

Disability in Contemporary China

Sarah Dauncey offers the first comprehensive exploration of disability and citizenship in Chinese society and culture from 1949 to the present. Through the analysis of a wide variety of Chinese sources, from film and documentary to literature and life writing, media and state documents, she sheds important new light on the ways in which disability and disabled identities have been represented and negotiated over this time. She exposes the standards against which disabled people have been held as the Chinese state has grappled with expectations of what makes the 'ideal' Chinese citizen. From this, she proposes an exciting new theoretical framework for understanding disabled citizenship in different societies – 'para-citizenship'. A far more dynamic relationship of identity and belonging than previously imagined, her new reading synthesises the often troubling contradictions of citizenship for disabled people – the perils of bodily and mental difference and the potential for personal and group empowerment.

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Citizenship, Identity and Culture

Sarah Dauncey
University of Nottingham



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For Andrew, Orla and Myles

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Although the process of change is often difficult, because it challenges you, poses you sufferings and pressure, this process will benefit all of us in the long run. We have to go all out and never give up. Even in the most difficult times, we must keep in mind that we are together. Xie Yan

As with many research projects, this book was born of personal experience, a desire for knowledge and the change that might come with that knowledge. My wonderful and talented daughter, Orla, was born in 2003 with cerebral palsy. As a family, we have since come to learn the ways in which disabled people can be included and excluded (and often, confusingly, at the same time), the ways in which they can be lauded and derided (and often, startlingly, in the same breath) and the ways in which they are encouraged to overcome their impairment through greater effort but are, simultaneously, pitied for their seeming inability to ever be ‘normal’. It was these very intimate experiences, eye-opening and upsetting in turn, that prompted me to think about how these same scenarios might be playing out in China, a country I had been visiting and studying since 1989. What might it be like to be disabled in China? How might I go about educating myself, and potentially others, about those experiences?

This has been my enjoyable and truly rewarding task for the past fifteen years or so. And, like many disability studies scholars before me, I hope that my work presented here and elsewhere can bring a greater understanding of the experiences of disabled people, both in China and around the world. ‘Disability’ is now generally defined in many academic, activist and policy circles as being ‘the experience of a range of “disabling practices” and attitudes within society that further disadvantage, devalue and attack the “personhood” of individuals who are already living with difficulties associated with their “physical differences”’ (Beckett, 2006: 3). At every point I have endeavoured to reflect this understanding in the way I have approached my work even though, as the book clearly demonstrates, this is not necessarily yet the case for China. Indeed, the very

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notion of para-citizenship came more of necessity rather than design because of this incongruity – how could we conceptualise the understandings and experiences of disabled people there (and potentially elsewhere, too) when they seemed to run counter to what more established theories from the UK, USA and elsewhere in the global North were telling us?

I also hope that by uncovering something of the obscured history of disabled people in China and the social, political and cultural mechanisms that have worked and continue to work to frame the ways in which disability has been understood and experienced there, I have identified potential avenues for social change. Certainly, the fact that my research here shows that cultural (self-)representation already appears to offer accessible and effective opportunities for personal and group-based empowerment suggests that positive emancipatory outcomes *are* possible for a wider range of disabled people in China beyond the few cases I have selected for analysis and explication here. But, as Xie Yan (co-founder and CEO of One Plus One Group for Disability) notes in the opening epigraph, this process is not necessarily going to be quick, easy or straightforward (Xie, 2016). This should not deter us in our task, though. This is a collective task and we are only at the starting line.

On that note of collective effort, I would like to take a moment to thank many of those wonderful people and organisations that have enabled me to get to this point. First and foremost, I have to say that the project would not have been possible without the generous support of a mid-career fellowship from the British Academy, held during my time at the University of Sheffield (2013–2014), as well as a period of study leave in 2019 at the University of Nottingham. Having the space and time to think and breathe away from the everyday hustle and bustle of teaching and administration, as well as to plan and carry out that all-important fieldwork in China, cannot be understated.

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Many others, of course, also helped me during the grant writing, research and writing phases of the project; some with leads, materials, translation, constructive criticism and proofreading, some with hospitality during my various research trips to China, and others with administrative support and teaching cover back in the UK. For this I would very much like to thank the following people: Jamie Coates, Hugo Dobson, Lisa Knowles, Michelle Nicholson, Mark Steele and David Walker at the University of Sheffield; Aidan Teare, Robynne Tindall, Richard Lamb, Sally Powell, Li-sa Lim and Caterina Weber, my graduates now scattered around the world; my former colleagues in the Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies at the University of Nottingham – Wang Chaoyan, Cao Cong, Tracey Fallon, David O’Brien, Jeremy Taylor and Zhang Xiaoling – some of whom are now based at our Ningbo Campus in China; Vera Chen and Lily Ma at the University of Nottingham’s office in Shanghai; and Stephen Morgan and Richard Hubbard, directors of the Nottingham–China Health Institute. I am sure there are many more, and I apologise if I have forgotten anyone!

I have been honoured by invitations to share my findings at varying stages with a wide variety of people, groups and institutions around the world. I always received extremely beneficial feedback that has helped to refine the arguments contained herein. Many thanks to the following universities and departments for their kind hospitality and engaging discussions: Department of Modern Languages, University of Stellenbosch; School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester; School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of St. Gallen; Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation Research Centre, University of Oxford; Centre for Transnational Studies, University of Southampton; Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford; Council for East Asian Studies, Yale University; and the Nottingham–China Health Institute, University of Nottingham Ningbo Campus. Thanks also to the

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Finally, this book is dedicated to my long-suffering family – my husband Andrew, Orla and her younger brother Myles – who have waved me off to China on more occasions than I care to remember. I will try to make it up to you now the book is finally finished ...

A Note on Language

Readers will note that, throughout, I use both ‘persons with disabilities’, which is person-first language as employed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and ‘disabled persons/people’, terms that are often preferred by disability studies communities here in the UK. I have done this deliberately to reflect the various contexts and/or provenance of the concepts and theories I am discussing. Readers will also note that I have included many terms and phrases that are now considered out-moded and potentially offensive. These are terms that I have translated from the Chinese and rendered in a way that is both as close as possible to the original sense and understandable to an English-speaking audience. Most of the translations from the Chinese originals are my own. Where this is not the case, I have indicated this in the text. Finally, as is standard practice these days, I have employed the *pinyin* system of romanisation, but retained Wade–Giles where material is quoted directly from another source. Where there are omissions and errors in the text, these are, of course, mine and mine alone.

Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party (also CPC)
CDPF	China Disabled Persons' Federation
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CYLC	Communist Youth League of China
DPF	disabled persons' federation (local or provincial)
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America