

Articulating Citizenship for Blind Children: Tactile Literacy in Twentieth-Century China

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Submitted: 11 June 2026 **Accepted:** 24 August 2026 **Published:** 17 September 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Youth With Disabilities in Chinese Society—Now and Then” edited by Shu Wan (University at Buffalo), Hao Feng (Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences), and Bingwan Tian (University at Buffalo), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i541>

Abstract

This article examines the role of tactile literacy in articulating citizenship for blind children across three distinct phases of twentieth-century China. It begins by tracing the localization of Braille systems through missionary schools since 1874. Missionary advocacy for tactile reading and writing aimed to cultivate religious inclusion, enabling blind children at the bottom of society to transcend economic survival. Beginning in 1927, the Nationalist state assumed control of education for the blind and made tactile literacy a criterion of blind citizenship. Within the social welfare system, civic instruction and manual training enabled blind children from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds to acquire social citizenship through tactile literacy. After 1949, the standardization of Chinese Braille as a lingua franca for “blind compatriots” (*mangbao*) facilitated blind children’s inclusion as socialist citizens through their participation in proletarian politics. Taken together, these three phases reveal how blindness was mediated through literacy ideologies promoted by religious, social, and political institutions, producing a language of blind citizenship grounded in Chinese understandings of disability, youth, marginality, and inclusion.

Keywords

20th-century China; blind children; Braille; citizenship; tactile literacy

1. Introduction

Mass literacy remains a persistent theme of social inclusion in twentieth-century China. As the foundation of non-school social education, mass literacy challenged traditional social hierarchies, effectively limiting the scriptural power of the ruling class. This concept further broadened educational means, contributing to the active expression and participation of marginalized groups in modern society. As targets of education

expanded from upper to lower classes and from men to women, literacy forms and methods also diversified. The expansion of subjectivities in mass literacy programs necessitated a redefinition of literacy from the perspective of non-normative bodies and individual abilities. Blind children, a well-represented group in special education history, accessed knowledge through tactile reading. Through acquiring tactile literacy, the blind became society's valued members during China's transition from an empire to a modern nation-state. As the dominant system of tactile literacy, Braille's localization in China reflected a profound shift in how state and social reformers conceived tactile writing as a medium of articulating citizenship for blind and disabled youth.

One of the most distinctive social education reforms of the twentieth century was the mass education movement, which began in 1920. Its leader, Y. C. James Yen, after graduating from Yale University in his early years, traveled to France to establish literacy classes for Chinese workers, teaching them to read newspapers and write letters. After returning to China, Yen initiated the first national literacy campaign in Changsha with YMCA support. Beginning in 1922, the campaign targeted urban laborers, petty merchants, beggars, and scavengers—society's most marginal members. Yen and organizers, including the young Mao Zedong, invoked the Chinese term for illiteracy—"literary blindness" (*wenmang*)—linking individual illiteracy to the alarming prospect that three-quarters of the Chinese population would "go blind" (Hayford, 1990, p. 43). This disability metaphor created urgency for social education to mold new citizens. As Hayford (1987, p. 153) notes, campaign leaders saw their effort as building "a national moral community" for a stronger state. As a supplement to formal schooling, social education emphasized localization in practice and the maintenance of the social environment upon which the educated groups relied for survival. For example, its intervention in rural areas required literacy education to align with the practical demands of the vast majority of peasants, which included the convenience of book-keeping and letter-writing, as well as advantages in resolving economic disputes. In urban life, meanwhile, the popularization of literacy established a connection with consumer culture precisely through mass media such as ballads, calendars and popular fiction.

Existing scholarship has highlighted the role of literacy in shaping civic identities and revolutionary agencies. Scholars have shown that Chinese citizenship emerged not from Western liberal frameworks alone but through contested intellectual discourses across political regimes (Fogel & Zarrow, 1997; B. Wong, 1999), and that social institutions and symbolic rituals defined citizenship as both ideology and participatory practice (Goldman & Perry, 2002; Harrison, 2000). Recent studies on literacy education further reveal how class positions and geographical locations created differential access to political participation, thereby shaping civic and revolutionary identities (Culp, 2007; Feng, 2023; Luo, 2022; Peterson, 1997). Yet these studies have largely focused on literate urban intellectuals, workers, and peasants, treating literacy as a tool for political mobilization and national belonging. What remains underexamined is how literacy ideologies shaped citizenship for those positioned at the margins of both literacy and the nation-state. Blind and disabled children have not only remained marginal to these accounts, but their acquisition of tactile literacy in China has been confined to the history of special education. Since the twentieth century, special education targeted at blind, deaf, and mentally disabled children gradually diverged from the public school system and entered the administrative purview of state-directed social welfare (W. Guo, 2012, 2022). However, scholarship on special education has primarily focused on institutional development and welfare administration, treating Braille as a pedagogical tool rather than examining how it functioned within broader citizenship projects.

