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Social Exchange, Accessibility, and Trust: Interpreters' Perspectives of Inclusion in Chinese Welfare Factories (1950s–1990s)

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Abstract

This article examines the social inclusion process of early-generation deaf workers in Chinese welfare factories (1950s–1990s) from the perspective of sign language interpreters. Drawing on oral history interviews with ten interpreters and social exchange theory, the analysis identifies three analytically distinct but sequential phases of social inclusion—initiating trust, reverse inclusion, and social inclusion—each centered on the interplay between accessibility and trust-building and distinguished by patterns of hedonic value, activity, and referent. The initiating trust phase reveals how interpreters shifted from negative perceptions and inaction to positive engagement, fostering linguistic accessibility and affect-based trust as they recognized deaf workers' competence beyond linguistic barriers. Both reverse inclusion and social inclusion are marked by positive hedonic value and high activity, but differ in their primary referents, or agents of action. In reverse inclusion, deaf workers welcome interpreters into the community, deepening linguistic and cultural accessibility and fostering affect-based trust that surpasses competence-based trust. They further exercise their agency by petitioning factory leadership to appoint these trusted colleagues as official interpreters. In the social inclusion phase, interpreters use their agency to advance inclusion beyond the factory; the accumulated affect-, commitment-, and competence-based trust from deaf workers empowers interpreters to bridge systemic inaccessibilities outside the factory. Our findings underscore accessibility as both the cornerstone and Achilles' heel of social inclusion: It emerges as a product of social exchanges and as an enabler of trust at each phase, yet when welfare policies and institutions provide only physical, without linguistic and cultural, access, genuine social inclusion remains impossible.

Keywords
accessibility; China; deaf workers; oral history; sign language interpreters; social exchange theory; social inclusion; trust; welfare factories

1. Introduction

How can genuine social inclusion be achieved for marginalized groups—especially for groups such as the deaf community, who face distinct barriers to accessibility? Welfare systems often champion accessibility through the integration of professionals, services, and communities, and by upholding human rights as guiding principles (United Nations, 2007), yet for many people with disabilities, these ideals remain more aspirational than real. This persistent gap between policy frameworks and lived experiences raises a fundamental question: Can welfare policies and programs, by design alone, guarantee accessibility and inclusion for individuals with disabilities?

This question is particularly critical for deaf Chinese individuals, who encounter not only barriers common to people with disabilities in China, but also unique challenges rooted in linguistic inaccessibility. Unlike many people with physical disabilities who access social resources through the dominant spoken language, a large portion of deaf individuals primarily rely on sign language (SL)—a linguistic modality historically misunderstood, stigmatized, and at times, derogatorily dismissed (Zhao, 2015). Societal perceptions have long associated deafness with incompetence, intellectual inferiority, and diminished social value (Gertz, 2003). This dual exclusion—stemming from both physical impairment and linguistic difference—renders deaf Chinese individuals especially vulnerable.

It was in this social context that the welfare factory model emerged in China in the 1950s as a state-led initiative to provide formal employment and social inclusion for people with disabilities (Huang et al., 2009; Shi, 2022). These welfare factories, typically in the manufacturing sector, became the primary mechanism through which deaf individuals could gain stable, formal jobs and participate economically—a historic shift from marginalization to formal inclusion, and, at least in principle, broader social participation. However, previous literature makes clear that the mere existence of welfare factories did not dismantle entrenched social and cultural stereotypes or guarantee genuine participation for deaf workers (Zhao & Huang, in press). In the early days, deaf individuals were often relegated to menial tasks and continued to face stigma. It was when sign language interpreters (SLIs) were hired that circumstances began to improve.

This discrepancy between policy intentions and lived realities highlights the importance of examining how social inclusion is—or is not—actually achieved. We argue that, in the case of Chinese welfare factories, the cornerstone of social inclusion for deaf workers was not simply a matter of physical access. Rather, it was the individual-based, negotiated, and relational process that unfolded at the micro level—through social exchanges between deaf workers and interpreters—that succeeded in dismantling barriers and fostering trust.

Despite growing recognition in the literature of the role social exchange plays in fostering inclusion (e.g., Hatamleh et al., 2023; Kulachai, 2025), most research tends to focus either on micro-level interpersonal dynamics or on macro-level policy frameworks, rarely exploring how grassroots exchanges within institutional settings contribute to broader systemic inclusion (e.g., Akram & Pervaiz, 2024; Rothstein &

Stolle, 2008). This study addresses this gap by examining the social inclusion of early-generation deaf workers in Chinese welfare factories from the 1950s to the 1990s—a period when the state played a direct and central role in shaping both policy and everyday institutional life, prior to the rapid privatization at the turn of the century.

Guided by Cropanzano et al.'s (2017) social exchange theory (SET) framework, this research asks from SLIs' perspectives:

> How did the social inclusion of early-generation deaf workers unfold within Chinese welfare factories from the 1950s to the 1990s?

Central to this investigation is an exploration of how micro-level exchanges between deaf workers and SLIs shape macro-level social inclusion. By focusing on the lived experiences and interactions within welfare factories, this research extends the understanding of how grassroots social exchanges can drive or hinder inclusion in institutional settings. To achieve this, we conducted oral history interviews with early-generation interpreters within the welfare factories, exploring from their perspective how they interacted with deaf workers during the formative era. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by bridging the gap between individual-level dynamics and systemic outcomes, offering new insights into the interplay of trust, accessibility, and social exchange in organizational contexts. Practically, examining this formative historical period provides valuable lessons for contemporary disability inclusion policies—highlighting the enduring relevance of relational, context-specific approaches.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Welfare Policy in China: A Focus on Economic Accessibility

According to China's Seventh National Population Census (collected through household registration in 2020), the country is home to 85 million people with disabilities, nearly a quarter of whom have hearing impairments (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). However, the development of SLI training in China has been comparatively slow, with most programs based in a limited number of regional and vocational colleges, resulting in a significant nationwide shortage of qualified professionals (Jones et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2025). Despite the size and needs of this population, accessibility—particularly its linguistic and cultural dimensions—has remained underdeveloped (Jones et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2025). This persistent challenge is reflected in the historical trajectory of China's social welfare system (Lin & Liang, 2019), which has prioritized economic access as the main avenue of social inclusion.

In the early years (1949–1955), social welfare in the newly established China primarily centered on public relief, with the government's main priority being to provide material assistance to the most vulnerable populations. However, limited resources and an urgent need for postwar economic recovery soon prompted a significant shift in welfare policy for people with disabilities. Following the Third National Conference on Civil Affairs in 1955, the government shifted from material relief to a "welfare-to-work" model that emphasized self-reliance through employment. This new approach prompted the establishment of the China Deaf-Mutes Welfare Society in 1956, which invested in welfare factories to provide employment opportunities for deaf individuals.

