# Why Can't Deaf-Mute People Be Cadres?:

# Disability Advocacy and Bureaucracies in 1980s China

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**Abstract**

Analyzing official disability magazines, this article argues that China's state-sponsored disability organization in the 1980s curated a space for persons with disabilities to publicly express grievances, among which labor was a central concern. This history shows that intensified bureaucratization may have marginalized persons with disabilities within the very institution meant to serve them.

*Keywords:* disability advocacy, bureaucracy, labor

# "Why Can't Deaf-Mute People Be Cadres?": Disability Advocacy and Bureaucracies in 1980s China

In 1986, three workers from Jinan Wire Drawing Factory wrote an angry letter to *Voices of the Blind and the Deaf*, the official magazine run by the China Association for Blind and Deaf-Mute People (hereinafter, "the Association"), the precursor of today's state-sponsored disability organization, the China Disabled Persons' Federation (hereinafter, "the Federation"). Their anger was directed at their city government's human resource bureau, who rejected all the deaf candidates recommended by the factory for promotion. Although the majority of the factories with over 500 workers had the presence of disability, they claimed none of the leaders were disabled. "Why can't deaf-mute[1] people be cadres?" they asked (Du et al., 1986, p. 2):

> "They all met the conditions for cadreship. It is so unfair to shut them out! Bullying and humiliation based on deafness and muteness belonged to the Old Society. Shockingly, such a scene reappeared today! […] The municipal human resource bureau claimed that this is the decision of the provincial bureau: because they are deaf-mutes, because they have physiological defects. According to this view, all cadres of our country must be muscular and strong. People who have a disability are not wanted. When did our country set such criteria [?]"

The letter received eager support from the magazine. Not only did the editors make it the first story of the journal issue, but they also supplemented a commentary criticizing the local human resource bureau. Titled "Please Respect Their Equal Rights," the commentary deplored (Xin, 1986, p. 2):

> "Higher-level leaders do not approve so I cannot do anything. This is a blatant and helpless excuse. The truth is, if you don't approve in the first place, why would the higher-level? Socialism granted disabled people equal rights, which is a hundred times better than capitalism. Unfortunately, due to feudal mindsets and prejudice, equal rights are more or less discounted in reality."

The publicity of this story resulted in speedy resolution of the case (Z. Li, 1988a). It is unclear whether the staff writer had a disability, though at least one complainant did. Nevertheless, this case marks a distinctive genre in the official publication of a state sponsored association — it explicitly claimed to represent the voices of people with disabilities and openly criticized government violations of the rights of disabled people, an act increasingly unthinkable today. I use the term "advocacy" as a shorthand to describe such content that facilitated claim-making for or by disabled people. Although propaganda made up vast majority of the magazine, roughly 3% of its pages were routinely dedicated to advocacy.

Analyzing advocacy cases in this official publication, this article shows that the state-sponsored disability organization in the 1980s curated deliberate space for people with

disabilities to publicly express grievances. Advocacy, however limited, existed within the institutions of the state rather than a separate realm, as the disability rights activists strive to carve out today. Sandwiched between the dramatic decades of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and the watershed reforms of the late 1980s, events in the early 1980s leading up to the establishment of the paradigmatic national institution — the Federation in 1988 — has received limited attention from scholarship on disability in China.

This article presents a prehistory of the Federation and the contemporary disability rights movement. The magazine offers a rare window into state-sanctioned disability advocacy in the 1980s, among which labor was a central concern. Market reforms disrupted the socialist labor structure of workers with disabilities, rendering in flux their livelihood, identity, and social relations that were previously organized through the workplace. Meanwhile, disabled readers of the magazine, mostly deaf people, displayed great ownership over the official platform and leveraged it to negotiate their new place in a transitioning society. Institutionally, the shifting discourse of the magazine over the decade, and its eventual takeover by the Federation from the Association, revealed how intensified bureaucratization of the disability cause may have ironically marginalized people with disabilities within the very institution meant to serve them, and corroded its advocacy potential.

