

Between Harmony and Difference: Accessibility Under Chinese Collectivism

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Abstract

This paper examines how collectivist ideology shapes the definition and practice of accessibility in contemporary China. Despite the expansion of national accessibility standards and disability policies in recent years, many disabled people continue to encounter environments and technologies that are formally compliant but difficult to use in everyday life. Drawing on policy documents, academic research, media reports, and community-based observations, I analyze how collectivist assumptions about unity, labor, and standardized participation help structure disability governance across three domains: education systems, public infrastructure, and assistive technologies. I argue that accessibility is frequently assessed through installation and regulatory compliance rather than through disabled people's lived experiences, resulting in infrastructures and technologies that signal inclusion without enabling independent use. By examining experiences within Deaf, blind, and DeafBlind communities, this paper highlights the persistent gap between accessible policy and accessible life. At the same time, it suggests that collectivist frameworks of collective responsibility hold the potential to support more inclusive access when disabled people are recognized as active collaborators in policymaking and design. Viewed through this lens, accessibility in China reflects both meaningful progress and enduring structural limits.

Introduction

In a first-person video titled “盲人第一视角：盲人独自去银行会发生什么？”，¹ a blind vlogger films what should be an ordinary walk to the bank (Yezizaizhuiguang, 2025). The tactile paving is shaped in sharp S-curves to avoid manhole covers and end abruptly at construction barriers. Eventually, the tactile strip collapses into cracked cement where the sidewalk ends without warning. This lived experience contrasts with the standards outlined in China's 《无障碍设计规范 (GB50763-2012)》,² which specify in detail where tactile paving must be placed, how wide it should be, and how it should form a continuous route (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China, 2013). In the video, we see the vlogger's hesitations and hear his cane hitting obstacles, showing how “accessible” infrastructure can still produce confusion and risk. But ramps, tactile paving, and elevators appear everywhere in official reports; municipalities photograph, catalog, and measure them. These contradictions reveal a deeper issue: accessibility often looks complete on paper but fails in practice. Why do infrastructures and technologies designed to promote inclusion instead reflect such narrow understandings of disabled people's needs?

I propose that the answer lies in the collectivist ideological framework that has long shaped China's approach to difference. Collectivism, which is rooted in unity, productivity, and

¹ “First-Person Perspective of a Blind Traveler: What Happens When a Blind Person Goes to the Bank Alone”

² *Regulations for Accessibility Design (GB 50763-2012)*, the national accessibility design standard issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China

contribution to the group, values homogeneity as harmony: students wear uniforms, knowledge is taught as realities, and participation in collective activities is mandated as part of becoming a good member of the group. When people with disabilities are asked to adapt to existing standards within this framework, disability is interpreted as something to be rehabilitated instead of a valued identity. In this paper, I demonstrate that collectivism's understanding of difference constrains the meaning and practice of accessibility and how people with disabilities are understood in China.

My argument also responds to a research gap. Although disability policies, institutions, and service models in China are well-documented, few studies examine how ideology shapes the meaning of accessibility (Shek & Merrick, 2012). To address this gap, I draw on policy documents, media reports, and community-based observations to examine how collectivist ideology shapes accessibility across three domains. I begin with the collectivist foundations of disability governance, examining how labor ideology, administrative classification, and standardized education shape disability as a problem of management. I then turn to public infrastructure, where the gap between visible and usable accessibility becomes most apparent. Finally, I examine two cases of assistive technologies for DeafBlind communities in China.

Collectivism, Labor, and Education

Since the mid-20th century, collectivism in China has operated not only as a cultural value but also as a state-organized political framework. Collectivism emerged from the socialist nation-building project of the 1950s, when the Communist Party sought to mobilize labor, unify social identity, and subordinate individual interests to collective development (Parish & Whyte, 1981). During the Maoist era, collectivism was implemented through work units (called “单位” in Chinese), which together cultivated the normative ideal of a “useful” citizen whose value comes from contributing labor to the collective (Chi, 2020). From early adolescence, this collectivist logic is reinforced through state-authorized textbooks. For example, according to *Morality and Rule of Law (Grade 8, Volume 1, 2017)*, a Chinese textbook:

建设美好集体，要坚持集体主义原则，发扬集体主义精神。当个人利益与集体利益发生冲突时，应把集体利益放在个人利益之上。只有坚持集体主义原则，把国家利益和集体利益放在首位，充分尊重和维护个人的正当利益，才能促进社会和谐发展。

Translation: To build a strong and harmonious collective, one must adhere to the ideology of collectivism and promote the spirit of collectivism. When individual interests conflict with collective interests, collective interests should take precedence over personal ones. Only by upholding collectivist principles, placing national and collective interests first, while fully respecting and safeguarding individuals' legitimate rights, can social harmony and development be effectively promoted.

