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# The Depiction of Disability in a Changing World: The Image of the Disabled Body in Chinese and East Asian Cinema and Literature

Steven L. Riep

Brigham Young University, U.S.A

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The depiction of characters with disabilities in literature and visual culture has changed dramatically over the past few decades. While for centuries disability was often been viewed from the perspective of stigmas and stereotypes, which read impairments as limiting and differentiating people from the able-bodied and neuro-typical “normal” person, physical and mental impairments today are now increasingly viewed with greater sensitivity in ways that are empowering and enabling. Works of fiction, poetry, film, and art today frequently see disabled people and their bodies as an integral part of society and as part of the human experience, rather than as a marginalized other.

At the outset, I will briefly explain some terms that I will use in the course of this paper. Impairments include blindness, deafness, speech/communication disorders and more rarely loss of taste or smell. Mobility impairments incorporate amputation, paralysis, limb abnormalities, or medical conditions that can impair movement such as cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis. Finally, cognitive impairments refer to conditions such autism and Down Syndrome that can limit mental function and intellectual development.

While the terms impairment and disability are often used interchangeably, in the humanities branch of disability studies, impairments describe the medical or physical condition of loss of function or ability, while disability engages the broader social conditions that lead to the ways in which impairments facilitate or limit a person’s ability to function. For example, accessible building design, Braille signage, and sign language interpretation reduce the disabling effects of impairment for people who are mobility impaired, blind, or hard of hearing. Similarly, social constructs, biases, and stereotypes associated with impairments can also have a disabling effect, whereas efforts to include, mainstream, and engage people with impairments enables rather than disables them, suggesting that impairments need not inherently be disabling.

Disability studies scholarship has called for a move away from a medical approach based on a need to treat, cure, and rehabilitate people with medical conditions (impairments) to a social model that sees disability as stemming from biases, stereotypes, physical barriers, and other factors that limit access and integration into society for people with impairments. In humanistic studies, the goal

is to facilitate inclusion by reducing barriers, minimizing difference, and enhancing capability that allows for rich and meaningful lives free from stereotype and stigma. Disabled bodies are no longer alien, strange, inferior, or objectified, but instead become in the words of disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson terms “extraordinary bodies,” different in a neutral or positive way.<sup>1</sup>

Depictions of impairments in East Asian literature and culture have developed significantly since premodern times. In earlier eras, impairments were often associated with particular stigmas or stereotypes. For the most part, blindness, deafness, mobility impairments, and cognitive impairments were viewed negatively, particularly within Confucian societies wherein disability could limit the ability to pursue a course of education, sit for and pass highly competitive civil service examinations, hold a job, marry, and have offspring. It could also limit the ability to practice filial piety and make ancestral sacrifices, making people with impairments incapable of fulfilling core social expectations. The more severe the impairment and the more it limited a person’s ability to meet social expectations, the more stigmatizing the impairment would be. While Daoism as taught by the fourth century BC philosopher Zhuangzi actually privileged people with impairments as models of proper conduct for their focus on meditation and devout practice, most people saw disability as limiting and something to be feared. Career and marriage options for people with impairments were quite limited, and many resorted to begging to support themselves.

In the early modern era in China and in other East Asian countries, people with impairments continued to face bias. In China, modernizing intellectuals and the Republican government supported calls for hygiene, physical fitness, and able and neuro-typical bodies in the military and in the civilian population at large. The whole and healthy body became a symbol of a strong and healthy nation, and this left little positive symbolic potential for the impaired body. Not surprisingly characters with impairments were rare in fiction and film from this period, and in the rare cases where they did appear played marginal and largely stereotyped roles. Under the People’s Republic of China, emphasis on the healthy proletarian body emerged as physical and cognitive fitness became prerequisites for serving the nation in constructing socialism. Disabled bodies did appear, but largely in roles geared to show the power of communism and Mao Zedong thought to miraculously transform people with impairments into productive citizens. In Taiwan, where healthy realism prevailed, characters with impairments appeared only rarely and were viewed as signs of karmic retribution as found in the book *Wang Yangzhong’s Boat* (Wang Yangzhong de yitiao chuan), a staple of the secondary school curriculum for many years, and its film adaptation of the same name, known in English as *He Never Gives Up*. In Japan and Korea people with impairments continued to be viewed as limited in capability and use to society, though in Japan, veterans with disabilities enjoyed greater resources and respect than in China, Taiwan, or Korea.