## History in and of the Official Publication

China's disability rights movement, as led by persons with disabilities based on

principles of the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2013), is often considered to be prompted by the state's ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* (CRPD) in 2008 (S. Huang, 2019; C. Zhang, 2017). Indeed, the CRPD created a momentum for grassroots disability activists to leverage the civic space and international cooperation for making explicit claims about rights and anti-discrimination in areas including education, employment, and accessibility, with uneven success (Cui et al., 2019; S. Huang, 2020; Y. Huang & Chen, 2022; Z. Ma & Ni, 2020). Despite the tightening of civic space in recent years, associational life and grassroots networks by and for people with disabilities continue to exist (Dai & Hu, 2022; S. Huang, 2022).

With the exception of Kohrman (2005), most scholarship on the political subjectivity and organizing of people with disabilities began with the pivotal year of 1988 (Hallett, 2019; S. Huang, 2021; Stein, 2010), when the Federation was established. The Federation was the brainchild of Deng Pufang, Deng Xiaoping's son who was injured and disabled during the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the Federation symbolizes enormous state commitment to disability issues, and heralds a dramatic intensification of bureaucracies and associational life for people with disabilities. This article seeks to contribute to the still scarce knowledge about institutional and self-advocacy prior to the Federation. The earlier days of the Association also present a different variant of state-led disability initiatives than the Federation.

The Association had a tumultuous history (see Figure 1). Formed in 1960, it was built on merging two preexisting groups — the China Welfare Society for the Blind (founded in

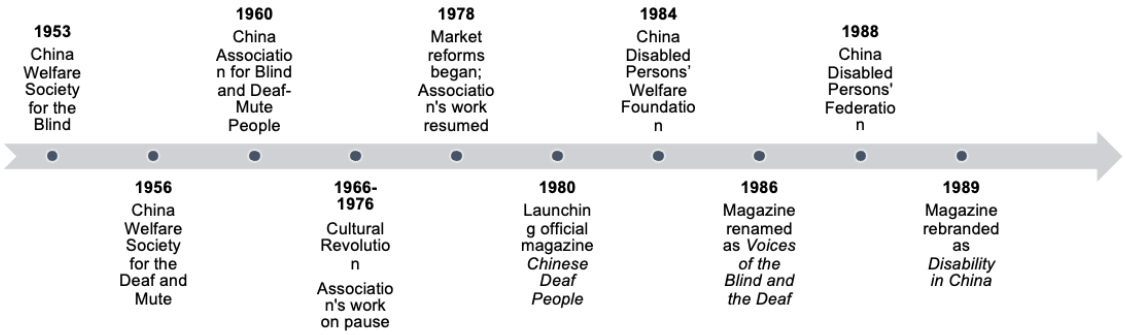
1953), and the China Welfare Society for the Deaf and Mute (founded in 1956) — initially under the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Central Relief Office. The Association's work was halted during the Cultural Revolution, as "welfare" became associated with reactionaries. Some staff members were persecuted, injured, and even killed (Kohrman, 2005, p. 226). It was only until 1978 that the State Council resurrected the Association as a bureau of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA). In 1988, the Association and the China Disabled Persons' Welfare Foundation jointly formed the Federation (China Disabled Persons' Federation, n.d.). Since then, five special associations representing people with visual, hearing, physical, intellectual, and psychosocial disabilities have been established, operating as internal departments of the Federation (X. Wu & Wu, 2022).

In January 1980, the Association launched its official magazine — *Chinese Deaf People*, later renamed as *Voices of the Blind and the Deaf* (hereinafter, "Voices") in 1986. Despite the dual constituencies of the Association, representing both blind and deaf people, its magazine had a strong focus on deaf audiences.[2] Its main readership consisted of the Association's staff members at all administrative levels, the MOCA, special education professionals, and deaf people. *Voices* defined its mission as "promoting the guidelines and policies of deaf-mute work, sharing experience, communicating information, and guiding work based on practice" (The Association, 1986, p. 32), as well as "reflecting deaf people's

voices, and protecting deaf people's rights" (Z. Li, 1985, p. 1). This latter set of goals, which I code as advocacy, is the focus of the study.