(Ministry of Education Compilation Committee, 2017)

This was also the textbook I used in seventh grade, and we were required to memorize these lines and write them in exams. I still remember copying these passages during dictation tests, treating them as unquestioned moral principles simply because they appeared in our textbook. This material is still taught today, continuing the early socialization process that introduces a collectivist logic of standardization. Under that logic, there is one “correct” way of being a good

student, a good worker, and a good member of society. Disability, which challenges standardization, becomes marginalized. Within this ideology, disability is understood through what Kohrman calls the “productionist” logic of socialist governance, where individuals are judged primarily by their capacity to return to labor and participate in collective production (Kohrman, 2005). Mao era rehabilitation programs thus aimed to restore bodies to functional norms that could serve collective needs.

Although China’s governance landscape has evolved since the 1980s, this collectivist orientation continues to shape labor and education. Consider the case of Ma, a Chinese woman who lost the toes on her right foot and was left unable to walk without a wooden block inserted in her shoe (Kohrman, 2005). After becoming disabled, Ma had no eligibility to work without an official disability ID. When she attempted to obtain a disability ID, the cadre evaluating her repeatedly insisted that “whether or not she could walk easily did not matter,” since she had lost “only” toes and therefore failed to meet the state’s standardized definition of disability. She did not receive a disability ID. While we do not know the specific rules or mechanisms of the disability ID, it is clear that Ma’s sensory needs are ignored because priority is placed on her ability to meet standardized definitions of disability and productivity.

Education further illustrates how collectivism shapes disability policy as an administrative task of managing rather than embracing difference. Recent policy language promotes inclusive education, with the Regulations on the Education of Persons with Disabilities in China stating, “the State guarantees the right of individuals with disabilities to equally receive education and prohibits any discrimination in education on the ground of disability” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2021). However, China’s actual practices still fall far short of these stated commitments. In a study of teachers, administrators, and parents, researchers found that many special schools lack essential assistive devices like refreshable Braille displays, Frequency Modulation (FM) listening systems, screen readers, and tactile learning materials (Alduai & Deng, 2022). Instead, classrooms rely heavily on unmodified, lecture-based instruction that assumes visual and auditory access, even in schools designated for blind or Deaf students. Meanwhile, mainstream inclusion often means physical placement in a general classroom without the captioning, tactile materials, or sensory supports necessary for actual participation (Wang & Shi, 2020).

My own experiences support these findings. Born with hearing loss, I attended a mainstream school in Beijing where no assistive devices were provided. During COVID-19, masks eliminated lip-reading, and I often had to infer missing content in class. Chinese textbooks are concise, intended to be supplemented through class instruction, so I purchased teacher edition textbooks to self-study. Later, in high school, I initiated an online tutoring program for students with hearing loss. Through this experience, I learned that many special education schools “accommodate” students by lowering academic difficulty; the Chinese Ministry of Education requires special schools to follow a reduced curriculum, so many high school age students are still studying middle school material, directly contradicting the law’s promise of equal educational access. Our program tried a different path. We recruited volunteers to create captioning, rewrite textbooks, and tutor students in their spare time, all without institutional support. Over three years, our program reached more than 300 students and logged more than 2,000 hours of volunteer effort. Most of the students we enrolled were initially scoring at or below the pass-fail line on standardized exams, and few expected to attend college at all. After attending our program, 68% of them were admitted to college, demonstrating their capacity for academic success once the curriculum is effectively adapted for their needs.

