliefs that taking massage courses is their *only* career option under these circumstances. From the analysis at a personal level of the PCS model, the teaching staff show prejudices and stereotypes as these vocational courses are set based on the types of disability of the students. These courses aimed to increase the employability of visually impaired people (The State Council, 1998). Most vocational schools, vocational training institutions, and tertiary education institutions serve this purpose. However, Young (2016) claimed that the disadvantages and injustices some people suffer are not caused by arbitrary power forcing them to do so but by the daily practices of a well-intentioned free society. The targeted employment policy does not reflect the reality that visually impaired people may have different career preferences and diverse employment expectations (Sui and Liu, 2021); as Wei complained, 'You cannot organise for all visually impaired people to learn massage [skills]'. As most participants' experiences showed, even a university or college degree could not help them prevent vocational stereotypes, especially those related to the massage industry. More precisely, tertiary education actively strengthens this stereotype.

### 6.3 The start of massage training through informal education

Referring to Chapter 4, not every participant had continuous access to formal education; half (13 participants) experienced dropping out of schooling. Most started to attend massage training after leaving school in two ways: taking short-term massage training or working as an apprentice. However, Xiaolei, Dan, and Dong returned to the formal educational system again, while Le, without any formal education, went on to work in a massage parlour immediately after the training. Only Shiwen got massage training from a private tutor, but he also learned other skills from them too. More of his stories are mentioned in Chapter 8.

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<sup>35</sup> Socialist modernisation in China, led by the Chinese Communist Party, is also called Chinese modernisation. The essential requirements of Chinese modernisation are as follows: '*Upholding the leadership of the Communist Party of China and socialism with Chinese characteristics, pursuing high-quality development, developing whole-process people's democracy, enriching the people's cultural lives, achieving common prosperity for all, promoting harmony between humanity and nature, building a human community with a shared future, and creating a new form of human advancement*' - Xinhua (2022, p.3).

This section describes how the vocational stereotype of massage further influenced visually impaired people's transition to get massage training through informal education, including their negative views that 'formal education is useless' and 'the blind should learn massage'. Additionally, policies such as separate education further strengthen this stereotype and limit the work choices of visually impaired people.

### 6.3.1 Negative perceptions

#### 'No need to complete studies'

Several participants' parents did not think a visually impaired person should spend time completing formal education and studying the regular curricula. To them, formal education was a waste of time compared to learning a practical skill such as massage, so they urged their son/daughter to drop out of school. The cases of Lisha, Xiaolei, and Mao show how their parents' negative attitude towards going to school subsequently influenced their pathway from education to massage training.

Lisha, who was born in a village and raised by his grandparents, first went to a formal special primary school 500 kilometres away when she was 12. However, she was not allowed to continue special primary school education at Grade 2 due to her father's patriarchal attitude. Her father preferred boys to girls (*zhong nan qing nü* 重男轻女) and thought Lisha should learn some skills to support herself in the future instead of completing compulsory education. Although Lisha was deeply hurt by her father's decision (*bengkui* 崩溃), she compromised and gave up going to school:

*To be honest, my father preferred sons to daughters, and I was also disabled, so he didn't take me seriously...In the second year [Grade 2 in special primary school], my father didn't want me to continue studying. What he meant, that is, I was a girl and a disabled person. When I went to school, I should learn something practical, then earn money, and support myself. He said that I went to school, but I didn't learn anything, and I didn't know how to do housework either and I was not able to earn money [in the special school] ... So, he didn't want to send me to school. But as I said just now, I felt that I couldn't stand it [staying at home] even though I only spent the winter and summer vacations at home. If I stopped going to school, I was going*

*to break down. I didn't know what I should do, or what I would become in the future. I was very anxious, but no one cared about me. At that time [in 2000], there was no telephone, and it was impossible to contact the outside world at any time by QQ and WeChat like now.<sup>36</sup> Finally, I backed down, and I told my dad that I would not follow this normal route [educational trajectory] to go to school like elementary and junior high school. I just had to give up. - Lisha*

Lisha's father's view toward a visually impaired girl reflects compounded oppressions (Thompson, 2021) caused by gender and disability, both as related explicitly to Lisha as well as to female visually impaired people more generally. Under the influence of disablism, Lisha faced obstacles to accessing formal education because it was considered useless for a disabled child to go to school; influenced by sexism, she was not taken seriously and cared for well by her family as a daughter. Her two interactive identities made her father not allow her to continue going to school. Her experience reflects on intersectionality in that discrimination and oppression are based on both disability and gender intertwined and influence each other and thus have an impact on life trajectories (Davis, 2008).

Xiaolei was also born in a village and had a chance to go to a special primary school at the age of 10, but he discontinued due to a financial crisis in his family:

*At that time [when my father asked me to drop out of school to attend massage training], I felt that I was still young [13 years old]. I wanted to continue to stay [in a school for the blind] for a while. [After that,] I would go to another place to study [get massage skills in a short-term training course] ... At that time, I felt that I couldn't do it [going to attend massage training directly], [but] my dad asked me to learn it. He said that in recent years [the financial situation] in our family has become worse. But I had no way, I was very young at the time. I could only obey, [although] I didn't want to learn [massage skills]. – Xiaolei*

Mao was born in a small county, and his experience differed slightly. His parents did not think access to tertiary education was necessary for a

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<sup>36</sup> QQ and WeChat are popular social media in China, equivalent to Facebook and WhatsApp.

visually impaired student as he would still take massage courses there. Instead, his parents just asked Mao to drop out of vocational school in his final year when Mao was focusing on preparing for the special admission exam. Their dropout experiences echo Zhou's (2012) view that parents of disabled children, especially in rural areas, may not have high expectations of their disabled children; some of them would not even like to send their children to school. This may also explain, in part, the low degree of completion of compulsory education among disabled children, especially in rural areas (Peng, 2013).

Referring to the analysis at personal and cultural levels of Thompson's PCS (2021) model, influenced by disablism, the personal prejudice from families about learning academic knowledge is that it is useless. On the other hand, the participants' experiences of leaving school involuntarily show that they or disabled people generally do not have much personal agency to make their own decisions to achieve life goals (Bandura, 2002), something that will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

### **'The blind should learn massage'**

Participants who dropped out of school and then chose to get massage training through informal education mentioned that this decision was made under varying combinations of influence from their families, friends, neighbours, and social media.

After giving up the hope of studying in a mainstream university, for example, Dong went to get massage training and worked in this area. He was introduced by a friend to work as a trainee for half a year in a massage parlour. There were more non-disabled staff in the shop. When I asked him why he chose to attend massage training after the dropout, he said:

*At that time, maybe [some] people around me... also did this [massage work]. Then my family said it should be done [learn massage]. After all, [working in the massage industry] does not require too much vision. Later, I did it [massage work] with the attitude of giving it a try. After I did it, I felt I was doing okay, so I kept doing it.*  
- Dong



Since Kun left mainstream primary education in Grade 1 at seven years old because of the loss of his vision, he stayed at home until he was 14. He left his small village and attended massage training in the city. He said that staying home made him feel 'life is worse than death (*sheng buru si* 生不如死)', 'useless (*meiyong* 没有用)' and 'handicapped (*canfei* 残废)'.<sup>37</sup> A relative in the city introduced him to a massage parlour an apprentice:

*He [that relative] remembered that the massage parlour beside his house was looking for employers and apprentices. The apprenticeship lasted for three years and was unpaid. You have to pay 200 yuan a month. It said [you] have to pay for three months and guaranteed that you could be able to learn to do [massage work] [bao xuehui 包学会]. – Kun*

Dan left special primary education after Grade 1 at eight because the teacher hit him. He stayed home until he was 12 and heard on the radio that a massage parlour was recruiting visually impaired employees. After he went to the massage parlour and got massage training there for about a year, he first enjoyed it but then realised that he knew nothing about maths. He had yet to learn how much the client should have paid him after the discount. Thus, he went to a special primary school and started to study at Grade 4.

Le, born in a small village, had a similar experience. However, she never knew a visually impaired child could have access to formal education. Her parents just thought she was 'A useless person (*meiyong de ren* 没用的人)' since she was little, so she also believed that she was a useless person from a very young age. When she was 13, someone in her village met a visually impaired person who came from another village and worked in a massage parlour in the city. Then, this villager introduced her to this massage parlour as an apprentice, and she paid the training fee of 3000 RMB. Although she said the employer did not want to teach her anything, she did not learn much there.

By contrast, Lee dropped out of a mainstream school and then went to get massage training in a formal vocational school. This was suggested by a friend and supported by his family. Similarly, Duo's teacher

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<sup>37</sup> *Canfei* is a word that reflects the English 'cripple' or 'invalid' or 'useless' or 'ineffective' (Dauncey, 2020); this word is now seen as discriminatory.

suggested that he attend massage training when he was in his final year during his internship in learning Chinese medicine, and his parents supported him as well.

On the other hand, Lili, born with no vision, studied piano playing in a special college, while her mother, who also had no vision, opened a massage parlour. Although Lili hated massage work and had been playing the piano for 20 years, she was still under huge pressure from her family (especially her mother), to become a massage worker:

*...My family kept nagging (laodao 唠叨) me, 'Why don't you go to a massage parlour? Your mother owns a massage parlour. That massage parlour is for you; you have to take it over. This parlour is well-established, having been open for more than ten years. - Lili*

As mentioned above, the participants dropped out or had never attended school for different reasons. However, they were all trained (or were persuaded or compelled) to work in massage parlours or to take massage courses. From the analysis at personal and cultural levels of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), some of their families still linked 'disability' with 'uselessness'. This results in visually impaired children themselves also thinking they are useless when they are less formally educated and after staying at home for a long time. Under the promoted slogan 'disabled but not useless' to define disability (Dauncey, 2020), they have to learn a skill to show themselves as not useless. As Dong said, massage work that does not require a high level of vision has become the first choice of visually impaired people after dropping out, with family support. In other words, people have already taken visually impaired people getting massage training for granted, influenced by the vocational stereotype for visually impaired people (Sui and Liu, 2021).

More importantly, this research identifies that gender might play a role in some instances (i.e., parents prefer a son to a daughter). However, according to their transition from regular curricula to massage training, gender is not the key element. Regardless of gender, whether they are voluntary or not, they mostly leave school at an earlier age or take up massage training; many of them are often regarded as 'useless' by their families before attending massage training. Thus, attending formal education or regular curricula is meaningless for a 'useless' person; by contrast, the priority should be learning a vocational skill—massage—and showing their ability to support themselves.

### 6.3.2 Policies to further strengthen massage stereotypes

Four participants returned to formal education after learning massage skills through short-term training or by being apprentices in massage parlours. As mentioned before, Dan and Zhou were to learn more academic knowledge in special primary school as Dan said he did not know how to calculate his service fees in the massage parlour. By contrast, Dong and Xiaolei continued to get massage training in vocational secondary school/college due to the influence of relevant policies (see more details below). This section uses two cases (Dong and Xiaolei) to highlight how the policies 'encourage' visually impaired people to learn massage skills and prepare for their future work.

Dong worked in different massage parlours before he opened his massage parlour in the capital city. During the 12 years he worked in the massage industry, he kept advancing his massage skills; he got a college diploma in massage, and then passed the Medical Massage Exam specifically for the Blind (*mangren yiliao anmo kaoshi* 盲人医疗按摩考试) that would allow him to obtain the Medical Masseur License specifically for the Blind later (*mangren yishi zige zheng* 盲人医师资格证):

*...I first went to a [massage] training class...a short-term one. After studying, I worked outside [in the job market]. Then I met some friends at work who told me there was a specialised school [to learn massage skills], and there were specialised students [who were getting massage training]. Then I went to [that] school to learn [massage skills]. Later, it was because I wanted to take the medical massage exam [for visually impaired people]. At that time, they said a degree was required [for this exam]. Then, I passed the adult college entrance exam and got a junior college degree [in massage courses].*

*...Then I took the exam for the blind medical masseur, [get] the qualification certificate. So, I always feel like I'm always learning. It [the learning habit] is still there now, and I am graduating soon from my undergraduate. - Dong*

Dong mentioned that one of the main reasons he continued to take massage courses was the relevant policies. In the Administrative Measures for Medical Massage for the Blind (*mangren yiliao anmo guanli*

*banfa* 盲人医疗按摩管理办法) (The CDPF, 2009) – it is stated that the candidates who take part in this exam should have at least a technical secondary school diploma in massage, and after getting the license, the visually impaired people can work in the medical massage area or open a massage parlour for offering medical treatment, such as frozen shoulder (*jianzhouyan* 肩周炎) and cervical spondylosis (*jinzhubing* 颈椎病). This is also an important reason why Xiaolei returned to the special vocational secondary school funded by the government to take massage courses. Local governments only provide funding for visually impaired people to support them in learning massage skills and increase their employability; this seems to be an easier option than funding mainstream schools with resources and accessible facilities for students with special needs. This direction is reinforced perhaps by the position of the CDPF, which sees massage work for visually impaired people as an essential way to increase employment rates for disabled people (The CDPF, 2018). These relative policies and what the government proposed are not mainly about equity in an accessible learning environment. Instead, all are about making visually impaired or disabled people more generally productive and contributing to society on an equal basis with ‘normal’ people.

As Dauncey (2014) has shown in her research, disabled people are often treated as a homogenous group’, rather than as individuals with differing abilities in China, interests, and aspirations. Lougen’s mainstream school experience also demonstrates the relevance of this understanding. He mentioned that usually, only the Provincial Education Centre (*sheng jiaoyu zhongxin* 省教育中心) is responsible for providing supporting resources for disabled students who learn in mainstream schools with special needs, like large font exam papers or Braille test papers for visually impaired students. It is not the mainstream school’s responsibility to do that. Lougen’s words reflect the published expectation that visually impaired people must first apply to the Provincial Department of Education for reasonable accommodation when taking the *Gaokao* (Hunan Provincial Department of Education, 2023).

Dong and Xiaolei returned to school to take massage courses mainly because of the related policies on massage work for visually impaired people. The ‘Administrative Measures for Medical Massage for the Blind’ (The CDPF, 2009) tightly binds visually impaired people’s employment to the massage industry. This also explains why most participants completed at least secondary education in massage, which was enough for them to take the exam and gain the license. Drawing on the cultural level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), it can be seen how this policy is influenced by the special educational system for visually impaired people and the vocational stereotype of massage, making ‘getting a

qualification or degree in massage and then having rights to work in the massage industry' for visually impaired people more planned and professional, and more normalised as well. Conversely, through legitimising this idea, the transition from education to massage training is further taken for granted by visually impaired people and the people around them.

Additionally, the link between visually impaired people and massage work can relate to China's socioeconomic context and other relative policies. Due to the economic reform in the market, the massage field has begun to operate in a much more market-oriented manner. In this circumstance, more and more massage parlours have begun to cater to market needs more than the needs of the workers. In addition to the policies introduced under the Administrative Measures for Medical Massage for the Blind mentioned before, the first Five-Year Work Outline for China's Disabled Persons from 1988 to 1992 (The State Council, 1998) indicates the importance of developing massage skills for visually impaired people. The Law of the Protection of Disabled People (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2008) states that vocational education for disabled people should be focused on. It claims that the government and society should vigorously establish massage institutions for visually impaired people to achieve centralised employment arrangements for disabled people.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the vocational stereotype that visually impaired people should work in the massage industry has been further strengthened by policies and the state. All participants grew up in this context; this vocational stereotype also strongly influenced their career expectations/development. They were likely expected to work in the massage field under the free market economy; as Xiaogao commented, 'It isn't that the blind people choose massage; it is the massage that chooses blind people'.

Therefore, the expectation that 'blind people should learn massage', the institutional regulations that positively allow them to get massage training, and the vocational stereotype that 'blind people work in the massage industry' all contribute to the continued oppression of visually impaired people in their career development. From the institutional rules to implicit prejudices and stereotypes, it indicates that visually impaired people or disabled people generally are unjustly subordinated (Taylor, 2016), as they do not have the same rights or opportunities to make their life decisions as non-disabled people.

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<sup>38</sup> Centralised employment refers to the employment of disabled people in various welfare enterprises, industrial institutions, massage parlours specialised for the blind, and other units that centrally employ disabled people.

## 6.4 Conclusion

The first question guiding the analysis in this chapter relates to the barriers visually impaired people face from their mainstream curricula education into vocational massage training. Participants in my research usually access massage training through formal education or informal ways (i.e., attending short-term training or being an apprentice in the massage parlour). Although attending massage training may not be many participants' first choice, the continuous encounter of various barriers keeps 'pushing' them to get massage training and subsequently work in related settings. On the one hand, the limited provision of special senior high schools and special/mixed colleges and universities opened to visually impaired people confined many of them from accessing the regular curricula and tertiary education. On the other hand, the relatively large number of special/mixed *Tuina* vocational schools (as the only vocational schools open to visually impaired people) provide them with chances to learn massage skills through their lax entrance and obtain a massage licence for visually impaired people. Since the mainstream schools refuse to accept them and the learning environment there is not accessible, going to the vocational school after the compulsory education stage to take massage courses becomes the only way for many visually impaired people to get the secondary education qualification. In addition, parents' negative perceptions of the visually impaired (e.g., 'the blind are useless'; 'mainstream curricula are useless'; 'blind people should learn massage') result in some participants dropping out of school and getting massage training through informal ways. More importantly, the current policies related to visually impaired people further link their educational path to massage work and strengthen the vocational stereotype of visually impaired people.

The second question refers to how the PCS model can help us understand the barriers visually impaired people face as they transition increasingly into massage training. At the structural level of Thompson's PCS model (2021), the places in special senior high schools are limited; thus, admission is competitive. Visually impaired students were not given equal opportunities as most non-disabled peers to make choices, as they may be required to travel far way to access these schools. In addition, the mainstream educational system is designed mainly for the non-disabled majority and the same for the *Gaokao*. Most participants went to college/universities through the specialised college/university entrance exam aimed at visually impaired candidates. However, only two subjects were open to them – massage and piano courses. Such restrictions gave

many of them no choice but to take massage courses in higher education. At the cultural level, the socialist ideology stresses that disabled people have to be valuable and productive, so learning a practical skill is necessary to show that they are able to support themselves rather than becoming a burden to society. Viewing from the personal level, influenced by the highly massage-oriented educational path at the structural level, many people around visually impaired people do not believe in the importance of formal education; they believe that visually impaired people will eventually fall into the massage industry. This results in the dominant views of 'education is useless for blind people' and 'the blind should learn massage'. This explains that no matter visually impaired people's educational levels and preferences, most eventually attend massage training and then work in the massage industry. During this process, the vocational stereotype that visually impaired people should work in the massage industry has been established.

Overall, this chapter identifies how the interaction of disablism, ableism, and socialism influences visually impaired people's transition from mainstream curricula to massage vocational training. The effects of disablism lead to disabled students studying in the special education systems, while the mainstream schools keep rejecting them. By contrast, the influence of ableism and socialism requires disabled people to overcome their difficulties (impairments) and use their bodies to contribute to society on an equal basis with able-bodied people. Thus, they can enjoy the same treatment as most non-disabled people. Under this circumstance, the aim of special education for visually impaired people or disabled people generally is to 'push' them to become more productive in society and contribute to the socialist construction. For them, the development of 'being productive' is to get massage training. More precisely, special education specialised for visually impaired people, especially in the secondary and tertiary education stages, aims to develop them into massage workers. This explains why education, or even higher education, cannot prevent visually impaired people from becoming massage workers. However, there are some gendered influences; both genders appear to have similar outcomes, such as getting massage training. It is not their disability but personal, social and political attitudes about their impairment that cause their problems.

## Chapter 7 Transition into Work

### 7.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 highlighted that special education for visually impaired people, especially in the secondary and tertiary education stages, seemed to concentrate on training more massage workers in the labour market. Under this circumstance, most participants receive massage training and have work experience in the massage industry; only a handful have working experience in fields unrelated to massage. However, according to their narratives, they experienced many barriers (including discrimination and oppression) both in the massage industry and in workplaces not related to massage. Applying Thompson's (2021) PCS oppression model to the analysis, this chapter continues to answer the second and third overarching research questions: '*What social barriers do they face in education, work and as they transition between the two?*' and '*How can these social barriers they face be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?*'. In doing so, I provide some answers to the following associated sub-questions:

- What do visually impaired people think of the massage industry?
- What social barriers have they faced in the massage industry?
- What social barriers have they faced in workplaces unrelated to massage?
- How can the barriers participants face in the massage industry or workplaces unrelated to massage be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the social barriers that participants faced through the transition into work. It highlights the discrimination and oppression they have experienced during their careers so far by referring to the PCS model. As far as the massage workplace is concerned, it first explores participants' perception of the massage industry, the barriers they face which relate to their integration into the massage parlour working environment, discrimination through the recruitment process, and the sexual harassment that commonly happens to visually impaired female workers in the massage industry. Then, it



presents the barriers in workplaces unrelated to massage, including the restrictions on attending accreditation exams, employers' refusal to accommodate special needs, and constraints posed by the other vocational stereotypes (i.e., creative industries, especially music). Lastly, my analysis indicates that discrimination and oppression exist in regular workplaces and are perpetuated predominantly by most non-disabled employees; it also exists in the massage industry, which, as we have seen, is considered a particular workplace for the visually impaired. All these experiences of discrimination subsequently urge many visually impaired people to work in smaller massage parlours, where most of their fellow workers have the same type of impairment (here, visual impairment).

## **7.2 The massage industry**

For some participants, working in the massage industry means they do not feel 'useless' anymore; this industry can provide them with a stable life, and they have a 'sense of accomplishment'. However, their narratives also show that working in the massage industry can have advantages and disadvantages. What it does not mean, however, is that this career pathway is accessible to all visually impaired people. Some participants mentioned barriers to integration into the workplace and recruitment discrimination that happened even in the massage parlours specialised for visually impaired employees. In addition, some female workers appear to face more chance of sexual harassment there, compared with their male counterparts.

### **7.2.1. Being 'useful' and 'grateful' to society**

According to Zhou and Kun, working in the massage industry made them feel 'useful'. Before that, they were considered 'useless' by their parents or relatives:

*At that time [when he was blind], my family had no experience with this aspect [visual impairment]. My third uncle wanted to abandon me. Especially my aunt, who thought I was born useless. Since I learned massage, they came [to my home] and asked me for [offering] massage [services]; the neighbours are at the door as well. They [came to my home] for my mother in the past. Now, they call my name first. This is a scene of a person being strong. If you have skills,*

*you are useful; if you don't have skills, you are just like a Canfei [cripple and useless] person. - Zhou*

According to Zhou, getting massage training made him feel 'strong' and 'useful'. From the last chapter and concerning the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), the discrimination and oppression the participants experienced during the transition from mainstream curricula to massage training can be understood as follows. The special education systems that push the massage industry as the career for visually impaired people, the social norm that 'the blind should work in the massage area', the personal prejudice that 'learning a skill is more important than finishing the formal education', as well as the emphasis of the massage industry to visually impaired people in the relevant policies. All of this has resulted in the vocational stereotype of massage being tightly associated with and for visually impaired people. All these provide a strong rationale for visually impaired people to pursue a massage career. At the same time, these also cater to (and are likely driven by) political rhetoric proposed by the CDPF that disabled people should be '*as socially and economically productive as 'able-bodied people'*' (*jianquanren* 健全人), but this does not mean that such messages are not very much welcomed by the individuals concerned too (Dauncey, 2014, p.137). Learning massage skills and getting employed mean they can have a chance to be productive like most non-disabled citizens and become strong, and thus, they are not 'useless' anymore.

When we talked about perceptions of the massage industry, Jianshan kept mentioning his gratitude to 'society, the Party,<sup>39</sup> and the State (*dang he guojia* 党和国家)', thanking them for their 'care for blind people':

*We [blind people] live in this society. Who gives us happiness and joy? It is our [Communist] Party and government and caring people in society...What does a country rely on to be strong? It is the firm leadership of our Party and the careful efforts of so many Chinese people, [so] it has achieved such an achievement. So, at any time when the country needs us [blind people], no matter how difficult it is, we must appear where the country needs us [i.e. agree to perform in the disabled people's musical instrument performance organised by*

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<sup>39</sup> The party is the Chinese Communist Party.

*the local DPF when he was invited by the DPF and suspended his massage job for a while].*

*The society is a big family. Each of us lives in this family. If you don't show love and I don't show love, this world will be very cold. We blind people can also be said to have grown up in everyone's love. If no one gives a warm hand to us, if no one cares [hehu 呵护] for us, our [blind people] lives will not be so quality, and even [our life] will not last so long. – Jianshan*

Dong also said that he was 'grateful' several times. He admitted that visually impaired people like him need help from 'normal people', and when 'normal people' help them, visually impaired people should be thankful for that; letting 'normal people' know this could encourage them to continue their support.

According to the analysis of the PCS model at cultural and personal levels (Thompson, 2021), his views on the needs of the visually impaired reflect the influence that the state, the CDPF and social media always emphasise on the help and care of disabled people. For example, the relevant news reported by one of the most authoritative official media in China - People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报) (2021), states that 'The CDPF calls on all sectors of society to care for, support and help disabled people'. The State Council (2023) claims that 'The disabled people are a special and difficult group that needs extra care and attention'. Additionally, Jianshan's words also reflect the influence of socialist ideologies on disabled people and how they continue to encourage them to contribute to society. He was proud of using his disabled body to serve the state. His enormous willingness to 'overcome' the difficulties to transform himself into a 'valued' person so that he can try his best to 'pay back' society and the state for their care and support and, thus, demonstrate his gratitude. This is something that Dauncey (2020) suggests is a characteristic of the ideal para-citizen in China. Under this approach, the offer from society and the state becomes a charity, as visually impaired or disabled people generally need to live with a grateful heart towards the outside world and be productive. This also increases the compassion of most non-disabled people towards disabled people since they have to care for and protect disabled people. Thus, it results in inequality in the social status between disabled and most non-disabled groups. All these forms of treating disabled people, as Dauncey (2020) comments, are highly problematic.

### 7.2.2. Advantages and disadvantages

Xiaogao suggests some reasons why the massage industry has become the ‘most suitable’ job for visually impaired people:

*First, [the] massage [industry] doesn't have too many requirements for vision... Massage parlours usually include three meals a day and accommodation. Usually, blind people just live in the massage parlour [the massage bed]. So, they don't have to worry about travel or cooking... There is no fixed opening time or closing time. They just work when the first consumer comes, until no one comes in the evening. - Xiaogao*

Xiaogao's descriptions of working in massage parlours align with the findings of Guo (2017), who claims that visually impaired people who work in massage parlours work irregularly and must work long hours every day; for this reason, most of them live in massage parlours themselves for convenience. According to participants Jack and Lisha, however, some massage parlours provide staff accommodation outside the massage parlours; these might be independent bedrooms (Jack) or shared rooms with other employees of the same gender (Lisha). However, this may cause another issue – the commute. Jack is satisfied with his accommodation – he is partially sighted, and he can easily identify the way to his accommodation. By contrast, Lisha, born with no vision, used to have trouble coming back to her accommodation; she did not know how to ask for help, so she quit and found work in another massage parlour which offered more suitable accommodation.