Disability studies scholars demonstrate that citizenship implies a normalization process through which disabled bodies can never achieve full recognition. This is because the norms of able-bodied citizenship, which epitomize the medicalization of disability through prevention and cure, reduce disabled citizenship to biological rather than social constructions of deviance (Oliver, 1990; Snyder & Mitchell, 2015). More recently, Dauncey (2020, p. 30) develops the concept of “para-citizenship” to address the perceived distance between disabled and able-bodied citizenship, arguing that disabled individuals in contemporary China and elsewhere negotiate “a semblance of inclusion” within the hegemonic discourses of ableism while lacking certainty of full legal rights and status. Considering disabled citizens as “analogous and parallel to” able-bodied citizens helps reposition our analytical stance toward disability, moving away from a dichotomized framework that perpetuates the categorical denial, denigration, and disempowerment of disabled bodies in representative politics. Instead, the concept of para-citizenship reveals nuanced forms of inclusion and identity formation without assuming normative interventions as necessary extensions of medicalization.

Tactile literacy offers a useful lens for conceptualizing blindness and disabled citizenship. Braille, named after Louis Braille’s invention of the six-dot system of tactile writing, is now regarded internationally as a shared “language of access” for blind and visually impaired people. Chiu (2026, p. 5) argues that Braille is more than a material technology of writing, and tactile literacy should be understood as encompassing both individual abilities and “historically and socially located practices.” In twentieth-century China, a host of locally adapted Braille systems in missionary schools clashed with different visions of social inclusion for the blind. Tactile literacy emerged in a process where Chinese citizenship was a fluid and contested category for articulation. As the earliest recipients of tactile literacy, blind children navigated Braille’s indeterminate status as an imported writing system and the uncertainty of tactile literacy as a means of securing their inclusion as national citizens.

This article argues that the localization of Braille systems in modern China shaped articulations of citizenship for blind children across religious, social, and political spheres. By examining institutional and societal perspectives, I demonstrate how citizenship ideals were framed through tactile literacy’s intersections with disability, class, and gender—categories that existing scholarship has largely treated separately. Moreover, by tracing how blind children’s bodies were marked, trained, and incorporated into different literacy projects across three phases—late Qing, Republican, and early Socialist regimes—this article extends scholarly insights about the embodied dimensions of citizenship to disabled subjects, revealing how physical difference itself became a site through which citizenship was articulated and contested.

2. Western Missionaries and the Invention of Tactile Literacy in Late-Qing China

Following the Opium Wars and the opening of treaty ports from coastal to inland regions, Western colonial expansion increasingly took various institutional forms. Missionary organizations—churches, hospitals, and schools—became crucial vehicles for cultural penetration. These institutions employed Western-style medicine and education to target society’s marginalized populations for evangelical conversion, simultaneously providing relief and advancing missionary goals. Protestant missionaries held fundamentally different views from Confucian gentry regarding the rescue of destitute family members, particularly children with disabilities. John G. Kerr (1824–1901), an American Presbyterian physician who arrived in Guangzhou (Canton) in 1853 and founded the Canton Hospital, discovered during visits to local charity halls that parents abandoned sick female infants at foundling hospitals due to lack of medical care. Only a fraction

of these infants returned to their birth families after recovery; most were commodified—sold as servants in adulthood or forced into prostitution. Kerr argued that local benevolent societies’ utilitarian approach betrayed humanitarian principles. Institutional relief grounded in family norms proved particularly inadequate for people with disabilities. The blind living in asylums, for example, often resorted to begging because they received insufficient state subsidies (Kerr, 1873). Unlike Confucian charity, which relied on restoring family through the virtue of communal aid, Christian philanthropy emphasized individual difference for specialized inclusion. The blind constituted one of the earliest lower-class groups to attract missionary attention, as eye diseases (cataracts, conjunctivitis) required surgical intervention that served evangelistic purposes (Lazich, 2006). However, missionary medicine could not overcome society’s prejudice against the blind. This prompted missionaries to shift from medical evangelism to educating blind children.