Thus, although national policy promises equal educational rights, actual implementation aligns with collectivist expectations that expect disabled students to adjust to standardized environments instead of directly adjusting the environments themselves. Across labor policy and educational structures, collectivism produces a system where disabled people are expected to adapt to the standard environment, even when that expectation directly conflicts with the law.

Accessibility and Limits of Usability

Having shown how collectivism manages difference through standardized expectations in labor and education, I now turn to the built environment to examine how these ideological assumptions become material. In public, accessibility is constructed to meet administrative requirements rather than support disabled people's movements. Tactile paving, ramps, and elevators appear everywhere, yet their usability is rarely part of the metric. In this section, I show how cities become filled with tactile paving, ramps, and elevators that signal inclusion but fail to support disabled people in their lived experiences.

Tactile paving is the most visible example of symbolic accessibility. China's national accessibility framework requires tactile paths in nearly all newly built public environments. The national accessibility design regulation, 《无障碍设计规范 (GB50763-2012)》³ outlines precise measurements: where tactile paving should begin, how wide it should be, the angle and spacing of bumps, and how paths should form continuous routes (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China, 2013). Unsurprisingly, these policies have produced an enormous volume of tactile paving nationwide. Media reports frequently highlight cities "completing" thousands of meters of blind paths each year, and municipal work summaries often list tactile paving as a primary indicator of accessibility expansion. One news reports even claims that "无论去图书馆、商厦、体育场馆, 还是各类文化场所, 到处都有无障碍坡道" (Zhang, 2022). Translated, this statement frames barrier-free ramps as being "everywhere" across libraries, shopping centers, stadiums, and cultural sites. However, not all these ramps are usable. Videos shared by the blind content creator @盲探-小龙蛋⁴ on TikTok illustrate these failures. He repeatedly encounters bicycles, cars, and illegal structures blocking tactile paving, and the paving itself often guides him to the ends of paths or directly toward traffic (Figure 1).

Another post on Zhihu⁵, titled "Acting as a blind person for 1 hour, I 'collided' with shared bikes a total of 16 times," further illustrates the imperfections of tactile paving (Chen, 2017). Walking roughly 1,000 meters along tactile paving near three major locations in Beijing, the reporter did in fact collide with shared bikes 16 times, demonstrating how randomly parked communal bikes create constant hazards on routes that blind pedestrians depend on for safe navigation. In my own neighborhood of Haidian Huangzhuang, a row of old trees outside my school pushed their roots upward, cracking the sidewalk. The tactile paving, installed according to regulations, rose into a jagged set of ridges that even I—a seeing pedestrian who does not rely on tactile paving for orientation—nearly fell over. These failures reflect a systematic pattern: tactile paving is only built to satisfy construction requirements, meet "barrier-free city" targets, and demonstrate modernization. Municipalities are evaluated on completion and installation, not

³ *Regulations for Accessibility Design (GB 50763-2012)*

⁴ @盲探-小龙蛋, meaning 'Blind Detective,' is the Xiaohongshu (RedNote) account of the blind content creator.

⁵ A Chinese social question and answer site



FIGURE 1: Screenshot from a Zhihu post illustrating accessibility barriers. (GuoGuan, 2020).

continuous usability. For blind pedestrians, this form of performative accessibility is obviously dangerous, which is why blind people are rarely seen on the sidewalks in China (GuoGuan, 2020). In fact, China has more than 85 million disabled people, meaning roughly one in every sixteen people is disabled, a number so large that one should encounter disabled pedestrians regularly (GuoGuan, 2020). This contradiction reveals how the built environment itself pushes disabled people out of public space.

Ramps and elevators reveal similar tensions. The national accessibility design regulation 《无障碍设计规范 (GB50763-2012)》⁶ requires new public buildings, transportation hubs, and government offices to install barrier-free access points (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People’s Republic of China, 2013). Yet in my own daily life, I repeatedly encountered elevators locked behind staff doors, ramps blocked by security rails, and slopes so steep that no wheelchair could safely ascend them. In many subway stations, accessibility elevators are technically present but locked during off-peak hours, requiring staff assistance that may or may not be available. For instance, a 2024 Pengpai News article titled “无障碍设施使用 ‘有障碍’，残障人士实测上海地铁”⁷ found that many Shanghai subway stations keep their accessibility elevators locked, requiring often delayed staff assistance (The Paper, 2024). At Nanjing East Road Station, the only elevator to the concourse was barricaded, and disabled passengers typically had to wait several minutes for staff to arrive and unlock it. Similar locked elevators were documented across multiple Line 2 stations, illustrating how accessible infrastructure can remain effectively inaccessible in practice. This example highlights the gap between policy and lived experience, emphasizing that accessibility on paper does not guarantee usability in real life.