In popular cinema of the 1960s from Hong Kong and Japan, we begin to see the depiction of leading characters with impairments in serial films, though in both cases they are martial

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1. See Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

arts practitioners living in the premodern era. Zhang Zhe (Chang Che)'s series of One-Armed Swordsman films starring Jimmy Wang Yu situated disability in the realm of the martial arts-practicing knight errant. In the case of this Hong Kong film series, the first installment, *The One-Armed Swordsman*, the eponymous protagonist Fang Cheng loses his arm when his master's daughter cuts it off, after which he flees into self-imposed exile. He teaches himself to fight with his left hand and, with the aid of a secret book of left-hand fighting techniques, soon regains his fighting ability and handily defeats the men trying to defeat his master and his brother disciples. In spite of his martial arts prowess, Fang refers to himself throughout the film consistently as *canfei*, a term equivalent to the English word cripple, implying worthlessness. This suggests that his impairment has devalued him and made him less than human, in spite of the fact that he alone is able to defeat the men who are killing his teacher's other disciples. In the first sequel in the series, *The Return of the One-Armed Swordsman*, Fang emerge from retirement to fight a consortium of eight villainous martial artists who threaten the established and upright schools of sword-using martial arts and victimize the local people. In this film, Fang is clearly identified as the only person capable of defeating the villains and enjoys the deep respect of all who fight with or against him. The self-deprecating references are absent from this film, suggesting that Fang has now become accepted for his superior fighting skills and no longer needs to apologize for his impairment, since it in no way limits his ability and has shifted from being a negative marker of loss to a sign of strength and superior skill.

Similarly, in Japan from 1962-1989, the *Zatoichi* franchise, a sequence of twenty-six popular films and a four-year-long television series of one hundred episodes, both starring actor Shintaro Katsu, brought disability to the fore. It stars the itinerant blind masseur and gambler Zatoichi, who happens to be a superb swordsman. In the films he makes his living by gambling with dice and giving massages, though he also practices acupuncture as well as plays music and sings, typical roles associated with blind persons in traditional Japan. Given the long run of the films and their popularity in Japan, Zatoichi became one of the most widely-known characters with an impairment—specifically blindness—in Japan. Zatoichi, with his finely-honed fighting skills, is unquestionably an example of an empowered person. Yet, because of the traditional setting of the films and television programs, his role as a knight errant, his practicing expected traditional career paths for people with visual impairments, and the ways in which Katsu played him, Zatoichi remains a product of the tradition-based popular films in which he appears and does not become a model for a person with disabilities in a modern age. The modern, able-bodied viewer sees the Zatoichi character as *kowai*, that is scary or frightening, or something to be dreaded, feelings they then associate with visual impairments and the people who have them, according to Kishi Hiromi, a historian of education for the blind who is affiliated with the Kyoto School for the Blind and Deaf.<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1980s, views of the disabled have changed dramatically in China, Korea, Japan, and

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2. Interview with the author, June 29, 2013, Singer-Polignac Foundation, Paris, FRANCE.

Taiwan. This has been due to domestic factors such as political liberalization, social and educational reforms, economic development, and the influence of local charitable, non-governmental, and religious organizations that have advocated for rights for people with disabilities. International factors, including the United Nations year and decade for disabled people, international NGOs, charitable and advocacy groups for people with disabilities, as well as educational and cultural exchanges including study abroad opportunities have also shaped views of disability at the individual, local, and national levels. Not surprisingly, literary, filmic, and artistic works produced after this period tend in general to show an awareness of, interest in, and sensitivity towards characters with disabilities. Over the last two decades in particular, characters with disabilities have become the focus of a variety of artistic works. While not always positive, the overall trend is towards more inclusive and less objectified treatments of people with sensory, mobility, and cognitive impairments. I would like to briefly survey a variety of examples that illustrate this trend. Because I specialize in Chinese literature, film, and culture, most of my examples come from China or Taiwan, though I will introduce one Korean film to demonstrate that this pattern also applies to East Asia as a whole.

To begin with an example from literature, I turn to the work of Yu Xiuhua, a peasant poet and a woman with cerebral palsy. Through its circulation on the internet, Yu's work has rapidly gained fame throughout China over the past four years. One of the central features of Yu's work is a discussion of her own body and disability, which she treats candidly and frankly. In a manner devoid of self-pity that balances both the challenges she faces and the opportunities they afford, she chronicles the challenges she faces living with cerebral palsy and the speech and mobility impairments had led to. In "I simply live brazenly," Yu writes:

A life without a single redeeming future, loving devoid of merit  
 a marriage that no medicine can cure, a body that, even with medicine, is difficult to cure.  
 In a thousand fateful moments in which I should have died  
 I grasp with all my life a chance to live  
 and with this only chance  
 I sing, I turn in my dance.<sup>3</sup>

Yu first acknowledges common perceptions about her life with disability—holding no future and having no accomplishments—and combines them with two aspects of her reality, a failed marriage and a body with impairments stemming from her cerebral palsy. By all rights, she notes, she should have died, but she has channeled her energy into grasping the chance to live, finding joy in her life