When local Christian missions introduced tactile reading (*modu*) to teach blind children, they adapted Braille systems based on regional dialects and customary expressions. In the late Qing and Republican periods, four widely used Chinese Braille systems coexisted across north China, Manchuria, central China, and the southeastern coast (Mackenzie & Flowers, 1949). Among these, the earliest Chinese Braille was the *Gusou tongwen* (Universal Script for the Blind), designed around 1874 by William H. Murray (1843–1911) of the National Bible Society of Scotland. This system combined the six-dot Braille script with Beijing Mandarin phonetics, using 408 commonly used characters from the Kangxi Dictionary to represent sounds. Consequently, it became known as Kangxi Braille (*Kangxi mangzi*; W. Guo, 2006). After arriving in China in 1870, Murray dedicated himself to promoting the Bible, distributing gospels in streets and alleys. However, his inability to speak Chinese severely hindered his work among the local populace. Only upon encountering blind beggars did he conceive the idea of creating a Braille system to overcome communication barriers. At the time, many Western missionaries viewed Chinese characters as obstacles to enlightening the lower classes (Kaske, 2008). Murray’s patron, Constance Gordon-Cumming (1837–1924), disseminated Kangxi Braille to Western and English audiences as “Numeral Type.” Since the system encoded Chinese syllables through numbers, it offered clear advantages over characters for spreading literacy. For example, a blind person fluent in the 408-character syllable table could hear a character’s pronunciation (e.g., ài 愛), then retrieve the corresponding number (2) in a mnemonic chart, and convert it into the Braille pattern (⠁⠃). Blind students who acquired this method could type up to 22 Braille characters per minute, matching the speed of sighted students (Gordon-Cumming, 1898). Supporters of the numeral type further claimed that it could also teach sighted people to read by combining phonetics and character shapes for visual recognition. When connected into patterns, the dots formed a more convenient script than the Latin alphabet, supporters argued (Russell, 1898). Braille’s potential as a tool against illiteracy became a key selling point for missionary groups to engage in social education. For example, members of the Ecumenical Missionary Society in China reported at an international meeting that a female missionary stationed in Beijing had successfully used this method to teach a class of sighted women from the countryside to read Chinese, achieving satisfactory results (Cunningham, 1900). Between 1874 and 1879, the Hill-Murray Institute for the Blind (later renamed the Beijing School for the Blind) actively recruited blind students from various Mandarin-speaking regions, including Hubei, Shanxi, Zhili, and Manchuria. Most mastered Braille within three months and actively participated in printing biblical literature and producing Braille primers, while others learned music and instrument tuning.

However, the problem with Murray’s numeral system was that it lacked the flexibility to accommodate the diversity of regional dialects. To address this, David Hill (1840–1896) of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary

Society developed the *Wufang yuanyin* (Syllabary of the Five Directions) in Hankou School for the Blind. This is an alphabetical system that uses Braille symbols to represent Roman letters, allowing initials and finals to spell out Chinese characters and pronunciations. Missionaries in South China subsequently introduced it to Fujian and Guangdong, adapting it to local phonetics to develop regional Chinese Braille systems (Clayton, 1909). Whether employing Beijing's numeral method or Hankou's alphabetical method, these attempts to overcome communication barriers posed by Chinese characters represented more than linguistic innovation. As Tsu (2010) points out, Braille's indigenization was a byproduct of the late Qing phonetic movement to romanize Chinese characters. Behind the phonocentric movement to de-sinicize the Chinese language lay Western attempts to establish cultural hegemony. Such efforts to replace Chinese characters with visible phonetic alphabets ultimately failed (Zhong, 2021). The invention of Chinese Braille through missionary schools underscored the centrality of local phonetics in creating tactile literacy for blind communities. As the next section demonstrates, Braille systems relied on oral folk culture to mediate between tactility and the promise of written literacy. Blind children's mastery of Braille revealed the political and social conditions for producing new forms of disabled subjectivity.

3. Uplifting Institutions: Crafting Religious Citizenship in Missionary Schools for the Blind

Late Qing dissemination of tactile reading systems aimed to shape religious citizenship for the blind. In 1883, the Beijing School secured funding from the British and Foreign Bible Society to use Shanghai's lithographic technology for printing the first Braille textbook and Bible. The school pursued a strategy of building a "literate" blind community capable of conveying religious knowledge to the sighted. Yet this attempt encountered practical challenges, particularly the oral traditions that had long shaped popular perceptions of the blind. As Murray recounted, when Beijing neighbors first saw blind students rubbing their fingers over raised dots, they associated the action with the divination practices of blind fortunetellers (Gordon-Cumming, 1898).