The Great Leap Forward (1958) triggered a rapid expansion of welfare factories but also created significant hazards. By 1959, 283,000 social welfare factories had been established, employing 2.45 million individuals with disabilities, which became a cornerstone of China's welfare model (Wong, 1994). However, many factories were established on weak economic foundations and quickly fell into inefficiency and disorganization (Local Chronicles Committee of Fujian Province, 1997). The situation reached a nadir during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when widespread upheaval led to the closure of numerous welfare factories, stripping deaf individuals of their sole means of economic access (Nanjing Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 1994).

With the Reform and Opening Up in 1978, China transitioned from a planned economy to a market-oriented one, presenting both opportunities and challenges for the country's welfare system. In 1979, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) introduced new policies, again focusing on economic issues, to address the challenges faced by welfare factories, such as inefficiencies in production and disruptions in supply chains (Nanjing Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 1994). Welfare production units employing more than ten percent of workers with disabilities became eligible for tax exemptions and other incentives, which helped sustain these units. By the mid-1990s, over 20,000 welfare production units were employing nearly 400,000 workers with disabilities (Han, 2020).

The Reform and Opening Up period also brought intensified market competition and structural changes. In response, the Chinese State Council issued an official government policy document, *Opinions on Accelerating the Socialisation of Social Welfare*, in 2000, which aimed to "socialize" welfare by encouraging multi-channel investment and mobilizing social forces to establish welfare institutions with preferential support (General Office of the State Council, 2000). As a result, welfare factories gradually disappeared, giving way to welfare enterprises as private investment was introduced. Eventually, in 2016, the MCA officially canceled the Credential of Social Welfare Enterprise (MCA, 2016). This marked a shift away from reliance on the government toward self-reliance, encouraging deaf individuals to start their own businesses or secure employment in non-welfare enterprises.

Despite a rich history of development, sociological research on welfare factories in China remains limited, with two main gaps evident in the literature. First, existing studies (e.g., Liu et al., 2021; D. Wang, 2020) often treat individuals with disabilities as a homogeneous group, which offers limited insight into the unique challenges faced by them, let alone the specific living and working conditions of deaf individuals within the system. Second, the literature (e.g., Han, 2020; Wong, 1994) largely addresses economic accessibility as the primary, and sometimes sole, measure of inclusion, overlooking the crucial roles of linguistic and cultural accessibility in achieving genuine social inclusion. As a result, the emphasis on economic participation leaves deaf individuals with significant barriers to full accessibility and inclusion, revealing an important but underexplored area in current research.

2.2. Accessibility: Cornerstone for Social Inclusion and Trust-Building

A persistent lack of accessibility undoubtedly undermines the social inclusion of deaf individuals. As the United Nations observes, accessibility is the cornerstone of social inclusion—extending beyond physical access to encompass information, communication, and public services (United Nations, 2007). This is especially relevant for deaf individuals, for whom mere presence in a workplace or institution does not

equate to genuine participation. Meaningful inclusion requires that deaf individuals are fully able to engage, communicate, and have their differences recognized and respected.

However, in the deaf context, accessibility remains a persistent barrier for the community in realizing meaningful social inclusion, with linguistic accessibility as a particularly critical challenge (Mack et al., 2021). In predominantly hearing societies, communication barriers—rooted in limited access to SL and a lack of institutional support—continue to exclude deaf individuals from full participation (Mack et al., 2021). Recognizing and supporting deaf individuals' linguistic agency, especially through the provision of SL and the institutional recognition of deaf culture, fosters trust and genuine participation (Batterbury et al., 2007; Glickman, 2013; Ladd, 2003). By contrast, when society frames deafness solely as a deficit to be cured or rehabilitated (Smith, 2021; Thomas, 2014), ignoring its linguistic and cultural dimensions (Oliver, 2023), exclusionary practices persist and undermine trust and social inclusion (Aldalur et al., 2021).

Given the centrality of linguistic accessibility, the provision of SL interpreting emerges as a critical—and often contested—mechanism for enabling deaf people to exercise their language rights and build social trust. While some scholars argue that interpreting alone does not guarantee true language-concordant access or social inclusion (De Meulder, 2016; De Meulder & Haualand, 2021; Reagan, 2010), SL interpreting, as a "hard-won right," nevertheless remains the primary channel for deaf people's access to domains including education, employment, healthcare, justice, and political participation (De Meulder & Haualand, 2021, p. 20). This holds true whether in countries with well-established interpreting systems (De Meulder, 2016) or in countries like China, where even basic needs are often unmet due to interpreter shortages (Xiao et al., 2025).

It is worth noting that much of the literature tends to approach trust-building and interpreting primarily from the interpreter's perspective (e.g., Chatzidamianos et al., 2019; Llewellyn-Jones & Lee, 2013; Napier et al., 2020), highlighting its importance, but rarely explores its working mechanism and forming processes (O'Brien et al., 2023). For instance, Llewellyn-Jones and Lee (2013) discuss trust without examining how it is formed, while Janzen (2005) assumes that trust develops automatically as interpreters become involved in the deaf community, without considering how involvement leads to trust-building. These discussions often center on interpreters' feelings about being trusted, treating trust as a prerequisite for effective interpreting rather than recognizing it as a collaborative, two-way process (e.g., Hetherington, 2012; Napier, 2021). The more recent research (O'Brien et al., 2023; Reinhardt, 2021; Young et al., 2019) that examines trust as experienced by deaf individuals using interpreting services agrees that trust remains vital for effective working relationships between deaf people and interpreters (Reinhardt, 2021; Young et al., 2019), while others suggest that interpreter's competence and skill may, in practice, be more important than generalized trust (O'Brien et al., 2023).

To address these gaps, this study situates the analysis of micro-level accessibility—enacted through deaf–interpreter exchanges—within the historical context of Chinese welfare factories, a setting that illustrates the "last mile" of national inclusion policies. By doing so, it foregrounds the ways in which social exchange, trust, and social inclusion are intimately linked and positions accessibility as central to understanding these relationships. The following section explores theoretical and empirical work on social exchange and trust, and examines how centering accessibility can deepen our understanding of social inclusion for the deaf community.

2.3. Social Exchange, Trust, and Social Inclusion: Centering Accessibility

The dyadic relationships between trust and social exchange, and between trust and social inclusion, are well-established in existing literature. To illustrate, the relationship between trust and social exchange has been extensively studied. As Putnam et al. (1993, p. 71) noted, "trust lubricates cooperation," facilitating smooth social interactions and enabling individuals to pursue shared, interdependent goals (Chen et al., 2021). Trust fosters satisfaction within relationships (Hatamleh et al., 2023) and inspires positive actions, liberating human agency and enabling uninhibited and innovative engagement (Kulachai, 2025; Zhang & Chi, 2025). SET provides a framework for understanding how trust emerges through recurring interactions based on reciprocity (Cook & Hahn, 2021). Within this framework, trust plays a dual role: It is both an outcome of successful exchanges and a facilitator of future interactions (Mayer et al., 1995). This recursive relationship—where trust, once established, enables deeper and more extensive exchanges—has been shown to improve communication, collaboration, and overall performance in organizational contexts (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Kong et al., 2014).