More importantly than somewhere to live, many participants said working in the massage industry can help them make a living and/or support themselves and their families in achieving a ‘stable life’. Jack said he stayed in the massage industry because he needed to support his family. Additionally, economic stability is an essential reason for Dan and Jianshan to work in the massage industry; they had been engaged in the creative industries, especially music, for many years but gave up this field and chose to work in the massage industry. Section 7.3.3 provides more details of their narratives.

Not only that, but some participants also mentioned that working in the massage industry provided them with ‘a sense of accomplishment

(you *chengjiugan* 有成就感)' when they helped their clients or so-called 'patients' relieve physical pain. This is one of the most satisfying aspects for them:

*This [industry] is not a great career, not as sacred as a doctor. But I think that every time I help clients solve their uncomfortable symptoms, [massage job] also has [some effects of] curing pain. When they recover, I feel very, very fulfilled... [although] I have met many weird clients at work - we also call them [clients] patients. I felt quite wronged then, but I have never thought about giving up [doing massage]; nor thought about trying other careers. I think this [job] is actually pretty good, I am very happy doing it, and I can also find my own sense of accomplishment. - Ling*

Emphasising the accomplishments of a massage career and job satisfaction shows that a sense of achievement in work is important for visually impaired people, as many of them reported have grown up thinking of themselves as useless drains on society. Moreover, the provision of meals and accommodation can minimise travelling for the workers and make their lives more convenient by not having to cook, increasing accessibility to working in the massage industry.

On the other hand, this provision could also mean they barely have any privacy as they work and live together. That is why Xiaogao preferred to rent accommodation alone, to have more personal space. Mao, Ouwen, Wei and Xiaogao similarly lament the lack of privacy and independence – i.e., with no free weekends, no social insurance, and the whole day just around the massage bed:

*...In normal times, because of this job, [I] usually stay in the parlour. In other words, there are fewer opportunities to go out. In fact, working hours do not always mean more than ten hours. Although you are not working all the time, your work and life cannot be separated from this [massage] parlour, because there is no such thing as weekends. These most basic five [social] insurance and housing funding [Wuxian yijin 五险一金],<sup>40</sup> because like our ordinary massage parlour...just like some small, some private profit-making [massage]*

*parlour s requires costs, are not available... That's it, just around a massage bed [the whole day and night], or around this parlour, but without some space of your own. - Wei*

Wei points out that the massage industry has relatively low welfare and relatively high work intensity, compared with the advantages that the massage industry can bring (i.e., economic stability, job satisfaction, and provision of meals and accommodation). More importantly, no social insurance could mean further inequality in their later stages of life. Wei's words find similarity in Shiwen's views on the massage industry for visually impaired people (*mangren anmo* 盲人按摩). He thought some massage industries deprived the dignity of visually impaired people:

*Now there is a kind of massage service offered by blind people for one or two hours [to earn money in massage parlours], and there is also a kind of real medical massage [in clinics or hospitals]. I think that [real] medical massage [in clinics or the hospitals] lasts about 15 to 20 minutes, and then it almost finishes... I haven't heard this [massage service] needs to be done in one or two hours. Such human dignity [of visually impaired people who work in the massage parlour], should not be deprived [like working for one or two hours one time to offer massage services there], I think. - Shiwen*

According to Shiwen, massage services related to Chinese medicine should only last 15 to 20 minutes rather than be served for hours. However, massage services in the blind massage industry may violate the value of medical massage and deprive masseurs of their dignity, as they perform intensive or even continuous massage services almost every day and have no social insurance. Xian also mentioned that his father always told him that 'doing massage has no dignity'. Contingent dignity is viewed as a construct experienced by interactions and is affected by personal, cultural, social and relational factors (Killmister, 2020). Referring to human dignity in the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), when visually impaired employees' values and preferences are not upheld in interactions with most non-disabled clients and massage culture for the blind, their dignity is violated or even lost. This service pattern in practice may violate the Administrative Measures for Medical Massage for the Blind (The CDPF, 2009); it stipulates the rights of visually impaired people whose work field is related to medical massage – i.e., Personal

dignity and personal safety shall not be violated at work. Additionally, when a visually impaired person's daily necessities, food, clothing, housing, transportation, and work can all be taken care of in a massage parlour, they rarely have the opportunity to go out. In this way, this research indicates that most visually impaired people are marginalised in the field of massage, barely having the time or a chance to go out and participate in society. Drawing on the structural level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), all of these provide excuses for not improving accessibility facilities for visually impaired people in most public places/or workplaces other than massage parlours, resulting in the lack of standardisation and systematisation of public facilities. For example, according to the news report (Wangyi (网易), 2022):

*Because there are often no blind people walking on the tactile pavement (mangdao 盲道), even if it is broken, no one will repair it. Occasionally, a blind person goes out and realises he or she cannot be accessible on the [broken] tactile pavement, so he or she will not go out next time. (Wangyi (网易), 2022)*

According to the report, because visually impaired people seldom go out and use it, the tactile pavement is not maintained and is not accessible; given this, visually impaired people are more likely not to use it and not go out. This has become a vicious cycle and is common in the news. Zhengjiang Daily (Zhejiang Ribao 浙江日报) (2018) and Suhu (搜狐) (2021) have recently included headlines such as 'Blind people are not seen on the road' due to 'not accessible tactile pavement'. All these barriers further restrict their ability to go out.

Low economic rewards and the brought on by massage work also prompted Xiaogao, Mao, and Ouwen to try to find other jobs unrelated to massage. Wei also said he wanted to change jobs but could not find one paying as much as the massage industry, so he failed to work in other areas. This also becomes an important reason why some participants may not enjoy working in the massage industry but continue working there. As Lisha said, 'I can't say I like doing massage, but I'm grateful that doing massage provides me with support in my life.' At least they can get better pay if they work harder in the massage industry, compared with other workplaces that the minority do, like the music industry and fortune-telling. Lee and Wei said the same thing; they 'have no other option but to work as masseuses.' All these complex and contradictory feelings about

the massage industry have yet to be fully discussed in the current academic literature.

Wei's views can be related to the current social insurance system. Social insurance is guaranteed by a stable job in China (Liu, 2014). However, visually impaired people working in massage parlours, may not have such insurance as their employers, including visually impaired employers, are not always willing to pay that for them. This is something that has yet to be discussed in any academic research. Those who do write about protections for disabled people, such as Guo (2015), only mention their working situation in massage parlours is not good. Even though they do not have social insurance, almost every participant I interviewed applies for a minimum living allowance (*dibao* 低保) as a disabled person through the local government. This is one social security benefit for disabled people in China, and the amount of subsistence allowance is determined based on local living standards (Zhang, 2015).

However, Tina pointed out another important issue - people with social insurance do not have the right to receive the minimum living allowance. As most visually impaired people want to keep their minimum living allowance, it becomes common that their employers in massage parlours do not pay visually impaired employees' insurance to reduce their costs. However, Tina and Lili mentioned that this results in another situation happened to disabled people called 'fake social security affiliation' (*shebao guakao* 社保挂靠), meaning that some visually impaired or disabled people more generally lend their disability certificates to companies in other provinces. In this way, the local government cannot track their social insurance record. Those companies will pay them social insurance and the local minimum wage monthly, but disabled people do not need to actually work in the companies. According to the Regulations on the Employment of Disabled People (The State Council, 2007), proportional employment regulations mean that companies must have a workforce that comprises at least 1.5% disabled workers. This has led to the phenomenon of disabled people being falsely employed in companies but working in massage parlours at the same time. Such stories have been common in the news. For example, the People's Daily Online (*renmin wang* 人民网) (2014) describes 'the grey/informal industry' (*huise chanyelian* 灰色产业链) of 'renting' disability certificates; Xinhua Net (新华网) (2020) and Guangming Net (光明网) (2023) also report that disabled persons rent out their disability certificates to companies and falsely claim social security benefits.

In this way, these companies can meet the legal minimum ratio of recruiting disabled employees, rather than paying the fines, and visually



impaired people or disabled people more generally can receive social security without actually working, which is reported as being seen as a win-win situation by both parties' perspectives (Guangming Net 光明网, 2023). Many employers think it is more troublesome to hire disabled people than to contribute to their social insurance (Ma, 2022a). From the personal levels of Thompson's (2021) PCS model, this reflects that employers do not think disabled employees can have the same 'value' as many non-disabled employees.

More importantly, Lili said some intermediaries provide these services for disabled people, and they can receive intermediary fees paid by both disabled people and enterprises for successful matching. This point can be found in the news report – *'Earning money with disability certificates: when the employment of disabled people becomes a business'* (Wangyi 网易, 2023). According to the news reported by Wangyi 网易 (2023), disabled people renting out their disability certificates to companies mainly value social insurance, especially medical insurance and pension. However, this does not mean the government has not exposed this practice. One news report from Tencent News (*Tengxun xinwen* 腾讯新闻) (2023) mentioned that a company paid a fine of more than 6.5 million yuan (about £700,000) back to the local taxation bureau after it was caught for falsely hiring disabled employees by the local procuratorate. However, this news report (2023) also said that remote work has provided excuses for companies to continue this practice (falsely hiring disabled employees) in recent years. Thus, it is difficult for the government to catch and stop it. At the end of this topic, Lili also said that if she had no way (i.e., no stable job) in the future, she may choose this way, as that company would afford her much more security.

Drawing on the structural level of the PCS (Thompson, 2021), although this fake recruitment might have a positive effect on disabled people's retirement entitlement (i.e., receiving a pension), it makes it more difficult for visually impaired people or otherwise disabled people to integrate into the mainstream job market.<sup>41</sup> It may also feed into the perception that disabled people are liars happy to defraud the country.

### 7.2.3 Barriers to integration into the workplace

According to some participants, not all massage parlours are barrier-free, and the inaccessible workplace may influence them to change jobs to work in a different massage parlour. This has yet to be discussed

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<sup>41</sup> The mainstream job market here means that jobs unrelated to massage.

elsewhere in academic or other literature. These participants mentioned their experiences working in big massage parlours where they usually faced difficulty identifying clients and rooms. Most of the staff there were non-disabled:

*There were a few visually impaired people [employees] and many 'normal people' [non-disabled employees]. In this way, visually impaired people have a big disadvantage. At that time, I felt that I could not do well in many things. [I] couldn't recognise clients when I met them and didn't know when to say hello. [Especially] When people [clients] didn't speak, it would inevitably cause misunderstandings, making clients feel that I was impolite... Some blind massage parlours are too big; some people [with visual impairment] could adapt it, while others [with visual impairment] don't have a good sense of direction and can't find the room to offer a massage service. - Hagang*

According to Hagang's experience, even in the workplace, which is said or believed to be the most suitable for visually impaired people, there are still many barriers for them. This is a significant finding. From the structural level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), it can be understood that the working environment in massage parlours predominated by most non-disabled employees favours the most non-disabled majority without due regard for their suitability for visually impaired employees. As a result, visually impaired people are expected to overcome inconvenient conditions on their own, just as the same situation happens in mainstream schools. Under this working environment, Lisha and Xiaolei, as the only visually impaired employees there, both faced isolation from other non-disabled employees because others were not willing to talk with them; this indicates the attitudes of not understanding or fearing disabled people as understood by the personal level of the PCS (Thompson, 2021). As Xiaolei said, this isolation made him feel lonely and lacking a sense of belonging. As a result, most of them changed to other massage parlours (i.e. relatively small ones), usually dominated by visually impaired employees/employers. These all push them to work in the massage industry where there are only/or mainly colleagues with visual impairments, further deepening their marginalisation in the workplace.

#### 7.2.4 Recruitment discrimination

Dong, an employer who opened a massage parlour, told me that the biggest challenge for visually impaired people is employment. The massage industry has been very competitive recently, and many non-disabled people are also applying to work there. Dong suggests that non-disabled people would be given priority to hiring over visually impaired people:

*Similarly, [if] a visually impaired person applies for [working in] massage [parlours], and a 'normal person' [non-disabled people] applies for the job [at the same time], under equal conditions, the 'normal person' must be hired first. This may be related to the fact that it is difficult for 'normal people' to find jobs [as well]. This results in a certain degree of competition between 'normal people' and the visually impaired [in the massage field]. Compared with this, the visually impaired have no advantage [to apply for the massage area]. - Dong*

When I was surprised to say that I had never known this situation before, Dong further explained:

*That's probably because you haven't asked anyone else [about this thing]. When massage parlours for blind people recruit people, although they [employers] say they want to [recruit] blind people, they don't always recruit blind people. After a few blind people [employees] they have, the number of [recruiting other] blind people [employees] will be further controlled. This is all understandable, if they are all blind [employees], some work cannot be carried out. So, this is one of the biggest obstacles for visually impaired people. Because when working, the role of visually impaired employees requires the help of a 'normal person'. For example, some people usually need to go out for a walk or do other things, and they need someone [non-disabled employees] to accompany them. - Dong*

Dong also mentioned the different learning effects of massage training between visually impaired and non-disabled apprentices/or employees:

*When I was learning massage, I had a lot of contact with 'normal people' [in a massage training class]. The effect of 'normal people' learning massage [skill] is much better than that of the visually impaired. The visually impaired need the teacher to teach them step-by-step [in person through tactile teaching by the teacher], and then they can experience it themselves. So, learning massage [skill] from scratch is not easy for the visually impaired. – Dong*

Prioritising the hiring of non-disabled employees is reflected in the research of Ma (2022a), who suggests that there is implicit discrimination that disabled people lack employability and indicates that it can be easy to view personal impairment as the biggest obstacle to disabled people achieving their employability. All these can be understood as part of the discrimination at a personal level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021) and the medical model (Barnes and Mercer, 2010). Many people, including disabled people themselves, still treat disability as their personal impairment and tragedy, think disability is a medical deficit and disabled people 'lack' things. This makes it difficult for disabled people to engage in certain 'normal' activities or fulfil certain 'normal' social roles (Ma, 2022b).

More importantly, Dong's words also show that even in workplaces run by visually impaired employers, discrimination is common in recruitment. Current literature and reports mainly point out that disabled people have suffered from employment discrimination (The Central People's Government of People's Republic of China, 2012; Liu and Xie, 2014; Pengpai News (Pengpai Xinwen (澎湃新闻), 2022). However, they may not indicate that discrimination could happen in the vocational stereotype area for visually impaired people and into which much effort and money are channelled by the state, education institutions and disabled people (and their families) themselves.

### **7.2.5 Gender differences**

Some participants mentioned that sexual harassment happened to visually impaired females, both in special education and in massage work (further discussion around experiences of this in education is discussed in Chapter 8). Of five female participants with massage work experience,

three of them shared their sexual harassment experiences in the massage parlour:

*It definitely wouldn't develop to the point where he really did something to me. When we [visually impaired female massage workers] were working [in other massage parlours] [and] encountered this kind of customer [touching us], we would usually say - I'm not doing this; please respect me. If he continued to do something [keep touching us], I would say - I'm sorry, please pay the bill; I won't [offer] massage [services] anymore. Then I would go to the reception and tell the boss [this service ended], and usually this kind of customer would pay the bill, and then I would leave [and wait for the next customer]. – Le*

*Many [male customers] like to do some small movements. [For example] he [one of these male customers] lies on the [massage bed]... When we [the visually impaired female masseuse] massaged him, we had to bend over... Then he may subconsciously reach out and touch your leg or reach out and touch your breast. He liked to do these small movements. Then we didn't want such people to come. [When] it was our turn [female masseuse's turn to provide massage services for these people], we may say the next [male colleague will do it]. And because of this, we were punished by the boss... Generally, the boss would only focus on money [profit]; they would not consider these things [sexual harassment of female employees by customers]. - Ling*

Additionally, Jack, as an employee in a massage parlour, also said one of his blind female colleagues shared a similar experience – being touched by the private parts from the abdomen up to the breast by a male client, and then she shouted and cried. While Le and Ling' suggested that their employers took no action, Jack did not keep silent but chose to hit this male client, asking for compensation for that visually impaired female colleague. Although the client eventually compensated the visually impaired woman, Jack's action could take the risk of legal liability and further stigmatisation. Referring to most participants' sexual harassment experience, Jack's heroic act of saving his female colleague is not common. Lisha, who also experienced sexual harassment, said all of these stopped finally when she got

married and set up her own massage parlour with her husband in her hometown. Their sexual harassment experience echoes the research of Xiong and Zheng (2021) that visually impaired women who work in small massage parlours are more likely to have similar experiences.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike in chapter 6 where I argue that both genders appear to have similar outcomes—getting massage training—gender differences are identified during the transition into work in this chapter. Referring to the PCS model (Thompson, 2021) and intersectionality theory (Warner and Brown, 2011), visually impaired females face multiple forms of oppressions from both disablism as disabled and sexism as female, suffering more employment restrictions in the massage industry. What is even more oppressive is that they ‘are not able to’ see which clients harass them. Their inability to identify the harassers has been taken as an opportunity for the latter to misbehave. The participants’ stories suggest that confrontation in Jack’s manner is rare. Many employers and visually impaired female workers choose to swallow their anger and keep quiet for fear of getting into trouble, so clients’ offensive behaviours like these become more and more common in the massage industry. Le also said sexual harassment is not only caused by the clients but also sometimes by her visually impaired male colleagues. None of this has ever come to light previously:

*Because I entered society [and started working] relatively early. I started learning massage [skill] at 13 [as an apprentice in a massage parlour for the blind]. And then I encountered a lot of [sexual harassment], whether it was [from] visually impaired colleagues or [from] customers. – Le*

Although Le did not give many details about sexual harassment from her visually impaired male colleagues, Lisha’s narratives of the imbalance in the gender ratio in the massage parlours could further strengthen Le’s related experience. Lisha mentioned that there were usually many single and older visually impaired males working in the massage parlours. As the only single female employee there, some male colleagues always tried to approach her and wanted her to be their girlfriend, even though

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<sup>42</sup> According to Rose Luqiu and Liao (2021), China has no social welfare protection and social support for sexual harassment and sexual assault, so most women who experience sexual harassment or sexual assault do not report the experience to legal authorities or do not even tell these experiences to other people.

she was uninterested. Lisha said she felt uncomfortable with these colleagues.

### **7.3 Working in fields unrelated to massage**

In addition to invisible recruitment discrimination (which exists in both massage-related and non-massage-related jobs), visually impaired people working in the latter also face some barriers that can be limiting factors in their career path. This section discusses three barriers that visually impaired people face in industries unrelated to massage – restrictions on attending license exams, employers' refusal to accommodate special needs, and constraints posed by the other vocational stereotypes for visually impaired people.

#### **7.3.1 Restrictions on attending exams**

Several participants mentioned recruitment saturation in the massage industry at the time of this study. As Wenqiang said:

*Just in the past few years, the domestic massage market has shown a saturated trend. Our university has two [massage] classes [for the blind] every year, which offer 60 places... [plus those from other schools], there are more than 100 undergraduate massage classes every year. Then there are technical secondary school students from various places, as well as several vocational colleges, who all enter the [job market]. The number of blinds [masseurs] joining the industry every year will be huge, but there are also old masseurs [who] are in their retirement age every year. They [don't want to retire] and want to work for two more years. - Wenqiang*

However, according to their narratives, they still face social barriers when they try to work in fields unrelated to massage. First, many accreditation exams are still set up with non-disabled people in mind. For instance, Tina, who works as a teacher in a special *Tuina* vocational school, said she was not allowed to attend the Teacher Qualification Certificate Exam in her province (Henan province) because the exam organiser was

unwilling to provide reasonable adjustments (such as Braille test paper) to enable her to take part.

Lee, Duo, and Lili also talked about the fact that visually impaired people are not permitted to take the Physician Qualification Certificate Exam (*Yishi zigezheng kaoshi* 医师资格证考试), recognised by the Health Department for people who are qualified to engage in medical work. However, the CDPF (2009) introduced the Administrative Measures for Medical Massage for the Blind, which proposed to strengthen and standardise medical massage activities for visually impaired people. Then, visually impaired people started to attend the specialised Medical Massage Personnel Exam for the Blind offered by the CDPF. This was further highlighted in a joint publication of many organisations (The National Health *et al.*, 2014), which states that 'blind medical massage personnel (*mangren yilioa anmo ren* 盲人医疗按摩人员) should attend the Medical Massage Personnel Exam for the Blind'. Several years later, however, the National Health and Family Planning Commission (2017) changed its guidelines and stipulated that disabled people cannot register as practising physicians, even though they have passed the Physician Qualification Certificate Exam and obtained the same qualification as a practitioner.

This means that even though the extensive (in some cases 5-year university level) massage training some visually impaired people have received is directly related to Chinese Medicine, the massage work they engage in cannot be recognised by the Health Department as medical work. They can only attend the Medical Massage Exam for the Blind, recognised by the CDPF. As Lee said, visually impaired people may not have a chance to work in the hospital as a physician because the local health department does not recognise the license obtained from the Medical Massage Exam for the Blind. Duo also said his friend, who graduated from the university as a massage student, could not get employed in the hospital, so he had to work in the massage parlours like the majority of visually impaired masseurs. Referring to the analysis at the structural level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021) and arguments of ableism (Campbell, 2009), such a separate exam system gives more advantages to non-disabled individuals over disabled people, keeping visually impaired people from getting related qualification certification and accessing workplaces unrelated to massage (i.e., hospital). Headlines from the Chinese press also expose this barrier. For example, 'A 26-year-old blind man from Shaanxi wanted to take the exam to become a practising doctor but could not apply for the Braille test paper. His career dream was broken (Huashang Net 华商网, 2020)' and 'A blind masseur had obtained a Medical Qualification Certificate for the Blind but could



*only do massage work [in the massage parlour]* (Oriental Today 东方今报, 2014)'.

However, this may not mean that every local health department refuses to recognise the license obtained from the Medical Massage Personnel Exam for the Blind. In Shiwen's city, this license was accepted in some clinics, and visually impaired employees who worked there were treated as physicians in offering medical massage. They were also paid more than those working in the massage industry. The city could be an exceptional example of recognising the 'value' of visually impaired people's work in the massage industry, as according to the majority of participants, most provinces rejected visually impaired people to work in medical settings. It shows the different attitudes toward the massage services offered by visually impaired people across provinces.

Lougen, a college student at the time of the interview, mentioned that he planned to call on more visually impaired people (i.e., his college classmates) to take the Physician Qualification Certificate Exam after graduation with a medical diploma. In this way, these visually impaired people can pressure the education and health departments to allow them to take the exam and provide reasonable adjustments to accommodate their needs (i.e., adaptations to the exam or the exam venue, etc.). News stories suggest that not every province prevents visually impaired people from attending the Physician Qualification Certificate Exam. Some provinces, like Fujian Province, first in 2018, and then Shandong, Gansu, Sichuan, and Shaanxi, changed their practices because of appeals from visually impaired candidates and the subsequent negative reports from the local media and communities on the discriminative practices (Zhihu 知乎, 2021).

The agreement to provide reasonable adjustments to the *Gaokao* also originated from pressure from some visually impaired people (Ma and Ni, 2020). Zhou commented on this behaviour as '*making trouble* (*naoshi* 闹事)'; if they do not act like this, it may be difficult for them (disabled people) to protect their rights. This behaviour could be politically sensitive, as these people could put themselves at risk to test the authority's tolerance.

In addition to the restrictions of these two licencing exams, other important public exams restrict the visually impaired or other disabled people from taking part, such as the Civil Service Exam (*gongwuyuan kaoshi* 公务员考试). As Duo said, he could not understand why he or disabled people could not work in the government department or the local DPF and have decent jobs like many 'able-bodied' people. All the

workplaces directly funded by the government require their workers to pass all exam elements, including written tests, interviews, and the final physical exam. This requirement inevitably creates more barriers for disabled people to pursue a career in public organisations. According to the General Standards for Physical Exam for Civil Servant Recruitment (Trial) (The Ministry of Personnel and Ministry of Health, 2016):

*Those whose corrected visual acuity in both eyes is less than 0.8 (standard logarithmic visual acuity 4.9) or who have obvious eye diseases that impair visual function will not be qualified.* (The Ministry of Personnel and Ministry of Health, 2016)

Those reasons for refusing employment to disabled applicants may seem 'reasonable' as, on paper, there are no overtly discriminatory words against disabled people and the same standard applies equally to all candidates (Ma, 2022b). However, referring to the three levels of analysis of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), this kind of implicit discrimination against disabled people in employment not only allows employers to avoid relevant legal responsibilities, resulting in restrictions for disabled people to enter the mainstream job markets and causing structural inequality but also makes such discrimination - 'prohibition of being employed against disabled people' become a social norm. Thus, the prejudice that disabled people are not able to work in the mainstream job market is further strengthened. Interestingly, as Lili noted, *'disabled people cannot become civil servants, but civil servants who become disabled accidentally can continue to retain their jobs and enjoy the relevant benefits'*. This suggests that how disabled people are treated could also vary.

However, some licensing exams have begun to provide reasonable adjustments to enable visually impaired candidates to participate, such as the Lawyer Qualification Exam. Tina and Duo both mentioned the case of a visually impaired person who passed the exam and became a lawyer not long before the interviews were conducted, having seen news reports such as *'He is the first blind lawyer in Tianjin to pass the lawyer qualification exam and uses technology to help blind people live without barriers'* (Sohu 搜狐, 2020). Tina said this 'blind lawyer' was her friend. However, being a lawyer did not mean that he could rely entirely on his career as a lawyer to support himself at the time of this study – he still did his original sales job on weekdays - selling mobile phone screen reading software to visually impaired people; he only worked as a lawyer when

the clients come for him. Duo also commented on this, questioning the possibility of visually impaired lawyers working like 'normal people':

*It's advertised like this online, but what's the actual situation like? I actually have this doubt - can he really take cases alone like a common lawyer and then go to court... to debate or submit some materials... Can he complete these tasks independently? I actually have doubts. I think his situation is still a bit difficult [to deal with these constraints further] now. - Duo*

Duo's comments also echo the experience of another of Tina's other visually impaired friends who achieved a bachelor's degree in Chinese, progressing from a junior college degree in massage through a college-to-undergraduate exam (*zhuanshengben kaoshi* 专升本考试). However, after Tina contacted three schools for the blind on this person's behalf, no one was willing to accept her friend as he had no vision. All their experiences (i.e., facing restrictions by accreditation exams and being rejected by the mainstream job market) show that employment discrimination exists for visually impaired people or disabled people more generally. This includes the official recruitment process of the government systems. According to the analysis at the structural level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), first, the universal requirements in the recruitment process become significant barriers preventing disabled people from participating in certain employment equally. Secondly, the mainstream job markets seldom consider the special needs of disabled employees and, therefore, tend to ignore their employment needs. More discussion of this is in the following section 3.2.