⁶ *Regulations for Accessibility Design (GB 50763-2012)*

⁷ “Barrier-Free Facilities Have ‘Barriers’: Disabled Residents Test the Shanghai Metro”

Assistive Technology and Rehabilitation Logics

Under collectivism, the burden of adaptation falls on disabled people. This logic also guides assistive technologies, which determine whether access means returning to a standardized norm or enabling different sensory ways of living. In this section, I examine how this design assumption unfolds in China, focusing on DeafBlind communication because it exposes the limits of function-centered design more clearly than any other case.

China's disability policy has long approached assistive devices through a rehabilitation logic. Rehabilitation emphasizes improvement, but it also defines disability through the senses that are absent. Technologies developed under this framework aim to restore sensory function through standardized sensory modes of hearing, vision, and speech rather than support alternative communication tools. A widely shared Xiaohongshu⁸ post shows an older Deaf man and his DeafBlind wife communicating at home by holding each other's hands and signing through touch (Figure 2). Although the wife cannot see or hear, she touches her husband's sign language, feels his moves, and responds through her own subtle shifts of pressure and rhythm. This is a form of language called Protactile, which has also appeared in DeafBlind communities of other countries (Leland, 2022). In Protactile communities, tactile communication is not a substitute for sight or sound, but rather a fully realized linguistic system (Edwards, 2024). Yet Chinese schools, rehabilitation centers, and policymakers fail to recognize Protactile as a legitimate mode of communication, instead imagining touch as merely compensatory, a temporary bridge toward "normal" sensation.



FIGURE 2: Image from a Xiaohongshu post illustrating Protactile communication. (Xiaofanzaipaizhao, 2022).

⁸ China's primary social networking and e-commerce platform, also known as RedNote

Thus, alternative forms of communication exist, but they exist outside of formal systems. The absence of institutional recognition becomes even clearer when considering the devices Chinese designers do produce. Many rely on sensory substitution models that convert environmental cues or text into vibration signals. David Eagleman’s research on sensory substitution appears frequently in Chinese engineering literature, where touch is imagined as a channel for transmitting coded information (Eagleman, 2021). Take the mobile phone designed for the DeafBlind. The invention comprises a mobile telephone, a Braille input device coupled with the central processor, and a vibration sensor coupled with said central processor for transforming received short messages into vibration to be output (Lou, 2006). But touch-based communication used by DeafBlind communities is not a series of vibration codes—it is relational and co-sensory. It depends on continuous movement, not isolated signals. So, even though the community-born language of Protactile already exists, it is not framed as a legitimate linguistic system and remains unsupported by policy, education, and technological development.

This gap between community-born communication and assistive technologies further reflects collectivism’s influence. First, it reflects a collectivist orientation that privileges standardized forms of communication instead of protecting the unique, culturally created languages of disabled communities or enhancing communication without reshaping disabled language itself. Second, it illustrates how collectivist systems tend to prioritize and optimize speed and efficiency over relational meaning, flattening complex tactile grammar into machine-readable units. In assistive tech, this becomes the belief that disability can be addressed through uniform devices designed by experts for a generalized “disabled user.” It imagines accessibility as a problem with a technical solution rather than a process requiring co-creation.

Yet global evidence suggests that co-creation is essential. Across numerous design cases, researchers have noted that prototypes developed without sustained collaboration with DeafBlind users often fail to support the embodied, co-created nature of tactile communication. Oosterom-Calo et al.’s systematic review of over forty studies found that DeafBlind people typically entered the design process only in late-stage usability testing, long after foundational assumptions had been set (2020). These patterns highlight the need for co-design and customization in creating technologies that reflect how DeafBlind people actually communicate.