Despite these insights, most micro-level analyses of social exchange and trust are based on general organizational settings and populations, overlooking the unique challenges faced by people with disabilities (Siegrist et al., 2020). These analyses often assume equal opportunities for all participants, neglecting the restricted accessibility to core social roles and environments that people with disabilities routinely face (Alcover et al., 2015). In reality, however, accessibility is not automatically available; it must be intentionally created—often through grassroots, low-threshold services and targeted outreach to connect with "hard-to-reach," marginalized individuals (Cortis, 2012; Grymonprez et al., 2017). Failing to account for accessibility, much of the literature inadvertently excludes those most at risk of social isolation, missing a crucial mechanism that underpins the micro-level interaction of trust and social exchange.

On the other hand, the macro-level trust-inclusion dynamic has also been well-documented, where trust functions as both a prerequisite for, and an outcome of, social inclusion. Previous research emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between institutional trust and social inclusion, highlighting how policy mechanisms and broader societal processes mediate these dynamics (Akram & Pervaiz, 2024; Connelly et al., 2018; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). At the societal level, trust operates through three primary mechanisms: fostering sociability and participation (Schilke et al., 2021); promoting tolerance and acceptance of diversity (Parry, 1976; Zaheer et al., 1998); and strengthening community bonds and collective solidarity (Brattström & Bachmann, 2018; Harkness et al., 2022). These mechanisms demonstrate the potential of trust to enhance social inclusion. Yet, such macro-level analyses often overlook the mediating role of accessibility as it is enacted within specific social and cultural contexts (Pineda, 2020). Without accessible environments, opportunities for participation and the realization of social inclusion are fundamentally constrained or even entirely absent (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011), making the emergence of social trust impossible.

Overall, this section of review highlights a critical gap in the literature: the three-way interaction between social exchange, trust, and social inclusion—with accessibility as the enabling foundation—remains underexplored. This gap arises in part due to methodological challenges and the traditional separation between macro-level and micro-level analyses. Macro-level research often focuses on societal trust and broad social inclusion outcomes (e.g., Akram & Pervaiz, 2024; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008), while micro-level

studies typically examine interpersonal trust-building through social exchanges within specific contexts (e.g., Hatamleh et al., 2023; Kulachai, 2025). Crucially, both levels of perspectives often overlook accessibility as the fundamental prerequisite for such interactions for groups with disabilities: without accessibility, meaningful social exchange cannot occur, making the development of trust and genuine social inclusion impossible. To address this gap, this research examines the context of interpreter-mediated welfare factories, a rare setting that has the potential to merge the micro and macro levels.

3. Theoretical Framework: SET

Our study adopts Cropanzano et al.'s (2017) SET model as its theoretical framework. From its inception in the seminal works of Homans (1961), Blau (1964), and Emerson (1976), SET has perceived trust as a core concept that shapes how interpersonal and organizational relationships develop through social exchange. Scholars have conceptualized trust along two dividing lines: one distinguishes between cognition-based trust (grounded in rational calculation) and affect-based trust (rooted in interpersonal closeness) (Legood et al., 2023); the other differentiates competence-based trust (confidence in ability and motivation) from integrity-based trust (belief in moral character) (Connelly et al., 2018). This dual perspective highlights the multi-dimensional nature of trust as it functions within social exchanges.

We selected Cropanzano et al.'s (2017) work as the guiding theoretical framework because it successfully navigates various SET theoretical models and applications, which lead to conceptual ambiguity and overlapping constructs (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Cropanzano et al. (2017) address these issues by distilling SET to its most critical components and clarifying its foundational mechanisms. Whereas earlier models described social exchange as a process involving (a) an actor's initial action toward a target, (b) the target's reciprocal responses—both attitudinal and behavioral, and (c) the subsequent development of relationships, Cropanzano et al. (2017) reframe these into three theoretically precise elements: initiating action, behavioral response, and relational response. This refinement allows for a clearer distinction between observable behaviors and the intangible evolution of relationships over time.

For our study, Cropanzano et al.'s (2017) work provides particular support by mapping social exchanges along two axes—hedonic value and activity—and across different referent layers. As shown in Figure 1, the vertical axis reflects the level of activity, distinguishing between active behaviors that are exhibited and inactive behaviors that are withheld. The horizontal axis captures hedonic value, differentiating between desirable (positive) and undesirable (negative) behaviors. The intersection of these axes creates four quadrants, each representing a distinct type of social action or response. For example, "administer desirable behavior" refers to actively providing positive actions such as support or assistance, while "administer undesirable behavior" involves engaging in negative actions such as publicly insulting someone. "Withhold desirable behavior" means choosing not to offer praise or help when it is expected, and "withhold undesirable behavior" refers to refraining from negative acts like gossip or criticism.

This two-dimensional yet multi-layered structure offers several advantages for this research. First, its focus on hedonic value and activity provides a precise analytical tool for examining how intangible emotions influence tangible actions. Second, the framework's distinction between the referents of exchange enables us to analyze relationships at both individual levels and organizational levels, thus capturing the multi-layered nature of social inclusion in historical welfare contexts. By situating this research within Cropanzano et al.'s (2017) model,

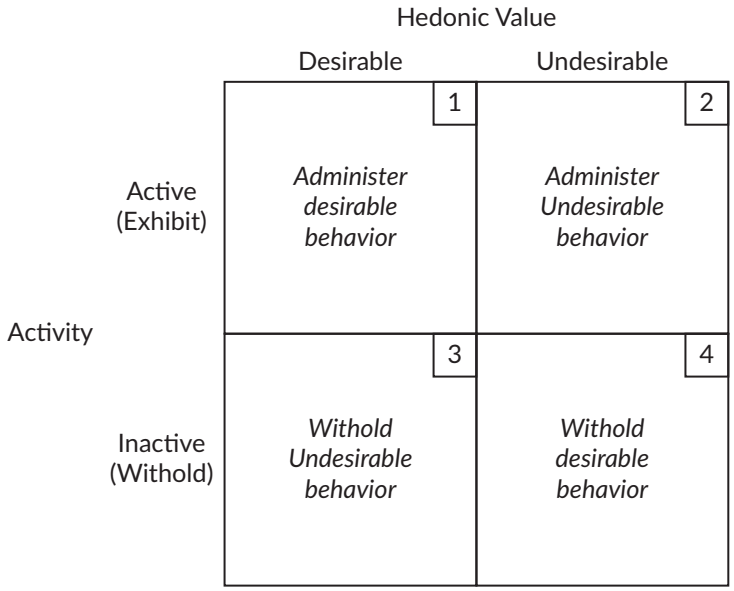

Figure 1. Two-dimensional social exchange framework. Source: Based on Cropanzano et al. (2017, p. 501).

this study proceeds to illuminate how micro-level exchanges—especially those involving interpreters and deaf workers—mediate trust-building and social inclusion among deaf workers in historical welfare settings.

4. Method

This study is part of a larger research project that combines oral histories from multiple generations of interpreters with archival materials to examine the history of SL interpreting in China. The present analysis focuses specifically on oral history data from interpreters who represent the early generation to work closely with deaf workers in welfare factories.

