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Disabled Chinese Struggle for a Good Education, and Acceptance

By *DIDI KIRSTEN TATLOW*

Ni Zhen didn't want to become a masseur, even though neighbors, educators and seemingly everyone else in his native Shandong Province urged him in that direction — because he is blind.

“The whole environment was saying, ‘Blind people can only do massage,’ ” said Mr. Ni, 28. “But I wasn't the slightest bit interested.” Music was the other career considered suitable for a blind person, but while attending schools for disabled people in the cities of Tai'an and Qingdao he dreamed of taking the “gaokao,” the all-important university entrance examinations, so he could choose his subject freely. Yet, “the local education department said, ‘We don't have the ability to let blind people do the gaokao,’ ” he said.

Mr. Ni seemed to bow to fate, taking a special examination for the blind and entering a five-year massage program. “I was rebellious because I didn't like being forced to do something that I wasn't into, and to have to spend so long doing it,” he said.

It has taken years for Mr. Ni to find his way, but he has: via Britain, where he completed a master's degree in education at Durham University, and Hong Kong, where he is now studying law at the University of Hong Kong. And he has a message for the world, summed up by the title of a 77-page, unpublished manifesto he has written about disability in China: “Untapped Talent.”

Around the world, one in 10 people have some form of physical or mental disability. “They are the [world's largest minority](#),” according to [United Nations Enable](#), the official website of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities. China says it has 85 million disabled people, about 6.5 percent of the population. The reasons for the lower figure aren't clear.

For many, gaining access to treatment and jobs is a challenge. Poverty is a common companion. The World Bank estimates 20 percent of the world's poorest are disabled. They face hurdles to getting a good education, reducing their chances of emerging from poverty.

In China, too, disabled people are poorer than their able-bodied peers with a disposable income about half of the national average. They are “one of the most needy groups in China, with many living [below the poverty line](#),” Zhang Haidi, the chairwoman of the China Disabled Persons Federation, was quoted by Xinhua, the state news agency, as saying at the federation's recent annual meeting in Beijing.

China has signed and ratified the United Nations convention, the goal of which is to shift perceptions of disabled people from “objects of charity” to “subjects with rights,” the United Nations website said. In 2008, China gave disabled citizens the right to attend mainstream schools.

Improvements are slow but real, said Xu Jiacheng, a professor of special education at Beijing Union University. In September 2012, about 8,700 disabled children began school in Beijing, with about 5,700 going to mainstream schools and nearly 3,000 to special schools, he said, citing government figures. Sometimes, though, the parents of able-bodied children object to the inclusion of disabled children in class. “We have some cultural attitudes to overcome,” he said.

And the state is [investing in people with disabilities](#), even if not always in the right way, experts said. In 2008, it spent 600 million renminbi, or \$87 million, on 190 new schools for disabled people, “[10 times](#) what the government spent on education for the disabled in the whole of the decade between 1991 and 2001,” China Daily quoted an official at the federation as saying. The federation’s chairman is Deng Pufang, who is paraplegic and a son of Deng Xiaoping.

In 2009, it spent more than 12 billion renminbi on “comprehensive service facilities” for disabled people, about four billion more than the previous year, federation figures show.

Yet more than buildings, China needs well-trained therapists, said John Giszczak, general manager of [Elliott’s Corner](#), a private pediatric therapy center in Beijing.

“That’s where they need to invest,” Mr. Giszczak said. “Eventually, they need to create armies of physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists, and they’re not doing that.”

The profession’s low standing hampers its development, he said.

“There is no occupational therapy license in China,” Mr. Giszczak said. “There is a ‘kangfu’ or rehabilitation license. But you are below even nurses in the hospital system. You are considered a technician and have low status. The best students will go on to do a master’s in medicine or the general field and will not go on to practice in rehabilitation.” Physiotherapy and occupational therapy college degrees have just started in some universities, he said.

So despite the significant fixed-asset investment, Mr. Giszczak said, “There is a huge need, a huge dearth in rehabilitation.”

Meng Weina, the founder of Huiling, a nongovernmental organization for people with mental disabilities, said the government often felt its efforts were not appreciated.

“They feel they have done a lot, they have invested a lot. And they have,” Ms. Meng said in an interview. But its urge to control has hampered its effectiveness, she said, with bureaucrats and politics, not specialists with real, on-the-ground experience, in charge.

As a result, disabled people are suffering, she said. “People lack information,” leaving

many parents of disabled children desperate, she said. “In the West, if a child is born disabled, a whole system kicks in to help. Early intervention. That’s not necessarily the case here. The government has hung up a lot of signs advertising services, but it can’t get the system internally to link up. Each part does its own things and guards it jealously.”

One result is that disabled people are not being integrated into mainstream society.

“The government hasn’t understood that disabled people need to grow up in society,” she said. “They build these huge places and stuff all these kids in them.” There is little incentive to change — the facilities are run by officials who may employ their relatives, she said.

The lack of integration means disabled people aren’t often seen in public, and that impedes acceptance. For Mr. Ni, this is revealed not just in the big challenges like education, but also in the daily inconveniences.

He divides his experiences into two distinct spheres: easy in Britain and Hong Kong, hard in mainland China. Public transport in China is very difficult to navigate as a disabled person, he said. When asking for directions on the street, people often respond with incomprehension.

“I’d take out my” government-issued “disability card and ask the way,” he said. “People would point with their hands. I’d say, ‘I’m blind, I can’t see where you are pointing,’ because I could feel their movement. ‘Can you please describe it?’ ” They would still point, he said, even if they added words of description.

In a recent report on access to education for disabled people in China, the advocacy group Human Rights Watch presented many examples of exclusion, such as the 2009 enrollment charter of Capital Medical University in Beijing, which stipulated no admission for “students with disabilities in the torso or the limbs.”

Over 40 percent of disabled Chinese are illiterate, the report said, adding, “While government figures show near universal enrollment of children in primary school, there is a large gap for children with disabilities: 28 percent of such children are not receiving the basic education to which they are entitled.”

“Children with disabilities have the right to attend regular schools like all other children, and are entitled to support for their particular learning needs,” Sophie Richardson, China director for Human Rights Watch, said in a statement. “But instead some schools fail — or simply refuse — to provide these students what they need.”

Said Mr. Ni: “In the mainland of China, there is prejudice against the disabled. It’s not people’s fault. But they’re not educated to know how to understand us.”

Yet like several other people, while he said China was moving in the right direction. Slowly.

“I feel there is a lot of hope because the information age is here, and it’s giving us so many opportunities to learn,” he said. “There are fewer barriers. There’s access to

international knowledge. I feel the direction is good and changes are afoot.”

Mr. Giszczak said he believes the chances of building a solid educational system to train therapists are “quite good, long term. We’re talking 20 to 30 years.” Some special education university departments, he said, were “making real changes to the structure of their programs.”

If education is the key to change — for disabled people, for the staff needed to educate them and the general public — then there is still much work to be done. Mr. Xu estimates that only 20,000 to 30,000 Chinese university students are disabled, out of a total student population of millions. Many of them, if they were blind like Mr. Ni, studied massage or music, the two subjects the state makes easily available. The state still does not offer disabled students access to the general “gaokao,” instead directing them to different systems, he said.

“There is real progress,” he said. “But it’s not perfect, and there are still large gaps.”