**Figure 1**

Timeline for the Association's key milestones




Methodologically, I draw on the official magazine of the Association as a historical primary source, and critically examine the content and discourse of the official texts. Rather than dismissing them as mere propaganda, I see propaganda as an object of inquiry that offers insights into, as Emma Stone puts it, "what *should be* in an ideal China," regardless of the intention or implementation (Stone, 1998, p. 54). In this case, the official magazine represents what the Association perceived as its ideal role. This study systematically reviewed the magazine from 1981 (the earliest issue available) to 1988 (the last issue before it was rebranded into a different publication) based on the collections of Harvard-Yenching Library,

including 51 issues with 1,945 pages in total.[3]

For coverage that expressed grievances to, exposed misconduct of, or sought redress from the state — termed as "fighting against discrimination and neglect" (Voices, 1982, p. 31) in the magazine's words, I coded them as "advocacy." I use page size as a proxy for importance. Articles typically take up a whole page (n=1), half a page (n=0.5), or 1/3 page (n=0.3). I counted 50.3 pages as covering advocacy, amounting to 3% of the total magazine pages. I then conducted a close reading of all the advocacy cases and organized them based on their dates, themes, complainant, objects of blame, and claims for redress. The magazine advocated for a variety of themes, including labor, education, residential status, housing, marriage, rehabilitation, discrimination, and crimes against/by disabled people. Based on frequency, I categorized three most significant clusters of claim-making that generated multiple rounds of dialogue in the magazine, signifying their resonance with the audience's common concerns as well as the self-perceived political priorities of the Association. In the following analysis, I unpack these three clusters of significant claims, namely — labor, sociality, and criminality.

## Labor: From Welfare to Profit

Labor is at the center of the magazine's advocacy. 44% of the pages coded as advocacy are related to the employment of people with disabilities. Debates included the lack

of career development for disabled people, "fake employment" by factories, and discrimination against deaf and blind workers. These cases illuminate the intense clash between the socialist welfare system and the new market economy.

China's market reform since 1978 induced dramatic changes in labor and welfare regimes. The "iron rice bowl" status enjoyed by once permanently employed state employees began to be replaced by labor contracts in the early 1980s (Lee, 2007). Institutional guarantee of welfare benefits also dissolved as the state retreated from welfare provision through the socialist "work unit" (*danwei*). Lay-offs, bankruptcies, loss of benefits, and mistreatment of workers in all types of enterprise gave rise to wide-spread labor disputes since the 1980s (F. Chen, 2003).

Among workers affected by the reform were disabled people working at welfare enterprises. The welfare enterprises, first set up in the 1950s for disabled veterans, allowed those deemed with work capabilities to participate in industrial work. Welfare factory workers reportedly "[received] the same wages as other workers and have access to free health care and sick leave" (Dixon, 1981b, p. 69). A proud sign of "socialist superiority," labor during the Mao era was considered a revolutionary tool to redeem the value of people with disabilities, transforming their "crippled and useless" (*canfei*) bodies into active contributors of socialism (Dauncey, 2020).

The reform preserved the shape of this legacy but altered its nature. The Mao-era welfare factories "placed welfare before factory," and expected little economic value from

their production (Stone, 1998, p. 203). By contrast, Deng Xiaoping's reform sought to transform these factories into competitive, viable businesses. Since the mid-1980s, eligibility to operate welfare factories expanded, together with tax incentives, giving rise to a decade-long boom of welfare enterprises (Shi, 1999). But the new factories generally hired a smaller proportion of disabled workers, and the priorities shifted from welfare to profit (Stone, 1998).

As a result, despite the soaring number of welfare factories in the 1980s (H. Liao & Luo, 2010), workers with disabilities were experiencing a decline in their rights. The magazine was quick to address these concerns. In 1982, Shihan Li, a deaf intellectual and Deputy Chairman of the Association, published a two-page opinion on this problem. He noted that market competition threw many factories out of business, and "under the mechanisms of value and profit, some social welfare factory productions developed disabled people out of jobs, especially blind people" (S. Li, 1982, p. 2). The 1980s also witnessed a stark increase in petitions (*xinfang*, or "letters and visits") by disabled people, according to the magazine. One of the key drivers was livelihood hardships during the reform (Wang, 1988).