4.1. Recruitment and Ethics

To address the research question, we employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. The primary objective was to identify interpreters who belonged to the first cohort working in the historical Chinese welfare factories. Initial participants in the broader project were recruited through referrals from members of the deaf community, the SL interpreting community, and the Chinese Deaf People's Association. Our first interview with an interpreter who had worked in a welfare factory highlighted the distinctiveness of this group through the interpreter's unique perspectives and experiences. Therefore, we began to focus specifically on this subgroup. As interviews unfolded, more factory interpreters were recruited through recommendations from previous interviewees, allowing the sample to expand organically.

The final sample consisted of ten female interpreters who ranged from fifty to seventy-four years of age at the time of the interviews (see Table 1). These interpreters were employed in factories located across nine cities (Xiamen, Zhengzhou, Hangzhou, Beijing, Shenyang, Tianjin, Nanchang, Nanjing, and Shanghai), representing Southeast, East, Central, Northeast, and North China. Their primary roles involved manual work within the manufacturing industry (see Figure 2 for a typical welfare factory job setting). Seven out of ten interpreters

began their careers as general workers, with no prior contact with deaf individuals. Even those who were hired directly as interpreters reported having little or no proficiency in SL upon entry, and none had received any formal interpreting training. Notably, eight of the interpreters were the first to serve as the SLI in their respective welfare factories following the factories' establishment and well before the profession's official recognition in China in 2007 (Xiao et al., 2025), making them the earliest generation of SLIs in the Chinese workplace. Although all interpreters entered the factories from the 1960s onward, their narratives include recollections shared by deaf workers about the 1950s, and their own post-retirement experiences through the 2020s—allowing the study to capture the full formative period of social inclusion in welfare factories and its subsequent impact on the broader deaf community.

Table 1. Interviewee profiles.

SLI no.	Industry	Year of entry	Age of entry	Initial position	Education background
1	Printing	1964	14	General worker	Primary school (not finished)
2	Synthetic fiber textiles	1977	30	Interpreter	Normal school
3	Mixed manufacturing	1980	20	General worker	High school
4	Cosmetics	1990	19	General worker	High school
5	Synthetic fiber textiles	1976	19	General worker	High school
6	Cable	1978	21	General worker	Junior school
7	Oil pipe	1969	15	General worker	Junior school
8	Manufacturing	1977	16	Interpreter	Junior school
9	Manufacturing	1979	18	General worker	High school
10	Bicycle parts	1965	17	Interpreter	High school

Notes: "Year of entry" and "age at entry" refer to when and at what age the interpreters began working in welfare factories; "primary school (not finished)" means incomplete elementary education; "junior school" refers to completion of lower secondary education; "high school" means completion of upper secondary education; "normal school" denotes a teacher-training college, typically attended in China after junior school at that time; given the small and close-knit nature of the factory interpreter community, individual interpreters are not linked to specific cities in the table to protect their anonymity.

Figure 2. Deaf female worker in 1988 at a welfare factory producing phenolic resin components. Source: Personal photo provided by an interpreter who participated in the research project; used with permission from the worker herself.

Participants were fully informed about the study's aim, procedures, and confidentiality protections, and provided verbal informed consent before interviews. Given the sensitive nature of discussing personal history, participants were reminded before and after the interview that they could withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms are used throughout all publications to further safeguard participant privacy.

4.2. Interview Method

The interviews were conducted using the autobiographical narrative interview method (Rosenthal, 1993, 2004), which consists of an initial unstructured section followed by a semi-structured one. Given our research focus—and the fact that many of our participants were seniors who have health issues—we retained the two-phase format but narrowed the scope of free narration in the first phase to focus on their welfare factory experiences, particularly their interactions with and observations of deaf workers. Given that the interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2021, and due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online except one in-person interview with a participant who lived in the same city as the researchers.

In the first phase, participants were encouraged to share freely any life experiences related to their time in welfare factories, with minimal intervention. Although the study's focus was informed, participants did not choose to discuss their professional lives only; many chose to recount personal events from before entering the factory or after retirement. This allowed us to situate their professional trajectories within a wider social and historical context, deepening our understanding of how the social inclusion process unfolded for deaf workers. In the second phase, open-ended questions were asked based on the recounted experiences in the first phase and the SET framework (Cropanzano et al., 2017). These questions explored topics such as how participants were recruited into factories, their initial encounters with and perceptions of deaf workers, their interactions with deaf colleagues and understandings of SL and deaf culture, their roles in facilitating communication at work and beyond, and their reflections on the long-term impact of welfare factory experiences on the lives of deaf workers.

Building trust and establishing rapport are essential in oral history interviews to encourage participants to share their experiences openly and authentically (Ritchie, 2014). To foster a sense of connection and trust, researchers maintained communication with participants through WeChat—a private social media platform particularly favored by the interviewees, most of whom were seniors and found WeChat more accessible than other digital communication tools. Thus, the nine remote interviews were conducted using WeChat video or audio calls, respecting participants' preferences. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit permission; individual sessions ranged from two to five hours, resulting in approximately thirty-five hours of recordings. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Chinese. Personal contact details and digital correspondence were securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

4.3. Analytical Approach

Our theoretical framework prompted us to identify and interpret themes related to initiating actions, behavioral responses, and relational responses within the workplace, as well as to trace the hedonic value and activity that explains how accessibility and trust develop over time. In line with established oral history analytical methods (Fritzová et al., 2024), our analysis proceeded through three main steps: familiarization

with the data, open coding guided by SET-informed concepts, and thematic clustering that reflected both the research question and the theoretical lens.

First, all transcripts were read multiple times by the research team to ensure familiarity with the content, with analytic memos written to capture initial impressions. Second, two researchers independently conducted open coding in NVivo, with coding discrepancies resolved through discussion and reference to the theoretical framework. Third, through ongoing team discussions, we grouped the codes into broader themes. To demonstrate our analytic approach, we present below (Figure 3) a representative section of the codes and themes generated for "Phase One: Initiating Trust."