### **7.3.2 Refusal to make adjustments in the workplace**

Xiaogao has experience with online job applications in customer services, which are not related to the massage area. Although digital assistance can reduce the information gap and increase digital inclusion in this type of work, there were still challenges for disabled people like him. He said that if he told HR he was visually impaired, he may get rejected instantly. If he had concealed this situation, there would have been more chances for him to pass the shortlisting stage and get an online telephone interview. He chose the second option and told HR about his disability after successfully passing the interview. He said it depended on the

attitude of the HRs. He said that usually, the younger HR officers may show more interest in him and then would like to give him an offer, while the relative older HR officers may not. He explained that younger HR officers may be more open-minded and curious about disabled people. After getting the job, however, the company refused to make any adjustments to the work environment; Xiaogao needed to adapt to the working conditions by himself. After working for several months, Xiaogao quit. Due to this, Xiaogao changed jobs unrelated to massage several times when he could not adapt to the working environment and no longer enjoyed the jobs.

Tina had also worked in a mainstream hospital as a *Tuina* physician, where she was the only disabled employee. The employer also refused to provide her with staff accommodation next to the hospital and to adjust the facilities to meet her special needs. After she argued with the employer lots of times but failed, she left the hospital:

*When I worked in the hospital before, I applied for a single dormitory provided by the hospital [free of charge] ...because every time it was windy, rained, or snowed, it was not convenient to go home in these weather conditions. I think that is because the hospital has it [free employees' dormitory], if there were no such thing, I wouldn't say anything... Then, when I went to apply, he [the line manager], ...said that only employees with household registration outside Zhengzhou City have the right to apply... In fact, you [the line manager] were thinking this way – 'It would be your honour to have you [work in this hospital] in a situation like yours'. However, you can say, 'Now we don't have this empty room, or we don't have any empty beds, but the line manager also understands your difficulties very well. If there are [vacant rooms] in the future, you will be given priority.' If you [the line manager] said something like this, I wouldn't be very angry, and I would not be very upset...*

*For example, the [hospital] elevator does not have Braille or a voice system. Then, I made some suggestions, such as whether the hospital can install a voice system. Not only was it convenient for me, but it was also convenient for many patients, elderly patients, right? Without this voice [system], strictly speaking, it did not meet the [requirement of] improvement of a barrier-free environment. Well, it's because I kept requiring these issues [special needs]. The line manager hated me so much. Then, the line manager finally said, 'There are more than 1,000 [employees] in the hospital; how could it*

*have been possible just install this [elevator Braille and speech system] because of you?*<sup>43</sup> - Tina

From the personal level of the PCS model, Xiaogao's practice of concealing his disability to get an interview opportunity supports the HR or the employers' negative views of disabled people, connecting their impairment (*can* 残) with uselessness (*fei* 废) (Ma, 2022a). For this reason, many companies are unwilling to recruit disabled people (Guo, 2015; Liao, 2020), even though this violates the Regulations on the Employment of Disabled People (The State Council, 2007). Due to this, applicants can only pretend to be 'normal' and 'able-bodied' and have a chance to pass the initial stage of the recruitment process. In addition, the attitude and comments of Tina's former line manager of the mainstream hospital indicate that recruiting a disabled employee in a mainstream workplace should be considered an 'honour' for the disabled person and an act of charity by the hospital. More importantly, Xiaogao and Tina's working experiences in the mainstream workplace reflect the predominance of the medical model (Fisher and Goodley, 2007) and disablism (Goodley, 2014) - it is the disabled employees' responsibility to overcome the barriers they face as the workplace facilities are mainly provided for those who are perceived as 'normal people'. It is very similar to the situation in the mainstream educational system as discussed in Chapter 6 – disability is regarded as a personal issue, and the individuals concerned are responsible for adapting to the work environment and performing like the commonly expected employees.

### **7.3.3 Constrained by the other vocational stereotypes**

In addition to facing barriers in fields unrelated to massage, many participants encountered a career pathway related to another vocational stereotype for visually impaired people – the creative industries, particularly music. This shared experience underscores the systemic challenges in the creative industries. For instance, Han, who did not enjoy working in the massage industry but learned the piano for more than 20 years, was uncertain about his other career paths. Similarly, Lili, Dan, and Jianshan's stories show some barriers in the creative industries.

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<sup>43</sup> Unlike in the UK, where employees can report workplace problems to a Trade Union or to a lawyer, in China, there is no formal mechanism for reporting related problems. Only a few employees take the issue to court, but none of the participants did this.

Lili's dream job was to become a piano teacher. After studying piano for 20 years and graduating from the special college, Lili, born with no vision, tried to be employed in the same local piano shop as one of her classmates. However, her classmate had low vision and was able to travel and work alone, while Lili had no vision and needed the company of others. Due to this, she was rejected. She said the employers saw her grandmother's company (i.e., as her personal assistant),<sup>44</sup> which left them a wrong impression and thought she was not able to work independently. This confirms Xiong and Zhang's findings (2021) that musical instrument companies were concerned about visually impaired women who face more travel difficulties, resulting in their rejection.

On the other hand, Dan and Jianshan's career-changing experience shows why creative industries might only sometimes work for them. According to their narratives, they needed a stable life to support their families. Working as an artist meant travelling frequently to perform in different parts of the country. They all wanted to lead a stable life. Giving up working in the creative industries and working in the massage area instead could provide their family with the lifestyle that they expected.

After graduating from Qingdao School for the Blind, Dan faced a difficult choice. He had the opportunity to attend the senior high school sector at Qingdao School for the Blind, but he chose to travel to other cities to learn music from renowned tutors. However, the cost of these lessons, 500 RMB per hour (about 55 pounds), was beyond his means. He turned to street performances and the massage skills he had learned earlier to finance his learning journey:

*I felt that I should go somewhere with more prospects [to learn music]. So I insisted and went to Beijing. Of course, going to Beijing faced many problems. One was that there was no place to live... Another was that I had no money. Without money, what should I do? At that time, I thought, forget it, I would perform on the street to make money... At that time, I also wrote a sign... The sign read - 'A blind person from the mountains of Guizhou [Guizhou shanzhong shimingren 贵州山中失明人], has difficulties in studying in Beijing [jingcheng xuexi xian kunjing 京城求学陷困境]; I beg everyone to give me a hand [kenqing zhujun shi yuanshou 恳请诸君施援手], and I vow*

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<sup>44</sup> Unlike the UK's personal assistant (PA), in China, family members often serve as carers or the role of PA to accompany/assist disabled members without any pay. Under the expectation of a socialist society, Disabled people who are able to work independently in China means that this person is able to work without people's assistance as non-disabled people and overcome difficulties by themselves.

*to repay society with my studies [shi jiang xueye bao shehui 誓将学业报社会]’... Although I had no experience, I printed this sign at a copy shop and hung it to perform [music].*

*But I didn’t know I couldn’t make much money from performing... I had no choice but to go to work in a massage parlour in Beijing. I did massage [work] for a while, and then I used the money I earned to learn vocal music. After learning that because the space [in the massage parlour] was limited, I couldn’t practice vocal music, and it was too noisy. So slowly, slowly, slowly, I forgot it, I couldn’t afford it, so I gave up. - Dan*

After he found that learning music required a substantial amount of money, if he worked as a masseur to support his studies, there would be no time for him to learn *and practice* music. His music teacher did not encourage him to continue learning because of the significant financial investment required. Thus, in facing this harsh reality, Dan joined a disabled people’s art troupe and started to travel across cities to perform to make a living. At the same time, he met his girlfriend (later became his wife), who had low vision and performed with him. However, he and his girlfriend could not bear to ride long distances to perform due to motion sickness, and they did not make much money from performing. Thinking they would get married, Dan felt that his job at that time was not a long-term solution. He needed a stable income and a fixed place to work. After discussing it with his girlfriend, they returned to Guiyang City and opened a massage parlour to support their family. Similarly, Jianshan worked in a local disabled people’s art troupe and performed across the whole country for about 15 years until his wife could not stand the frequent long-term separation and chose to divorce him. He then learned massage skills at a short-term training program in his early thirties to have a more settled lifestyle. Then, he worked in this industry, opened his massage parlour, and married again.

Dan’s ‘street performing’ is based on an image of a visually impaired person/artist; the ‘touring performances’ by the disabled people’s art troupes are based on the images of a group of disabled artists. Through Dan’s street performance, he showed his self-improvement and self-motivation, thanked society for their care and love and showed a tragic but inspiring image. Earning a living by art performance echoes the research findings of Dauncey (2020, p.130), who describes the case of people with short stature making a living by performing for paying tourists in a theme park called ‘Kingdom of the Little People’ near Kunming City. It

further exposes disabled bodies to the gaze of the able-bodied, highlighting the difference between the disabled and able-bodied (Dauncey, 2020). From the analysis at the personal level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), such performance may further strengthen the stereotype (i.e., pity, but self-improvement) of disabled people among most non-disabled people under socialism; hence, many disabled people may donate to disabled people to show empathy and compassion.

In such a work environment of 'job instability' and constant travelling, Lili and Han both mentioned that 'if this way [working as artists] doesn't work in the future, I'll go for the massage [industry]'. However, Xian had already tried this way temporarily during COVID-19 when all the art performances were suspended (i.e., getting massage training), although he finally returned to do the art performances after the lockdowns of COVID-19 (discussed further in Chapter 8).

## **7.4 Conclusion**

Referring to the first question guiding this chapter's analysis, on the one hand, for some participants, learning massage skills makes them feel useful and gives them a stable life and some sense of achievement. They valued the opportunities provided by society and the state. On the other hand, working in massage parlours has disadvantages that lead to dissatisfaction and loss of dignity, such as relatively low welfare and high work intensity.

As for the social barriers in the massage workplaces, they experienced discrimination in recruitment and the jobs that happened in both the massage parlours dominated by most non-disabled employees and visually impaired employers, respectively. Regarding the gender differences during their transition into work, different from the last chapter, gender becomes a vital reason to restrict visually impaired females from having a safe working environment; they need to worry more about sexual harassment from both male clients and colleagues in massage parlours or their independent travelling. There needs to be better protection and criminalisation of this behaviour so that visually impaired women can work in peace and safety.

For the barriers in the working areas unrelated to massage, some participants faced restrictions on attending accreditation exams, being refused by employers to accommodate their special needs during work and being constrained by the other vocational stereotypes for visually



impaired people. Some learned a musical instrument and then worked in the creative industries (i.e., being the piano tuner or doing musical instrument performances to make a living).

According to the analysis at the personal level of the PCS model (Thompson, 2021), the barriers they faced both in the massage parlours and in the workplaces unrelated to massage reflect the prejudice against visually impaired people. It was common practice to regard the existence of disabilities to be personal issues and to think of disabled people as not able to achieve at the same level as most non-disabled people. This belief could also be common in the massage industry. Due to this, drawing on the analysis at the structural level, these workplaces refused to provide reasonable adjustments for disabled people. Only by repeating their requests or using more confrontational actions to attract attention can they safeguard their legitimate rights and interests. The barriers faced by visually impaired people during their career development are assumed to be 'normal' practices which deny access to decent employment to disabled people.

To sum up, the special needs of visually impaired or disabled employees are more likely to be ignored in workplaces where the commonly expected people dominate. These are considered personal issues that require individuals to solve and overcome difficulties independently. Otherwise, disabled people have no choice but to leave these workplaces. Interestingly, from a policy perspective, the policies in the previous chapter related to developing the productivity of disabled people (i.e., getting vocational skills) have been strictly implemented. By contrast, policies that promote the participation of disabled people in the job market may not work in practice.

## Chapter 8 Agency through the life course

### 8.1 Introduction

Much of sociology focuses on the social structural constraints that frame people's choices. What may be lost, however, is the fact that choices are still made within these constraints. That is why agency should not be ignored, but also explored as part of the bigger picture of how and why certain individuals take (or are compelled to take) certain paths in their lives (Hitlin and Elder, 2007a). In the preceding chapters, I have revealed the discrimination and oppression that participants faced throughout their transition into education, their transition away from mainstream curricula to vocational massage training, and their transition into formal work (essentially, the massage industry for most participants). However, even though, as I have shown, they experienced similar obstacles to varying degrees, all of which can be explained as occurring on personal, cultural, and structural levels and interactions between those levels, what has also become apparent through my analysis is that they exercised agency differently in encountering those barriers.

'Agency' has been central to theorists throughout the history of sociology, albeit under different terms at different times. Individuals are active agents in shaping their biographies—subject, of course, to myriad constraints—but people vary in their ability to successfully shape their own life trajectories (Hitlin and Elder, 2007a). Agency, as a fundamental tenet in the life course theory, is understood as a way in which people are able to influence their own lives (Elder, 1994). For life course scholars, it is important to explore the various aspects and mechanisms of agency, including how cultural and structural factors shape it and under what circumstances can an awareness of agency explain behaviour and life course outcomes (Hitlin and Kwon, 2016). Levels of agency may vary between individuals due to differences in external opportunities or internal abilities (Landes and Settersten, 2019). In life course studies, therefore, agency is a central aspect of structuring a life course (Hitlin and Kwon, 2016).

Visually impaired people have traditionally been put in a disadvantaged position with regard to their ability to access education and work and experience relevant discrimination and oppression, which is well-known and has been reinforced, too, by the findings of this study. However, these people are not just passive victims of circumstance; they also have the ability to influence their own lives within such constraints. How they exercise their different agencies to resist or 'overcome'

difficulties influenced by those personal/cultural/structural levels of oppression in their attempts to integrate more fully into mainstream society is less well known. To this end, my analysis moves in this final chapter to focus on the participants' agency, which is differentiated into the four types identified by Hitlin and Elder (2007b): existential agency, pragmatic agency, identity agency, and life course agency. From this, this chapter tries to answer the final overarching question in the research – *'How and to what extent do visually impaired people use their agency as they encounter these social barriers?'*. In doing so, it aims to find answers to the following sub-questions:

- How do participants exercise existential agency when accessing to education and work?
- How do participants exercise pragmatic agency when accessing to education and work?
- How do participants exercise identity agency when accessing to education and work?
- How do participants exercise life course agency when accessing to education and work?

This chapter applies the four types of agency from Hitlin and Elder (2007b), supplemented by an understanding of three elements of agency – namely, the sense that individuals have agency, the structural constraints on this sense, and cultural beliefs about the relationship of the two (Hitlin and Long, 2009). It first sets out the definitions and conditions for agency along the life course, paying particular attention to those four types and three elements just mentioned. It then examines the data collected to show how participants exercise their agency through four types of agency, with the analysis of how three elements affect their exercise of agency. Finally, it points out that no matter the type of agency participants exercised, their sense of possessing agency is affected by structural constraints (i.e., the restrictions during lockdown in COVID-19 and the refusal to accommodate special needs, especially in workplaces unrelated to massage) and cultural beliefs (i.e., vocational stereotypes and social norms for disabled people) in Chinese contexts.

## 8.2 The link between agency and the life course

### 8.2.1 The four types of agency

Agency remains an elusive concept due to inconsistent definitions across theories. For life course analysts, human agency is a personal-level construct that underlies social action (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency is:

*'a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)'. (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; p.963)*

As temporality is a basic as well as an important component of agency, it is particularly resonant in life course theory (Hitlin and Kwon, 2016). Due to this, Hitlin and Elder (2007b) suggest that agency is anchored in sociopsychological understandings of the self. They identify that different temporal foci lead to four analytic types of agencies. The first, 'existential agency', is inherent in social action and is understood as universal human potential. This capacity for self-directed action underlies all types of agency and refers to the fundamental level of human freedom. For example, even those with the least power, such as slaves or young children, can make decisions about their own actions to some extent, even though they may face serious consequences from these choices. However, people are less interested in the capacity for spontaneous behaviour than in its social dimensions and consequences. The ability to act differs from the perception of that ability, self-efficacy,<sup>45</sup> which is central to human agency, a belief about one's abilities that can be acquired through reflection. Instead of treating 'free will' as an end in itself, researchers need to consider a self-reflexive understanding of our abilities and capacity to exercise such will in specific domains, like aspirations, choices of behaviour, mobilisation, and affective response etc. Such self-reflective capacities can develop a sense of 'personal

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<sup>45</sup> Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in his or her ability to organize and execute a course of action required to achieve certain achievements (Bandura, 1982).

empowerment' that motivates and guides our ability to act (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b: p.177).

The second, 'pragmatic agency', concerns those aspects that must be acted upon when previously routine circumstances break down, and the person is forced to focus on more proximate goals. People's ability to influence their behaviour is sociologically related only in a social context or when it has social consequences. People can process social stimuli rather than respond passively (Flaherty and Fine, 2001). Much of our behaviour involves habits because we rely on existing, pre-established routines to guide interactions. However, if these habits fail, people must make choices within the flow of situational activity. Such factors as emotional and personality traits, specific personal experiences, moral principles, and tendencies all influence individuals' choices during emergencies. For example, emotional responses form criteria people can draw on to consider whether various possible actions meet their self-concept, a reference that people use when they are highly concerned about exercising agency under problematic situations. In addition, situational emotional responses are related to culture. People try to conform to cultural expectations of how they should feel, and when their fleeting feelings do not match, they try to shape their behaviour to fit the cultural definition, or ultimately, they reshape their definition themselves (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b: p.177-178).

The third, 'identity agency', emphasises how individuals interpret and enact important identities and roles in different routine situated activities; it involves agentic and self-directed actions and represents habitual patterns of social behaviour. People hold themselves and others accountable based on the identities they seek to claim and internalise; although patterned, the actions taken to generate identity-specific credibility involve personal choice and free will and thus constitute identity agency. Identity agency relies on people's personal autonomy, even as people follow social directives. When people follow the guidelines of their social identity, they consciously try to internalise and adhere to those guidelines and their norms, and the social norms then guide them. However, while actions that follow social norms and guidelines can be described as constrained actions, individuals are able to exercise agency in the successful (or unsuccessful) execution of these activities (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b: p.179-181).

Achieving situated identities relates to another level of agency in which interaction goals are less about re-establishing sustainable interactions and more about attaining desired social and substantive goals. For example, taking on the role of professor does not involve

completely reconstructing the self in daily interactions; past behaviours and experiences can guide a professor's current role-based behaviour to free up cognitive space to focus on goals other than current successful identity formation. Successfully realising an identity—even the highest identity in our hierarchy of salience—requires effort and defining ourselves as agents. Identity agency captures the meaning of the motivational nature of identity commitment (Gecas, 1991). Individuals choose situations that allow them to establish and fulfil important identity commitments. Over time, the different identities people internalise motivate their actions, and they exercise agency within the performance of these identities. People commit to themselves and others, formulating and recreating these commitments in their interactions (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b: p.179-181).

Finally, 'life course agency', is the notion that subjective beliefs at one point in time can influence subsequent trajectories and the outcomes of the life course. Among these four analytic types, the last is the most anchored in empirical studies of agency beliefs across the life course. People do not simply act agentially toward temporary proximate goals (pragmatic agency), nor do they consider only situational goals (identity agency), as some of their actions involve broader perceptions of the future, which are important in shaping individuals' adaptation to situations (Lutfeý and Mortimer, 2003). Thus, Hitlin and Elder (2007b) refer to the behaviour of attempting to exert influence to shape a person's life trajectory as 'life course agency'. According to them, life course agency consists of 'a situated form of agency (exercising action with long-term implications), and the self-reflective belief about one's capacity to achieve life course goals' (p. 182). The former is a long-term version of existential agency, a capability possessed by all individuals; the latter is a form of self-confidence that reflexively guides decisions over longer time horizons, which influences perseverance in difficult situations over the life course and, like self-efficacy, also influences individuals' self-perception of their capacity to solve pragmatic agency problems. Self-perceptions of agency have social consequences (Hitlin and Elder (2007b). For example, compared with girls, boys are more likely to ignore negative feedback on maths ability, overattributing success to their abilities (Correll, 2001).

Additionally, people who perceive more agency are more likely to persist in facing problems, both in situations and when encountering obstacles that represent structural barriers (Bandura, 1992). Some people have a self-concept (which may or may not be accurate) about the likely success of their efforts, allowing them to endure setbacks or plan their lives with longer-term goals (Hitlin and Elder, 2007a). As Hitlin and

Long (2009) have said, agency, as planful competence,<sup>46</sup> represents an individual-level construct that determines one's ability to develop/persist with beneficial long-term plans. Through embedding agency into the life course, the understanding of agency would benefit from empirical explorations of actors' beliefs and feelings about the future as they act in the present, particularly for actions with potential life course consequences (Hitlin and Johnson, 2015). Therefore, life course agency as an analytical construct involves individuals' positioning of their potential self-capabilities to construct and engage in successful long-term plans, emphasising the variability of the life course at specific moments based on social structural position and personal resources (Hitlin and Elder, 2007a).

However, Landes and Settersten (2019) point out that the definition of existential agency from Hitlin and Elder (2007c: p.37) has the potential to exclude disabled people, as Hitlin and Elder describe it as *'the capacity of developmentally normal beings to act freely in a fundamental manner'*. Landes and Settersten (2019, p.2-3) criticise that this definition shows that 'developmental normality' and 'social competence' are necessary features of agency, going against agency being considered a universal attribute of all human beings. They argue that the most troubling shortcoming of this exclusionary line of thinking is the assumption that individuals often classified as 'developmentally abnormal', 'incompetent', or 'irrational' are incapable. For example, intellectually impaired people have been viewed as 'mentally retarded', 'imbecile', and other deplorable terms that indicate social designation as 'developmentally abnormal' or 'socially incompetent' (Carey, 2010). However, empirical evidence suggests that those people often engage in agentic, self-determined actions, but are dismissed by many life course researchers as not possessing this potential (Gill, 2015).

To get out of this conceptual dilemma, Landes and Settersten (2019) propose connecting the concept of linked lives with human agency and argue that reconceptualising agency can be primarily within interconnected lives. As Chapter 2 of this thesis noted, linked lives and human agency are two key themes of the life course approach (Elder, 1994). Elder *et al.* (2004, p.13) state that the principle of linked lives is that 'lives are lived interdependently, and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships'. Elder (1994) reinforces this notion that human life is typically rooted in social relationships with family and friends across the lifespan. In contrast to

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<sup>46</sup> Planful competence represents an individual's ability to formulate and stick to beneficial long-term plans, involving awareness of the individual's own intelligence, social skills, and emotional responses to other people (Shanahan et al., 2003).

modern sociology's view of individuals as independent agents capable of making free and rational choices, recent research in sociology and psychology advances the view that social relationships are a fundamental component of agency (Bandura, 2006; Burkitt, 2016).

Additionally, Elder and Giele (2009) claim that agency of human beings must be considered when structuring people's daily lives and connecting these personal lives to the wider social context. From a relational perspective, agency is not an essentialist attribute of a person, separate from the larger social world and relationships. Instead, agency can only arise through interaction with these social worlds and within these relationships (Burkitt, 2016). Furthermore, Landes and Settersten (2019) particularly argue that the linked lives are not just an optional component of agency, as they are inseparable from agency; agency thus always depends not only on social relations in general but also on interpersonal relationships in particular. This argument can apply to everyone, especially for people who have various forms of disability, younger adults who are gradually gaining independence after they enter adulthood, and older adults who are struggling to maintain their independence in the final decades of life (Landes and Settersten, 2019).

### **8.2.2 Three elements of agency**

Further to those four types of agency discussed above, Hitlin and Long (2009, p.139) have proposed three elements of agency that map in large part onto Thompson's PCS framework; namely, 'the sense that individuals have agency' from the *individual* level, 'the structural constraints on this sense' from the *structural* level and 'cultural beliefs about the relationship of the two' from the *cultural* level. According to their study, there is a theoretical distinction between the extent to which individuals actually have the situational ability to exert influence and their subjective beliefs about their personal ability to exert influence; the actual power that individuals have is what they call the structural agency; and the structure can be a social structure or a local situated structure, that is, an individual who has the power to make others behave in a certain way, like a kindergarten teacher. Sometimes, individuals may *think* they have a large agency, but the structure is quite limiting, such as young children who believe they influence their surroundings but actually have almost no meaningful agency from the social perspective (Hitlin and Long, 2009). More importantly, agency may not be a constant, and this belief may vary within a single individual depending on age or background (Hitlin and Long, 2009). These two aspects of agency - the sense that individuals



possess agency and the structural constraints on this sense, are referred to as 'bounded agency' by Evans (2002).

The third element mentioned by Hitlin and Long (2009, p.140) is 'cultural understanding of the nature of individual agency', in acknowledgement that cultural beliefs also influence the concept of agency. Any culture will have one (or more) set, culturally shaped expectations about the influence any individual might exert on his or her life at different stages (Hitlin and Long, 2009). In a more group-oriented culture, a person's sense of personal agency and the structural opportunities to exercise that sense of agency are likely to be relatively high. However, cultural ideologies may downplay or hide structural opportunities (Hitlin and Long, 2009). For example, East Asian cultures are often thought of as collectivist rather than individualist, cultures in which individuals see themselves as interdependent on others (Snibbe and Markus, 2005). This intertwining of lives with agency is directly reflected in Elder's (1994) notion of 'linked lives' of life course – to be an agent is to treat significant others as an aspect of the self.

### **8.3 Participants' four types of agency**

This section presents my analysis of agency among the participants in this study. It covers the four types of agency—existential agency, identity agency, pragmatic agency, and life course agency—as identified by Hitlin and Elder (2007b). It also analyses the ways in which the sense that individuals have agency is affected by structural constraints and cultural beliefs.

#### **8.3.1 Existential agency**

As noted above, existential agency refers to the fundamental level of human freedom; as such, it might be considered sociologically banal (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). However, Routledge (2022) connects existential agency with 'meaning', which has a self-regulating function, highlighting the more agentic and action-oriented dimensions of meaning. Thus, Routledge (2022) has defined existential agency as '*people's beliefs about their ability to find, maintain, and restore meaning in their life*' (p.4). To be existentially agentic is about believing in one's ability to create a meaningful life despite the obstacles, challenges, and tragedies in his or her life (Routledge, 2022). In addition, Routledge (2022) argues that existential agency can uniquely predict motivation. For example, the higher the level of existential agency among aspiring entrepreneurs, the

more motivated they are to pursue entrepreneurship. People who see themselves as existential agents are more likely to take responsibility for their lives, participate in community activities, and have a positive, solution-oriented mindset, promoting human progress and social well-being. Here is the case of Tina, who decided to change her job from a hospital to a *Tuina* vocational school.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that Tina faced many barriers and was unhappy when she worked in a mainstream hospital as the only disabled employee. There was no staff dormitory for her to stay in, no voice prompt in the elevator and performance ranking was based on the number of patients seen in total. Her attempts to secure reasonable accommodations so she could do her job without issue were rejected by her supervisor. As she continued to request to improve the hospital's barrier-free facilities, the hospital managers were reluctant to do that and became very dissatisfied with her. She suffered a lot and became frustrated. Finally, she quit, even though her family did not support her decision. After that, she heard from one of her friends that a new special *Tuina* vocational school was funded by the local DPF, recruiting teachers. She said that before applying, she was confident she could succeed and believed the position was right for her as she met every requirement. Accompanied by her sister, she went to the interview. She only finished half of her presentation during the interview before being told it was over and that she was hired. Since then she has been teaching there for more than five years at the time of the interview. She mainly taught massage and computer courses and was also in charge of the massage internship at school. She said she was satisfied with this job, as all the facilities are blind-friendly and accessible, and the school also provided her with free accommodation there. She could easily travel across her accommodation and classroom:

*There is a braille or voice prompt in every facility/building on our campus, like the lift and the classroom door. There is a helpful App designed by our sponsor that can locate my location and then tell me my real-time location when I shake my phone. All the electric appliances [in my accommodation] are voice-controlled, and I can easily adjust them. I do not think there is anything different between me and able-bodied people with the assistance of AI. - Tina*

Tina also worked a few hours a week at a massage clinic set up at the school. She said she wanted to continue massage work in practice. She

tried to keep in touch with ‘patients’ there to alleviate their disease since she had been a doctor for more than ten years before. She said she was born to be a teacher and felt happy to pass on her massage skills and experience to students. She even gained 15 kilograms in the last few years, and she called this ‘happy weight (*xingfu fei* 幸福肥)’, as the meals in school were great; she enjoyed time with students and patients.