The magazine publicly criticized fraudulent practices in welfare enterprises that disadvantaged people with disabilities during difficult times. In the first issue of the 1986 new edition, the magazine spent a whole page discussing the issue of giving blind workers "long holidays," referring to practices in which factories hired disabled people on paper but did not assign them actual work and only paid them minimally. This was discussed as a

common issue across the country, causing noticeable protests (*shangfang*) by disabled workers (Voices, 1986c). Later that year, the magazine launched a series of reporting about welfare fraud in Wenxi County, Shanxi Province (Jing, 1986, p. 3): some factories enjoyed the tax benefits of welfare enterprises but did not hire enough disabled workers; some exploited disabled workers as cheap laborers; and some failed to care for disabled workers and treated them as burdens. The magazine's commentator accused these factories of "profiting privately from welfare enterprises, wiping oil off of disabled people, and taking advantage of the state" (Yue, 1986, p. 2). The story led to the inspection and restructuring of seven factories in Wenxi within a year (Jing, 1987), which the magazine proudly attributed to their constructive criticism (Voices, 1987).

It is worth noting that the magazine's narrow focus on welfare enterprises reflected more its intended audience than the general experience of people with disabilities during this period. Organizing work was one of the key mandates of the Association (China Association for Blind and Deaf-Mute People, 1984). The disabled people featured in the magazine were almost exclusively workers of state-owned industries, ranging from steel, paper, oil, automobiles, to cement, metal, and sewing. In reality, by 1987, half of the country's "employable" disabled people were still unemployed (Z. Li, 1988b). Among those employed, less than half worked at welfare factories even at its peak in the 1990s (J. Huang et al., 2009). The perils of reform-era welfare factories, nevertheless, crystalized broader social turbulences spurred by the drive for profit and the retreat of the state.

Welfare enterprises began waning in mid-1990s due to tightened regulations, partly in response to fraudulent practices (Stone, 1998). Instead, employment quota became the main policy incentive to create jobs for persons with disabilities (J. Huang et al., 2009). Yet "fake employment" practices exposed by the magazine four decades ago remain rampant today (J. Liao, 2020). It is symptomatic of a competitive job market that lacks equal education opportunities and infrastructures for meaningful inclusion but abounds in deeply entrenched views about the worthlessness of persons with disabilities.

**Sociality: The Erosion of Community Space**

The socialist *danwei* functioned as a crucial anchor of economic and social activities. Typical *danweis* were state-owned, urban work units in the public sector that provided shared communal facilities and a range of benefits in addition to a secure job (Lu & Perry, 1997), which had an all-encompassing impact on its members' every aspect of life. For this reason, labor was more than a means to income; it was the core mechanism through which all kinds of social relations — between workers, workers and factories, and workers and the state — were forged. The reform created a vacuum. Since early 1980s, discussions about what to do "beyond the eight hours" of work began emerging in the magazine. The dissolution of old-style welfare production *danwei* had an impact beyond the loss of livelihood. It removed a key space for social life of disabled factory workers, to whom alternative opportunities for sociality became ever more important.

In a 1982 "Reader's Voice" column, the magazine published a letter from six disabled

people in Jinan City, Shandong Province, demanding their social club to be returned (C. Wu et al., 1982). Run by the local Association, the club was the only activity space for blind and deaf people in the city. Since the Cultural Revolution, it has been occupied by a government bureau. Accordingly, the letter complained,

> "[T]he blind, deaf, and mute lost the space for gathering. Everyone could only spend their leisure times at home, bored and frustrated. [We] cannot learn knowledge, cannot understand the current affairs of the country, and cannot participate in cultural and sports activities. How very sad! Under such circumstances, people have no choice but to mess around, wander away, start gambling or even become a criminal."

The letter presented the takeover of community space as a common problem, citing that clubs in many other places have been returned. Indeed, similar problems occurred in Taiyuan City, Shanxi Province. The year 1986's very first story was a detailed report on the occupation of Taiyuan Association's clubs by the military since the Cultural Revolution. The military allegedly refused to implement the municipal government's decision to return the space. The journalist asked (Voices, 1986d, p. 3):

> "Doesn't our *Voices* magazine want to speak for blind and deaf-mute people, and protect their legitimate rights? Then please publish this letter, and urge the Beicheng District military to implement Taiyuan government's decision and return the houses immediately."