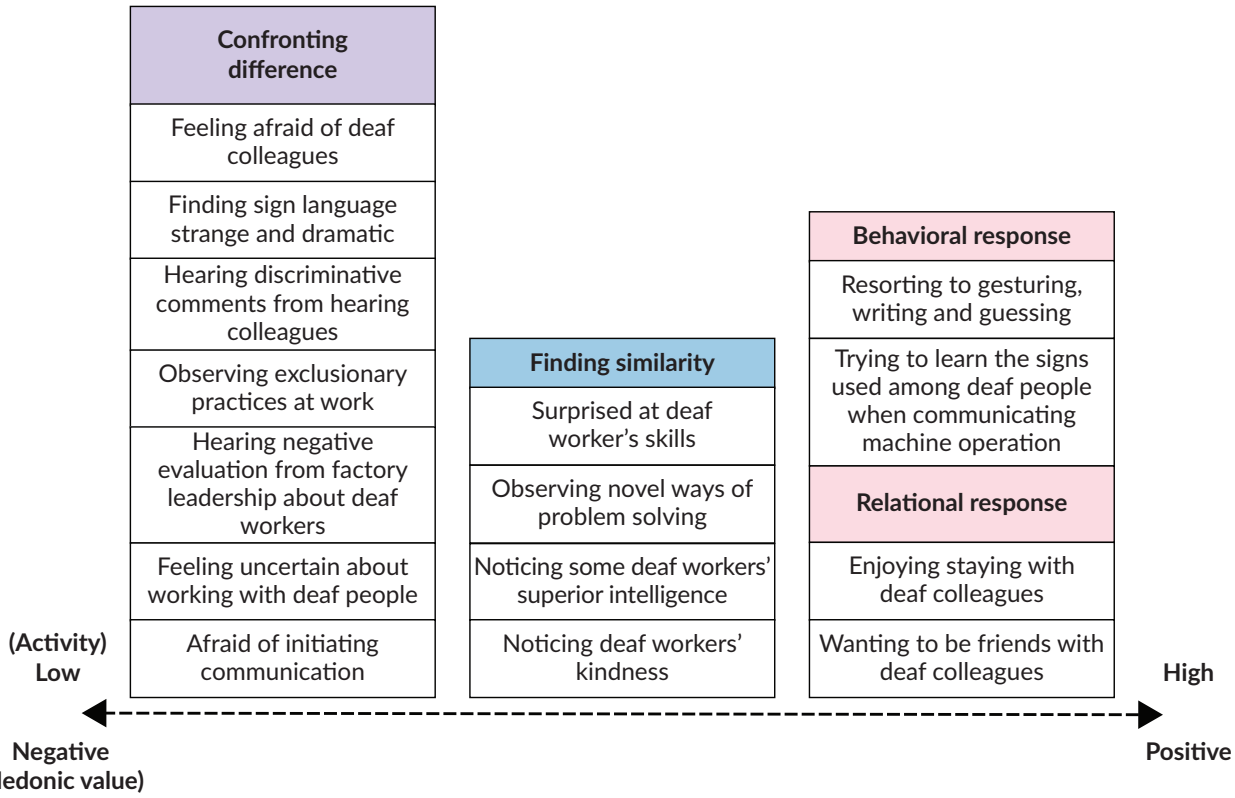

Figure 3. Mapping of the "Initiating Trust" phase codes onto Cropanzano et al.'s (2017) two-dimensional model.

The three analytical phases of the social inclusion process—initiating trust, reverse inclusion, and social inclusion—were delineated following SET, drawing specifically on the dimensions of hedonic value, activity, and referent (Cropanzano et al., 2017). The first phase, initiating trust, is characterized by a transformation in hedonic value from negative to positive as SLIs' perceptions of deaf colleagues evolve. Regarding activity, this phase also reflects a shift from reserved or hesitant action to genuine attempts at interaction. The second and third phases are both marked by high levels of activity and positive hedonic value, but they differ in terms of referent: reverse inclusion highlights the agency and actions of deaf individuals in welcoming and mentoring interpreters, while social inclusion emphasizes the agency and supportive actions of interpreters toward deaf colleagues and wider community members.

4.4. Methodological Limitations

A key limitation of this study is that all data are drawn solely from the accounts of SLIs. This is primarily due to our current limitations in SL proficiency, which prevent us from independently conducting in-depth interviews with deaf participants. While it is possible to conduct interviews with deaf workers using external SLIs, we are mindful that this approach may still influence the interview dynamics and affect the openness of participants' responses—particularly when discussing sensitive topics related to interpreter-deaf worker relationships. Out of respect for the deaf community and in the interest of capturing authentic perspectives, we are actively seeking appropriate collaborators who are both skilled in SL and experienced in sensitive, community-based research. At the same time, we are committed to improving our own SL abilities to enable more direct communication and engagement with deaf people in future research. We acknowledge this limitation and remain dedicated to including deaf workers' voices and perspectives through more inclusive and collaborative methods in subsequent studies.

5. Results

The results section delineates the three-phase process of trust-driven social inclusion in Chinese welfare factories (1950s–1990s), grounded in SET (Cropanzano et al., 2017) and interwoven with the concept of accessibility and trust. This process unfolds through the phases of initiating trust, reverse inclusion, and social inclusion, each arising from social exchanges between interpreters and deaf workers that disrupt patterns of institutionalized inaccessibility and exclusion. Across all phases, outcomes are linked to evolving forms of accessibility—linguistic, cultural, and systemic—as well as to different forms of trust: affect-based, commitment-based, and competence-based.

5.1. Initiating Trust: The Ability to Shift From Fear of "Difference" to Appreciation of "Similarity"

The process of initiating trust between interpreters and their deaf colleagues began with a distinct pre-exchange phase marked by communicative inaccessibility and negative perceptions. In this phase, interpreters observed deaf colleagues from a distance, noting their distinct communicative behaviors—such as expressive signing and gesturing—triggering negative hedonic emotional responses (e.g., fear and uncertainty; see Cropanzano et al., 2017):

> When I first arrived and saw the deaf-mute individuals, they couldn't speak, staring at me and gesturing. I didn't understand a thing, and I was scared when I saw them. (Interpreter No. 10)

For many interpreters hired at the same time, these intense negative emotions resulted in passive-negative inaction—they chose not to engage in any form of social exchange and eventually left their positions. This response also mirrored the behavior of most hearing employees in the factory, who avoided initiating contact with the deaf cohort. Similarly, factory management displayed superficial positive pre-exchange emotions (e.g., sympathy), but these shifted to active-negative actions (relegating deaf people to the menial jobs) when expectations were unmet, blocking systemic access:

> When new leaders first arrived…they saw deaf-mute individuals as pitiful, as a vulnerable group, and showed a lot of sympathy. But over time, they started feeling [like], "I've given you a good job, so why

> aren't you doing it well?" They had certain expectations and wondered why those expectations weren't met, without making any effort to truly understand why they couldn't be made. (Interpreter No. 3)

This shift illustrates Cropanzano et al.'s (2017) point that positive emotions do not guarantee sustained positive actions if structural barriers, like communicative inaccessibility, persist. In contrast, interpreters who built trust and initiated positive actions were able to overcome linguistic inaccessibility by first recognizing the intelligence and competence of their deaf coworkers. Interpreter No. 1 describes a moment of this change when observing deaf workers troubleshoot machinery:

> When there was a machine malfunction, we hearing individuals relied on listening [to detect the problem]…but they [the deaf workers] were amazing. They simply pressed their hands on the machine, felt the difference in vibrations, and immediately identified the problem area.