Meanwhile, in a distant Manchurian village, tactile reading produced unexpected results. Bible Society records documented Chang Sen (?–1900), who traveled from Mukden (present-day Shenyang) to study Braille with Murray. Upon returning to Manchuria, Chang used Braille scriptures to preach to local villagers, holding the text while his fingertips traced the raised dots and he murmured words. Crowds gathered, marveling at what they perceived as a miracle (British and Foreign Bible Society, 1906). According to a missionary stationed in Manchuria, Chang had persuaded as many as 300 locals to convert to Christianity by the fall of 1892 (Goforth, 1929). Missionary writings portrayed Chang as a religious citizen through his mastery of Braille—a language mediating access to Christian faith. One illustration depicted him seated in a long gown, holding an embossed book with a fingertip touching the page to demonstrate tactile reading ability (Gordon-Cumming, 1892). The absence of religious symbols in the visualization of a blind Chinese gentleman undermines narrative coherence in missionary descriptions of Chang as a Christian convert. Yet the visual composition draws attention to blindness and the "seeing" fingers—a contrast establishing tactile literacy against Chinese notions of illiteracy as a sign of social marginality.

The ambiguous presentation of blindness's association with Christian identity reveals a simple fact: Tactile reading in the tradition of fortunetelling remained a specialized skill among Chinese blind diviners. Even after graduating from Braille schools, many blind students continued fortunetelling, as it remained a widely recognized blind competence (H. Wong, 1936). On a societal level, this persistence reveals how training

blind pupils as Christian preachers constrained Braille's promise for blind literacy and the progressive vision rooted in social education. Braille's reach remained limited outside missionary schools, and blind children continued to be organized in occupational groups: Blind men engaged in fortune-telling and divination, while blind women performed music and singing for a living. Confucian charity reinforced the gendered occupational demarcation, institutionalizing family norms in blind organizations. These structural conditions meant that promoting Braille for religious conversion could not fundamentally alter society's perception of blindness. Braille's potential as a medium of social education only emerged after the 1911 Revolution, when traditional blind organizations faced significant challenges.

Guangzhou demonstrated an alternative path for conceiving Braille within the missionary model of religious citizenship. Beginning in 1835, American medical missionary Peter Parker (1804–1888) established the first ophthalmic clinic (later the Canton Hospital), where he encountered numerous patients blinded by eye disease and attempted surgical treatment. Subsequent missionaries shifted from medicine to education, attending to the social conditions of the blind and disabled. Mary W. Niles (1854–1933) of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions arrived at the Canton Hospital in 1882. Inspired by John G. Kerr's founding of China's first psychiatric asylum in 1898, she established the Ming Sum School for the Blind (Mingxin gumu xuexiao) in 1906. The school initially targeted blind girls from impoverished families abandoned or sold into street begging and performance (Niles, 1892). At the time, blind songstresses (*guji*) constituted a distinctive occupational community that adopted blind girls and trained them to perform in teahouses. However, the majority lacking exceptional talent were reduced to street singing. They often suffered severe beatings from their adoptive mothers for failing to earn enough money, and some were forced into prostitution. Following the 1911 Revolution, Guangzhou's revolutionary government deployed police forces to transfer adopted blind girls to Ming Sum, seeking to shut down performance organizations and reform social mores. Responding to government requests, Niles implemented a religiously inspired social education program aimed at "rectifying the hearts" (corresponding to *zhengxin* in Chinese), emphasizing literacy's role in countering societal prejudice that viewed blind girls as natural-born entertainers and in making them "useful" (Niles, 1916, p. 6). After enrolling in the education program, rescued blind girls were presented in photographs wearing white shirts, standing together in an open field with joined hands. Contrasting with the image of the blind gentleman mentioned earlier, the collective portrait's redemptive message in literacy promotion is evident. With religious inclusion featured centrally in blind education, Guangzhou's blind singing girls became subjects of moral edification and social reform, directly challenging the survival-based economy that had structured their identity formation (Wang, 2020a).

Ming Sum tailored its pedagogy by adapting tactile literacy to prepare blind girls for gendered forms of disabled labor. For instance, instructors combined Braille lessons with weaving cotton and linen to cultivate blind girls' tactile sensitivity. Of the 128 blind women who graduated from Ming Sum between 1908 and 1939, thirty worked in handicrafts, four became professional masseuses, and three entered domestic service. Additionally, 57 graduates served in Christian institutions (hospitals, churches, blind schools), while approximately one-third either married or remained unemployed, dependent on family support (Ming Sum School for the Blind, 1939). These statistics reflect Ming Sum's pioneering role in expanding the social reach of Braille education and improving the social conditions of blind children. The school sought not only to broaden employment opportunities for these young people with disabilities but also challenged traditional gender ideologies that had shaped their social identities.