Tina exercised her existential agency when she tried to change jobs and found new meaning to her life while working in her new job. When working in the hospital, there were many barriers and challenges, but she did not compromise with these constraints or overcome them with her own efforts. Instead, she quit her work and believed that she had the ability to create a meaningful life outside this hospital. Additionally, when preparing for the job interview, her confidence shows an optimistic attitude about that potential job. This reflects the argument of Routledge (2022) who suggests that existential agency can predict motivation - i.e., her relatively high level of existential agency motivated her to get employed in a new workplace successfully. More importantly, although Tina continued to work successfully at this special vocational school, her career was still connected with massage work and visually impaired people. Many barriers beset her former working experience in a mainstream hospital, so her story indicates that her sense of agency was influenced by structural constraints, showing a ‘bounded agency’ (Evans, 2017). As such, she exercises her existential agency in a workplace accessible to visually impaired people.

Furthermore, an accessible workplace in this vocational school reduced many barriers for Tina. It facilitated her fundamental level of human freedom so that she had the ability to work in the school without assistance. She said she felt included in teaching in a *Tuina* vocational school. The accessible facilities in her workplace and accommodation demonstrate the importance of the social model approach; here, an inclusive, barrier-free working environment that facilitates independent living and active involvement in the local social network (Barnes *et al.*, 2010). Her experience shows that in an accessible environment where digital technologies are used, visually impaired people can potentially be more independent. An enabling environment can support disabled people’s perception of their capacity and their capacity for action, as well as develop their beliefs that they have the power to solve challenges and live meaningful lives.

Similarly, Xiaogao, Mao, and Ouwen also exercised their existential agency by accessing digital technology and changing jobs no longer related to massage work, i.e., NGOs, telephone customer service, and IT

areas. They did not enjoy working in the massage industry, so they persevered to avoid it and break the vocational stereotype to build a better tomorrow for themselves. The fact that they would also have the potential to earn more money and achieve economic security also helped. Mao mentioned the ideas he learned from social media; he said, 'disability is not a defect; everyone may have some impairment at some time or another'. He believed that he had the ability to achieve his life outcomes out of visually impaired people's vocational area – massage work. During this process, advancements in digital technology also appear to play an essential role in creating a meaningful life outside the massage industry. As Shiwen commented on the benefits of digital technology - computers have reduced the gap between visually impaired people and sighted people:

*Braille used to be independent of Chinese characters. After learning to use a computer, you can input Braille and output Chinese characters. Communicate with sighted people without any barriers. - Shiwen*

Xiaogao, Mao, and Ouwen all had chances to learn computer skills or programs; then, they used the screen reading mode on their computers or mobile phones to work in fields unrelated to massage. Mao and Xiaogao needed to work in person, while Ouwen could work online (at home). Additionally, many participants mentioned using social media to make disabled/non-disabled friends online through digital technology development. This supports the idea that social media can be important for visually impaired people to communicate with the outside world, consistent with Li's (2017) study on the importance of technology for visually impaired people to socialise via social applications.

Their experience of working in areas unrelated to massage suggests that visually impaired people can have more job opportunities with the assistance of digital technology; conversely, digital technology can enable their existential agency. This supports the research findings of Goggin *et al.* (2019), who argue that digital technology can solve employment problems for disabled people. Their action of learning digital technology, like computers and mobile phones, shows the broader perceptions of their future education and career (Hitlin and Elder, 2007a). Xiaogao was ultimately unable to sustain working in areas unrelated to massage due to the barriers he needed to overcome in the workplace during this study; by contrast, Mao and Ouwen were able to work for a longer time with the

same NGO and in IT, respectively. These different results of trying to work in areas unrelated to massage reflect the argument of Hitlin and Elder (2007a) that individuals are active agents in shaping their own biographies— subject, of course, to myriad constraints—but people vary in their ability to shape their own life trajectories successfully.

### **8.3.2 Pragmatic agency**

In contrast to ‘existential agency’, ‘pragmatic agency’ is related to proximate (short-term) goals a person must act when the previously routine circumstances break down (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). Factors such as emotional and personality traits, specific personal experiences, moral principles, and inclinations, all influence the choices individuals make in emergencies (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). Here are several examples of what happened to the participants in this study when during the COVID-19 lockdown. These experiences help to illustrate this form of agency.

All the interviews for this study took place in 2022, when the pandemic still impacted some participants' choices to greater and lesser degrees. Xiaolei, Wenqiang, and Lougen were massage students during the pandemic, so they had to study online for a long time. Xiaolei told me that this way of learning had increased his anxiety, as he lacked step-by-step tutorials in person to attend massage training. He found it difficult to follow the teaching online due to his visual impairments.

Some participants had to make decisions around their potential career pathways when their work was suspended during the lockdown, especially for the participants working in the massage industry. Due to the strict restrictions imposed on services requiring close in-person contact, many massage parlours were not allowed to open when infections were detected in that city, directly impacting participants' income. Xiaogao, Xian, and Lee returned to their hometowns to save on living costs. In contrast, married couple Haidi and Hagang chose to run an apartment-based massage parlour, posting this news on their social media and providing massage services in their living room. Some found they had more space and time to learn skills unrelated to massage online or even tried to work in different areas. For example, Wei, Hagang and Haidi tried to learn how to produce audio novels for a while, although they returned to work in the massage industry after the lockdown. Xiaogao and Mao successfully discontinued working as masseurs and took up other jobs. Wenqiang learned online customer service, and Kaili started to write online advertisements. All these actions reflect their ability to plan short-

term goals and exercise their pragmatic agency when their previously routine circumstances break down (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b).

Ouwen suggested that COVID-19 left visually impaired people more free time to reflect on their career interests, something they did not have the chance to do before:

*The situation before was that their business [in massage parlours] was very good. It's when you [visually impaired people] are tired [of working in a massage parlour] for a day. Because of this physical fatigue, you don't have the energy to think about [the possibility of working in other fields] at night. But the pandemic has blocked these things [busy life in massage parlours], which may give blind people more time to examine and reflect on this industry. - Ouwen*

Additionally, Ouwen also suggested that COVID-19 provided more convenience for visually impaired people—remote working allowed them to avoid the troubles of commuting.

Lili's job as a piano tuner was influenced by COVID-19, too, as there were some COVID-related restrictions for her when doing piano tuning in situ. She just used her free time to learn more things, such as trying a new part-time job like online customer service, reading, and learning how to describe a movie for visually impaired people. Lili said she was open-minded about her future life and enjoyed learning and exploring new skills to see what areas interest her. Lili's choices during COVID-19 could be related to her optimistic personality. She believed she could find other part-time jobs (unrelated to massage) that interested her if she kept trying, which is consistent with the argument that personality influences individuals' choices in emergencies (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b).

In contrast, Shiwen and Xian, who worked in creative industries, tried to improve their skills and get massage training as a backup skill. All the musical performances were cancelled during the lockdown; travelling across provinces sometimes needed approval during COVID-19. Because of this, Shiwen, as an official reciter in the Provincial Disabled Art Troupe (*sheng canjiren yishutuan* 省残疾人艺术团), had more free time to read and develop his massage skills to a more advanced level. He took advantage of all the skills he had learned before to have more income streams. He became a part-time private tutor, giving recitation and music tutoring at home, working with the piano stores to tune the

pianos, and offering massage services if necessary. Xian decided to return to his hometown first and use *Yijing*, a skill he had learned before, as a part-time job to maintain his income, which could be done online and in person. Meanwhile, he also joined a short massage training course organised by the local DPF for visually impaired people as a backup skill. After COVID-19, he returned to Beijing and joined the Art Troupe. Shiwen and Xian's responses to COVID-19 reflect how their specific personal experiences with prior skill acquisition influenced their proximate choices (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b).

All their decisions and actions during COVID-19 show their proximate goals in the present moment within problematic situations (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). These goals were either unplanned or perhaps unwanted short-term goals. For many of them, once those problematic situations ended, such goals may not be their focus anymore – i.e., Shiwen and Xian returned to the creative industries, while Wei, Haidi, and Hagang returned to their original career—the massage industry.

Additionally, Shiwen and Xian learned more about massage skills and advanced their massage skills to diversify their income streams. Their emotional responses to getting massage training are, as Hitlin and Elder (2007b) suggest, culture-related, as massage work is considered the most 'suitable' job for visually impaired people from the vocational stereotype – the cultural expectation level. When they realised their musical performance was suspended during the lockdown, they tried to adjust their behaviour to fit the cultural definition. This also suggests that the agency they exercised was influenced by both the structural level (e.g., COVID-19 restrictions) and the cultural level (expectations of the massage industry for visually impaired people).

### **8.3.3 Identity agency**

'Identity agency' focuses on how people interpret and enact important identities and roles in different routine situated activities (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). In achieving a situated identity, our attention becomes less focused on the current problematic situations and more on achieving a desired social goal or enjoying a successful interaction (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). This section focuses on three identities that appear central to the participants in their narratives - as a 'disabled person', as daughters and as students.

For as long as she could remember, Lisha did not realise that she was 'blind'. She often imitated her grandparents when doing housework,

such as sweeping the floor and doing laundry, until a guest who visited her grandparents questioned how she could do the housework correctly. After that, she realised she was 'different':

*When I first started to remember, I didn't know I was different from others. Then, I was also a curious kid. I wanted to follow others in doing whatever they did. I wanted to follow others in sweeping the floor. I thought it was so interesting. Then others were doing the laundry [by hand], and I wanted to follow suit, but no one wanted to let me do it... But I was curious, and they didn't teach me, so I figured it out alone. Then I didn't know that I couldn't see. Anyway, I just imagined [how to do housework and then did that]. [For example] how they swept the floor and washed the clothes. As a result, someone came to visit and asked my family if I was able to sweep the floor. Was I able to clean it? If I was also able to wash clothes, Was I able to wash clothes cleanly?... That's when I realised, ah, I am different from others; it turned out that I can't see. - Lisha*

Just like Lisha, many participants mentioned that they did not know they were 'disabled' at the start (particularly those who accidentally lost vision later, like Kun, or those with low vision at an early age, like Duo and Lougen), so they still followed the way that most non-disabled peers took. However, once they realised they would lose their vision gradually, or lose their vision forever, they started to label themselves as 'disabled' and 'blind' (like the case of Kun below), differentiated their actions and capacities from those of so-called 'normal people' and followed the guidelines and social norms that most visually impaired people took – getting massage training and working in this industry (like Duo and Lougen below):

*Later, my family heard that it would cost a lot of money per month [for eye treatment], and it might not be cured, so they gave up. Then, I didn't go to school...so I just stayed home and did nothing. I don't want to mention it. It really felt like life was worse than death during this period. Because you had known that you were disabled at that time, and it meant being useless... - Kun*



As mentioned in Chapter 5, Duo, who studied in the mainstream school until tertiary education, started to know he was 'special (*teshuva de* 特殊的)' from being treated differently during the mainstream junior high school. Additionally, his mother informed the teacher about his low vision situation and suggested that he sit in the front row to see the blackboard. Thus, Duo sat in the front row for all three years of junior high school. However, he felt uncomfortable, as he was much taller than his peers, which made him look odd (*tuwu de* 突兀的) sitting in the front row. Even though he still was not able to see the words on the blackboard. Coupled with the need for 'parental pick-up and drop-off' after class, he further realised the difference between himself and his classmates, and he also realised that his eyesight would decline little by little as time went by. He said he became withdrawn as a result:

*Maybe after knowing these things, I started to feel a little withdrawn and a little autistic. I didn't make many friends in class, and I wasn't willing to talk that much. But back then, I was a not bad person, so I had a few friends. However, I didn't have any close friendships, we just played together. . . But we couldn't [play together] at night, not at night. During the day, I was also able to take physical classes, play basketball, and play [with them]. However, it's not a close friendship... I kept this deep inside, some awareness that I was different from others. After this, I started to become withdrawn. I started to be autistic and had low self-esteem. . . I unconsciously put myself in the class from an outsider's perspective. - Duo*

When Duo got old, this difference in vision further affected his choices in tertiary education – taking massage courses:

*As I got older, I also realised that my vision was not good. And it would gradually deteriorate in the future. Maybe after knowing these things, I became a little withdrawn and a little self-isolated... [After graduating from mainstream technical secondary school], I was under very high pressure then. In fact, it meant that my eyesight was already bad, but I still had to involve myself in the network of 'normal people'. The pressure was very high, and the pressure was very high... After that, I learned from others about the Luoyang Massage Institute [including the sectors of vocational secondary school and junior college], which used to be a [vocational] school for the blind to*

*learn massage [skills]. There were quotas prepared for the blind students [to enter this technical college] ... Then my mother accompanied me to Luoyang to take the [entrance] exam set by the school... After the exam, I was admitted [to learn massage skills] ... - Duo*

Lougen followed mainstream education before graduating from junior high school. Then, an operation after graduation caused him to lose his vision completely. He then heard from his attending doctor about the school for the blind and disabled:

*I have had poor eyesight since I was a child, and I had surgery [to treat cataracts] a few months after I was born... I didn't know about the disability certificate until I was a teenager when I graduated from junior high school. In other words, I didn't realise I was disabled until that time... I was having an operation in the hospital, and then I heard the attending doctor talk about that school [for the blind]. Only then did I know and understand that [School for the Blind]. Then [I] went to take the [entrance] exam for this school... There were about more than ten people. I took first place on the exam. There were high schools [to learn the regular courses] and vocational secondary schools [model] [to learn massage skills], but I still chose vocational secondary schools. I felt that I didn't plan to take the Gaokao in high school, so [attending] vocational secondary school [education] was already enough. - Lougen*

According to Kun, being 'blind' makes him feel useless. By contrast, deterioration or loss of vision results in Duo and Lougen realising their differences from sighted peers. Then, they begin to play the role of 'blind people' that society expects them to play—getting massage training and working in the massage industry. Affected by socialism, disabled people are required to be economically productive, so developing vocational skills is essential for them. Given that, they become 'useful' through massage work. Their acting as a 'blind person' supports the argument from Hitlin and Long (2009) that social norms guide people as they make a deliberate effort to internalise and adhere to these norms. By contrast, Xiaogao, Mao, and Jack said they 'don't think of themselves as blind/disabled people'. As Jack noted, he had many able-bodied friends and enjoyed socialising and hanging out with them. He also mentioned

that many blind people around him lacked confidence and were afraid of other people watching him. Mao said he thought he should be a person first, and 'disability' should not be the main label for him. These words show that although the social norms and guidelines constrain their actions, pushing them to work in the massage area and marginalising them from mainstream society, those participants have the ability not to execute the activities expected by the social norm when they exercise their agency (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). Here, some of them felt able to reject labels that they felt would be disadvantageous to them, something that Dauncey also identified in her work on the ways in which disabled people in China would reflect or embrace labels depending upon their understanding of whether 'being disabled' or not could be advantageous or deleterious to their own personal situation (Dauncey, 2014).

Additionally, almost every participant reflected on their roles as students, sons or daughters. Here, I use Lisha's story to demonstrate how she exercised identity agency within the performance of her two roles as student in the special school (boarding school) and daughter. Compared to her childhood, when she lived with her grandparents and stayed home all day, Lisha enjoyed herself once she started special school, even though she was always alone. She studied and became independent and free there without the kind of barriers and restrictions she had experienced at home. She told me that she learned things very quickly and all the teachers treated her well. However, she said she did not have many social skills to make friends. She was afraid that she would be considered to 'have never seen the world (*mei jianguo shimian* 没见过世面)' [meaning not worldly wise]. Additionally, she had not communicated with people outside her family for a long time before schooling, so she found it difficult to get to know her classmates; her classmates also could not understand her dialect as no one had taught her to speak Mandarin (the common language) before. Although there was no classmate to play with, she thought school life was fun, and she could read books and listen to the radio. She even did not want to come home during holiday, as she could do lots of things by herself:

*Also, I didn't remember anything else clearly, but I just felt that school was exciting and fun. There were many classmates and friends, and even if there were no classmates or friends to play with me, I could still read books, and I could still listen to the radio. I can rely on myself [to do many things independently]. For example, I could go by myself if I wanted to go to the bathroom. I can go to the dining hall to have lunch alone during mealtime. I can wash clothes by myself. I really*

*liked the kind of things that I wanted to do, and I can do them by myself basically. That was the feeling of being able to do things that I could do, and then I started to have the feeling of not wanting to go home [where I had to rely on families to do things above due to the inaccessible living environment]. - Lisha*

The enjoyable school life inspired Lisha's desire to go to college. However, her 'dream life' in schooling was destroyed by her father, who preferred sons more than daughters. As mentioned in Chapter 6, her school life ended because his father forced her to drop out of school when she was 14, to learn a practical skill that could support her in the future. This pressure made her break down, as she said she would lose the chance to be independent at school, and she would come back to the life that relied on families. However, Lisha said she finally compromised and gave up being a student. She thus chose to learn massage skills as one of the few skills open to visually impaired people. She wanted to borrow 5,000 RMB [about £550] from her father to take a one-year massage training course, but her father gave her money directly without asking for the money back. When Lisha was in the massage training course, she was repulsed by the training and was not willing to study it well, but she knew she had no choice but to learn other skills as a visually impaired person without a diploma. She felt very 'down' (*yumen* 郁闷) when she recalled her previous aspiration during her schooling to go to college and be a teacher. After the training, Lisha started to work in the massage area. Her role thus changed from a student to a massage worker.

When Lisha was at school as a student, she acted as a student to study, read, and be independent. At this time, one of her goals was to go to college. However, before she had the chance to use this internalised role to motivate her own behaviour further and exert her initiative, her student role was interrupted by the influence of another role - the daughter of her father. While Gecas (1991) suggests that individuals choose situations that allow them to establish and fulfil important identity commitments, my research shows that actually individuals may have few choices to do it due to the constraints they face. In addition, like some participants mentioned above, Lisha followed the social norm to learn massage skills, showing that their agency is influenced by cultural beliefs (Inglehart and Baker, 2000).

### **8.3.4 Life course agency**

The 'life course agency' refers to subjective beliefs held at one moment that can influence subsequent trajectories and outcomes over the life course (Hitlin and Elder, 2007b). Hitlin and Elder (2007b) define the act of attempting to influence a person's life trajectory as 'life course agency'. This section discusses the participants' life course agency through Shiwen's case of learning skills unrelated to massage at home for long-term career pathways and Lili and Ling's case related to the long-term effect of sexual harassment.

### **Learning skills unrelated to massage and adopting home study**

Some participants, like Lili, Kaili, Han, Xian, and Shiwen, learned skills unrelated to massage from an early age. Here is the case of Shiwen, who studied some skills following his mentor and finally used the skills to develop his career pathways.

Shiwen met his mentor at a church at the age of eight. Like most participants, he was not accepted into preschool, so he spent much time in the church with his grandmother. He had fun there and thought he should be like priests and those who sang hymns, as those people were very friendly. During lunch breaks, he would recall and recite the preacher's words and sing hymns from the pulpit. Doing this brought him to the attention of his mentor, a man from an urban area. Shiwen told me his mentor thought then: 'This kid is very interesting. His eyes can't see, but the memory is not bad.' After that, the mentor would visit the church frequently to keep in touch with him. The mentor then started to take him home and teach him for one year before he went to the special primary school. Shiwen said it was also the first time he smelled the books and the ink.

In the first few years in the school for the 'blind, deaf, and dumb', Shiwen received home education in the evening after school with his mentor, who taught him traditional Chinese culture. He said the education in this school was at a low level, as teachers there always encouraged visually impaired students to learn massage skills; however, Shiwen admitted at least one good thing about studying there: he learned Braille. Then, the mentor suggested Shiwen drop out of the special school in the sixth grade, as the mentor thought the special education system was unsuitable for him and would hinder his further development. Shiwen agreed with this and then dropped out from schooling and formally adopted home education.

After that, his mentor specially designed a new learning model for Shiwen – being taught about Chinese culture by the mentor and learning other skills from the related masters (*mingjia* 名家) (including males and females) who had connections with the mentor. Due to this, in the following years, Shiwen learned recitation, *guzhen*,<sup>47</sup> piano tuning, massage, and *Yijing* from personal tutoring, funded by his mentor, and computer skills from the local DPF. All these skills have become his further means of making a living. Shiwen explained why his mentor arranged these courses for him:

*My mentor said, 'I support you to learn art... If you were not talented and had no chance in the art industry, you could go back to your profession of blind people [massage and fortune-telling]; but if you [have the capability to] learn art, you would have an advantage over them [blind peers] [in finding a job and supporting yourself]'. - Shiwen*

After Shiwen finished all the classes at the age of 22, he took a fortune-telling job first and then went to a national recital competition and won the championship. This award-winning experience laid a foundation for his next job application – he successfully applied for the Provincial Disabled Art Troupe (*sheng canjiren yishutuan* 省残疾人艺术团) in Zhejiang province as an official reciter. This job had a good salary and insurance. At the same time, he is also the part-time head of the local disabled art troupe. When I asked Shiwen how his mentor perceived his visual impairment, he said proudly:

*He doesn't care. He doesn't care at all. What's on his mind? - It's just that some people in ancient China who couldn't see were very powerful (*lihai de* 厉害的). That's what he understood. He gave me examples, like Zuo Qiuming and some Chinese musicians.<sup>48</sup> - Shiwen*

All these long-term skill-learning processes and the influence of his mentor have developed his self-concepts of the possible success of his

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<sup>47</sup> A Chinese ancient musical instrument.

<sup>48</sup> A visually impaired historian and author of the *Zuo Zhuan* (左传).

efforts, allowing him to plan his life with longer-term goals (Hitlin and Elder, 2007a).

As mentioned in Chapter 6, Shiwen's learning experience also indicates a potential new way of learning for visually impaired students – home study – that enabled him to offset the poor quality and restricted choice of special education through learning skills other than massage in the hope of a better future. Kaili, Han, and Lili all studied piano playing at home and successfully entered tertiary education to improve their piano skills.

In Kaili's case, she left education after graduating from special primary school. She then learned piano playing from a private tutor and English in a training institution with other non-disabled students. She first wanted to work in the Disabled People's Art Troupe. However, after several failures in applying for jobs, Kaili realised the importance of a degree, so she decided to prepare for the special admission exam for visually impaired students to access tertiary education. She said people around her questioned her decision and did not believe she could succeed due to the limited admission quota – six places. However, she got full support from her mother, who said it could be 'normal' if she failed since there was so much academic knowledge that she had not learned; if she failed in the first year, she could keep trying in the second year. Kaili disagreed with her mother and said confidently, *'I can make it. I don't need to try again. I will definitely be admitted!'*. Then she searched for past exam papers and studied by herself on the computer. Meanwhile, she learned Chinese reading, writing, and English from private tutors. She also made a risky decision – giving up the study of maths to solely focus on Chinese, English and piano playing, as she said her math level was only primary school level, and she could not waste time on this. Finally, after preparing for 13 months, she was admitted to Changchun University and Beijing Union University with first and second place, respectively. Then, she chose to study in Beijing.

Kaili's confidence in getting admitted to college shows her optimism about her future life course. Hitlin and Elder's (2007a) research identifies 'optimism' as an important psychological component of life course agency. In addition, Kaili's experience of staying at home to prepare for the special college entrance exam reflects her positioning of their potential self-capabilities to construct and engage in successful long-term plans, something that Hitlin and Elder (2007a) also identify as important.

However, only some have the opportunity to learn skills other than massage to enhance their ability to make longer-term plans for the future

that are in line with their wishes and aspirations. For example, Lisha and Xiaolei, who grew up in a small village, had no choice but to undertake massage training and work in the massage area since they were forced to drop out of primary school. Those who had the opportunity to learn musical instruments outside of school mostly came from families with better financial conditions in the city and had only one child, such as Lili, Han, and Kaili. This shows that family cumulative advantage also increases exposure to opportunity (Ferraro and Shippee, 2009). In this way, financially well-off families, combined with supportive parents, may provide visually impaired people with training opportunities unrelated to massage training. However, these training chances are still related to the other vocational stereotype – the creative industries. This is consistent with the concept of ‘bounded agency’ (Evans, 2017) – the sense that an individual possesses agency is affected by the structural constraints that visually impaired people should learn those skills considered most suitable for them by society. Additionally, families with different conditions have a different intergenerational impact on their visually impaired children’s life opportunities or misfortune (Hutchison, 2019). This supports the argument of Calarco (2011) that parents with more advantaged social positions transfer character, abilities, and knowledge to help their children gain advantages.

### **The long-term effect of sexual harassment**

As discussed previously in Chapter 7, sexual harassment was reportedly an extensive issue in school and work. For Lili, this happened to her twice in school and influenced her subsequent career choices. She says that at her school, there were students without visual impairments studying massage in secondary school. Such boys often bumped into her in school, and their hands touched her randomly. However, she could not identify who did this to her due to her visual impairment, so she kept running fast towards the teacher’s office. In addition, she told me that some visually impaired males also used visual impairment as an excuse, saying that they did not touch girls on purpose. The second sexual harassment happened in the classroom:

*Anyway, there were two incidents that were more terrifying. Once, I went to the classroom to read a book on weekends and sat there reading. Then someone like this came [and sat next to me and touched me randomly]. At that time, I did not know how to tell him to stop. Then I kept trying to get rid of him, but I couldn't. Then I shouted*



*and two boys came and drove him away, but the experience scared me a lot... - Lili*

The experience of sexual harassment made Lili traumatised. Then, she chose to suspend schooling and study at home. However, she was often in a trance at home because of her traumatic experiences:

*Later, when I suspended schooling and stayed at home. They [my family] called me to eat something or drink water at home, but I couldn't hear that and didn't respond. - Lili*

More importantly, she had become sensitive and even was scared when someone, especially the males, touched her. This made her refuse to work in the massage area, which required her to approach male clients and touch them by providing the massage service. This influence shows that being sexually harassed reflexively guided her decisions over a longer time horizon (Hitlin and Elder, 2007a). Such a belief influenced her perseverance in later difficult situations over her life course, something identified by Hitlin and Elder (2007a). For example, in her case, the experience of sexual harassment gave her the beliefs to fight against the vocational stereotype, when her mother asked her to work in the massage parlour, or when others did not understand her to keep learning piano playing and work in the sphere of music rather than massage.