The finding of intellectual similarity beyond communicative difference encouraged interpreters to initiate active exchanges despite limited SL proficiency—using writing, drawing, and gesturing as alternative strategies. These active-positive initiating actions predicted behavioral responses and relational responses (Cropanzano et al., 2017), as deaf colleagues reciprocated with patience and mentorship, resulting in a cycle of repeated positive exchanges that gradually fostered linguistic accessibility and built affect-based trust (Legood et al., 2023). Interpreter No. 8 describes how her proactive engagement with deaf workers opened pathways to deeper connection, allowing her to understand their experiences at home—ongoing exclusion and lack of recognition for their ability:

> In their spare time, they would talk to me about how they were treated unfairly at home. Many deaf individuals have told me that their parents didn't want them when they were young, saying things like: "People like me were thrown into the countryside, left in rural areas where no one cared." They would take me to their homes, and I found that some of their parents indeed looked down on them.

The excerpt demonstrates that deaf workers disclose deeply personal and painful experiences of familial rejection and social marginalization. Statements such as, "people like me were thrown into the countryside, left in rural areas where no one cared," illustrate the profound exclusion and emotional hardship faced by many deaf individuals. The act of sharing such stories—and inviting the interpreter into their homes—can be understood as an offering of vulnerability and trust, resources that are not casually given but earned through repeated positive interaction (Cook & Hahn, 2021). For the interpreter, there is an implicit exchange as well. By listening empathetically and accepting invitations into deaf individuals' personal lives, the interpreter invests emotional labor and time—resources that go beyond the formal boundaries of their professional role.

These accounts demonstrate that social inclusion is not an automatic result of physical integration or policy, but is contingent on reciprocal, high-quality social exchanges that affirm the identities and capabilities of deaf individuals, overcome linguistic accessibility, and foster affect-based trust. This sets the stage for the later process of reverse inclusion.

5.2. Reverse Inclusion: Deaf Workers' Agency in Building Trust

Building on interpreters' shift from pre-exchange fear to active appreciation (Section 5.1), the reverse inclusion phase highlights deaf workers' agency in integrating interpreters into their community, thereby deepening linguistic accessibility and fostering cultural accessibility (United Nations, 2007, Article 30). Unlike conventional models of inclusion, which focus on assimilating marginalized groups into majority settings, reverse inclusion—as observed in this study—operates in the opposite direction and is enabled by affect-based trust (Legood et al., 2023). Deaf workers, as the recipients of interpreters' initiating actions, reciprocated with both behavioral and relational responses by welcoming interpreters into their cultural lives—particularly through participation in SL and engagement with community norms. For example:

> Our factory would organize movie screenings. When I went to watch movies with the deaf, I wouldn't sit with the hearing people; I would sit with them, and they would gather around me. Back then, movies didn't have subtitles, so they had to rely entirely on watching pictures to understand the plot. They would sign the movie content to me while watching and correct my signing when I made mistakes. Through this, my sign language improved very quickly. (Interpreter No. 8)

Here, the activity (Cropanzano et al., 2017) dimension is high for both parties: interpreters actively pursue learning opportunities, while deaf colleagues actively offer instruction and inclusion. The reciprocated exchanges, with high positive hedonic value (Cropanzano et al., 2017), reinforce and deepen affect-based trust (Legood et al., 2023). This trust reached its peak when deaf workers, prioritizing it over competence-based trust (Connelly et al., 2018), exercised their agency by formally petitioning factory management to appoint their trusted colleagues as their official interpreters—even when those interpreters lacked advanced SL skills at the time:

> Many deaf individuals trusted me and insisted that I should become their interpreter. Eventually, they wrote a letter to the factory expressing their strong request. At that time, the factory had a union, and they brought their request to the union chairman. Later, the chairman assigned me to be their interpreter. (Interpreter No. 6)

The high activity of the deaf community underscores the collective agency of deaf workers. Rather than passively accepting institutional assignments, they mobilise social and organisational resources—writing letters, engaging union leadership, and leveraging their collective voice—to shape their own support structures. In doing so, they challenge the dominant narrative of deaf individuals as passive recipients of aid, and instead position themselves as active agents in the accessibility process (Glickman, 2013). This agency reimagines accessibility as a deaf-driven practice, where the community determines what meaningful support and inclusion look like.

Crucially, the impact of this agency is not confined to formal workplace arrangements or language learning. These exchanges spill over into social life, as deaf workers welcome interpreters into their circles, treating them as family and offering practical care and support. In this way, accessibility becomes not just a matter of communication, but a deeply relational and reciprocal practice, rooted in everyday acts of inclusion and mutual assistance:

> There was a time when part of our work involved collecting scrap copper and iron, and the workplace could only provide a tricycle for transportation….Deaf colleagues would take off their jackets and place them on the backseat for me, treating me like a little sister…when I needed to move house, they would come and help, and leave immediately after it was done, not even asking me to cook a meal to thank them. (Interpreter No. 1)

These acts exemplify high-quality social exchanges marked by sustained, positive hedonic value and active, voluntary support—hallmarks of what Cropanzano et al. (2017, pp. 480, 489) describe as "emotional," "open-ended," and "trusting" relationships, which are characteristic of social exchange (in contrast to economic exchange). The process of reverse inclusion, then, is not merely an inversion of mainstream inclusion models but a dynamic negotiation of trust and accessibility. It reveals how marginalized groups can reconfigure the boundaries of community—not by assimilating into dominant norms, but by inviting others into their cultural worlds on their own terms. Through affect-based trust and mutual investment, deaf workers create a context where interpreters adapt, learn, and earn their place through relational engagement and shared experience. This re-centering of agency challenges deficit-oriented narratives of disability and reframes accessibility as a co-constructed, evolving process grounded in reciprocity, respect, and trust.

5.3. Social Inclusion: Fostering Systemic Accessibility Through Trust

The identified instances of reverse inclusion show that meaningful integration arose not from physical proximity or policy mandates alone but through sustained, identity-affirming social exchanges that built affect-based trust (Legood et al., 2023), thereby enabling linguistic and cultural accessibility. Over time, this affect-based trust evolved into competence—and commitment-based trust (Connelly et al., 2018; Pratt & Dirks, 2017), extending the interpreters' support to the broader deaf community beyond the workplace.

Our data consistently show that once interpreters were recognized as trusted partners by the deaf community, the institution became truly accessible to deaf workers. The interpreters, now seen as effective negotiators with factory leadership, actively persuaded management to assign deaf workers to more valuable, skill-building roles. Through these efforts, positive hedonic exchanges between the interpreters and the deaf community solidified the interpreters' commitment, deepening the relational quality and activity level of the exchange (Cropanzano et al., 2017). In turn, interpreters sought to reciprocate the trust and inclusion they had received by extending their support beyond the confines of the workplace. As Interpreter No. 8 describes:

> I would visit each family one by one and communicate with the deaf individuals, asking them: "What are your feelings about your family?" Then I would tell them: "I'll help you communicate step by step, and help your parents gradually understand and get to know you. Even though you're their child, they might not fully understand or truly know you."