Despite institutional efforts toward social uplift, persistent gender norms made lower-class blind women less inclined to leave their established occupational communities. Wen Lirong (1900–?) was born into a poor Guangzhou family and lost her sight at age six. Her parents sent her to a music guild specializing in adopting blind girls to learn Cantonese opera singing. When the revolutionary government began banning blind singing guilds, Wen Lirong’s adoptive mother hid her in advance, enabling her to escape police searches and avoid institutionalization, unlike other rescued blind girls of that period. Recalling this experience after 1949, Wen remained skeptical of the government’s reform efforts, believing that blind girls in missionary schools “could not learn survival skills” (Wen, 1963). This dilemma of emancipation also reveals how old survival strategies and gender ideologies persistently shaped lower-class disabled identities as resilient forms of social marginality.

Well-educated blind children were rare and came primarily from upper-class families. Their exceptional cases demonstrate how literacy’s promise of upward mobility enabled some blind individuals to challenge traditional gender ideologies and negotiate their identities with institutional authorities. Born into an upper-class family in Guangzhou, Ching Man-Fai (1936–2011) lost her sight at six months due to eye disease. In her autobiography, Ching described herself as “one of the lucky ones,” attributing her fortune to encountering Braille early in her childhood through listening to the radio. Her determination to pursue education convinced her parents to give up traditional expectations that blind girls become entertainers. When the Second Sino-Japanese War erupted, her family relocated to Hong Kong, where, supported by the church, Ching used Braille to transcribe lessons and graduated from a local high school. After the war, she received a scholarship to study at Perkins School for the Blind in Boston, then returned to Hong Kong as the first blind female social worker with the Social Welfare Department (Ching, 1980, 1989).

While recognizing the social challenges facing the blind community due to educational exclusion, we must acknowledge exceptional cases of blind children who achieved upward mobility through acquiring Braille. Unlike Wen and blind girls coming from lower-class families, Ching and graduates from the Ming Sum School explored possibilities for disabled women’s participation in social education. The missionary school model reflected a structural transition from isolation to integration (Winzer, 1993). Tactile literacy, combined with vocational training, shaped a process of broadened social inclusion for disabled youth.

4. Learning Braille for the Nation: The Nationalist Articulation of Blind Citizenship

During the 1910s, Chinese reformers and government authorities recognized special education as central to state-directed social welfare. Huang Yanpei, then head of the Education Bureau in Jiangsu province, identified the absence of disabled children’s education from the modern public school system, arguing that this gap marginalized tens of thousands of blind individuals as vulnerable social subjects (Y. Huang, 1982). During a visit to the United States, Huang met John Fryer (Fu Lanya in Chinese), the famous late-Qing translator and author of *Jiaoyu guren lifa lun* (*Treatise on the principles and methods of educating the Chinese blind*). In it, Fryer explained Braille’s significance as a form of social education, proposing that the Chinese government incorporate the education of blind children into social welfare programs and supplement existing missionary schools (J. Fryer, 1912). By 1915, nearly all missionary schools in Mandarin-speaking regions had adopted Union Braille, a system that facilitated the printing of embossed books for blind children, whose enrollment in these schools was estimated at about one thousand (J. Fryer, 1915). John Fryer’s profound interest in the welfare of blind children further motivated his son, George B. Fryer (Fu Bulan

in Chinese), to introduce pre-school education and healthcare for blind children for Chinese readers (G. B. Fryer, 1913). Beginning in December 1912, the Beiyang government officially placed all schools for blind and deaf children under the Department of General Education. At the time, the majority of Chinese-run schools for the blind and deaf were private, with teachers recruited from missionary institutions. Du Wenchang, founder of the Beiping Private School for the Deaf and Mute in 1919, brought the fingerspelling method from Annette E. Thompson's deaf school in Yantai, Shandong. Historian Gu Jiegang, whose deaf daughter attended Du's school, commented that "education" (*jiao*) should take precedence over "custodial care" (*yang*) for disabled children (Gu, 1932). The institutional spaces created by missionary schools, where blind and deaf children learned to read and write in their own language, were gradually taken up by Chinese reformers, who adopted a statist definition of disabled citizenship that treated tactile and manual literacy as prerequisites for national inclusion.