Once again, the magazine responded enthusiastically. They added another strongly

worded commentary on the same page, titled "It's Time to Take Actions." The commentator accused the military of being corrupted by Cultural Revolution-style anarchist mindset, ignoring central Party directories, and indifference towards disabled people, against the socialist spirit. Mocking the military's mentality, the author deployed bold, colorful language (Voices, 1986a, p. 2): "You have witty plans; I have solid rules. You have policies; I have counter measures. You make your decisions; my ass is still firmly sitting here."

The seemingly inappropriate language made it even more striking how the Association felt it was appropriately within its position to publicly shame other state organs in its official publication on behalf of people with disabilities. This emotionally charged condemnation paid off. Two years later, the magazine announced that the Taiyuan club reopened. Not only did it recover spaces for reading, gaming, studying, and entertainment — it got better. It now had a match-making office (Y. Ma, 1988).

Indeed, love was a big part of the story. Throughout the decade, letters and questions about romantic life and marriage never ceased to appear in the magazine. Inquiries typically centered on the difficulties of finding love as a disabled person. Although these inquiries did not carry the same political significance as other claims made, they reveal the shifting social conditions in which intimate relationships and collective deaf identity were made possible.

Multiple deaf readers noted how welfare factories were essential spaces for them to meet other deaf people, and potentially, their future life partners (He, 1982). Rural deaf people, they claimed, worked on separate farms and never had a community (Damin, 1984).

Now, as employment became less concentrated in cities, conventional space for deaf encounters also eroded. Meanwhile, the magazine became a virtual space where (mostly) deaf men could post advertisements looking for deaf women, and deaf women could seek advice about their love life. A multi-coverage debate took place around the question "Can deaf-mute and able-bodied people get married?" (Zhu, 1982) Although the discussions are mostly supportive of such relationships, the exoticism and excitement in the debate was indexical of the relative segregation of deaf communities, and a somewhat defined deaf identity whose difference from hearing people needed explicit overcoming.

**Criminality: Moral Panics about Outcasts**

As the state retreated from planning for all aspects of lives, people with disabilities inside and outside the state factory system sought to explore new sociality and cultivate their own space. While factories and clubs were considered legitimate places worthy of the magazine's support, activities beyond the reach of state control were starting to cause moral panics.

In this section, I analyze a distinct cluster of social dialogues that took place in the magazine — deaf people as "criminals" — triggered by the phenomenon of deaf people selling paintings and gambling. Since 1982, the magazine launched a multi-coverage discussion about deaf painting-sellers, inviting readers from all sides to comment on the issue. It was the most extensive single-topic debate throughout the magazine's history. No other subject received such coverage of back-and-forth readers' correspondence about the

pros and cons of the phenomenon. Although the magazine eventually took the official stance of harshly condemning painting-selling, a few deaf readers were able to exploit the space and defend their fellow deaf comrades. This case shows the limited extent to which alternative voices were tolerated, and demarcates the boundary of the Association's advocacy.

Since early 1980s, stories about "deaf-mute people" using fake credentials to forcefully sell high-priced, low-quality paintings began to circulate. These sellers would often carry a fake recommendation letter from their *danwei*, travel to other cities, pirate paintings, and refuse to leave until someone purchased the paintings. These stories sparked heated debate about the morality of the sellers. Most reader comments considered selling paintings a dishonest way of earning, a crime of "cheating the state and the collective," and a symptom of "capitalist liberalization" (A. Chen & Wang, 1982, p. 8). The sellers were said to have stable jobs in factories but tempted by higher profits (Nanjing Association, 1982). Their lifestyles were perceived as greedy, vagrant, and promiscuous (Voices, 1983b). Painting-selling was therefore considered a sign of indolence that betrayed the proletarian work ethic and socialist morality of altruism, diligence, honesty, and frugality (Dixon, 1981a).