As the interpreters' commitment and SL competence grew, they earned not only affective but also competence—and commitment-based trust from the wider deaf community, positioning them as vital bridges in domains critical to deaf individuals' social survival. For example:

> Not long ago, a deaf individual was detained in a prison about a hundred kilometers away. I made over a dozen trips there. They had hired a lawyer and needed an interpreter, so I went on weekends, and

> often had to bring my grandchild along because there was no one at home to watch him. The deaf individual had struck someone—he was trying to defend another person, but in the process, he pushed someone, who fell backward onto a small stone bench and suffered a serious concussion. As a result, he was sentenced to four years for the charge of brawl. There was no surveillance footage at the time. Through sign language, I was able to understand and explain the situation. In the end, he was released eight months early. (Interpreter No. 5)

Such accounts clearly illustrate that these interactions were not motivated by economic, transactional considerations. The interpreters frequently traveled significant distances, often after retirement and without compensation, to serve as advocates in legal, medical, and social contexts. Similarly, Interpreter No. 8, retired for over a decade, continues to provide interpreting services for deaf individuals at hospitals, often without compensation or for a nominal fee of approximately 24 euros per day:

> In 2019, a nonprofit organization secured funding for a medical assistance program for the deaf. They came to me and I said: "If we're going to do this, let's do it right. We need to partner with a top-tier hospital, preferably at the provincial level or higher, and offer something truly valuable for the deaf. It's not enough to just go with any hospital." They agreed. Our translation fee was 200 RMB per day, from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The pay was definitely low…but I'm still happy to help. Before this program, I often didn't charge them a penny. With medical bills already so expensive, why charge them more?

These cases exemplify commitment-based trust (Pratt & Dirks, 2017) as described in SET: The interpreters' actions, which involved significant personal cost and emotional investment, would be irrational if viewed through a strictly economic, transactional lens. Instead, their sustained efforts reflect the emergence of high-quality social exchange relationships characterized by commitment, loyalty, and mutual identification, where the rewards are primarily relational and emotional rather than material (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Here, relational exchanges—marked by high activity and positive hedonic value—replace role-bound, detached professionalism with ongoing, holistic support.

Yet, these narratives also reveal a vulnerability in the accessibility system: access to essential resources for deaf individuals was often contingent on the presence and personal commitment of individual interpreters. For example:

> After I retired, the deaf individuals said: "Once you left, we didn't have recreational activities in the factory anymore." Starting in 2018, they came for me again. There was an aerobics competition organized by the MCA. Though I was already retired, I decided to go back and help out. We practiced for just a month or two, and we won first prize again in the competition. (Interpreter No. 7)

The narrative exposes the fragility inherent in informal, person-dependent systems of access, where the withdrawal or absence of key individuals can jeopardize hard-won gains in inclusion. Thus, while the stories exemplify the transformative power of trust and reciprocity in expanding accessibility, they also highlight the pressing need for institutional mechanisms that embed and sustain these relational achievements. True inclusion, therefore, emerges not only from individual goodwill and affective bonds, but from collective efforts to institutionalize equitable access—ensuring that participation, support, and belonging endure beyond the contributions of any one person.

6. Social Inclusion—An Interplay Between Social Exchange, Accessibility, and Trust

Our study demonstrates the unique value of SET—particularly the framework proposed by Cropanzano et al. (2017)—in revealing accessibility as both the cornerstone and the Achilles' heel of social inclusion, which is the central goal of welfare policy. By analyzing trust-driven exchanges in Chinese welfare factories, our findings illuminate how accessibility, trust, and social exchange interact to shape both the possibilities and the limitations of inclusion for marginalized groups (see Figure 4).

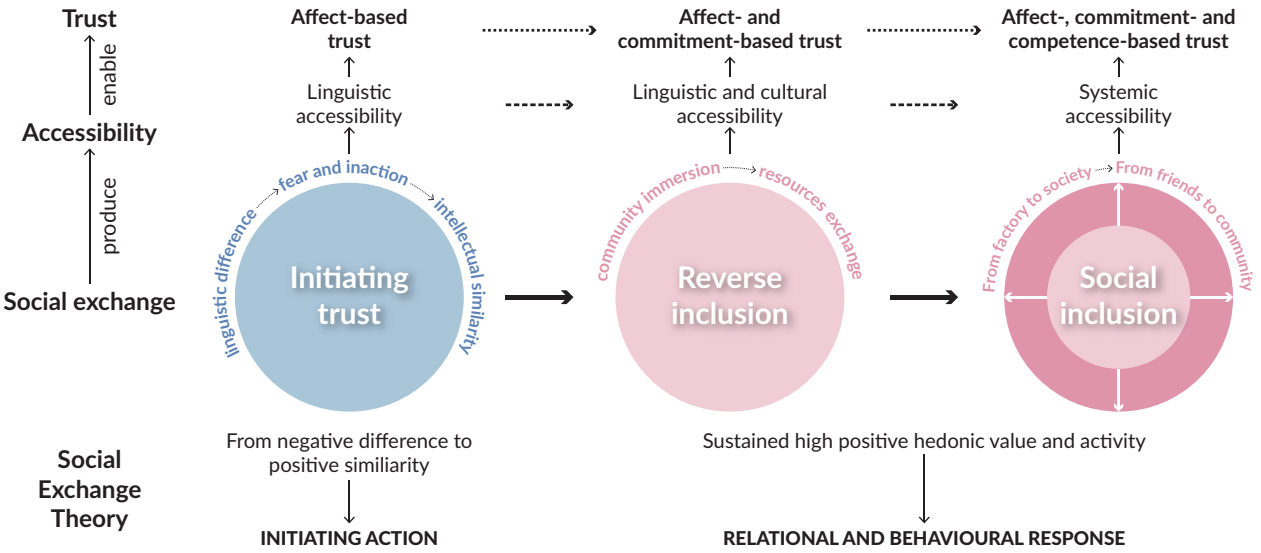

Figure 4. Theoretical mapping of social exchange processes and the constructs of trust and accessibility.

Our findings report a three-phase process of trust-driven social inclusion in Chinese welfare factories from the 1950s to the 1990s: initiating trust, reverse inclusion, and social inclusion. The first phase begins with a pre-exchange phase of fear and uncertainty, as the interpreters—like other factory staff—initially reacted to deaf colleagues' different communication modes with fear and inaction (Zhao, 2015). Unlike most, however, some interpreters were able to look beyond linguistic difference, recognizing the intellectual similarity and capabilities of deaf workers. This shift enabled the development of affect-based trust (Legood et al., 2023).

This phase highlights that linguistic accessibility is, indeed, the "Achilles' heel" of the welfare policy examined in our study. Even though current guidance recognizes accessibility as a foundation for participation and inclusion (United Nations, 2007), our study confirms that policy efforts in the early years of China's welfare system often focused narrowly on physical access—admitting deaf people to welfare factories—while neglecting linguistic, cultural, and other systemic accessibility needs (Zhao & Huang, in press). Our study also provides historical evidence to support the argument that accessibility for deaf people is fundamentally a matter of communication (Mack et al., 2021) and SL access is underdeveloped in China (Jones et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2025). Our data also confirm that when confronted with different communication modes, the hearing majority often automatically respond with negative hedonic emotions (Zhao, 2015), blocking the opportunity for social inclusion. Consistent with SET, unless these emotions are transformed into positive, sustained engagement, no meaningful social exchange—or eventual inclusion—can occur (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

In the second phase, affect-based trust (Legood et al., 2023) prompted deaf workers to actively include prospective interpreters into their community. Deaf workers sustained primarily unidirectional exchanges of linguistic and cultural resources, which significantly improved the interpreters' SL competence and provided them with cultural accessibility (United Nations, 2007). It is also the phase where affect-based trust—rather than competence-based trust (Pratt & Dirks, 2017)—deepened to the point where deaf workers exercised agency by formally recommending these interpreters for official interpreter roles in the factory. This trust and agency, in turn, fostered a growing sense of commitment (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Kong et al., 2014) among interpreters to the deaf community.