Blind students also contributed to discussions of special education reform during the 1930s. Homer S. Wong (Wang Xiangyuan, 1910–?), supposedly China's first blind person to earn a doctoral degree, exemplified this intellectual engagement. Wong grew up in an intellectual family in Changsha, Hunan, where his grandfather served as a late Qing imperial academician and his father as principal of Yali College. At thirteen, Wong injured his eyes during a sports event and lost his sight. To learn Braille, Wong went to Shanghai to study with George B. Fryer, who was superintendent of the Institution for the Chinese Blind. In 1933, Wong graduated from St. Johns College with a degree in literature and philosophy. He subsequently attended Soochow University Law School and the National Conservatory of Music before leaving China during the Sino-Japanese War to pursue doctoral degrees in law and music at Marburg University in Germany ("Zhongguo weiyi mang xuezhe," 1938). As an advocate for blind education, Wong contributed to *The China Critic*, a liberal magazine in English featuring independent social critique since 1928. In a commentary, H. Wong (1936, p. 16) argued that missionary Braille systems required significant reform because they "carry simply the sound and not the meaning of (Chinese) words." Wong's educational experience revealed that effective blind education should combine literacy and specialized guidance: the former addressing intellectual needs of blind students pursuing higher education, the latter responding to practical needs for self-support through music, storytelling, and massage.

During the Nanjing Decade (1927–1937), Chinese educators urged municipal authorities to establish public schools for blind and deaf-mute children, arguing that special education should overcome reliance on foreign charity (Shu, 1927). The Kuomintang state positioned blind citizenship within social welfare administration that "combined care and education" (*yang jiao jiehe*), a model adapted from early local welfare experiments such as Zhang Jian's Nantong school. By treating blind and deaf-mute children's education as a means of reforming vagrancy, this welfare approach differed fundamentally from the school-centered model (Shao, 2004). When the Nanjing government established the municipal school for the blind and deaf-mute in 1927, it recruited teachers trained at Nantong, including Ye Binghua, who designed the Chinese Braille for National Pronunciation (*Guoyin mangzi fuhao*) based on the Nanjing dialect. Rather than representing Roman letters, the six-dot cells of Braille were adapted for a phonetic representation of Chinese, corresponding to Zhuyin (Mandarin phonetic symbols) that include 21 initials, 16 finals, and 22 combined finals (Ye, 1933). Nanjing's implementation of a national Braille system exemplified state control over tactile literacy and the construction of blind citizenship. An investigation shows that blind students studied national language, handicrafts, history, and civics, while deaf-mute students received lipreading, writing, and vocational training in manual skills such as weaving and printing (Kong, 1936). This differentiated curriculum reflected how the state reshaped disability categories through the division between literacy and vocational education.

Despite its status as a national model, Nanjing's special education system faced significant limitations. The national Braille system had limited reach, extending primarily within Nationalist-controlled southeast regions. Meanwhile, local governments deployed tactile literacy for civic education and administrative control of vagrancy. Guangzhou's municipal social welfare exemplified a coercive assimilation strategy, institutionalizing disabled beggars and fortunetellers in government-run poorhouses and specialized relief institutions. Social welfare administrators reclassified the urban vagrants according to intersections of age, gender, and disability, sheltering the elderly with physical handicaps in relief homes while organizing blind youth into Braille and vocational workshops (Wang, 2020b). This social welfare model shaped distinct pathways for developing citizenship qualifications among lower-class blind children, one defined by collective participation for utility and control rather than individual rights and representation.

According to the Ministry of Education, by May 1936 there were 22 blind schools (8 public, 14 private) and 18 deaf-mute schools (five public, 13 private) nationwide, enrolling 694 and 735 students respectively. However, many blind and deaf-mute children were placed in government-supervised relief workshops rather than formal schools, reflecting the state's welfare-oriented approach to disabled populations (Jiaoyubu, 1936). After 1938, Chinese-run schools for blind and deaf children—including the Nanjing school—were forced to relocate with the Nationalist government to the southwestern hinterland, while others operated in exile in Japanese-occupied areas such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang (Ma & Li, 2026). These special education and social welfare programs promised social citizenship for blind and disabled children, yet this promise was contingent upon selected groups demonstrating self-sufficiency and productivity. The Kuomintang's articulation of blind citizenship as a social welfare demand persisted until 1949, when the Communist Party fundamentally transformed the vocabulary of disabled citizenship.

5. Reforming Braille and Revolutionizing Blind Citizenship in Socialist China

After more than half a century of regional experimentation, Chinese Braille and tactile literacy—disseminated through missionary schools and social welfare programs—underwent fundamental transformations in the early People's Republic. As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) consolidated its regime, a nationally unified, standardized, and mass-oriented Chinese Braille gradually emerged. Central to this transformation was Huang Nai (1917–2004), son of revolutionary leader Huang Xing and a senior party member. After losing his sight in the Yan'an revolutionary base during wartime, Huang Nai devoted himself to reforming tactile literacy. The blind linguist sought to create a standard Braille system based on Pinyin (the Mandarin phonetic alphabet) that better represented Chinese pronunciation than the missionary-introduced romanization. As contemporary linguist Li Jinxi noted, Huang's reform of Chinese Braille built upon the simplification of Zhuyin symbols, which had constituted the officially adopted Braille system before 1949 (Li, 1955). Published in 1953, the New Chinese Braille Scheme (*Xin mangzi fangan*) further introduced the method of "word-based continuous writing" (*fenci lianxie*) to reflect Chinese grammatical and lexical structures.