Ling, who had low vision, began formal education at 12 and similarly experienced sexual harassment in the school for the 'blind, deaf, and dumb'. Xiaogao, male, also noted the high frequency of sexual harassment incidents and even abortions happening in his school for the blind:

*Except in the class, girls and boys may not have many chances to communicate and interact as they had to follow the strict timetable to come back to the dormitory on time after class. Too many rules and restrictions made students more curious about sex deep inside, so tragedy [sexual harassment] happened frequently. - Xiaogao*

According to Ling, some students with speaking and listening impairments always tried to grope and hug her intentionally when she went upstairs. Then she reported this thing to her class tutor, but her tutor said there was no evidence to prove this thing, so the school was not responsible for dealing with it. Thus, she told this to her classmates, and one of her male classmates (who then became her boyfriend at the time of the interview) tried to help her. They planned to catch those boys, so the male classmate first hid downstairs. When the same thing happened to Ling, her male classmate appeared quickly and grabbed one of the boys, and then he beat that boy up. After that, Ling said that the line manager and teachers finally recognised this was happening, but they did not help to solve it and even blamed them for causing a fight. At last, when the class tutor said the school could not deal with this issue and suggested inviting her parents to the school here to discuss it, Ling chose not to tell her parents:

*The class tutor finally said they [the school] couldn't handle this matter and suggested that I ask my parents to come to the school. At that time, my parents were working in Shenzhen, and it was impossible for me to let them come to [school]. And I was already a teenager; I didn't want my parents to worry too much. I thought they've already done their job by raising me, and I think they've done a good job. I shouldn't make them worry a lot. So, the matter, in fact, would not be resolved in the end. At that time, I felt I faced wrongful treatment (Weiqu 委屈). - Ling*

Ling's story also revealed the failure of the school and the tutor to deal with sexual harassment, resulting in her loss of confidence in the school. The school could also fail to develop her positive attitude and necessary skills to face problems confidently and persevere through adversities. This differs from the research claimed by Mirowsky and Ross (1998) that the training and sense of accomplishment acquired in the school can help students develop a sense of control - i.e., the belief that an individual can master, control, shape, and change their lives. However, Ling also thought she was lucky later when she faced this behaviour as she had support from her friend and boyfriend:

*Later, I thought about it, in fact, so many people around me have also encountered this kind of situation [sexual harassment], but they may not be as lucky as me, like having the company of friends and the help of my boyfriend. Thinking about it, in fact, it's been a long time, and it [the impact of this incident] faded. However, I actually think the class tutor is very important. The impact of meeting an irresponsible class tutor, a class tutor who has no sense of responsibility, is quite big, I think, and I was quite pessimistic for a long while. - Ling*

Ling's long-term emotional consequences were caused by the school and teachers who did not take that incident seriously. After she knew she was treated unfairly, she tried to shape her behaviour to fit the school's expectations – dropping this incident and not letting her parents know, even though she thus had little faith in that class tutor. Ultimately, she reshaped her definition of 'self', focused on the good side, and showed her optimistic perspective in this incident - the support from her friends (i.e., having the company of friends and the help of her boyfriend). This reflects that she used her inner strength to understand this incident from a positive perspective. Due to this, she used her ability of moderate self-regulation and self-control to control her impulses and negative feelings (Hitlin and Long, 2009).

## **8.4 Conclusion**

Agency is bounded, including the sense that individuals have agency and the structural constraints on this sense, and it is also shaped by cultural beliefs (Hitlin and Long, 2009). Among the four types of agency, existential agency, as a fundamental element of human free will, relates to self-initiated actions and pursuing a meaningful life. My analysis here has pointed out that those participants who decided not to be involved in the workplaces related to massage believed that they had the ability to find and maintain meaning outside of massage, even though multiple barriers existed at the structural and cultural levels. In addition, with technological advancement, participants had more opportunities to exercise their agency and restore meaning in their lives.

When the previous routine environment breaks down, the pragmatic agency is about people's choices for proximate (short-term) goals. Since this study was conducted during COVID-19 in 2022, every participant experienced the lockdown. Participants' different proximate reactions to

the lockdown show how they reflected on their career pathways in their surroundings over time. Additionally, how they exercised their proximate agency suggests how the structural constraints—COVID-19 and the following restrictions—influenced the sense that visually impaired people have agency. These cases indicate they could make rational decisions based on their strengths, although most returned to their original working areas after the lockdown.

As for identity agency, it refers to an established mode of action, role-playing, or identity performance involving agentic action (Hitlin and Long, 2009). If participants identify as 'disabled', many of them would usually follow the guidelines of this social identity, acting in similar ways that most visually impaired people choose; if they do not limit themselves to this social norm, they would like to estimate their ability as most non-disabled people and try to get involved into the mainstream society as well. Any culture has a set (or sets) of culturally influenced expectations that influence the impact that individuals have on their lives at different stages of their life trajectory (Hitlin and Long, 2009); this means that if people do not identify themselves as disabled, they are not wholly influenced by cultural expectations about disabled people.

The life course agency involves action with long-term implications and self-reflective beliefs about one's ability to achieve life course goals. For some participants, the skills unrelated to massage they learned early increased their capacity to achieve their life course goals in their subsequent education and career pathways. These skills enabled them to possess a greater sense of self-efficacy, especially encouraged by their families or mentor(s). Such greater sense made them believe they could challenge the social norm targeting visually impaired people, work in industries unrelated to massage, and achieve what they wanted to some extent. However, incidents like sexual harassment also left long-term trauma for some female participants, which may have reduced their sense of self-efficacy as they felt more hopeless and powerless at that moment.

Overall, consistent with 'bounded agency' (Evans, 2017), visually impaired people's sense of possessing agentic capacity is constrained by the structural level and cultural beliefs. For the structural constraints, visually impaired people still need to adapt to the working environment by themselves if they work in fields unrelated to massage; if not, they may need to quit. In addition, they are able to set short-term goals (especially those that can be achieved online during the lockdown) to encounter COVID-19. Regarding the influence of cultural beliefs, social norms generally set the cultural expectations for visually impaired people, which

will further guide and affect their life choices (i.e., learning massage skills and working in this industry). Additionally, the skills unrelated to massage that some visually impaired people learn are still influenced by the other vocational stereotypes related to the visually impaired – the creative industries, especially musical instruments.

## Chapter 9 Conclusions

### 9.1 Introduction

For visually impaired people or disabled people more generally, their transition into education and transition from education to work is full of barriers in China. This study of 'understanding disability in China from a life course perspective' has shown how visually impaired people transitioned from education to work, what barriers they experienced, including further discrimination and oppression, and explored how they exercised their agency to face these social barriers. It has shown that the entry to education and the change of career pathways of the 26 participants varied. However, their transitions between education and work (and sometimes back again) are predominantly intertwined with massage training and massage work. In addition, the study has shown that it is difficult for visually impaired people to enter mainstream schools and workplaces unrelated to massage, where they are either rejected directly or refused reasonable adjustments that would eliminate the barriers of that workplace. By contrast, going to special education (especially at the secondary education stage) sees visually impaired people encouraged to develop a vocational skill – massage. This study further points out that special education for visually impaired people, especially in the secondary and tertiary education stages, is mainly to train them to become massage workers; related policies further strengthen this vocational stereotype and their massage-learning pathway.

The medical model and the social model provide the logical starting point for the development of this study (see Chapter 2). Following these two models, this study applied the life course approach to show how visually impaired people transition into education and work and the barriers they face during this process. It then analysed these barriers from the perspective of the PCS model (see Chapters 5, 6, and 7).

This concluding chapter first draws together the answers to the four research questions. It then further discusses the inevitability of massage and the original contribution of this study. After providing policy recommendations, it presents the research limitations and future areas for exploration. In the end, referring to the para-citizen (Dauncey, 2020), this chapter argues that visually impaired or disabled people generally take parallel pathways to make it seem like disabled people are included in these social processes and economic endeavours. However, these

pathways further reinforce the difference between disabled people and most non-disabled people.

## **9.2 Addressing research questions**

### **9.2.1 Research question 1**

Chapter 4 addresses the first research question: *'How do visually impaired people in China transition into education, and then transition from education into work?'.* The life course approach is related to a series of social events and roles that individuals experience over time, emphasising the connection between individual perspectives and the historical and socioeconomic environments in which these individuals live (Giele and Elder, 1998). Key questions in the life course revolve around the interrelationships between transitions, the order and timing of transitions, and how these experiences show different pathways through the life course (Macmillan, 2005). Building on the life course approach discussed in Chapter 2, this study identified five patterns of participants' transition from education to work to address the first research question.

For the visually impaired people taking part in the study, their transition from education to work is challenging. Their entry point to formal education varied, but almost every participant underwent massage training either in formal or informal education, and most of them worked or used to work in this industry. Due to this, the five education-to-work patterns are represented by three patterns by the entry point to education and two patterns by the career trajectories.

With regard to the three patterns by the entry point to education, I noted that among 26 participants, 16 participants started in special education, nine started in mainstream education, and one never had formal education. However, regardless of their education pathway, most did not receive the common preschool training among their most non-disabled peers. The other two patterns are related to participants' career trajectories - the typical pathway for those 19 participants who had predominantly non-mainstream education experiences and had career trajectories in the massage industry, and the atypical pathway for four participants who mainly attended special education but working in the areas unrelated to massage, or those two who mainly studied in mainstream education but eventually working in massage-related jobs. There is also one participant with no formal education, but got the massage training and then worked in this industry.

Additionally, half of them (13 participants) dropped out of school at different educational levels, particularly in their compulsory education stage. Their dropout rate is significantly higher than most non-disabled people's compulsory education completion rate, as Peng (2013) reported. After dropping out, most had no option but to undergo massage training in a massage parlour or a short-term massage training project. However, several participants returned to formal schooling after working in the massage industry. For those who continued their studies after compulsory education, the majority of them attended vocational school to learn massage. As for their career trajectories, some only had massage work experience, but some also tried to work in workplaces unrelated to massage before or after working as masseurs.

Their complicated and different transition patterns from education to work align with Erickson and Macmillan's argument (2018) that the combination, timing, and sequence of roles ultimately define specific and differentiated pathways through the life course. Whether dropping out of school, pursuing massage training at different stages of life, working in other fields unrelated to massage, or returning to school or the massage industry, these experiences share common yet distinct pathways that define visually impaired people's lived transition into education and transition from education into work.

### **9.2.2 Research question 2**

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 focused on the social barriers that participants faced when transitioning into education, shifting from mainstream curricula to massage training, and transitioning into work, respectively. These chapters also explore the barriers from the perspective of the PCS model, which is related to research question 3 and is discussed in the next section. Combined, these chapters addressed the second research question – *'What social barriers do they face in education, work and as they transition between the two?'*. An understanding of the medical model and the social model of disability informs the analysis of these chapters. The medical model sees disability as a personal tragedy and an inherently abnormal and pathological malfunction of bodily systems (Goodley, 2016). By contrast, the social model emphasises cultural or social oppressions and barriers external to the person and the influence of personal impairment (Barton, 2013; Shakespeare, 2013).

Chapter 5 first addressed the barriers they faced in their transition into education. Before accessing formal primary education, most participants had no experience in preschool training; this means most



participants' entry into formal education was delayed by at least three years. Instead, some of them spent most of their early years seeing doctors; this shows that some parents expected their children to have 'normal' vision through medical treatment, whether the condition was curable or not. Several participants had experienced parental negligence or been refused when they wanted their parents' support, showing that these parents saw their visually impaired children as 'useless' and of 'no value'. These research findings show that perceptions of disability as an illness that can be cured by medical intervention or that 'disabled people are useless' from some parents are still very common. In other words, many people still use a medical model to understand disability (Fisher and Goodley, 2007).

Many participants were rejected by the local mainstream schools, so they started their schooling in special education. However, due to the limited number of special schools and their capacity, some participants had to travel long distances to even primary schools in other cities. Also, some experienced waiting for years for admission due to poor access to suitable special schools, lack of appropriate local household registration, or insufficient number of visually impaired students registering that year. Existing research has not fully reported these barriers to accessing formal education. Therefore, this study has contributed to understanding the barriers faced by visually impaired people in their entry to education. These barriers result in the participants beginning schooling at a comparatively late age, which also explains the large age difference among participants in Grade 1 (i.e., ranging from 6 to 15 years old, as opposed to six or seven years old among their most non-disabled peers). Moreover, the study also showed that the link between 'the massage industry' and 'visually impaired people' began to develop at this very early stage in the special primary schools, as evidenced by the encouragement that 'the blind should do massage' from the teachers, and the provision of massage courses by the school to support employability for students who had entered school at a relatively old age. This is also an original finding from my research.

For participants who started in mainstream education, the barriers they faced included an inaccessible learning environment, being treated differently, and not having teachers with appropriate training to teach students with special needs. Additionally, many participants experienced a deterioration of vision; although they may have started off partially sighted, their sight gradually deteriorated until they had no vision. This process has affected their ability to adapt to the learning environment in mainstream school, as well as their perception and identity of 'disability.' Thus, none of the participants managed to complete mainstream

education in a way that would have been expected of the majority of their non-disabled peers.

In addition, Chapter 6 discusses the barriers to the start of massage training mainly from two aspects: undertaking massage training following formal education or informal education. The provision of special senior high schools for the blind that offer regular curricula is relatively limited across the country; this is exacerbated by competitive admission placement and the restrictions of local household registration. Even if accepted by the schools, visually impaired students often have to travel extensively or board to attend. By contrast, there are a relatively large number of special/mixed *Tuina* vocational schools open to visually impaired people; these schools offer massage courses and have lax entrance requirements. This means it is easier for visually impaired people to get massage training at the secondary education level than to study mainstream curricula at special senior high schools; this also shows the emphasis on vocational skills training for disabled people at the institutional level, following socialism's insistence on productivity. Moreover, taking massage courses is also the only subject provided for visually impaired students in these schools. Exclusion from mainstream schools and the inaccessible learning environments in these schools make going to the *Tuina* vocational schools to take massage courses a common choice after compulsory education among visually impaired people, no matter whether this is what they want. The two ways to access tertiary education are also full of barriers. One is by taking the *Gaokao* for all national students. However, most participants have no chance to study at senior high school and learn the regular curricula; the *Gaokao* set for these regular curricula is challenging for visually impaired students who mainly learn massage skills. Another is the specialised college entrance exam prepared for visually impaired students, to access several special/mixed colleges and universities. However, the provision of these colleges/universities is also limited, with only two subjects -massage and piano courses- that are open to visually impaired people. Additionally, their admission chances are also competitive. These barriers in secondary and tertiary education result in further negative perceptions towards mainstream education.

On the other hand, for those who underwent massage training through informal education, their families' perceptions of visually impaired people play an important role in affecting their massage training journey. Many families or even visually impaired people themselves considered that formal courses and higher education could be useless in developing their vocational skills (massage) and may even prevent visually impaired people from learning massage skills and earning a living at an earlier age.

Such perceptions lead to some participants dropping out of school to get massage training through two channels: attending short-term training courses or taking up an apprenticeship in a massage parlour.

Furthermore, Chapter 7 explored the barriers to the transition into employment, including the massage industry and workplaces unrelated to massage. In the massage industry, massage work gives some participants the feeling of accomplishment as this skill makes them feel 'useful'. However, irregular working hours, lack of social insurance, and high work intensity also resulted in some participants' dissatisfaction and a sense of loss of dignity. Additionally, there is also discrimination against visually impaired people in massage parlours in which the majority of employees are non-disabled. Moreover, discrimination may also take place in the recruitment process even though the massage parlour is run by the visually impaired employer (i.e., prefer to recruit non-disabled employees over visually impaired people). This indicates that employment discrimination not only happens, as many literatures and reports discussed (for example, in Pengpai News, 2022), in accessing workplaces unrelated to massage, but also in the massage industry - the field considered to be the most suitable for visually impaired people.

For workplaces unrelated to massage, there are restrictions on visually impaired people attending accreditation exams. For instance, visually impaired people are not allowed to attend some national exams, or there are no reasonable adjustments provided in the exam (i.e., the Physician Qualification Certificate Examination and the Teacher Qualification Certificate Examination). In addition, for those who have a chance to work in areas unrelated to massage, there are no expectations for employers to provide reasonable adjustments to accommodate special needs, even though the Regulations on Barrier-free Environment Construction propose them to do that. Visually impaired people have to tackle the obstacles they encounter with their own means and resources. More importantly, many of their working experiences unrelated to massage are subject to other vocational stereotypes, such as the creative industries, which are both assumed to be suitable for visually impaired people to engage. However, being a performer may not bring a better life. Some participants mentioned the experience of travelling across the country to perform with other types of disabled people. The long hours of travelling have made establishing a stable life very difficult, so they quit the creative industry and started working in the massage industry again.

Overall, the study has found that the life courses of these visually impaired people are significantly affected by the barriers they face as they transition from education to work. The interaction of their particular

impairment with the social barriers they face means that it is extremely difficult for them to complete regular education, transition to work and work in even an industry for which they are targeted. As Shakespeare (2013) admits, disabled people lack some form of capacity due to their impairments, so they need support to guarantee equal access. On the other hand, social barriers against visually impaired people almost take place in every educational system and workplace, no matter whether in special or mainstream schools, the massage industry or workplaces unrelated to massage. Moreover, their visual impairments are mostly treated as their personal problems. It is their responsibility to overcome the barriers with their own means and resources. This indicates that disability is still viewed as a personal tragedy (as suggested by the medical model) in China; disabled people are excluded and isolated by mainstream education and workplaces. Given this, visually impaired people are marginalised by or excluded from mainstream society. This results in a common pathway that many visually impaired people follow - attending special schools, taking part in massage training, and working in massage workplaces predominated by visually impaired employees.

### 9.2.3 Research question 3

Following the barriers above, Chapter 5, 6, and 7 further explored these barriers through the PCS model and addressed the third research question - – *‘How can these social barriers they face be understood from the perspective of the PCS model?’*. By applying Thompson’s PCS model (2021), the study explored the extent to which this model can help us understand those barriers in the Chinese context. The PCS model challenges potentially discriminatory and oppressive structures and practices by examining social interactions at three levels – personal, cultural, and structural. Discrimination occurs when an individual or group is disadvantaged because they are seen as ‘different’ in social and/or political terms (such as disability, gender, or ethnicity). Oppression is the result of unfair treatment (Thompson, 2021). Additionally, two disability-related terms, disablism and ableism, are highlighted to analyse the discrimination and oppression that participants faced through the PCS model. Disablism refers to the discrimination against disabled people. By contrast, ableism is discrimination in favour of non-disabled people; it is defined by its deviation from ability, suggesting that disabled people as a group are inferior to those non-disabled (Henderson and Bryan, 2004). The following three paragraphs explore the barriers participants faced at the structural, cultural, and personal levels, respectively.

At the structural level, it refers to how oppression and discrimination become 'institutionalised' (firmly established through patterns of thinking, language, and behaviour) because of the way in which society privileges most non-disabled people (ableism); in which way it becomes woven into the fabric of society (Thompson, 2021). The structural oppression participants experienced from education to work has been developed through mainstream institutions which reject visually impaired people and/or fail to provide equal access for them. The mainstream education systems and the workplaces outside of the massage industry are mainly designed for most non-disabled people; these institutions usually refuse to provide reasonable adjustments for those with special needs. All these institutions are beneficial to the most non-disabled people; thus, they have more privileges than disabled groups. Additionally, since visually impaired people do not have an equal chance to access education and work as most non-disabled peers, they mostly go to special schools for the blind. Then, many of them work in the massage industry. Affected by the insistence of socialism on the productive individual, the limited provision of special senior high schools leads to highly competitive admission to access the regular curricula in secondary education for visually impaired people; it results in many of them taking part in massage training in special/mixed *Tuina* vocational schools.

At the cultural level, the interaction of different social norms and vocational stereotypes of the massage industry affects visually impaired people. The deep-seated cultural beliefs and the influence of ableism about health and the value of human life create an environment that is often hostile to disabled people. Disablism exists through discrimination against disabled people from educational and career systems. In line with these beliefs, disabled people are considered 'useless' and 'abnormal'. However, the socialist ideology stresses that disabled people should be productive in contributing to society as commonly expected rather than a burden on society. Due to this, learning a skill, such as massage skills, is necessary for visually impaired people to show they can support themselves and contribute to society, resulting in a vocational stereotype for them.

At the personal level, the discrimination and oppression that participants faced in mainstream schools and workplaces indicate that visually impaired people are affected by personal prejudice and biases. Visually impaired or disabled people more generally are viewed as 'victims' of their personal tragedy, so they need to overcome obstacles by themselves in mainstream schools and workplaces. Some teachers and employers do not believe that disabled people are of equal value as 'able-bodied' people. Many people around disabled people believe that formal

education and/or regular curricula are not crucial for visually impaired people. Therefore, the latter should accept the assumption that massage training is necessary and that working in the massage industry is the best, if not the only choice for their employment. In addition, the charitable concern (i.e., care and protect disabled people) from the state and society for disabled people put disabled people in an inferior social position. Education, work, and other participation in social and economic life have become benevolent acts of the government and the wider society instead of services they are entitled to as citizens or members of society.

#### **9.2.4 Research question 4**

The second and third research questions focus on the barriers that participants faced throughout their childhood and young adulthood and how to understand barriers through the PCS model. It is asserted that visually impaired people are not necessarily the ‘victims’ of circumstance; they can also be active agents in shaping their own lives and tackling social constraints in different ways. Thus, Chapter 8 addressed the fourth research question – *‘How and to what extent do visually impaired people use their agency as they encounter these social barriers?’*.

As a fundamental tenet in the life course approach, agency is defined as the ways in which people are able to influence their own lives (Elder, 1998). Hitlin and Long (2009) propose three elements of agency – the sense that an individual has agency at the individual level, the relative structural constraints on this sense at the structural level, and the cultural beliefs of the relationship between the two at the cultural level. This means agency is ‘bounded’ and affected by structural constraints and cultural beliefs (Evans, 2017). To better address this research question, Chapter 8 applied the four types of agency, identified by Hitlin and Elder (2007b) – existential agency, pragmatic agency, identify agency, and life course agency.

Existential agency refers to self-initiated actions and pursuing a meaningful life. My analysis showed that participants who got tired of the massage area believed that they were able to maintain a meaningful life outside of the massage industry. In addition, the advancement of technology has enabled visually impaired people to have more chances to access workplaces unrelated to massage, even without the provision of reasonable adjustments.

Pragmatic action is the choices people make for short-term goals when major changes occur in their previous environment. My analysis refers to the reactions that participants had during the COVID-19 lockdown. Although their original jobs (e.g., massage work or music performance) were suspended, they made proximate decisions to develop their income streams, such as learning new skills or working part-time online according to their strengths.

Identity agency is related to an established pattern of action, role-playing. The identity of 'disability' or 'blind people' with culturally influenced expectations and following guidelines affects visually impaired people's agentic action – i.e., going to a special school, attending massage training, and working in the massage industry. However, suppose participants do not identify themselves as disabled. In that case, they may not restrict themselves to social norms related to disability and instead exercise their agency like most non-disabled people. However, they are still affected by structural constraints.

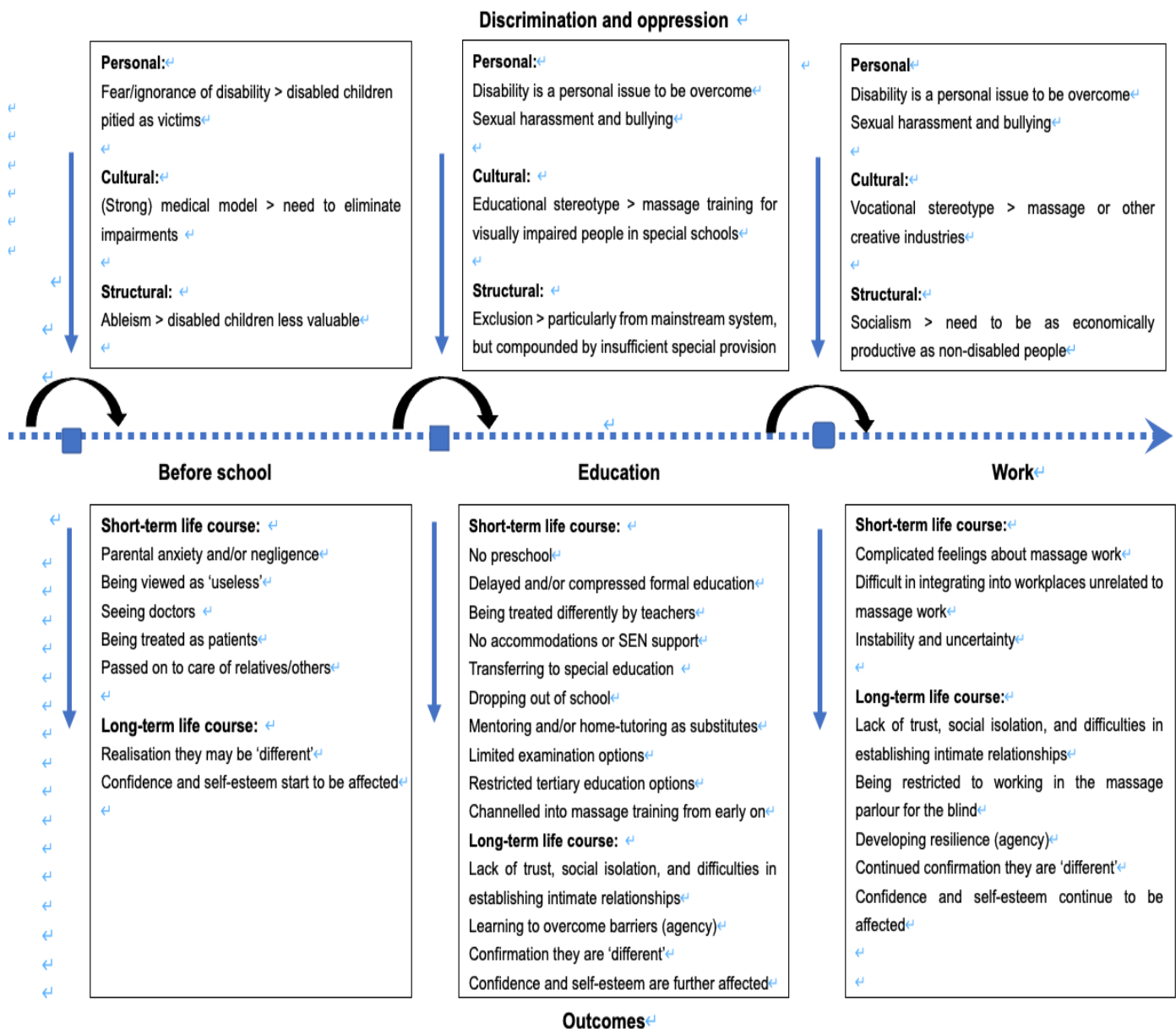
The life course involves actions that have long-term consequences. This study shows a new educational path for visually impaired people—learning skills (unrelated to massage) at an early age through learning at home rather than attending special education or vocational courses. More importantly, learning at home is encouraged by family and mentors to achieve a career goal unrelated to massage in the future. However, these skills are still related to other vocational stereotypes for visually impaired people, such as music performance and fortune telling.