A few readers did express sympathy for the painting-sellers. An eighth-grade deaf student from Nanchang City, Jiangxi Province, for example, raised the question of limited work opportunities for deaf people and projected their own insecurities (Deng, 1982, p. 9):

> "In my opinion, after a deaf-mute student graduates, without a job arranged, he has to continue being dependent on his parents. When he thinks of the burden of his parents,

> his mind cannot be at peace. […] I guess after I graduate, I won't find a job immediately either. What to do? I am very worried about my future now. So I hope to hear your thoughts."

Other proponents defended painting-selling as a legitimate source of income under the market economy, a means to proliferate arts and creativity, and a form of "self-help through production" (*shengchan zijiu*) that ultimately would reduce the burden of the state.

Interestingly, even those against painting-selling repeatedly stressed the importance of work and the responsibility of the state. They blamed the factories for letting the workers "fall out" and not "properly arranging deaf-mutes' life and production" (Wei & Lu, 1982, p. 29). They urged the sellers to return to their production unit and demanded the state to educate and help the deaf outcasts settle (A. Chen & Wang, 1982; Zhao, 1982). The Party Secretary of a Beijing factory proposed that the solution was to "occupy the battlefield outside the eight hours" (Meng, 1982, p. 11). If factory leaders kept deaf workers engaged after work with education, sports, and entertainment, the argument went, delinquent deaf workers could be transformed. Another commentary stated that leadership was all that mattered. Some deaf workers were able to resist the temptation because the Party and state leaders cared enough to ensure them proper job placements and political education (Yin, 1982).

These arguments all pointed to the same anxieties about the state's loss of total control over disabled workers' lives. Deaf criminality and labor were two sides of the same

coin. Without a full-blown state arrangement for one's life inside and outside work, deaf people were expected to either be forced to fend themselves through criminal activities or be allured by capitalist egotism. Life was imagined as either entirely under the auspices of the Party-state, or completely off the rails. There was no middle ground. The existence of mobile, enterprising, and self-serving deaf people was unsettling. It contrasted starkly with the model worker figure who was always obedient, loyal, and altruistic (Dauncey, 2020). The agency displayed by the deaf painting-sellers also threatened to dismiss the paternalistic relationship that the state presumed to have with its people, particularly those with disabilities (Z. Ma, 2020). Though some deaf readers managed to advocate for their peers through the debate, the magazine's eventual denouncement of deaf painting-sellers marked the limit of the Association's advocacy. It drew the line where its disabled constituencies were not demanding entitlements granted by the state but were seeking to break free from state control.

## Discussion: Evolving Disability Bureaucracies

In January 1989, shortly after the establishment of the Federation, the magazine was overhauled and refashioned to match the new political alliance between people with different kinds of disabilities and their representatives. No longer called *Voices of the Blind and the Deaf*, the new title of the magazine became *Disability in China*. The change was more profound than a mere rebranding. After 1989, voices of disabled readers almost entirely disappeared from the pages. Discussions of specific identity such as deafness or blindness were replaced by the new official category of *canji*, an umbrella term for all kinds of

disabilities. Individual stories gave way to abstract opinions. More significantly, the content of the magazine shifted from a diverse range of real-life issues that deaf and blind people presumably cared about, to a narrower focus on the priorities of professionals working on disability, such as statistics, rehabilitation, special education, and international events. In other words, the magazine — representing the official voice of the Federation — transformed from a magazine *for* people with disabilities, to one that is *about* them.

This discursive change reflected a broader institutional shift. With the birth of the Federation in 1988, the former Association effectively dissolved. Some of their staff became cadres of the Federation. Five new associations representing people with different types of disabilities — visual, hearing, physical, intellectual, and psychosocial — were gradually established. On paper, the Federation is the formal alliance of the associations. In reality, the five special associations are subordinate to the Federation. With a handful of full-time staff, and a frugal annual budget between 300 USD and 30,000 USD allocated by the same-level federations, their power has practically relegated to organizing a few social activities every year (Sun & Ding, 2016).