The technical innovation was politically revolutionary. The New Chinese Braille (*Xin Mangzi*, hereafter NCB), N. Huang (1952, p. 3) argued, would eradicate "the illiterate among our blind compatriots" (*mangbao zhongde wenmang*). Huang's effort aligned with the CCP's anti-imperialist ideology. In the inaugural issue of *Blind Monthly* (*Mangren yuekan*), N. Huang (1954) stated that in the past missionaries brought Braille symbols (*mangzi fuhao*) to propagate their religion, whereas the NCB served as a weapon against ignorance, transforming blind compatriots into "socialist new persons" (as cited in N. Huang, 1999, p. 8). The Ministry of

Education then approved the NCB for nationwide instruction in blind schools, and established a Braille printing press for the circulation of embossed textbooks and magazines (Chen et al., 2008). Blind education shifted from social welfare institutions back toward formal schooling, fundamentally transforming the institutional framework for the articulation of disabled citizenship.

However, the reform of Chinese Braille and the post-1949 return to school-based blind education offered limited solutions to the survival and developmental challenges facing blind communities, which had been exacerbated by prolonged warfare. In 1957, at the second national meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Huang Nai, speaking on behalf of the China Welfare Association for the Blind (Zhongguo mangmin fuli xiehui, hereafter CWAB), reported that China's blind population numbered 1.6 to 1.7 million. Yet only about 10,700 elderly and adolescent blind people received government subsidies and special education. Municipal governments had organized fewer than 600 blind persons into productive labor, leaving the vast majority reliant on "street singing, fortune-telling, and begging" for livelihoods. Huang attributed this lack of social participation to the stigma of the "useless person" (*feiren*), noting that cadres often discouraged blind individuals from joining agricultural production even during mobilization campaigns (N. Huang, 1957). To overcome barriers to social inclusion, the CWAB drew on Soviet theories of developing non-visual sensory capacities for blind workers for socialist production ("Kaipi mangren shengchan," 1957). For instance, in 1958, the Shanghai branch of the CWAB organized over 200 blind individuals across the city into industrial production, urban propaganda, and afforestation work. Reports indicated that a Shanghai nail factory staffed by blind workers produced approximately 2,000 jin (1,000 kg) of nails daily, demonstrating the viability of blind labor in socialist construction ("Yindao mangren," 1958). The material goods produced by blind workers demonstrated the CWAB's successful mobilization of marginalized lower-class bodies to promote equal participation—a principle constitutive of the CCP's revolutionary citizenship. This fundamentally transformed how the welfare state defined subject formation through social education, shifting blind subjectivities from compulsory welfare obligation to active social participation.

Beyond productive labor mobilization, the CCP also organized former blind artists (*mang yiren*) for cultural reform and political propaganda. At a symposium on reforming traditional Chinese opera, Yu Shanmin, a blind male artist from Haiyang County, Shandong, performed a newly composed song with reformed opera lyrics: We are cultural warriors of the revolution; everyone must raise their ideological awareness (He, 1950). Such articulation exemplified blind people's embrace of political citizenship. Beginning in 1954, local cadres organized short-term study classes for blind artists, instructing them in socialist transition guidelines and Five-Year Plan objectives. In Xiangshan County, Zhejiang, for instance, blind villagers learned to perform "selling surplus grain to the state" and were dispatched to townships and villages to propagate party policies through folk performance ("Zuzhi mang yiren," 1958). Blind male storytellers contributed uniquely to CCP propaganda. Han Qixiang, renowned for his revolutionary storytelling accompanied by a three-stringed guitar, gained widespread popularity through anti-Japanese propaganda, anti-superstition campaigns, and the dissemination of Marriage Law in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region (Cong, 2016; Hung, 1993). After liberation, the state continued to assign blind artists the function of popularizing socialist education. A cadre in Liaocheng County, Shandong, noted that blind entertainers had proven immensely popular in advocating for the Marriage Law and facilitating campaigns during the Korean War. He urged local cultural departments to recognize the cultural capacities of blind entertainers and to provide them with new oral materials for enriching socialist culture (Xu, 1963). Beyond oral performance, the physical mobility of blind propagandists traveling across rural villages also functioned as a politically viable form of disabled labor, facilitating the articulation and recognition of blind citizenship by the socialist state (Ren, 2026).