Our findings on reverse inclusion extend previous research (e.g., Llewellyn-Jones & Lee, 2013; Napier et al., 2020), which has often focused on exploring the deaf–interpreter trust relationship from interpreters' perspective, but has not fully examined the underlying mechanisms and processes through which trust is formed. Our study enriches this line of scholarly exploration by revealing that the collaborative, two-way exchanges can bring about linguistic and cultural accessibility, which then shape evolving types of trust between deaf individuals and interpreters—from affect-based to commitment-based, and then to competence-based trust. More importantly, we demonstrate that the nature of trust cultivated in such relationships is particularly critical in under-resourced contexts where formal interpreter training is absent (Xiao et al., 2025). In the Chinese welfare factories, competence-based trust (Pratt & Dirks, 2017) could not be assumed, as all interpreters lacked professional qualifications—a challenge echoed in the broader literature on interpreter shortages worldwide (de Wit, 2016). However, our findings reveal that competence is not the critical factor that decides the outcome of social inclusion. Rather, the interplay of deaf agency and interpreters' willingness to engage can enable an affect-based and commitment-based trust that is powerful enough to erode linguistic inaccessibility, making systemic accessibility and inclusion possible for people with disabilities (Reinhardt, 2021; Young et al., 2019).

Importantly, our results on reverse inclusion underscore the necessity of recognizing deaf individuals not as passive recipients of access, but as active agents in shaping accessible environments and trust-based relationships (O'Brien et al., 2023). Deaf workers valued interpreters who treated them as equals and actively sought cultural immersion, affirming deafness as a cultural-linguistic identity—consistent with the social model of disability (Glickman, 2013; Oliver, 2023; Thomas, 2014), and underscoring the inadequacy of medicalized approaches that reduce disability to a mere deficit (Smith, 2021).

In the third phase, social inclusion emerged through reverse inclusion, during which the interpreters became culturally aware of deaf individuals' needs and systemic barriers to accessibility. At the same time, they developed linguistic competence and a strong commitment to issues affecting the deaf community. They began by advocating for better workplace treatment within their immediate deaf circles, but the trust deaf people placed in them—rooted in affect, competence, and commitment—extended beyond the factory. As a result, the interpreters' support and advocacy radiated outward to the broader local deaf community, with their services expanding into familial, legal, medical, and other social domains, thereby fostering systemic accessibility.

The social inclusion phase illustrates both the transformative potential and the fragility of individual-driven accessibility. As seen in the literature on grassroots accessibility (Cortis, 2012; Grymonprez et al., 2017), even a single committed professional can bridge profound gaps between the deaf community and society,

enabling systemic accessibility in domains such as healthcare and legal and social services. However, this study also reveals two key vulnerabilities: (a) although the impact is significant given the efforts of a single interpreter, it remains small relative to the size of the entire local deaf community; and (b) such inclusion is often unsustainable without broader institutional recognition and support, revealing that "person-dependent accessibility" leaves communities at risk if these individuals leave. For countries in similar historical or developmental contexts, our findings suggest that initial efforts may need to focus on identifying, supporting, and empowering these "bridge" individuals and then transforming their experiences into policy and institutional practice.

The discussion about the three phases underscores our study's contributions to the fields of accessibility, social inclusion, social exchange, and trust. First, we have meaningfully bridged macro-level inclusion policies with micro-level exchanges in everyday practice. Rather than treating these levels as separate, we have identified the underlying mechanism demonstrating that micro-level exchanges and macro-level inclusion are interconnected processes. This mechanism, as our findings reveal, is the synchronized progression of social exchange, achieved accessibility, and enabled trust across the three phases of inclusion. Second, this study further contributes to a socio-historical perspective (Pineda, 2020) of accessibility, challenging the argument that "competence-based" or "skills-based" trust is more important than "general trust" (O'Brien et al., 2023). Instead, we caution that in contexts where competence is yet to develop, it is crucial first to foster general trust—rooted in affect and commitment—from which competence-based trust can later emerge.

Third, our study advances SET by moving beyond its typical application in mainstream or well-resourced contexts to a historically marginalized setting—welfare factories involving people with disabilities, who routinely face restricted access to core social roles and environments (Alcover et al., 2015; Siegrist et al., 2020). Our findings reveal that accessibility is not merely a contextual backdrop to exchange, but a foundational precondition that determines whether meaningful social exchange, trust, and inclusion can occur at all. In contexts where accessibility is absent or underdeveloped, as in the early Chinese welfare factories, social exchanges and trust-building are severely constrained, regardless of individual intentions. Moreover, our data demonstrate that, in these settings, trust must first be built on affect and commitment (general trust; see O'Brien et al., 2023) before competence-based trust can emerge—a sequential process not fully explored in the discussion of trust in existing SET models. These findings suggest that SET can be refined, especially in disability contexts, to explicitly account for structural and systemic barriers to exchange and the staged, dynamic development of trust. In this way, our study extends SET by theorizing accessibility both as an outcome of social exchange and as a necessary foundation for its initiation and evolution among marginalized groups.

In sum, our findings answer our research question that meaningful social inclusion in historical welfare factories in China is not achieved through policy or physical access alone, but through ongoing, multi-level processes of social exchange, trust-building, and accessibility—especially linguistic and cultural access—for deaf workers. SET provides a robust framework for understanding how emotional resonance and relational commitment, through meaningful exchanges, can shape the real-world outcomes of welfare policy (Cropanzano et al., 2017). For sustainable inclusion, especially in underdeveloped or transitional settings, investment is needed not only in systems but also in supporting the relational and emotional capacities of individuals who bridge the gaps between marginalized communities and society.

While this study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of social exchange, trust, and accessibility within Chinese welfare factories, it is important to acknowledge its methodological limitations. Most notably, our analysis is based solely on interviews with interpreters, rather than direct accounts from deaf workers themselves. As a result, our findings have not fully captured the lived experiences and voices of deaf individuals. To address this gap, our future research will actively recruit deaf interviewers with advanced signing proficiency to join our team, enabling authentic, direct engagement with deaf participants. We believe this approach will significantly enrich our understanding of accessibility and inclusion.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the personal and confidential nature of the oral histories collected in the research, data sharing does not apply to this article.

LLMs Disclosure

OpenAI's GPT-4o was used for language refinement only. All content and arguments presented in the article remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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