The absence of co-created technology in China thus reflects not only a lack of research but also a deeper ideological structure. Disability governance is government-driven and service-oriented, leaving little institutional space for grassroots sensory knowledge to shape design. Meanwhile, disabled students face structural barriers in accessing mainstream and higher education settings where design labs, interdisciplinary studios, invention competitions, and other innovation platforms are located. These programs are technically open to all university students, but because so few disabled students ever reach the institutions that house them, disabled students remain largely absent in technological creation opportunities. In fact, according to the *Livelihood Situation of Disabled Population in China*, only 3.77% of disabled people have a high-school education, 1.21% hold a vocational secondary certificate, and just 1.15% have earned an associate, bachelor’s, or graduate degree (Chen et al., 2009). In a collectivist system where innovation is framed as a national project advanced through colleges and universities, those excluded from mainstream educational pathways have almost no opportunities to enter design spaces and act as co-creators. Lived sensory experience is rarely recognized as knowledge and instead devalued in favor of credentialed expertise.

My own experiences underscore how different and more effective technology becomes when disabled users are included from the beginning of the design process. In high school, I

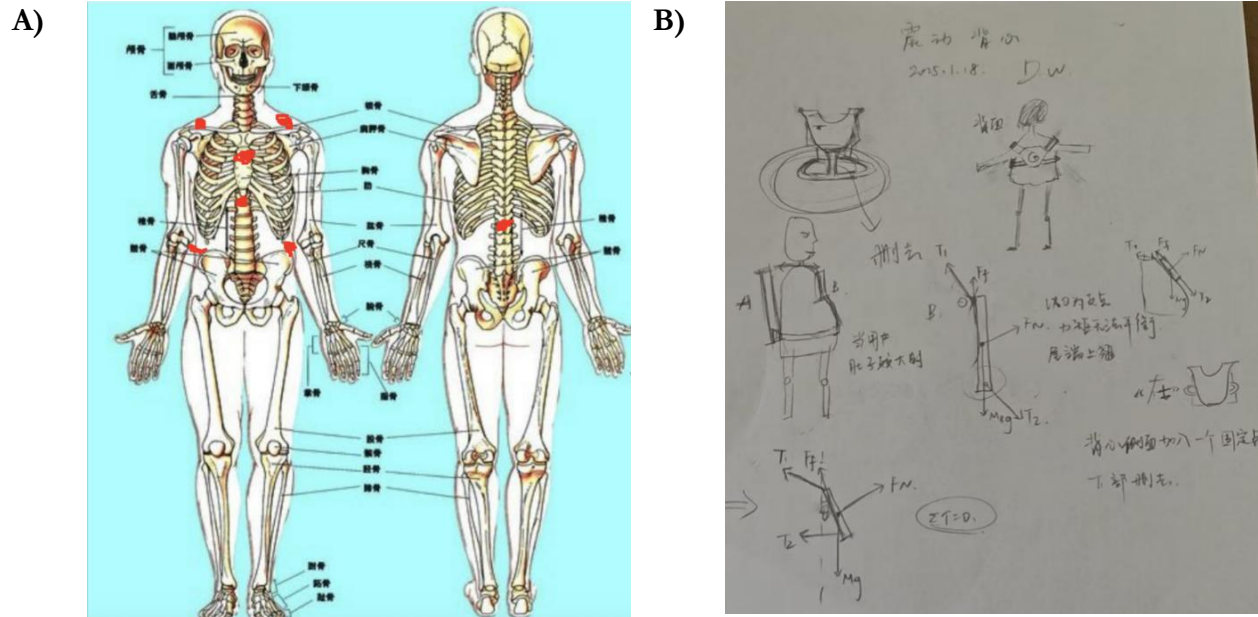


FIGURE 3: Key Elements of Author's Co-Creation Design Experience. A) Sensory test results indicating bone areas with increased sensitivity to vibration (red spots). **B)** Design sketches. All diagrams were created by a student collaborator and reproduced with permission.

worked with classmates to develop vibration vests for people with hearing loss to experience music at concerts. Before designing anything, we invited ten hard-of-hearing participants to help test which parts of the sternum and clavicle were most sensitive to vibration (Figure 3A). Through these sessions, we learned that the sternum and clavicle convey vibrations most clearly, which then shaped where we placed the transducers (Figure 3B). We continued prototyping with users, adjusting intensity, frequency, timing, and musical mappings based on their feedback. The vest was later used at an accessible concert and was covered by CGTN⁹ in a news report titled “Accessible concert showcases power of music to break down barriers” (2025). At the festival, many users said they could finally feel the sound frequencies through their vest.