### **9.3 Inevitability of massage training**

In Chapter 4, five education-to-work transition patterns were identified. Three patterns (i.e., starting in the special school, starting in the mainstream school, and having no formal education experience) are according to the entry point of education. The other two patterns (i.e., a typical pathway and three atypical pathways) follow the career trajectories. However, regardless of which pattern, almost every participant received some form of massage training at different life stages. This section first shows the discrimination and oppression that participants faced and the outcomes during their life course. Then, it discusses the connection with visually impaired people, education, and the massage industry.

### 9.3.1 Discrimination and oppression across the life course

This study mainly applies two important theoretical frameworks – the life course approach and the PCS model. Figure 10 combines these two frameworks and shows the discrimination and oppression from the personal, cultural, and structural levels (the PCS model) that participants faced (at the top) and their outcomes during their short/long-term life course (at the bottom) when participants transition into education and from education to work. Not every participant attended consistent formal education from preschool to tertiary education and then went to work. Thus, the line with the ending arrow, from 'Before school' to 'Work', represents the participants' life course, and it is dotted since their lives are not linear. This figure shows that massage training/industry is important in visually impaired people's transition from education to work.





### **Figure 10: Discrimination and oppression across the life course and its outcomes**

According to Figure 10, some similarities and differences are highlighted in discrimination and oppression (top) and outcomes (bottom) when participants transition into education and work. On the one hand, participants experienced common discrimination and oppression on the personal level – disability is seen as a personal issue; sexual harassment and bullying both happened in their education and work. From the cultural level, the vocational stereotype of the massage industry strongly affects visually impaired people's educational and career pathways. Additionally, at the structural level, ableism, which argues that disabled children have less value, affects disabled people from an early age. On the other hand, following the outcomes of a long-term life course, participants start to realise they may be 'different' before school, then confirm that they are 'different' during education. Then, they continue to confirm that they are 'different' during work. Additionally, their confidence and self-esteem also experience 'start to be affected' before school, 'further to be affected' during education and 'continue to be affected' when transitioning to work, respectively.

The following sections discuss the inevitability of massage training during the life course of visually impaired people to further analyse the connection between massage and their education and work.

#### **9.3.2 Why special schools?**

According to participants' narratives, the reason most could not access the mainstream education systems was mainly because of their visual impairment—that is, as they told their narratives, they were seen as 'different'. Based on this, I further explored why they are considered different and how their 'difference' is defined to explain why most disabled people study special schools.

The institutional rules, social norms, stereotypes, and disability-related language in China are significantly influenced by the interaction of disablism and ableism. Discrimination against disabled people exists at the personal, cultural, and structural levels. All these hinder disabled people from taking part in mainstream social and economic life; disability is regarded as a personal issue, so disabled people need to overcome

barriers by themselves. In addition, ableism's emphasis on discrimination in favour of non-disabled people results in the majority of non-disabled people occupying structural power. The latter's ideology justifies and reinforces the former's discrimination against disabled people. As a result, these two ideologies support each other and promote the different life pathways in which disabled people are isolated from mainstream society and have less privilege than most non-disabled people; most disabled people can only access mainstream society by overcoming difficulties by themselves.

### **9.3.3 Why even mainstream education cannot keep them from massage training**

Regardless of how participants entered formal education and their educational level, most had received massage training in either formal or informal education.

For participants who started in mainstream education, the inaccessible environment and being treated differently made it difficult to overcome the barriers there by themselves. Hence, they either dropped out of school or transferred to special education, where reasonable adjustments were provided; in addition, they were influenced by the vocational stereotypes that visually impaired people should learn massage skills. With the similar advice of their family, teachers, and fellow visually impaired people, they eventually received massage training at different educational levels. This also explains why two participants (Duo and Dong) received mainly mainstream education but finally got massage training and then worked in the massage industry.

For participants who started in special education, the unavoidable connection between the massage industry and 'the blind' was a message communicated by teachers from the start of primary school. Since only a few special senior high schools offer open but competitive admissions for regular courses, many visually impaired people have no choice but to enter special/mixed vocational schools in which massage courses are provided specifically for the visually impaired. Due to the lack of opportunity to learn from the regular curricula in vocational schools, participants may not have acquired enough knowledge to pass the *Gaokao*. Thus, they usually choose to attend the specialised college entrance exam prepared for visually impaired people, which only offers two subjects - massage and piano courses. Compared to piano playing, which requires long-term financial investment and some levels of piano

skills, massage work does not require a high threshold of prerequisites. It thus becomes a popular choice in tertiary education.

All the participants' experiences show that they are 'pushed' to take part in massage training as the other pathways are practically 'blocked', and as they said, there are no other options but learning massage skills. As mentioned in previous chapters, the design of secondary (vocational) and tertiary education for visually impaired students is mainly to develop them to become massage workers. This explains why formal education cannot offer them the range of skills and/or opportunities required for different career pathways.

#### **9.3.4 Why massage for visually impaired people?**

The interaction of disablism and ableism results in disabled people facing barriers to being involved in mainstream society and having less privilege than most non-disabled people. Additionally, socialism in China reinforces the idea that disabled people should be useful people and contribute to society as much as commonly expected and not become a burden to the state and society. Therefore, it becomes necessary to organise employment for disabled people to make them more productive. Instead of providing an accessible environment in practice, the state chooses to develop special education and vocational training for people with different types of disabilities. This strategy equips disabled people with employment skills and becomes 'useful'. However, it further marginalises disabled people by putting them into certain school types and workplaces which are detached from mainstream society. In addition, this arrangement embeds ableism even further—giving more privileges to most non-disabled people through all the systems, social structures, and the design of buildings, and emphasising physical beauty, health norms and hierarchical thinking of favouring the values of most non-disabled people (Campbell, 2008).

For visually impaired people, attending massage training and working in the massage industry may not require a high financial investment or a long training period. In addition, vision is not necessarily required in this industry. Most massage parlours provide free accommodation (i.e., sleeping on the massage bed) and meals. They can also be more accessible for visually impaired people as living in the parlours can save them the trouble of travelling and cooking (having said this, the findings of this study show that this is not always the case - barriers exist everywhere). This suggests that visually impaired people are trained to work in specifically marginalised areas so that their labour can be used to

contribute to achieving the socialist goal. Thus, the vocational stereotype that visually impaired people should learn massage skills and work in the massage industry is deeply embedded in the social norms in socialist China.

### **9.3.5 Family and cumulative (dis)advantage**

Four participants in the atypical pathway mainly attended special education but had no massage-related working experience. As mentioned in Chapter 8, the skills they learned at a younger age or developed at home enabled them to exercise their agency to achieve their career goals in areas unrelated to massage. Whether participants have the chance to learn other skills or not depends on the support of their families, especially those with good financial conditions. This reflects the importance of family support and the family cumulative advantage (Merton, 1968) that increases exposure to opportunity. However, this advantage and the following opportunity cause cumulative inequality (Ferraro and Shippee, 2009). For instance, participants from better-off families may have little urgency to take up massage work and earn money to support themselves or their families. Instead, they are able to develop their career paths based on their skills unrelated to massage. However, their sense of having agency is still constrained by the structural level. The provisions of special senior high schools for the blind which offer regular courses are limited. They still had to attend or register at a special *Tuina* vocational school in their secondary education stage, as the secondary education certificate is one of the mandatory requirements for taking the special college/university entrance exam and entering tertiary education to learn other courses, such as piano. This echoes the principle of linked lives mentioned by Elder (1994), which states that lives are interdependent and that sociohistorical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships.

## **9.4 Research contributions**

This section discusses the original contributions of this research. It includes ‘theoretical advancement’—a) the theoretical contribution to the life course approach and the PCS model, and b) critiques of theoretical perspectives on disability, combined with disability study in China; ‘Enhancing the knowledge base’—the knowledge of understanding the lives of visually impaired people or disabled people more generally in China.

### **9.4.1 Theoretical advancement**

#### **a) Theoretical contribution**

There are two important theoretical advancements in this study. One is applying the life course approach to understand disability study in China. Transition is an important aspect of the life course. Every individual experiences various transitions in roles and status during their life course, marked by specific life events (Elder and Johnson, 2003), such as going to school, leaving home, completing school, getting married, and getting employed. Conventional disability studies tend to emphasise a slice of disabled people's lives (Janus, 2009). However, if a disability impairs an individual's ability to make a particular transition, this may also impact the subsequent transitions in their life stages (Tisdall, 2001). Thus, emphasising only a certain life episode may lead to a limited view of humanity (Settersen, 2003). Instead, applying the life course approach to study disability can contribute to reconceptualising the lives of disabled people as an ongoing process (Levy *et al.*, 2005). It also helps to enhance the understanding of how historical and social factors influence people's personal and career developments (Elder and Giele, 2009). In addition, the life course approach admits the importance of both personal barriers and social barriers in disabled people's life course (Priestley, 2010). However, limited studies have applied the life course approach to understanding disability in China. Thus, understanding disability through the life course perspective is one of the originalities in Chinese disability studies because it has helped to show the lived experiences of visually impaired people under the social and cultural contexts in China.

The other theoretical advancement is to use the PCS model to explore the barriers that visually impaired people faced. The existence of barriers means that differences exist between visually impaired and disabled people generally and most non-disabled people. Whenever there is a difference, there is the potential for unfair discrimination and oppression, as it has the potential to result in specific individuals or groups being seen as 'different' and, therefore, treated unfavourably (Thompson, 2021). Applying the PCS model to disability studies can help us better understand how inequality and discrimination occur at different levels across disabled people's life course, especially for those who are likely to experience such discrimination and oppression directly and indirectly. Thompson (2021) only mentions the connection between disablism and the PCS model, so linking ableism and the PCS model is also a theoretical originality. This is also an important original theoretical contribution to this study.

## **b) Critiques of theoretical perspectives on disability**

### **The medical model and the social model**

The medical model, which conceptualises disability as a problem within the individual resulting from a medical condition or impairment that requires treatment or intervention, has long been the dominant framework for understanding disability in many contexts (Shakespeare, 2013). As noted in the Literature Review, a key limitation of the medical model is its failure to account for how social and environmental factors impact a person's ability to function. This perspective ignores the reality that many barriers to participation are constructed by society rather than being an inevitable consequence of impairment (Barnes and Mercer, 2010). In this sense, the medical model fails to acknowledge how external factors may shape disability. Furthermore, it promotes the idea that disabled people must undergo medical treatment or therapy to become 'normal', reinforcing an exclusionary mindset that marginalises those who cannot be 'cured' (Goodley, 2016). By focusing solely on impairment, the medical model also neglects the psychological and emotional aspects of living with a disability. This reductionist view can result in policies that exclude disabled voices from decision-making processes, further marginalising an already disadvantaged group (Shildrick, 2015).

In contrast to the medical model, the social model of disability argues that disability is not caused by an individual's impairment but rather by societal barriers that restrict their full participation in society (Oliver, 1990). However, despite its progressive approach, the social model has been criticised for oversimplifying the complexities of disability and for downplaying the role of impairment itself (Shakespeare, 2006). While environmental and attitudinal barriers undoubtedly contribute to disability, many disabled individuals also experience pain, fatigue, or functional limitations that cannot be fully addressed through social change alone (Crow, 1996). Furthermore, the social model's strict separation between impairment and disability fails to account for the interplay between biological and social factors. Disability is often an interaction between physical, psychological, and social factors, making it difficult to neatly separate the two (Thomas, 2004).

My research here reveals that neither the medical nor social models alone are sufficient to explain the interaction between impairment and disability. Through participants' stories, they have shown that disability as a lived experience is an interplay between both biological and social factors. If disability was just related to social barrier factors, then we would not see how the realities of living with their condition (which often

changes) impact their experiences (psychologically as well as in terms of how others treat them). If disability was just related to biological factors, then we would not see how systems of oppression and discrimination inhibit their flourishing as human beings with rights to participate in education and employment. As Shakespeare (2018) has suggested, we need to look to more holistic approaches that recognise the interplay between medical, social, and political dimensions of disability if we are to better understand how disability is experienced in real-life contexts.

### **The life course approach and disability**

The life course theory is a series of social events and roles that individuals experience over time, emphasising how historical, social, and cultural factors shape an individual's experiences over time (Elder, 1994). Applying this approach to disability study emphasises the importance of impairments and social barriers (Priestley, 2003). This perspective acknowledges that disability is not static but evolves due to biological, social, and environmental factors (Shakespeare, 2018). One of the main extant criticisms of the life course approach is its assumption that individuals move through predictable, sequential life stages, such as childhood, education, employment, family life, and retirement (Priestley, 2003). This structured model often fails to capture the nonlinear and disrupted life trajectories that many disabled individuals experience (Williams et al., 2009). Another major limitation of the life course approach is its insufficient attention to structural inequalities that shape the experiences of disabled people (Priestley, 2003). The life course framework often assumes that all individuals have equal opportunities to transition through life stages, failing to acknowledge how oppression and discrimination create unequal pathways for disabled people (Shakespeare, 2018).

While I found the life course approach to be very useful in identifying how people transition from different trajectories, its lack of directed attention to the often unequal opportunities to transition through life course stages for disabled people particularly meant that it was very difficult to analyse the barriers these people experience. My findings show that while disabled people often aspire to transition in ways that are considered 'normal' in China, structural inequalities often deny them those opportunities to progress 'normally'. They are often denied access to education or are forced to start later or return later to education. Instead, they are channelled into specialist segregated schools, 'targeted vocational training' and 'targeted employment', which provides them opportunities to 'transition' but within prescribed limits. In addition, my research has also shown that participants' trajectories are impacted by

the change in their biological experiences, which reflects that the life course approach makes it difficult to predict their impairment.

### **The PCS model and disability**

For these reasons, I chose to employ Thompson's PCS model (2021) as it aims to provide a framework for analysing oppression and social inequalities. While it offers insights into disability studies, I have some critiques about this model. On the one hand, the PCS model analyses oppression from the Personal, Cultural, and Structural levels, but it may ignore the role of personal agency in these social constraints. By focusing primarily on the mechanics of oppression, the PCS model risks portraying disabled people as passive recipients of discrimination rather than active agents of change. This is something that I realised early on in the data analysis, and why I decided to present an extra chapter to specifically discuss participants' agency.

On the other hand, the PCS model provides a static snapshot of oppression rather than a dynamic understanding of how disability experiences evolve. Disability is not a fixed category—many individuals experience changing impairments, shifting support needs, and evolving societal attitudes throughout their lives (Hahn, 1988). This is something I also noticed as progressed through the analysis. The PCS model did not account for how oppression and accessibility change over time, making it less applicable to the complexities of lifelong disability experiences. Many of the participants in my study had complex eye conditions that were constantly changing over time which meant that both they, their families and the institutions they were interacting with were constantly having to react and/or adapt based on their current condition. Similarly, it was clear that shifting policies over time were impacting even 'stable' impairments. For example, the introduction of Administrative Measures for Medical Massage for the Blind (The CDPF, 2008) states that the candidates who take part in this exam should have at least a technical secondary school diploma in massage, making the way of 'getting a qualification or degree in massage and then work in this industry' for visually impaired people more professional. This explains why most participants only obtained certification from the *Tuina* vocational secondary school before concluding their educational journey. It also clarifies why some participants, after dropping out at an early age, later chose to return to the vocational school to earn their certification. Given all of this, a critical application of the PCS model, in conjunction with the life course perspective, enabled me to capture better the evolving nature of disability oppression and empowerment across their life course.



### 9.4.2 Enhancing the empirical knowledge base

Current empirical disability studies mainly focus on Western disability, while this study contributes to the disability study from the global north perspective. It not only provides an understanding of disability in China but also enhances the knowledge of visually impaired people's lives.

#### Barriers and agency

This study shows the varied pathways visually impaired people take from education to work and the inevitability of their massage training. It also points out the high rate of dropping out of school, especially in compulsory education. Additionally, for entry into education, this study shows that most participants were rejected by preschool or the whole mainstream education and workplaces unrelated to the massage industry. It indicates poor access to suitable special schools, i.e., the waiting system to enrol in special education, which is an important reason to delay participants' entry into formal education. On the other hand, the barriers to admission to mainstream schools for visually impaired people continue to exist currently. This study also reveals the limited establishment of special senior high schools for the blind, compared with a relatively large number of *Tuina* vocational secondary schools. All of this suggests that mainstream education has not been improved to include disabled students in the last few decades. This is rarely mentioned in the current Chinese disability literature.

The focus on vocational training further reflects socialism's insistence on disabled people's productivity. More importantly, it shows the ways in which ableism, disablism, and socialism affect the lives of visually impaired or disabled people more generally. For the transition into work, this study indicates, for the first time, visually impaired people's complicated feelings about the massage industry. This skill earns them a living, but some also get tired of it since learning massage skills is a career move made after having no other choices. Additionally, this study also suggests that discrimination against visually impaired people may also happen in the massage industry.

Chapter 8, related to agency, shows participants' different responses to the lockdown – i.e., learning various skills. This chapter also indicates a new learning way for the visually impaired to develop their skills – home education; all these skills these participants learned from an early age enable them to access workplaces unrelated to massage, although their agency is still affected by structural constraints and cultural beliefs.

## Intersectionality

The role gender plays in disabled people's life course cannot be denied. For the transition to education, disabled women and girls experience multiple oppressions, such as being 'female' and 'disabled'. Influenced by patriarchal thinking, they are more likely than their male peers to be considered 'useless' and are not sent to school by their families (especially in the rural areas). Although many male participants in this study were also viewed as 'useless', more male than female students were in their schools. For example, there were 12 male and only two female students in Xiaogao's class. On the other hand, although some non-disabled girls also have no chance to attend school, the current research indicates that girls, more generally in China receive more schooling on average than boys by 2023 (Jin, 2023). However, this may not be inconsistent with the educational situation of visually impaired females in this study. All this shows the differences between visually impaired girls and boys and between visually impaired and most non-disabled girls.

However, although the one-child policy allowed parents to have a second born if the first one was disabled (McCabe and Barnes, 2012), three female participants (Lili, Kaili, and Tina) were the only child in their family; their transition from education to work was less influenced by the patriarchal thinking or sexism (gender discrimination) in their families. They all entered tertiary education and later worked in industries unrelated to massage. For families that strictly followed the one-child policy (usually urban families), the only disabled girl in the family usually received full attention and delicate training (i.e., piano) from her family. Thus, this study supports the argument of Jin (2023) that the one-child policy has improved the access of females to (tertiary) education and to a certain extent, it has also improved job opportunities for females.

By contrast, gender may not make much difference in visually impaired people's transition from education to massage training. No matter whether they are male or female, many of them experienced dropping out of schooling; their visual impairment was a deciding factor in whether they experienced massage training in formal or informal education.

For the transition to work, one major gender difference in massage parlours is women's vulnerability to sexual harassment. Such harassment can be from both visually impaired colleagues and non-disabled clients. These female workers usually chose not to report it to avoid trouble.

Sexual harassment may stop after the visually impaired females get married (usually with a visually impaired male) and have their massage parlours. Additionally, sexual harassment can also happen in the special school by boys - including disabled boys in the special school and some non-disabled boys in the mixed vocational school. The sexual harassment that many female participants faced also left them with long-term trauma and influenced their sense of self-efficacy. Current studies seldom give the details of sexual harassment that visually impaired females experience. This study shows visually impaired women do not only experience sexual oppression from some non-disabled people, but also from some disabled men.

### **Critiques of other authors' research findings**

**Education:** The recent literature in China primarily discusses special education achievements (Lu, 2023) and the challenges of the Learning in the Regular Classroom model in mainstream schools (i.e. disabled students having trouble adapting to the learning environment) (Zhao and Dong, 2023). However, most studies are descriptive and lack criticism of the accessibility of mainstream education, especially given that the majority of disabled students are rejected by mainstream schools. These studies rarely address the difficulties faced by disabled students, especially visually impaired children, in accessing mainstream schools. My research, by contrast, discusses the barriers visually impaired people experience to accessing mainstream education from preschool to tertiary education, which also is an important original contribution to my research. More importantly, my research also analyses and explains *why* they experience these barriers through the PCS model. It is an important difference to the often basic empirical work done by Chinese scholars which, while providing useful statistical data or identification of 'barriers' in a broad-brush way, fails to interrogate their findings through more critical or conceptual lens.

**Employment:** Although studies recognise that visually impaired individuals in China have restricted career choices, primarily within the massage industry (Tie and Guo, 2011; Xiong and Zheng, 2021), there is limited exploration of whether they actively choose this profession or are compelled by a lack of alternatives. Additionally, existing literature highlights employment discrimination against disabled people in China (The Central People's Government of People's Republic of China, 2012; Liu and Xie, 2014; Pengpai News (*Pengpai Xinwen* (澎湃新闻), 2022), but rarely addresses vocational stereotypes, particularly the expectation that visually impaired individuals work in the massage industry. Again, my research was able to reveal their different reasons for choosing to work in

this industry. My approach also revealed important nuances and their often complicated feelings about massage work. Using theoretical tools enabled me to not just reveal but also explain *why* they have these choices and feelings.

## **9.5 Policy recommendations**

Referring to the discrimination and oppression that visually impaired people face across the life course in 9.3.1 (see Figure 10), this section presents a set of policy and practice recommendations. It first provides the discussion of implications for policy and practice at each of the **P**, **C** and **S** levels, and then it considers the potential pathways to influencing CDPF policy towards education and employment of visually impaired people.

### **9.5.1 Implications for policy and practice at each P, C, and S level**

This study highlights the complexity and controversy surrounding disability policies, particularly their effectiveness in practice. While some argue that compulsory special education enhances the vocational skills and economic productivity of disabled individuals, others point out that policies designed to promote their participation in society often fail to achieve their intended goals. Issues may arise at various levels, including policy design, funding models, implementation, regulation, and monitoring.

For instance, despite existing policies aimed at preventing discrimination against disabled people, such as the Law of the Protection of Disabled People (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2008) and the Regulations on the Employment of Disabled People (The State Council, 2017), my research reveals that discrimination persists in education and employment. Under the influence of ableism and disablism, disability-related policies sometimes reinforce vocational stereotypes rather than promote genuine social inclusion. As evidenced in this study, a participant reported that their visually impaired child faced the same barriers in accessing mainstream primary education as they did decades ago. This suggests that the government has prioritised economic productivity over true social integration.

However, my research also indicates that some cities have adopted more inclusive policies, particularly in economically developed areas. These disparities highlight a major source of inequality, both between disabled and non-disabled individuals and among disabled individuals themselves.

To systematically address these issues, I have structured the recommendations using Thompson's PCS model, in conjunction with Figure 10, focusing on three life trajectories: Before School, Education, and Work.

### **Before school: Early childhood development and inclusion**

At the personal level, my research revealed that many parents of visually impaired children experience uncertainty and fear, often viewing their child as fragile or incapable, which hinders early developmental opportunities. To mitigate this, comprehensive parental education and early intervention programs funded by the state should be introduced to equip families with the knowledge and skills necessary to support their child's development. Such programs should include home visits from trained professionals, peer-support networks for parents, and community-based initiatives that foster positive attitudes toward disability from an early age. For instance, the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services emphasize the importance of coordinated, comprehensive services in early childhood programs, including home visits and community-based initiatives, to foster inclusion and development for children with disabilities at later stages of their life course (U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, 2015).

At the cultural level, the prevailing medical model of disability, which perceives impairment as a condition that needs to be 'fixed', must be challenged. Public awareness campaigns and inclusive educational content in preschool curricula should be developed to promote positive narratives about disability, ensuring that visually impaired children are not seen as burdens and victims of their own individual impairment, but as individuals with equal potential given the right opportunities. In addition, research indicates that while portrayals of disability in children's literature have improved over the past decade, persistent stereotypes continue to convey negative messages about the nature of people with disabilities (Adomat, 2014). Therefore, representations of visually impaired individuals in children's books, media, and educational materials should be actively promoted to counteract ingrained stereotypes.

At the structural level, we saw that many are excluded from preschool due to their impairments, leading to delayed learning and social integration. To address this, the government should mandate the inclusion of visually impaired children in mainstream preschools. The Ministry of Education should establish a national regulatory framework outlining minimum accessibility standards for preschools. Schools that fail to comply with inclusion policies should face penalties, while those that

successfully integrate visually impaired students should receive government incentives (e.g., extra financial grants). However, those children who might not adapt to the learning environment, can go to state-funded early intervention centres, which would ensure they receive the necessary support from the outset, preventing their long-term marginalisation. For example, Qisehua inclusive kindergarten in China is a successful example that has been seen as a model for providing inclusive education for disabled children for over two decades (CGTN, 2022). Through individualised education plans, expert rehabilitation support, and early intervention programs, the school has significantly improved students' cognitive and social skills, enabling better integration into society. So far, with government support and its model being replicated in some cities, Qisehua exemplifies the importance of collaborative efforts among schools, families, and communities in fostering long-term development for disabled children.

### **Education: Equal access to learning and career development**

At the personal level, we saw that many visually impaired people are discouraged by family, friends and teachers from pursuing academic success or are directed toward vocational training in industries traditionally deemed 'suitable' for them. In contrast, those who found mentors were more likely to achieve success in the areas not related to massage work. To address this, mentorship programs should be introduced, encouraging visually impaired students to learn from role models who have successfully navigated mainstream education or historically made achievements in diverse industries. These programs would offer academic guidance, career mentorship, and advocacy training, empowering students and their families/friends/teachers to challenge societal biases and pursue diverse career paths.

At the cultural level, the research clearly showed that the vocational stereotype narrows educational and career opportunities and reinforces societal perceptions of visually impaired people as limited in capability (McDonnall et al., 2022). Education systems must actively counter this by providing diverse career training opportunities in fields such as law, information technology, business and entrepreneurship and education in the same manner offered to non-disabled students. This ensures that visually impaired students are not automatically channelled into a limited range of professions.

At the structural level, mainstream educational institutions continue to exclude visually impaired students, either through outright rejection or by failing to provide necessary accommodations. Existing legal

frameworks may acknowledge inclusive education, but they often lack specific mandates that ensure enforcement, leaving many students without adequate support. Furthermore, even within special education settings, opportunities remain limited, contributing to high dropout rates and restricting access to tertiary education. To address these shortcomings, legislation should explicitly require mainstream schools to admit disabled students and ensure that universities allocate a percentage of seats specifically for them. These institutions must also provide reasonable accommodations, such as access to digital learning technologies and dedicated special educational needs coordinators. Additionally, vocational training programs should expand their offerings to include diverse skill areas such as computer programming, law, education, business, psychology, and music production. To enhance career prospects, structured internships and apprenticeships should be developed, supported by government sponsorship. Companies that participate in these initiatives could be incentivized through tax benefits, encouraging broader industry engagement in inclusive workforce development.

### **Work: Expanding employment opportunities and workplace inclusion**

At the personal level, I showed how many visually impaired individuals face deep-seated bias and discrimination in employment, particularly when seeking jobs outside the massage industry. To address this, there needs to be more disability awareness training for employers first and a move towards 'Disability Confident' scheme, like the UK currently introducing (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014). Additionally, legal frameworks should be strengthened to provide avenues for visually impaired individuals to report discrimination, ensuring that workplace prejudice is actively challenged.