Though both are state-sponsored mass organizations, the politics of the Federation and its precursor Association differed in subtle ways. A legacy of Leninist regimes, mass organizations typically function as "a transmission belt through which the Communist Party is able to reach a particular constituency of the people" (Judd, 2002, p. 16). The double duty of serving the Party and serving the constituency is considered theoretically compatible. In

practice, mass organizations are often "unequivocally biased towards the state" (X. Chen & Xu, 2009, p. 651), working more towards top-down policy implementation than bottom-up interest representation (Unger & Chan, 1995; Dreyer, 2008). While the Federation states its mission as "representing, serving, and managing" all disabled persons, its representational function is often enacted by forceful collective actions that threatened local stability (X. Chen & Xu, 2009), and limited to issues of existential value to its institutional or financial status (Kohrman, 2005), such as resisting the ban of motorized tricycles.

The Association similarly privileged Party voices over people's. But its representational efforts were also evident in its readers' reactions. Deaf readers, in particular, displayed genuine ownership over the magazine. When the magazine changed its name from *Deaf People in China* to *Voices of the Blind and the Deaf*, some deaf readers questioned why "squeeze us deaf people together with blind people" and mourned the loss of "a dedicated publication of our own" (Zeng, 1986, p. 27). Readers earnestly critiqued the magazine for too much party-line views and positivity, and they demanded to see the complexity of real lives (Voices, 1983a). Overall, the Association's proactive support for selective claims of disabled people appeared systematically in its official magazine, despite the small scope. Compared to the Federation, the Association exercised more discretion in publicly criticizing (mostly local level) government bodies and challenge discriminatory practices.

Why did the Association routinely allow advocacy by and for people with disabilities in the 1980s? The magazine's own discourse offered some clues. First, rights-protection was

a more explicit mandate of the Association. In multiple occasions, the magazine stressed its own purpose as to "fight against thoughts and actions that discriminate against and neglect deaf people, and correctly reflect reasonable and feasible demands of deaf people"; to "protect the legitimate rights of deaf-mutes, and counter social discrimination" (Z. Li, 1985, p. 1); and to "reflect the voices […] and defend the rights of blind and deaf people" (Voices, 1986b, p. 32). Reflecting upon the magazine's history in the very last issue of *Voices* before the rebranding, the former Director of the editorial department, Zhiqi Li, who later became a Federation official, proudly remarked on the magazine's rights-protection efforts. Despite the tiny proportion, he devoted more ink to advocacy than any other columns of the magazine. He referred to the publication of five readers' letters in 1981 as a major progress, "a heartening step that the magazine took to protect the legitimate rights of deaf people" (1988a, p. 2). Even today, the three core functions of the five associations are "representing, serving, and rights-protection," one word different from the Federation's "representing, serving, and managing" (Y. Zhang, 2021).

Second, the institutional status of the Association was weaker than the later Federation. Early in 1990, thirteen readers wrote to the magazine, asking "can disabled people ourselves form a disabled persons' federation?" (Pan et al., 1990, p. 8) To this, the magazine responded that federations must be approved by the government and cannot be formed by individuals. Federations are "semi-governmental and semi-civil" (*banguan banmin*), said the magazine, and individuals can only form "associations" constituted of the people (as opposed to the state), and apply to become local federation's group member. The

response highlighted the distinction between "association" and "federation," the former more akin to interest groups and the latter more aligned with the state. Increased state investment elevated the institutional status of disability affairs, but paradoxically, may have subjected the Federation to more compliance with state agenda and stricter political scrutiny.

Most importantly, as the official representative body of disabled people in China morphed from associational groups to professional bureaucracies, their personnel makeup also changed. In 1990, two deaf readers asked the magazine whether deaf people could work in the Federation. Having taking leadership positions at a municipal Association for over twenty years, they were puzzled by "why people like us who have worked on disability affairs for a long time cannot join the Federation" (P. Zhang & Guan, 1990, p. 8). In response, the editor affirmed that in principle all disabled people are welcome, but with conditions:

> "The Federation is different in nature from the former Association. The Federation is a semi-governmental semi-civil public institution [*shiye tuanti*]. Staff of the Federation are working state cadres. Generally, to work at the Federation, one must first be a state cadre. […] We believe, as the society progresses, and the quality of disabled people improves, more and more disabled people will work in their own organization."