3. “我只是死皮赖脸的活着” (Wo zhishi sipilailian de huozhe 我只是死皮赖脸的活着), in Yu Xiuhua 余秀华, 我们爱过又忘记 (*We Have Loved and Forgotten 我们爱过又忘记*) (Beijing: Xinxing chunbanshe, 2016), 100-101. English translation published in Steven L. Riep, “Body, Disability, and Creativity in the Poetry of Yu Xiuhua,” *Chinese Literature Today* October 2018.

as indicated by her singing and dancing. Life for Yu Xiuhua may pose challenges, but it is rich and rewarding also. As a woman with cerebral palsy, someone who is doubly marginalized in Chinese society, Yu writes extensively about her body and her impairment, giving her poetry the unique perspective of a disabled writer, not simply a character with impairments created by an able-bodied author or filmmaker as is the case for the other works I will discuss.

Feng Xiaogang's 2010 epic disaster film *Aftershock* also offers positive depictions of disability, though in terms of a supporting character. Fang Da, the son of the protagonist Li Yuanni, is injured when he is caught in a collapsed building during the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake. To rescue him, a large slab of concrete that traps both him and his older sister is moved, leading all to believe that his sister Fang Deng is crushed to death. Fang Da is taken from the rubble alive, though his left arm has been crushed and must be amputated. This leads his paternal grandmother to complain tearfully that his life is ruined because he cannot hold a book and pen at the same time, meaning he will not succeed in school. For the grandmother, Fang Da's impairment means little to no future, since disability implies that one is useless, stigmatized, and incapable. For her, Fang Da becomes an object of loss and pity. Fang's mother, Yuanni, however, works to help her son succeed in school and pass as able-bodied, a goal Fang Da does not share. She aims to have him follow the educational path to career and life success, though Fang Da has no interest in going to school and taking exams. She buys him an expensive prosthetic arm, which would hide his impairment, but he opts instead for a passive cosmetic arm, a subtle way of acknowledging his disability by not hiding it. Fang Da aims to make a career for himself in the travel industry, beginning with a job as a pedicab driver. Through his hard work and effort, Fang Da works his way up through the ranks to become the owner of a large and prosperous travel agency. He also acquires the trappings of a wealthy businessman, including a home, BMW sedan, wife, and eventually a son. The film portrays him as upwardly mobile, capable, and non-objectified. He becomes a model of success for not only disabled people, but also for able-bodied people as well, a reminder that hard work and effort can facilitate success and that the traditional education-centered career path is not the only road to success. This depiction of disability may also hark back to Zhang Haidi, the mobility impaired author, translator, and later disability group leader who, in her earliest appearance in propaganda posters in the early 1980s, became a symbol of overcoming adversity through hard work and personal effort for the population at large. *Aftershock*, a main melody or politically orthodox film of 2010s, thus echoes this earlier use of the iconic model Zhang that emerged at the start of the era of reform and opening up when disability was also reappraised in China in a positive light.

The Taiwan film *Island Etude* likewise demonstrates how a character with an impairment can live a rich and full life and advance in society as is shown in the works of Yu Xiuhua and in the character Fang Da. The protagonist Mingxiang, a college student on the verge of graduation, embarks on a bicycle trip around the island of Taiwan, a popular rite of passage. Mingxiang happens to be hard of hearing and has some speech challenges, yet the film never depicts these impairments as becoming barriers to the successful completion of his trip. Loosely constructed

from a series of encounters between the protagonist and a variety of people from all walks of life and cultural and ethnic backgrounds in Taiwan, *Island Etude* lacks a strong central narrative thread other than the bicycle journey of a young man with some disabilities. The film director Chen Huaien had previously shot a series of travel videos for a Taiwan tourism organization, and the episodic nature and visual style of the film with its emphasis on motion and travel reflect this. These features suit the depiction of Mingxiang particularly well as they highlight his capability, mobility, and inclusion. He converses freely and easily with both old and young, men and women, and foreign as well as Taiwanese people from all walks of life, engaging with each in a way that impacts their lives in a positive way. The director's frequent use of tracking shots, which frame Mingxiang riding his bicycle along highways with expansive views of the ocean and of fields, conveys a sense of his freedom of movement and physical mobility. The film empowers its protagonist and instills in him independence, competence, and confidence that allow him to function fully and meaningfully in a wide variety of situations without making him subordinate to larger narratives of overcoming of the sort found in *Aftershock*.