At the cultural level, China's socialist emphasis on productivity places significant pressure on disabled individuals to prove their economic worth. This has resulted in the widespread belief that visually impaired people should only pursue jobs that align with societal expectations of what is 'practical' for them. To shift this narrative, public campaigns should emphasize the diverse contributions of visually impaired professionals across multiple sectors, reinforcing the idea that employment is about capability rather than fitting into predefined roles. Moreover, entrepreneurship and self-employment should be actively promoted, with government funding and support schemes designed to help visually impaired individuals start their own businesses or enter fields beyond traditional disability-related industries. As my findings revealed, many had

taken the step towards self-employment because it offered more flexibility and control over their lives, something that has been identified more widely by the International Labour Organisation (2024).

At the structural level, visually impaired individuals face systematic exclusion from non-traditional career paths, largely due to a lack of reasonable workplace accommodations and inadequate legal protections. In China, the existing employment quota for disabled individuals is 1.5% of a company's workforce, but enforcement is weak, and many employers opt to pay fines rather than hire disabled workers (Guo, 2015). To counteract this, the current affirmative action policies should further require companies to actively recruit and support visually impaired employees in diverse fields. For example, the current policy should strictly enforce the employment quota for visually impaired individuals in both public and private sectors, given that there is still recruitment discrimination (i.e., physical exam) in public sectors from my research. The companies that fail to meet the quota pay a fine that directly funds disability inclusion programs, while companies that exceed the quota receive extra tax breaks and financial incentives. Moreover, a ranking system should be introduced to reward companies that excel in disability hiring and reasonable accommodation, promoting competition for inclusivity.

### **9.5.2 Potential pathways to influencing CDPF Policy on education and employment**

The CDPF advocates for and represents disabled people while actively collaborating with the government to develop public policies and deliver essential services for disabled people. It simultaneously represents both the government and disabled individuals through a unique governance model known as the 'half government-half public' approach (Zhao and Grotz, 2019). In this way, the CDPF do not have authority to make policies independently and directly. It is more likely to provide services that the government requires for disabled people.

As a researcher, influencing CDPF policy requires strategically sharing research findings and shaping stakeholders' perspectives. A key approach is establishing a strong network with CDPF officials, disability activists, policymakers, scholars, and relevant NGOs involved in disability-related policies. This can be achieved by attending policy forums, academic conferences, and public consultations where disability rights and welfare are discussed. Additionally, I should build connections with research institutes, think tanks, and universities that collaborate with



the CDPF or conduct disability-related studies. Engaging in policy dialogues and advisory panels—by submitting research findings, participating in expert consultations, or joining government-led pilot programs—will enhance my credibility and visibility. Furthermore, contributing to working groups or policy committees responsible for drafting and evaluating disability policies allows me to present evidence-based recommendations directly. Partnering with disability NGOs with established CDPF ties can also provide access to key discussions and advocacy platforms, further strengthening my ability to influence policy development.

## **9.6 Advantages of the Chinese approach**

While the thesis has already outlined the numerous disadvantages of China's approach to supporting individuals with visual impairments, it is also important to recognise its advantages, particularly in the realm of vocational training. Unlike many Western countries, where the integration of visually impaired individuals into the workforce could be fragmented and dependent on broader accessibility initiatives (e.g., In the UK, only 27% of working-age individuals who are registered as blind or partially sighted are employed, compared to 51% of the broader disabled population and 75% of the general population (Vision Foundation, 2021)), China has developed a well-structured, state-supported vocational training system in the massage industry that provides tangible employment opportunities.

One of the most notable aspects of this approach is the targeted vocational training in massage skills. Supported by the Chinese government and the Disabled Persons' Federation, this structured pathway, as we have seen, ensures that visually impaired individuals acquire specialised skills from an early age, enabling them to support themselves in the future. Massage education institutions and short-term massage training programs provide both foundational and advanced skills, offering flexibility to meet different levels of training needs. These initiatives can, as some participant narratives revealed, enhance employability and help individuals develop a sense of professional identity and self-sufficiency. By ensuring stable employment, this approach provides a basic level of security for visually impaired people and contributes to economic production.

While Western countries also prioritise economic productivity, they do not limit visually impaired individuals to specific skill sets. My research findings indicate that vocational training for visually impaired people in

China remains too narrow, which may not suit everyone. As recommended above, the state and society should expand training options and provide diverse opportunities. As one participant, Wei, stated, those who enjoy massage work should be able to pursue it, but for those who do not, education institutions and the CDPF should offer alternative skills and career paths to ensure greater inclusivity and choice.

## **9.7 Research limitations and future areas for exploration**

The aim of this study has been to explore the transition experienced by visually impaired people as they transition into education and work. I recruited 26 participants (including males and females) with work experience. However, the male-to-female ratio of the participants was three to one. According to the participants, more males of all visually impaired people enrol in all school levels (primary, secondary and tertiary education). It is quite possible that, like participant Le in the study, there are many visually impaired females who never attend formal education settings. The life stories of these ‘invisible’ females still need to be further explored.

Additionally, the years when most of the participants in the study attended educational settings were between 1990 and 2019. Further exploration of the engagement of visually impaired people or disabled people more generally in formal education in recent years is needed. This study has not examined the life course of visually impaired people over 50, another area that needs further research. Additionally, very little research has been published about the visually impaired elderly in China. Future studies could explore many aspects of their lives.

## **9.8 Concluding remarks**

This study is about understanding disability through life courses, using the case of the transition from education to work for visually impaired people. According to Elder (1994), four main factors influence individual development across the life course—historical and geographical location (i.e., historical experience on the geographic location and cultural changes), linked lives, human agency, and the timing of lives (i.e., variations on the timing of life events, transitions, and social roles). With regard to these four factors, the study has shown how their life courses have been affected by social barriers (i.e., from structural and cultural

contexts and personal prejudice) and personal impairment, how they exercised their agency to deal with social barriers, and how they interacted with people around them, during the transition from education to work. In addition, other experiences that reflect variations in the timing of events in their lives include attending formal education at diverse ages, dropping out of school at different levels, attending massage training in various ways and during different stages of life, getting married or divorced, working in the massage industry, or getting employment in fields of work unrelated to massage.

Referring to the notion of 'para-citizen' proposed by Dauncey (2020), the ways in which visually impaired or disabled people generally may be entirely excluded from fruitful participation in social processes and prevented from meeting markers such as education. However, they may equally be offered parallel pathways (i.e., attending special schools, getting massage training and working in the massage parlour). These pathways present disabled people in ways that make them seem to be doing things that society deems valuable and to be included in these social processes and economic endeavours. Some thus feel a sense of achievement about their work and lives. However, these pathways are on separate tracks and continue to reinforce their 'difference' to normative bodies and common expectations. These parallel pathways become the source of intense frustration or even a source of ongoing discrimination and oppression for many visually impaired or disabled people generally. The aim of this study has been to shed light on how visually impaired people deal with barriers they encounter when they transition into education and work. It is hoped that the evidence provided can be used as a basis for further research in the future.

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# Appendix 1: Research ethics application form

## School of Sociology & Social Policy

### Application for Research Ethics Approval for PGR Students and Staff

This form and any attachments must be completed, signed electronically, and submitted to [researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk) LQ-

This application must receive FEO (Favourable Ethical Opinion) by the School of Sociology and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee (SSP REC) before potential participants are approached to take part in any research.

Any significant change in the question, design or conduct of the research over the course of the research should be reported to the SSP REC and may require a new application for ethics review. Please consult the School's [Research Ethics website](#) and reference where relevant the guidance on [CoPREC](#), researcher safety, lone working, working abroad, the Mental Capacity Act 2005, research data management, travel, partners, etc.

**Please note that all FEOs via this REC will be submitted for annual audit and university-level review, thus adherence to REC application documents throughout your research is important.**

### Application Checklist

You should provide documents to cover each of the questions below where your answer is 'yes', and tick to indicate the type of evidence you have enclosed. All forms and templates are on the [Research Ethics website](#).

Questions about your application	Evidence required	Enclosed
(Re)Submission date/Version number <a href="#">Please re-sign and re-date with each resubmission</a>	Date: 16/12/2021 Version No:3	
Does the research project or thesis involve human participants or their data (even if you judge it to be of minimal risk)?	Application for Research Ethics Approval (this form)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>Note for survey method.</b> A standalone/separate participant consent form and participant information sheet & GDPR privacy notice is not required. Surveys should commence with this information, via a survey-embedded introductory page, followed by a (required) tickbox for consent (no identifying signature is required) indicating that the subject has read and understood the provided information and agrees to complete the survey on that basis.	Participant Consent Form	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Participant Information Sheet & GDPR Privacy Notice	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>Where a survey data collection method is being used, please read the declaration below and provide a live link to the survey draft for REC review.</b>  Rather than submitting separate Consent Form and Privacy Notice and PIS forms, I will instead select and edit the relevant Participant Information Sheet/Privacy Notice and Consent Form information from the School's templates and place this information at the beginning of the MS Form / survey, and participants will be required to tick a box to confirm they've read, understood, and agree to participate.  <b>Please paste the survey link address here:</b>  <i>Acceptable survey methods: MS forms, JISC, Qualtrics.</i>  <i>Note: Qualtrics is supported and is GDPR compliant. PIs should request a certificate. Contact Dr Mel Jordan for the licence number.</i>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the research involve fieldwork or data collection off campus in the UK or overseas? If yes, please see the <a href="#">fieldwork guidance</a> , Fieldwork Safety Policy and Hazard Checklist and complete the Fieldwork record form.  For fieldwork-related to travel outside of the UK please ensure	Fieldwork record  Overseas travel may require additional risk assessments and additional authorisation.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

<p>Does the research involve fieldwork or data collection off campus in the UK or overseas? If yes, please see the <a href="#">fieldwork guidance</a>, Fieldwork Safety Policy and Hazard Checklist and complete the Fieldwork record form.</p> <p>For fieldwork-related to travel outside of the UK please ensure appropriate insurance is in place. Review the <a href="#">Overseas Travel Guidance</a>. Please consult the travel advice <a href="#">Flow Chart</a>. <b>DO NOT</b> book overseas travel before being advised to do so.</p>	<p>Fieldwork record</p> <p>Overseas travel may require additional risk assessments and additional authorisation. Please read the travel guidance.</p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>If the research is to be conducted outside the UK or involves international partners, is ethics review required by a non-UK REC?</p>	<p>Non-UK REC approval</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Does the research require approval from a UK REC other than the SSP-REC (eg, NHS-<a href="#">HRA</a>, HMPPS)?</p> <p>Please see Research Integrity Byte: <a href="#">Health Research Authority</a></p> <p>Please note: Health and social care prison and probation research via the IRAS HMPPS route.</p> <p>Non-health and social care prison or probation research via the NRC route.</p> <p>See <a href="#">Research at HMPPS - Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)</a></p>	<p>External REC approval</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Research Data Management Plan (DMP)</p> <p>Researchers are encouraged by UoN to have a data management plan. Please confirm one is in place for this research project.</p> <p><a href="https://uniofnottm.sharepoint.com/sites/DigitalResearch/SitePages/Research-Data-Management-Policy.aspx">https://uniofnottm.sharepoint.com/sites/DigitalResearch/SitePages/Research-Data-Management-Policy.aspx</a></p> <p><a href="https://uniofnottm.sharepoint.com/sites/DigitalResearch/SitePages/RDM-Policy-obligations--at-a-glance.aspx">https://uniofnottm.sharepoint.com/sites/DigitalResearch/SitePages/RDM-Policy-obligations--at-a-glance.aspx</a></p> <p>These two documents may assist you with your DMP writing:</p> <p>.</p>	<p>Yes, I have a DMP in place</p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

<b>Section 1: Applicant details</b>	
Name of researcher	Chen Minjie
Role	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Postgraduate research student <input type="checkbox"/> Staff
Email address	Lqxmc14@nottingham.ac.uk
Names of other project members  Please note the School of the PI for this study? Is it SSP?  If this is not a home School REC application, please refer to REC Chair to debate suitability, before REC review  Please note that a UoN PI who is undertaking a funded research project with a partner organization(s) will require a signed contract which covers partner professional indemnity insurance and sub-contractor agreements (incl. data management/security/sharing/deletion.).	N/A
Please provide details re. funding - internal or external - where relevant (e.g., ESRC, AHRC, NIHR, HMPPS)	N/A
Conflicts of Interest in relation to this research?	Do you or any member of the Research Team have any conflict of interest? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No    If Yes, please describe:  Please confirm that you have followed the UoN Conflicts of Interest, Gifts and Hospitality guidance <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Is this project a collaboration with an external body? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	If yes, please confirm that a legal agreement will be place. <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable
Expected start & end date of fieldwork? A proposed month and year, please (e.g., May, 2022). Thank you. This is needed for the ethics data retention/deletion/audit schedule.  Please note there is an annual monitoring and audit process and your study may be selected for audit.	Research project start date: October, 2020 Research project end date: October 2024  Proposed fieldwork start date: December 2021 Proposed fieldwork end date: February 2022
In order to secure FEO from this university's REC, the researcher must please demonstrate past	Academically, my subject in my undergraduate project is social work. The most important skills I have learned from my major are the sense of empathy and communication skills. I know how to understand other people's life experiences from their standpoint,

<p>In order to secure FEO from this university's REC, the researcher must please demonstrate past experience in undertaking other similar projects, their skills in this research realm, and/or training received, and any other professional experience, and/or planned near-future UoN training pre-fieldwork. Thank you. Please list details here.</p>	<p>Academically, my subject in my undergraduate project is social work. The most important skills I have learned from my major are the sense of empathy and communication skills. I know how to understand other people's life experiences from their standpoint, and how to communicate with them in words they can understand. Additionally, during my postgraduate project, I have learned qualitative research methods. From the course, the key things I have learned are about how to protect the interviewees from unfavorable factors during the fieldwork and how to keep collected data privately and safely.</p> <p>Practically, I have conducted the fieldwork in my undergraduate and postgraduate projects, to interview disabled people personally and by telephone separately. I have experience of listening to their stories and I knew how to show my patience and respect to them. Besides, I have one-year working experience in a local NGO near my hometown, and I followed the NGO team to conduct fieldwork about investigating the poverty situation of the local village and I also interviewed the family members to help collect data.</p>
<p>Researchers should complete this Researcher Academy Research Integrity course: <a href="https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/researcher-academy/research-integrity/course">Research Integrity: CONCISE (Standalone online learning course) (nottingham.ac.uk)</a></p> <p>Please tick to confirm completion    Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>	

To be completed by students only	
Student ID number	14338883
Degree programme	PhD Sociology
Supervisor(s)	Sarah Dauncey; Ruby Chau

## Section 2: Please indicate which of the below criteria apply to your project.

2.1. Trigger Criteria:		
Trigger Criteria	Yes	No
Research projects that give rise to evident and significant risk of reputational damage to, or legal liability on the part of, the Researcher or the University of Nottingham.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Procedures where the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research project are greater in and beyond those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Procedures the nature of which might be offensive, distressing or deeply personal for the target group. This may include surveys and questionnaire-only research designs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects that involve children under the age of 16 or other vulnerable groups.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving current prisoners, immigration detainees, or young persons with convictions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving police, probation services, or those involved in the criminal justice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Research designs requiring participants to take part in the research project without their knowledge and/or consent at the time and research projects that involve deception or withholding information from research participants even if the research participants are briefed afterwards.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects accessing records and/or the collection of <b>personal data</b> , concerning identifiable individuals as defined by data protection legislation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving the linking or sharing of personal data, <b>special category data</b> (sensitive data) or confidential information beyond the initial consent given.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving the collection or access of audio, video recordings, photographs or quotations where individuals may be identified (beyond images that are in the public domain and are being used in their intended context e.g. photographs of politicians).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects offering incentives which may unduly influence participants' decision to participate.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects that are likely to lead to incidental findings or disclosures.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects carried out by third parties wishing to recruit University of Nottingham's staff and/or students as participants (although the REC may require that it simply ratifies the approval from the third party -see section 3.8 of CoPREC policy).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving the new collection or donation of human tissue from a living person or the recently deceased as defined by the Human Tissue Authority (HTA). Please see the Health Research Authority (HRA) guidance. If yes, is it likely that this SSP REC is not the correct REC for this review ; please speak with the REC before an application is prepared.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects which had previously received a favourable ethical opinion (FEO) but had not started within a year of the FEO.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects which had previously received an FEO but have not been completed within five years of the FEO date.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving travelling to countries/regions against the advice of the <b>British Foreign Commonwealth Office</b> .	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research Projects involving data collection outside the UK (except at UoN international campuses). If Yes, Please provide details	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving activities or the outcome of which may pose a security risk or may be perceived to pose a security risk.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Research projects involving activities that could potentially compromise the safety/wellbeing of the researcher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
The University REC (UREC) is concerned with potential reputational damage, potential security concerns, and/or insurance implications. Therefore, please tick this box, and then elaborate if required, if your research intends to include: terrorist activities, treason, safeguarding issues, intended harm to self or others, money laundering, partner organisations in countries with human rights issues or less rigorous research ethics standards, children participants under 5 years old, pregnant persons, or researchers travelling to areas against the advice of the FCDO.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1. Does this research involve non-human animals – if so, please elaborate below, in terms of social science research methods and ethics?		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. Does this research involve the collection of *human* and/or non-human samples (e.g. genetic materials) from inside or outside the UK? If yes, is it likely that this SSP REC is not the correct REC for this review ; please speak with the REC before an application is prepared.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**Please elaborate on trigger criteria and how you will manage this element in its research design and practice? (Please specify which trigger number(s)). Thank you.**

Trigger Criteria: Research Projects involving data collection outside the UK (except at UoN international campuses).

Details:

My research project is about understanding disability through the life course perspective in China. I am currently in my hometown – Yuncheng, China. My F2F interviews will be conducted in Zhengzhou, China, a city only an hour away from my hometown by high-speed train. As I'm based in China and undertaking 'in-country' travel, I don't need to travel abroad to collect face-to-face data, and the risks during this process can be avoided. Additionally, the pandemic has been controlled well in China, and there are zero new cases of COVID-19 currently in most cities in China, including my hometown and Zhengzhou, except only several new local cases in July/August /November in Zhengzhou. There are no social distances we need to keep in most places in China.

The F2F data collection will be conducted from December 2021 to February 2022. I will come to Zhengzhou 6 times during this process, twice a month by high-speed train, and each time will last about 3 days. Before I travel, I will book a hotel with a good reputation, close to the subway station in downtown Zhengzhou, complete the recruitment of at least 10 participants in the first phase and schedule the interviews with them. I will also make sure this hotel has already introduced appropriate COVID-19 control measures in advance. I will spend an hour coming to Zhengzhou by taking the high-speed rail from my hometown. When I arrive in Zhengzhou, I will take public transport to interview venues, especially subway and public buses, as the subway system and bus system are convenient in Zhengzhou. I will wear a face mask in a public place to keep safe. I will not have any other social events which are not related to my research, and I will not go to other dangerous places and isolated areas to put myself in danger.

### Section 2.3: Project details

Project title	<p>Understanding disability through the life course: life experiences of visually disabled people in China</p> <p>[The definition of visually disabled people: this is the official term used in China to refer to people with visual disability. According to the China Disabled Persons Federation, the visually disabled are mainly divided into two categories, including the full blindness and the semi-blindness. People with full blindness (eyeball atrophy or calcification) loses response to all lights, while people with semi-blindness have severe/slight amblyopia or have the severe/slight vision]</p>
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<p>Please provide a <b>lay summary</b> of the project.</p> <p>This must not be taken from your protocol and should be in lay terms.</p> <p>This is a new requirement, in line with the university's new 2021 CoPREC.</p>	<p>Approximately 200 <b>words</b>. in accessible, non-technical language.</p> <p>In China, there are 82.96 million people with disabilities, but their social, physical, and psychological needs could be ignored by mainstream society, their basic living standards in most places may be lower than those of the national average, and there are still vocational stereotypes that existed for people with different types of disabilities.</p> <p>However, current research about the life course to disability is limited in China, we still do not clearly know what disabled people's life experiences such as the transition of education to work are, especially after the establishment of the China Disabled Persons' Federation in 1988.</p> <p>Due to this, this research will explore the life experiences of disabled people under the socio-economic and political contexts in China, focusing on the transition of education to work and the social barriers they have faced across their life courses. Due to the diversity of types of disability, people with visual impairments, as a relatively large group with vocational stereotypes that are frequently emphasized by officials and society, will be focused on in this research. This research will collect data in Zhengzhou (as the capital city of Henan), Henan province. Based on these, it will use telephone and in-person interviews and audio diaries to collect data and explore the life experiences of visually disabled people in Zhengzhou. It will then apply narrative analysis to analyze data.</p>
<p>Research question(s) or aim(s)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do people with visual impairments in China transition from education to work?</li> <li>2. What social barriers do they face across education, work and as they transition between the two?</li> <li>3. To what extent does gender play a role in the life course of a person with visual impairment across the life course?</li> <li>4. How do people with visual impairments use their human agency to react to the constraints they have faced across the life course?</li> </ol>

<p>Method(s) of data collection</p> <p><b>Accepted remote methods of data collection are Telephone/Skype for Business/MS Teams/MS Forms/JISC.</b></p> <p>Please note the use of Zoom within the University is not recommended because of the security and GDPR issues associated with using the free, non-corporate version. These risks are lower if you are joining an externally hosted Zoom session where the host has a corporate Zoom licence and has taken steps to secure and control the meeting using joining credentials and passwords. This is relevant for external partner organization research only. UoN-based researchers should utilise UoN-supported platforms.</p> <p>Please note that some questionnaire platforms can collect IP addresses from participants, this would be a GDPR issue and identifiable data. Please ensure JISC / MS Forms are not set-up in this manner (e.g., turn off the 'no repeated response' function.).</p> <p><a href="#">See here for more data management guidance.</a></p> <p>This study will abide by the pandemic/Covid Govt guidance within all geographical areas of fieldwork, and it is recognised by the PI that it's their responsibility to ensure updated/current guidance is used.</p>	<p><b>This study will abide by the pandemic/Covid Govt guidance within all geographical areas of fieldwork, and it is recognised by the PI that it's their responsibility to ensure updated/current guidance is used.</b></p> <p>I will gather life story data by interviewing 25-30 participants, twice each at different times (these may be face-to-face or by telephone depending upon local COVID restrictions – see below) and by receiving audio diaries with a balance of male and female participants aged 18-40 in the city of Zhengzhou, China.</p> <p>Due to the COVID-19, there are lots of restrictions on fieldwork involving the face-to-face interviews and travel planning currently in School's ethics policies. It is for this reason that my data collection allows for two different methods – face-to-face and by telephone.</p> <p>First, and with regards the face-to-face interviews (initial and follow-up), the process of data collection will be conducted safely in Zhengzhou, Henan province, China, a city with just one-hour high-speed rail to reach for me as I'm in my hometown in China and study remotely. Also, there have been no cases of infection in Zhengzhou or in my city or even in the two provinces where these two cities are located since the start of 2021, except several new cases showed in July/ August /November 2021 in Zhengzhou, but currently there is no new local cases of infection. In addition, the pandemic is controlled well in China at present and there are no social distances to be kept or even no need to wear a mask in most public places. I was vaccinated in June/July 2021. However, to keep safe, I will still wear a mask and check the digital Health Code of each participant in advance. The Health Code can track every citizen's travel movement and the green code means this person has no close contact with an infected person. In this way, the face-to-face interviews can be conducted safely in Zhengzhou.</p> <p>However, I have also planned the possibility of telephone interviews. This is for participants for whom in-person meetings are not convenient or who feel nervous or feel uncomfortable to meet me in person at their workplaces or other public places to tell their life stories, as I am a stranger for some of them, and they might feel stressed for face-to-face interviews. Additionally, people with a visual disability are used to recognizing people's voices. Voice chat may be the most convenient way for them to keep in touch with their friends. Moreover, the telephone interviews are safe and convenient for both the researcher and the participants. The interviews can be conducted in my and the participants' own homes. This will avoid any potential risks in traveling or meeting in unfamiliar venues. At last, if the pandemic got worse in China in the future, the telephone interviews would be a safety net for me to collect data.</p>
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**Note for survey method.** A standalone/separate participant consent form and participant information sheet & GDPR privacy notice is not required. Surveys should commence with this information, via a survey-embedded introductory page, followed by a (required) tickbox for consent (no identifying signature is required) indicating that the subject has read and understood the provided information and agrees to complete the survey on that basis.

Where and when will data collection take place? (please consult the University's [Lone Working](#), [Working Abroad](#) and [Safe Conduct of Fieldwork guidelines](#))

I will collect in-person data in Zhengzhou and telephone interviews in my own home respectively in China. I will conduct the interviews personally from December 2021 to February 2022.

As detailed above, I am planning for this to be done via several ways depending on their situation of using technology, their preferences, and the conditions of the pandemic. One way for visually disabled participants is to sign the consent form electronically. Some participants are good at technology since they can proficiently use the built-in screen reading mode of the system in the computer or the phone to access the technology as the same as people without a visual disability. Due to this, they will be informed about the content that will be translated into Chinese via email before the interviews and signed electronically. This way will be easy and time-saving for them to read online as the technology can assist them to read the informed consent quickly, instead of reading it in written materials with the aid of lighting and magnification.

However, if the participants do not have an email account or the facilities to read from a computer/phone, there will be two additional ways for them to sign the informed consent. One is about signing their names on the written materials, which can only be conducted in face-to-face interviews. In this way, visually impaired participants who can recognize Chinese characters with the aid of lighting and magnification, such as people with low visions receiving regular education, can choose to read the written materials prepared to reduce glare and improve readability and legibility and sign their names in Chinese. Another way is that for the participants who are not able to recognize Chinese characters and do not know how to sign their name in Chinese as the Braille they have learned in special schools is completely different from Chinese characters, such as participants only receiving special education or participants with blindness, I will incorporate the information sheet into the interview schedule and get their oral consent. This way can be conducted both in telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews. In this case, I will choose to read out the documents in full to them at the beginning of the interviews.