This interaction revealed the marginalization of disabled people in the new Federation meant to serve them. The magazine's editorial team had deaf staff such as Wen Damin, Li

Shihan, and Fu Zhiwei (Z. Li, 1988a) and blind staff like Li Dafang (D. Li, 2013). The Association also had many active staff members with disabilities. Similarly, the special associations today are typically staffed by people with the kind of disability they represent or their relatives and are closer to local disability communities than the Federation (Y. Zhang, 2021). By contrast, vast majority of the Federation's staff are able-bodied civil servants with no interest in disability. The few disabled staff are more likely men with less severe physical disabilities, preferably veterans, whose number was kept low for efficiency and obedience (Kohrman, 2005). Once a people, disability now means a career (*canjiren shiye*). The bureaucratization and professionalization of disability affairs in late 1980s successfully elevated disability to national significance, but at the same time, it seems, ironically pushed many former disabled cadres out, and diluted its advocacy mandate with able-bodied career bureaucrats representing state interests.

No doubt, the Association's relative freedom to speak up was also a product of the socio-political environment. The 1980s, up until 1989, is known for its unprecedentedly liberal political atmosphere. Media began breaking the convention of only covering good news (Chan, 2002) and critical reportage of societal problems became a popular genre (Lei, 2018). Discourses about "rights" began rising in official media after 1978, and the state eagerly promoted notions of law and rights to help address social and economic crises triggered by the reform (Lei, 2018). The magazine functioned as a *de facto* platform for petition — a mechanism for voicing grievances with long history in imperial China, and routinely facilitated by the modern state since early 1990s (X. Chen, 2011). In this sense,

advocacy by state institutions like the Association is not surprising given China's long tradition of state mobilization of the masses (Perry, 2002). What is worth noting is the institution's own evolution — from a state-affiliated interest group to a hegemonic bureaucracy — one that is increasingly considered by today's activists as a barrier, not just a blessing, to disability rights.

This article does not intend to overstate the shift in disability politics or exaggerate the space for advocacy in the 1980s. The institutional changes have been subtle and oscillating. The claims made through the magazine were predominantly individual grievances rather than collective action, framed in official rhetoric and moral terms, and directed at local rather than national actors, with no intention to question the overall system. Further, the magazine only captured a meager fraction of disabled people's voices. In the magazine's own accounting, its maximum readership was 20,000 nationwide (Yan, 1988). The 1987 National Disability Census also suggested high rate of illiteracy and semi-literacy (68%) among people with disabilities (Stone, 1998), which means only a small literate disabled elite could make claims through the magazine. Advocacy was still the exception, not the norm, in the official publication throughout the 1980s. This article sheds light on what these exceptions were and what made them possible.

## Conclusion

Surveying official publications of the precursor of China's state disability agency, this

article analyzed three significant domains of state-sanctioned advocacy during the 1980s — labor, sociality, and criminality. Fair treatment in welfare enterprises and access to social activities and space was considered legitimate claims that disabled citizens and their allies could make through official channels. Yet deviation from state-approved space such as factories and social clubs could lead to moral panics about the criminality of people with disabilities. These articles revealed the texture of daily lives of people with disabilities amidst the dramatic social and economic transformations in the 1980s. Reforms in the labor regime destabilized working disabled people's livelihood, identity, and social relations that were interwoven with their workplaces. This pushed more people with disabilities into a competitive labor market without equal education or meaningful inclusion, sowing seeds for contemporary disability activism. The publication's discourse also alluded to the nuanced difference in state approaches to disability issues between early 1980s and now. As disability affairs moved from the associational end toward the governmental end of the spectrum, the institution that claimed to represent disabled constituencies seemed to have also lost its edge for advocacy.

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## Footnotes

[1]"Deaf-mute" (*longyaren*) was a common term used by the magazine to refer to all people with hearing impairments. I follow the magazine's original language when translating its quotations. In my analysis, I follow the readers' tendency to refer to themselves as "deaf" (*long*), "blind" (*mang*), or "disabled" (*canji*) during this period.

[2]Two other disability magazines co-existed with *Voices — The Blind Monthly*, which dates back to 1954, and *Spring Breezes*, run by the China Disabled Persons' Welfare Foundation since 1984. But *Voices* is the official mouthpiece of the Association and later the Federation.

[3]A few issues were missing from the collection accessed by the author, including 1981-1, 1987-1 to 3, and 1988-2.