It is worth noting that not all films depict disabilities in a positive light, and that while the overall trend in literature and art has been to treat disabilities in increasingly progressive ways, some examples of more negative, retrograde depictions continue to appear. There is no better example of this than Lou Ye's 2014 adaptation of Bi Feiyu's novel *Tuina* or *Blind Massage*, which despite being a recent film, depicts visual impairment in stigmatized and stereotypical ways. Set in a massage therapy clinic staffed with blind massage therapists, the film focuses more on their isolation, sexual relationships, and limited career possibilities than it does on their capability, mobility, empowerment, or inclusion. While therapists with visual impairments manage operations and treat clients, they rely heavily on sighted staff who take care of day-to-day operations and the day-to-day needs of the massage physicians. The blind staff members live segregated in a dorm to which they are taken as a group by their sighted staff members, who also prepare and serve all meals. They are rarely if ever shown moving around their neighborhood, much less the city independently or taking care of their own needs. The cinematography offers point-of-view shots that are out of focus, dark, or otherwise unclear, representing the limited sight of the visually impaired staff members, but this represents the limitations of their capability rather than any sort of empowerment. The camera's gaze is at times voyeuristic, depicting private, intimate moments in an intrusive format that privileges the sighted viewer over the blind subject of the camera's gaze. Instead of showing the blind staff's capability and mobility, the film focuses on their sexual desires in a way that perpetuates stereotypes that link disability with polarized sexuality: either a complete absence of desire or passions raging out of control. Similarly, there is a tendency to show those who are blind as irrational, emotional, and unpredictable rather than as rational, intelligent, thinking people. When the clinic closes at the conclusion of the film, the plot reveals that few if any of the blind therapists continue to practice massage therapy. In fact, most seem to head off into unspecified and thus uncertain futures. The only character to continue to work in massage therapy is Little Ma,

who through an accident, regains some of his sight. This troubling ending indicates that only the sighted can live independently, hold a job, and have meaningful lives, a pessimistic view that does little more than reinforce popular stereotyped and stigmatized views of the lives of people with disabilities.

It is fair to say that in literature as well as in art, authors, filmmakers, and artists from not only China, but also other East Asian countries portray characters with disability with sensitivity and awareness and in ways that highlight capability, mobility, and inclusion. *Blind Massage* then is more the exception than the rule. In the wider East Asian context, we find this in works such as Korean director Sang-hoon Ahn's 2011 film *Blind*. A police detective drama with a blind former police cadet fighting a misogynistic serial killer who targets women, the film stars a female protagonist, Min Soo-ah, who happens to have visual impairments, is depicted as an independent, intelligent, mature, and capable woman. It shows her life in quotidian detail and reveals that she is capable of working through challenges and solving problems and crimes through the use of her native intelligence, police training, persistence, hard work, and the selective use of adaptive and assistive technology. The film also interrogates preconceptions of blindness as debilitating and offers a candid portrayal of how blind people are treated in South Korea. Those with visual impairments are frequently seen as unlucky, careless, and unintelligent. The film shows this early on when Soo-ah attempts to cross a street in a crosswalk, only to be honked at and verbally abused by impatient drivers waiting for her to clear the intersection. It also reveals bias when the police officers interviewing witnesses resist taking her statement because in their minds, her impairment precludes her from being a reliable witness. However, the film's central narrative demonstrates an alternative approach to disability in contemporary South Korea that moves beyond traditional biases. Soo-ah earns the respect of a police inspector from the southern port city of Busan on temporary assignment in Seoul. As a marginalized man from the periphery who faces bias in the metropole, he comes to believe her story and collaborate with her. Together they try to find the killer before he finds and kills Soo-ah. The film climaxes with a nighttime confrontation at the deserted and darkened orphanage where Soo-ah was raised. Soo-ah uses her blindness and adaptive technology to level the playing field with the strong, sighted, and violent killer in the thriller tradition of the Audrey Hepburn film *Wait until Dark*. Min Soo-ah triumphs over the villain when she knocks him out after she has lured him to his car by breaking a window and setting off the car alarm. The film empowers Soo-ah by placing her at the center of the plot: she moves the investigation forward, solves the crime, and captures the killer. As the film concludes, she is readmitted to the police academy, graduates, and is poised to take her first job.

In sum, over the past two decades, depictions of people with disabilities have increased in frequency in East Asian literature and art. In general, these depictions have evolved away from stereotypes and stigma that focus on disabled people as minor characters who are dependent, incapable, and lack physical and social mobility towards empowering, inclusive, and mobilizing portraits of leading protagonists with impairments. While there are exceptions to this, as seen in

the case of *Blind Massage*, the trend overall is positive, encouraging, and real. In the case of Yu Xiuhua, a poet with impairments, we find a person with impairments as the author rather than the subject of a work of art, reminding us that disabled persons can be the creators of literary, filmic, and artistic works as well.

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