I will make sure that they understand and agree to take part in the study voluntarily. Such procedures will be recorded and showed in the interview transcripts. If they decide to take part, they are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. This would not affect their rights. Additionally, there will be the witness at the same time to witness the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant who cannot sign and to make sure that the individual has had the opportunity to

	<p>to ask questions. The witness will confirm that the individual has given consent freely. The witness will be the staff the NGO in the face-to-face interviews, or participants' next of kin who are able to identify the consent form and information sheet in the telephone interviews</p> <p>More importantly, my travelling to Zhengzhou to collect face-to-face data will be safe. I'm in my hometown (Shanxi province, China) currently and study remotely, so there is no need for me to travel abroad to collect data from the UK to China. All I need is to take the one-hour high-speed rail to come to Zhengzhou, and this process will be totally safe, as everyone in China is asked to show the digital Health Code before takes the train, also needs to wear a mask in the train. Second, I will take public transportation especially subway and public bus when I conduct the in-person interviews in Zhengzhou, as the subway system and bus system are very convenient. In addition, to protect the participants' privacy and reduce the risk posed to the researcher's personal safety of conducting interviews on private premises, I will conduct as many of the interviews at the NGO as possible, as most participants are users of the service centre and/or their friends. Otherwise, I will use telephone.</p>
<p>How will access to participants and/or sites be gained?</p> <p>Describe your inclusion/exclusion criteria, the recruitment methods, how you will identify participant and recruitment process, including details on any prior approvals needed.</p> <p>If online, explain what platform you are using and how they comply with GDPR and ensure participants' privacy.</p>	<p>I will work with an NGO in Zhengzhou which relates to offer free services and create social networking opportunities to visually disabled people. I used to work in the Disability Services Department of this NGO and keep connections with the head and other employees of this NGO. They will be my gatekeepers to access my participants as the NGO have contacts of the visually disabled people.</p> <p>To aid in participant recruitment, I will work with this NGO, recruit from the users of this service center, and connect with visually impaired individuals by making announcements at events, through word-of-mouth, and by providing potential participants with information about the study and my contact information. Additional participants, if needed to meet the age and gender requirements of the sample population, will be recruited through snowball sampling, where I will ask existing participants to pass on my contact information to eligible peers.</p> <p>The ideal recruitment result is half of the participants are male and half are female. However, depending on my previous recruitment experience, recruiting visually impaired female could be difficult, largely because the percentage of working disabled women is lower than the disabled men as the two identities of 'disability' and 'female' lead them to face more barriers and discrimination in labor market. Given this, the researcher will use purposive recruitment through contacts as well as snowball sampling to recruit eligible women with a visual disability working in Zhengzhou.</p> <p>Participants recruited at the NGO will be assured that their involvement is voluntary and the service they receive will not be affected their decision to take part in the study or not. The service users will not be put under any pressure to participate.</p>

<p>Benefit to Research Participants (from CoPREC):</p> <p>Highlight the potential impact of your research directly on the participants, the participant group, to further knowledge or change policy</p>	<p>For the participants, taking part in this study will not bring any personal benefits to individual participants, but the findings would raise public awareness, enhance the understanding of people with visual disabilities and contribute to better services and policies in the future.</p> <p>In return to thank for my participants' and the NGO's support, I will organize some workshops to share my research findings with the NGO, my participants, and the local community to draw more attention, which is a good way to encourage my potential participants to feel free to share their life stories in the following interviews. The process of workshops can ensure that the research findings are fed back to the community for their and others benefit, as I am going to work directly with the service center. Before preparation of workshops, I will seek explicit, separate consent from the participants and get their permission</p> <p>About change policy, this study aims to help explore the life experiences of visually disabled people in China, which may have a chance to be published to raise public awareness and contribute to better understanding, policies, and services in the future.</p>
<p>How will research data be moved, managed and stored? (see Guidance on Research Data Handling for PGR Students and Staff &amp; <a href="#">Digital Research</a>)</p> <p><i>Please note that if you use an external transcription service, a confidentiality agreement must be in place.</i></p> <p><i>If using UON Auto Transcription Service please see ethics guidance <a href="#">here</a>. You must also have confirmed your funder approves usage of this cloud based service.</i></p>	<p>Firstly, I will record the interview process by my phone, after each interview I will immediately transfer the voice file to my University OneDrive folder. After that, I will finish the transcriptions from Chinese to English and all the data will be kept confidential through the following ways. I will transcribe interviews and diaries in their original language, carry out the analysis also in the original language, and only at that stage translate into English.</p> <p>The recorded data will be uploaded immediately after each interview and stored securely using log-in OneDrive from the start date of the interviews (in December 2021) to the completion of my transcriptions (at the end of September 2022), and these files can only be opened by my personal password. Once I upload a recording to OneDrive, I will delete the original recordings on my phone immediately, and once the recordings are transcribed, I will delete the interviews. For more security, I will rename the recording files with sequence number, like No.1 to No.7.</p> <p>The process of transcriptions will be finished on my personal laptop by using Microsoft Word. In the transcription, the recording data including the name will be anonymized (like participant 1) and stripped of identifying information to respect the privacy of my participants. No one can access my laptop due to the password showing on the computer starting up. For double security, the files will be password protected again and will be named with a number. The data will be kept securely for 7 years. After this time the data will be disposed of securely (at the end of September 2029).</p> <p>To prevent data loss due to personal laptop damage, these verbatim transcripts will be uploaded and stored securely using log-in OneDrive, and only I can open them. For double security, the files will be named with a number. The deletion dates of verbatim transcriptions are the same as above. Once I update the transcripts in OneDrive, I will delete original transcripts on my laptop. I will store the data (both voice files and transcripts) in my University OneDrive folder only.</p>

<p>Dissemination</p> <p>Describe how you will ensure your research gets to the appropriate and widest audience possible and indicate any potential risks of participants being identified in any form of dissemination</p>	<p>How to get the appropriate and widest audience:</p> <p>This could be separated into three ways, as I will have different audiences and the dissemination methods would be different. First, for targeting academics, I will attend academic conferences and submit related papers about my research findings. I will also publish journal articles to attract more readers who are interested in my topic. In addition, for targeting the local community and the public, I will share my findings with the service center and the local community, since this is a common way to create a sense of shared community and to raise awareness beyond those involved and this may also contribute to better understanding, and local services related to disabled people in the future. I am going to work directly with the service center to ensure that the research findings are fed back to the community for their and others benefit. To do this, I will organize some workshops in the service center where I will share the research findings. Before preparation, I will seek explicit, separate consent from the participants and get their permission. Finally, I will make policy briefings to target service providers or local officials, to contribute to the current services and policies related to people with visual impairments.</p> <p>Indicate any potential risks of participants being identified in any form of dissemination:</p> <p>All my participants' personal information will be anonymized, so they will not be identified in any publication or academic conference. However, even if I don't put participants' names in the research findings, the readers in the local community might still be able to identify some participants by some life events recorded in the findings in the shared workshops. To avoid conflicting with the principles of anonymization and confidentiality, I will make sure that this is done with the explicit, separate consent of the participants. I will only share the findings with the local community after getting their permission. If some of them are not willing to accept this, I will not include their data in the findings shared with workshops. The ways of signing this separate consent form and setting witness are the same as signing the consent form of interviews.</p>
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Data security: All research data should be stored securely using UoN log-in OneDrive, SharePoint, or Teams - with restricted ownership and access.	Yes, I will use my UoN log-in OneDrive, SharePoint, or Teams - with restricted ownership and access. to secure all research data.  No, I am providing additional information detailing my data security measures above	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Only 'audio-only' interview recordings are permitted. I will immediately transfer audio recordings to O365 and once transcribed, delete the interviews.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Not recording interviews
A DBS check is required if the research involves being left alone with children under the age of 16 and/or vulnerable adults	<input type="checkbox"/> DBS Not required	
	<input type="checkbox"/> DBS Required <b>please tick to confirm that this will be acquired before the relevant project activity commences)</b> DBS Number (if known at this point) is:	

Face to face fieldwork Covid declarations	Yes	N/A
Re. COVID: This study will abide by the pandemic/COVID Govt guidance within all geographical areas of fieldwork, and it is recognised by the PI that it's their responsibility to ensure updated/current guidance is used. Timing is important here and current regulations will be double-checked at time of fieldwork. Keeping up-to-date with relevant guidelines is the researcher's responsibility - please implement any changes as required, including where necessary postponing fieldwork and/or seeking other means with which to collect/create data as appropriate and subject to REC (re)submission/approval.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Re. COVID: The study will respect the COVID-related PPE, social distancing, or likewise measures that are encountered within fieldwork settings (e.g., schools, prisons, hospitals) and researchers will adhere to these local regulations, plus any specific requests of participants (e.g., the wearing of masks during an interview).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Re. COVID: Please note that where UoN researchers are undertaking a funded research project with external non-UoN partner organisations, there will be a signed contract which covers partner professional indemnity insurance and sub-contractor agreements; plus, relevant research ethics and integrity elements will be agreed and recorded (e.g., data management and privacy). These non-UoN PO arrangements will include a COVID-related agreement (e.g., yes/no PPE; yes/no social distancing).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Re. COVID: Please note, there is still an extended risk assessments process for F2F fieldwork (and travel for fieldwork, especially overseas) - please complete the relevant documentation before bookings/arrangements are made.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Section 3: Questions about the appropriate REC to review the application</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
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Does the study involve: patients or social care users as research participants, relatives or carers of past/present users of NHS or social care services, the use of NHS or social care records or data, Department of Health funding? <b>(NB. NHS-HRA review is not normally required for research involving NHS or social care staff recruited as research participants by virtue of their professional role, except where the proposal raises significant ethical issues) (see here for more information - <a href="#">Health Research Authority - Research Integrity Byte v.1 15 June21.pdf</a>)</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Does the study involve participants age 16 or over who are unable to give informed consent (eg, people with learning disabilities: see Mental Capacity Act 2005/ Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Does the study involve staff and/or prisoners within HMPPS prison establishments, offenders and/or staff within the National Probation Service/Community Rehabilitation Companies, or staff within HMPPS Headquarters? Probation - like the prison service - requires HMPPS NRC approval. See <a href="#">Research at HMPPS - Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If you have answered 'yes' to any of the questions above, you will need to send this completed form to the SSP-REC for reference and submit your research for ethics review to the appropriate body (eg, NHS-HRA, HMPPS). Once granted, a copy should be sent to the SSP-REC for its records.		

#### Section 4: Ethical considerations

Please answer **ALL** of the following questions by ticking the appropriate box and providing additional information in the text box where required.

4.1: Questions about consent	Yes	No
Does the research involve other potentially vulnerable groups: children under 16, residing in residential care, having a cognitive impairment, mental health condition, physical or sensory impairments, previous life experiences (eg, victims of abuse), other (please specify below)? <b>"Please note that research which intends to involve 5,000+ participants, pregnant women, and/or children under the age of 5 will automatically involve the central university insurance team."</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will the research involve people taking part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

If you have answered 'yes' to any of the questions about consent, you will need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethics issues raised by your research in the box below:

<p>Q: Does the research involve other potentially vulnerable groups?</p> <p>A: This research will involve people with a visual disability. However, being disabled does not necessarily mean being vulnerable. As in my previous interview experience of visually impaired people, my participants are all over 18, and are totally capable to make informed consent and voluntary participation by themselves, I don't think a visual disability of my participants should affect their capacity in these two respects. Additionally, like I mentioned before, the interviews are not planned to touch on any sensitive issues. I will not put any participants at risk. I will try to avoid arousing psychological stress or anxiety. All participants will be told that they can withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to discuss any topics should they wish. After the interview, I could provide information of online services, telephone hotlines or other consulting services if the participants feel that they have been affected in any way by anything that has been raised in the interviews.</p> <p>Q: Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited?</p> <p>A: As I mentioned above, I will work with an NGO in Zhengzhou which relates to offer free services and create social networking opportunities to visually disabled people. I used to work in the Disability Services Department of this NGO and keep connections with the head and other employees of this NGO. They will be my gatekeepers to access my participants as the NGO have contacts of the visually disabled people.</p> <p>To aid in participant recruitment, I will cooperate with this NGO, recruit for this service center, and connect with visually impaired individuals by making announcements at events, through word-of-mouth, and by providing potential participants with information about the study and my contact information. Additional participants will be recruited through snowball sampling, where I will ask existing participants to pass on my contact information to eligible peers.</p>
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4.2: Questions about the potential for harm	Yes	No
Will the research involve discussion of sensitive or potentially sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use, physical or mental health, racism, prejudice, illegal activity)? <i>"Please note that, regarding illegal activities, confidentiality will be breached and relevant authorities may be informed where offences related to the following are disclosed: terrorist activities; money laundering; treason; neglect and/or abuse of children or vulnerable adults. Contact the REC Chair for further guidance, if required."</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the research involve physically invasive procedures, the collection of bodily samples or the administering of drugs, placebos or other substances (eg, vitamins, food)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the research place participants at any greater physical or emotional risk than they experience during their normal lifestyles?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive investigation (eg. longitudinal research)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the research expose the researcher to any significant risk of physical or emotional harm (eg, lone working in international research)? <i>"Please note that where UoN researchers are undertaking a funded research project with external non-UoN partner organisations, there will be a signed contract which covers partner professional indemnity insurance and sub-contractor agreements; plus, relevant research ethics and integrity elements will be agreed and recorded (e.g., data management and privacy)."</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Does the research involve members of the public in a research capacity (participant research)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

If you have answered 'yes' to any of the questions about the potential for harm, you will need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethical issues raised by your research in the box below for both researcher and participants. Please also reflect carefully on whether/how your research and the current COVID-19 context may represent a risk of emotional harm, both to your research participants and to you as researcher

e.g. for the researcher, planned debrief with Supervisor, PI, others in study or peers, [UON Counselling service](#), [Student mental health and wellbeing](#). Signpost participant to appropriate debrief contact or counselling support.

4.3: Questions about data management preparation	Yes	No
Are you aware of the GDPR and is the proposed research compatible with it?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the research to be undertaken in the public interest?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will research participants be given/directed to an appropriate GDPR privacy notice?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you read the University of Nottingham's <a href="#">Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics</a> , and agree to abide by it?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you read the <a href="#">Data Protection Policy and Guidance</a> (login required) of the University of Nottingham, and agree to abide by them?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you have answered 'no' to any of the questions about the potential for harm, you will need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethical issues raised by your research in the box below:

4.4: Questions about data collection, confidentiality and storage	Yes	No
Will the research involve administrative or secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will data collection take place somewhere other than public and/or professional spaces (work setting)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the research involve internet participants or other visual/vocal methods where participants may be identified?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the personal data of research participants (eg, name, age, gender, ethnicity, religious or other beliefs, sexuality, physical or mental health conditions) be revealed in research outputs or stored data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will the research involve the sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?  <i>Please note that participant vouchers need HoS sign-off beforehand, and usage of the voucher request form and central system.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

If you have answered 'yes' to any of the questions about data collection, confidentiality and storage, you will need to describe more fully how you plan to deal with the ethics issues raised by your research in the box below:

4.5: Translation of research documents	Yes	No
Will you be translating the REC reviewed English language docs into another language for the fieldwork? If yes, please indicate below which category this application falls within.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
For staff: the responsibility lies with the staff researcher to check the translation - please tick this box to confirm.	Staff	<input type="checkbox"/>
For PGRs: the responsibility lies with the supervisory team, and the PGR, to check the translation - please tick this box to confirm.	PGR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
For low-risk UG/PGT fieldwork, the responsibility lies with the student to check the translation - please tick this box to confirm.	UG/PGT	<input type="checkbox"/>



## DECLARATION OF ETHICAL RESEARCH

### I/We, the researcher(s):

- By signing this form agree to work within the protocol outlined and the University of Nottingham Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics and UoN Policies and Guidance.
- Understand that, for studies conducted outside the UK, it is my/our responsibility to understand and adhere to all local regulations and guidelines and will ensure all required permissions are in place before any relevant Research activities commence.
- The research project activities will not commence before obtaining favourable ethical opinion from SSPREC and any other relevant permissions.
- Understand the Principal Investigator must ensure all researchers are suitably qualified and trained to conduct the research described, or are appropriately supervised until deemed qualified/trained
- Agree to maintain the confidentiality of the research participants and will grant access to data only to researchers named on this application
- If I make any changes to my protocol which would change my answers to any of the questions above I will submit a new form to my supervisor or module convener and to [LQ-researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:LQ-researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk).

By signing this form I agree to work within the protocol which I have outlined and to abide by the University of Nottingham's Code of Research Ethics. If I make any changes to my protocol which would change my answers to any of the questions above I will submit a new form to [LQ-researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:LQ-researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk).

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*Signature of applicant*

*Mzinge*

*Date 15/12/2021*

### AUTHORISATION

Having reviewed the ethical issues arising from the proposed research, I authorise the research to go ahead.

*Dauncey*

16/12/2021

*Ruby Chan*

16/12/2021

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*Signature of supervisor*

*Date*

The School's Research Ethics Committee authorises the research to go ahead as described.

*Signature of REC / REIO*

*Date*

**Please remember to enclose all of the documentary evidence required to support your application, as indicated in the checklist on the front page of this application**



## Appendix 2 Participants information sheet



University of  
Nottingham  
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

### Participant Information Sheet & GDPR Privacy Notice

#### Section 1 - Participant Information Sheet

Date: 24/10/2021

Title of Study: Understanding disability through the life course: life experiences of visually disabled people in China

Name of Researcher(s): Chen Minjie

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. Before you decide we would like you to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. I will go through the information sheet with you and answer any questions you have. Talk to others about the study if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear.

#### What is the purpose of the study?

I plan to get valuable insights into what the life experiences of people with visual impairment are, especially in their education and work what difficulties they have faced, and their opinions on the current welfare services.

#### Why have I been invited?

You are being invited to take part because you are a person with visual impairment living in Zhengzhou and aged between 18-40. We are inviting 25-30 participants like you to take part.

#### Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. This would not affect your legal rights.

#### What will happen to me if I take part?

There will be two interviews - an initial interview and a follow-up interview about at least a week after the first one. In the interviews, we will talk about your life experiences, your education, your work. You can also tell the researcher about your opinion of any difficulties faced by people with sight impairments. Each interview will take about 1 hours and will be recorded on my phone. Additionally, between the two interviews, you also have the opportunity to record a brief daily (5-10 minute) update on your work experiences that day (what special incidents have happened and/or how you feel on each day) via MS

Teams. If you don't have it, you can just ask me to call you and play your audio diary down the phone.

There are two ways the main interviews can be conducted face-to-face interviews or telephone interviews, and you can feel free to choose any way you feel comfortable or is most convenient for you. The face-to-face interviews will be conducted in the service center where the workplace can provide a space for you to attend the interviews in private. Before the interviews, you are welcome to ask what the interview questions are about. If any questions that you are not willing to answer, I will not mention them in the interview.

### **Expenses and payments**

Participants will not be paid an allowance to participate in the study. If they are interviewed by phone, the researcher will make the phone call and pay the network charges.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

The interview is about your general life experiences and your experience in education and work. There should be no potential disadvantages or risks in taking part. However, , you do not have to answer specific question and you can ask to stop the interviews at any point. After the interviews, I will provide information relating to online services, telephone hotlines or other consulting services if you feel that you have been affected in any way by anything that has been raised in the interviews.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Taking part in this study will not bring any personal benefits to individual participants, but the findings would raise public awareness, enhance the understanding of people with visual disabilities and contribute to better services and policies in the future.

### **What if there is a problem?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak to the researcher who will do their best to answer your questions. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this by contacting the School Research Ethics Officer. All contact details are given at the end of this information sheet.

### **Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

We will follow ethical and legal practice and all information about you will be handled in confidence.

If you join the study, the data collected for the study will be looked at by authorised persons from the University of Nottingham who are organising the research. They may also be looked at by authorised people to check that the study is being carried out correctly. All will have a duty of confidentiality to you as a research participant, and we will do our best to meet this duty.

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept **strictly confidential**, secured within the University of Nottingham. Any information about

you which leaves the University will have your name and address removed (anonymised) and a unique code will be used so that you cannot be recognised from it. Anonymised data may also be stored in data archives for future researchers interested in this area.

Your personal data (address, telephone number) will be kept for 3 months after the end of the study (the end of December 2024), so that we are able to contact you about the findings of the study *and possible follow-up studies* (unless you advise us that you do not wish to be contacted). All research data will be kept securely for 7 years. After this time your data will be disposed of securely. During this time all precautions will be taken by all those involved to maintain your confidentiality, only members of the research team will have access to your personal data.

Although what you say in the interviews are confidential, should you disclose anything to us which we feel puts you or anyone else at any risk, we may feel it necessary to report this to the appropriate persons.

### **What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?**

Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without your legal rights being affected. If you withdraw then the information collected so far may not be possible to extract and erase after 3 months and this information may still be used in the project analysis.

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

My study will be finished and submitted during the academic year 2024, and if you want to receive a copy of the final submission, I can send it to you. No personal information (e.g., name and address or other identifiers) will be disclosed in the final report. After that I will keep the transcription for 3 months for further research and delete these files on the end of December 2024. Additionally, you are welcome to ask for a copy of any publications come out from this study. You will not be identified in any report/publication of this kind. I will send you a copy if you want to see this report/publication. Moreover, if the results are to be written up as part of an educational qualification, I must tell you that this is the case.

### **Who is organising and funding the research?**

This research is being organised by the University of Nottingham and the researcher is in no funding status currently.

### **Who has reviewed the study?**

All research in the University of Nottingham is looked at by a group of people, called a Research Ethics Committee (REC), to protect your interests. This study has received a favourable ethical review by the School of Sociology and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee.

### **Further information and contact details**

Researcher: Chen Minjie, Postgraduate Researcher, School of Sociology and Social Policy.  
Email: [lqxm14@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:lqxm14@nottingham.ac.uk), +86 13673636904

## Appendix 3: Participant consent form



### School of Sociology and Social Policy Participant Consent Form

**Name of Study:** Understanding disability through the life course: life experiences of visually disabled people in China

**Name of Researcher(s):** Chen Minjie

**Name of Participant:**

By signing this form, I confirm that (please initial the appropriate boxes):	Initials
I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	
Taking part in this study involves two interviews with me that will be recorded using audio and written notes. I understand that all recordings will be deleted from the researcher's phone once they have been securely uploaded to OneDrive, and from OneDrive once the recordings have been fully transcribed.	
Personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the study team.	
My words can be quoted in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs.	
I give permission for the de-identified (anonymised) data that I provide to be used for future research and learning.	

#### I agree to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

For participants unable to sign their name, mark the box instead of signing



I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form with the potential participant and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

2 copies: 1 for the participant, 1 for the project file

## Appendix 4: Research ethics approval



University of  
**Nottingham**  
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Faculty of Social Sciences  
School of Sociology & Social  
Policy  
University of Nottingham  
University Park  
Nottingham  
NG7 2RD

### Reference:

2122-14-PGR

17/12/2021

Dear Minjie,

### Application for ethical review from the School of Sociology and Social Policy REC

Project title: Understanding disability through the life course: life experiences of visually disabled people in China

The School of SSP REC has reviewed your planned project and can now give a Favourable Ethical Opinion (FEO); therefore, you now have ethical approval to commence your study, subject to the conditions and ethical processes outlined in your application being upheld. This Favourable Ethical Opinion is subject to you: adhering to the details specified in the application; securing local access approvals where required; complying with all applicable local policies and regulations, and any contractual and funder requirements; reporting any deviations and adverse events to this committee.)

### Please note:

- that any substantial changes or deviations from the application's content and planned research will need to be reviewed by the committee prior to their implementation - please contact the REC Chair (Dr Mel Jordan) to debate the significance of the desired amendments;
- COVID: it is the researcher's / PI's responsibility to keep up-to-date with relevant Government, University and local guidelines/safety measures - please implement any changes as required. We strongly encourage researchers to undertake data collection online or via telephone where possible. If this is not possible researchers must follow the public health guidance in place at the time, including where necessary postponing fieldwork and/or seeking other means with which to collect/create data as appropriate and subject to REC (re)submission/approval;
- Please re-read COVID declarations in the ethics application and the Fieldwork Record, before you organise and commence face to face fieldwork;
- that research undertaken by UoN postgraduate researchers and staff is subject to a University mandated annual ethics audit process, whereby several studies per year are selected for audit.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dr M. Jordan'.

Dr Mel Jordan

Research Ethics & Integrity Officer, REC Chair, & Associate Professor in Criminology

+44 (0)115 74 87284/ 85 15410  
LQ-researchethicSSP@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk  
[nottingham.ac.uk/sociology](http://nottingham.ac.uk/sociology)



## Appendix 5: Interview questions

1 Can you tell me something about your current job (or the most recent job)?

- Where do you work?
- What do you do?
- How did you get the job – through the training centre/friends/family, open competition, etc?
- What is the best thing you can get from this job? Is it stable income, job satisfaction, working with people with similar conditions (eyesight impairment), being close to home, having a suitable working environment, etc.?
- Can you tell one or a few things/incidents that made you feel very happy in this job?
- What is the worst thing you can get from the job – workload, demanding customers, long hours, low income, far from home, etc?
- Can you share one or a few things/incidents that made you feel very unhappy in this job? How did you feel at that time? Do you know why this/these could happen? Did you take any action to solve the problem? What were the outcomes?
- How long have you been working this job?
- What did you do before?
- What made you change your job?
- What is your plan for the coming few years? Will you stay in this job, take a similar job in other places, or do something different? Why?

2 Tell me about your school life.

- Which school did you attend—a mainstream or a special school?
- How did you get into that school (or schools)?
- Did you enjoy your school life?
- What is(are) the things (s) that you like most at school – good teachers, some subjects, friendships among classmates, etc?
- Can you name one or a few things/incidents that made you feel very happy at school?
- What is(are) the thing you dislike most at school – homework, some subjects, unfriendly teachers/classrooms, feeling different from others, etc?
- Can you name one or a few things/incidents that made you feel very unhappy at school? How did you feel at that time? Do you know why this/these could happen? Did you take any action to solve the problem? What were the outcomes?
- How did you feel when you were about to leave school? Did you worry about getting a suitable job? What kind of job did you want to do at that time? Why?

- What kind of job-related training did you receive at school or after finishing school?
- Did you have a smooth transition from school to work? Did you experience any difficulties in getting a job? What are these difficulties? Did you overcome them, and how?
- What was your aspiration at school? Does your current job match with your aspiration? If you have a choice, what kind of job would you like?

### 3 Let's talk about yourself and your family.

- Can you tell me something about your family? Who do you live with? Who brought you up? Which family member influence you most?
- How would you describe yourself or your personality? Are you happy/sad, optimistic/pessimistic, outspoken/shy? Who is your role model, and why?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Would you regard your eyesight impairment as a weakness? Does the impairment affect your life? In what ways?
- When and how did you get the impairment, from birth/certain age, through illness/accident, etc?
- How did you or your family feel about your impairment? Did you or your family do something to overcome the difficulties caused by the impairment?
- Are you a registered disabled person? What kinds of support/services have you received from the government, community, or organisations?
- What support/services do you find the most useful and why?
- Which other kind of support/services would you like to receive, and how would such support/services help to improve your life?

### 4 When did you realise that your vision differed from your peers?

### 5 Do you think the lives of people with eyesight impairment differ from those without eyesight impairment? If yes, In what ways (school, work, family relationships, career path, social life, etc)?

- Why do you feel that way?
- Do you remember how it felt? What impact did it have?
- How did you cope with it?

### 6 What do most people face as the main obstacles/challenges with eyesight impairment in this city (e.g., lack of job opportunities, social attitude, lack of training, etc.)?

- Why do you think so?
  - What impact does it have on you?
  - What would happen if these obstacles did not exist?
- 7 What can be done to help people with eyesight impairment overcome these obstacles (people with eyesight impairment, their families, the neighbourhood, the local community, the government, the general public, disabled people organisations, etc.)
- 8 What's the influence of COVID-19?
- 9 Is there anything else that you want to discuss or tell me?