In many ways, this co-creation design process was inherently collective. Rather than beginning with a fixed technical solution, the project developed through repeated interaction with participants, whose sensory experiences directly shaped decisions about transducer placement, intensity, and timing. Knowledge was thereby produced through testing, adjusting, and iterating together, interpreting feedback as a team, and allowing the design to reflect how users actually perceive sound through their bodies. When coordination is structured around shared participation and disabled participants are included as active collaborators in shaping design decisions, collectivist frameworks can support forms of accessibility that emerge from lived experience.

Conclusion

Across labor, education, infrastructure, and assistive technology, my research has demonstrated how collectivism shapes accessibility not as a practice of honoring sensory difference but as a project of standardization. In classrooms, disabled students are asked to adjust to fixed

⁹ The English-language news channel of state-run China Global Television Network, based in Beijing, China

pedagogical norms; in cities, accessibility is evaluated through installation rather than usability; in technology, devices are designed to restore conventional function rather than support diverse sensory practices.

However, while collectivism often narrows the meaning of access through standardization, it can also coordinate large-scale initiatives that provide a degree of stability for disabled communities. For instance, employment policies such as the Regulations on the Employment of Persons with Disabilities have established quota-based hiring systems and state-supported “concentrated employment,” creating protected pathways that reduce exposure to open market competition (Wen, 2020). Although these arrangements may limit long-term mobility, they can also offer more predictable access to income and institutional support. Similarly, collectivist governance has enabled nationwide mobilization around disability through coordinated campaigns such as the National Day for Helping Persons with Disabilities, where government agencies, social organizations, and the media participate in unified efforts to raise awareness around disability rights and expand accessibility initiatives. These examples reflect that, like any social framework, collectivism carries multifaceted effects.

Ultimately, these dynamics matter not only to policymakers and designers, but also to readers, who already participate in the collective environments described throughout this paper. Most people will, at some point in their life, rely on ramps, elevators, captioning, or tactile cues; whether the cause is injury, aging, caregiving responsibilities, or simply navigating crowded spaces, we all need accessible infrastructure and accommodations in our daily lives. Understanding how collectivist assumptions shape accessibility reveals how deeply everyday experiences are governed by underlying ideological choices, enabling us to co-create a truly accessible world built on lived experiences rather than detached institutional standards and definitions.

Coda

I began this project thinking of accessibility through the narrow lens of my own experience. I recalled trying to hear teachers through masks during the COVID-19 pandemic and studying with multiple versions of teacher edition textbooks because each one contained different explanations. I was also denied the Language Listening Test of my high school entrance exam; instead of arranging an accessible exam, I was simply excused from the test and given full marks without being allowed to take the actual test. Later, when I organized the online tutoring program for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students described in the Collectivism, Labor, and Education section, I found myself asking why schools preferred lowering academic standards rather than redesigning education to make learning more accessible.

Once I started paying attention, the built environment revealed the same faulty logic. Near my home, tree roots buckled the tactile paving into uneven peaks, workers swept fallen leaves onto the blind path, and shared bikes occupied entire sidewalks. When an injury put me in a wheelchair, I realized that ramps were too steep to climb safely, elevators remained locked behind staff doors, and there was a glaring everyday absence of people with physical disabilities that spoke more to environmental exclusion than population statistics.

These experiences taught me that accessibility is not a cliché concern. Ramps ease movement for parents with strollers and workers carrying heavy loads. Tactile paving supports older adults whose vision has faded. Captioning benefits language learners and anyone struggling to hear in a crowded place. Yet collectivism continues to treat difference as something to be managed or rehabilitated, asking people to adapt themselves to a shared standard rather

than expanding that standard. If accessibility in China is to move from symbolic inclusion to lived participation, collectivism must first shift toward recognizing the diversity of sensory and embodied knowledge already present in its communities. I hope my research will help pave the way for that cultural and ideological change.

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