The CCP's reform of blind female entertainers also shifted gender norms governing the blind community. Based on oral history research on Qingdao's reform of female drum-song singers, Zhao (2014) highlights this group's transitional social identity—situated between “obscene” feudal culture and socialist revolutionary culture. The occupational ambiguity between singing girls and prostitutes in the old society made this group's bodily emancipation particularly urgent. The blind songstress Wen Lirong, mentioned earlier, became a cultural worker after 1949 and actively participated in Cantonese opera reform. Her oral history testified to the identity transformation of blind entertainers. According to Wen, blind songstresses as an occupational group enjoyed no social recognition until the CCP included blind artists in the proletariat class and granted them a distinct cultural status. Reflecting on her career, Wen expressed sympathy for blind girls forced into prostitution due to their inability to earn through singing, asserting that disabled people experienced domination in the most intimate ways (Wen, 1963). Published interviews with blind female entertainers in rural areas before 1949 reveal harsher experiences of physical domination. The “blind sisters” (*mangmei*) of Wuzhou, Guangxi performed only on riverboats, earning minimal payment for singing while specializing in massage—a practice often implying coercive prostitution by adoptive mothers and human traffickers (Ou et al., 1981). It was precisely these disabled women at society's margin—powerless to escape bodily exploitation—who harbored the strongest consciousness for emancipation. After liberation, former blind sisters actively participated in campaigns against feudal culture, received education, and contributed to socialist production.

Beginning in 1955, the CWAB established vocational training programs for blind men and women nationwide. These “disabled but not useless” (*caner bufei*) trainees included blind entertainers previously begging and singing on streets, war-blinded veterans, and cadres and workers blinded in service. Prioritizing blind people's capacities for re-employment, the training workshops categorized trainees by gender and occupational background, remaking their citizenship qualifications across four domains: education, music, industrial production, and traditional Chinese massage. In music workshops, blind entertainers formed bands to learn and perform local folk music—Cantonese ballads like *Rain Pattering on Banana Leaves* and *Dance of the Golden Snake*—using tactile codes to transcribe musical scores. Chinese Braille lessons were a core element in the curriculum, aiming to elevate the cultural literacy and political awareness of the trainees to become “blind cadres” and work in the schools for the blind (E. Guo, 1957). In Fuzhou's blind school, blind female cadres engaged in music and art education, and some taught blind children to make crafts (Lin, 1957). Handicraft industries most dramatically reflected blind people's identity transformation through engaging in productive labor. Within two years, over 630 blind individuals from ten cities—Tianjin, Shenyang, Fuzhou, Nanning—mastered weaving techniques, generating 300 different woolen knitwear patterns for department stores (Xinhuashe, 1957). By late 1957, 56 blind production units nationwide employed 1,559 blind workers (“Baituo liulang,” 1957).

The CCP's conception of blind citizenship reflected a dual-track approach—productive labor and cultural literacy—implemented through mobilizing blind men and women across all social strata. In this process, the disabled body of blind performers acquired political significance as a medium of capacious transformations into socialist citizens. Through participating in socialist education and acquiring national language in Braille, blind individuals transformed their political identity as workers rather than dependents. However, this class-based mobilization did not challenge the ableist framing of blind citizenship as predicated on productivity in the context of accelerated socialist industrialization. Rather, the socialist state reorganized bodily difference for differentiated values of inclusion: economic as well as cultural, material as well as

ideological. In particular, blind women's experience of disability reveals how socialist transformation pursued a gender ideology of bodily emancipation by linking physical hardship with ideological struggle. Oral histories of blind female entertainers reveal how lower-class survival strategies locked disabled bodies within structural dominations produced by feudalism and imperialism, entrenching the notion that physical impairment equated to "uselessness." Under socialism, the ideal of being "disabled but not useless" taught blind women who relied on traditional skills—such as Wen Lirong—to recognize the oppressive structures they inhabited in the past. For those whose bodies had been commodified for survival, including blind girls coerced into prostitution, gendered awakening and collective resistance took shape through demands for bodily emancipation and "inclusion" in proletariat society.

6. Conclusion

Locating blind citizenship across the 1949 divide reveals a pattern of tactile literacy's intersections with disability, class, and gender. The Kuomintang state adopted a social welfare logic that appropriated tactile literacy for civic education, turning blind children into docile citizens. The CCP's revolutionary conception, however, aimed at liberating disabled subjects from class and gendered oppression and enabling active participation in social and political life. This contrast was evident in post-1949 critiques of Christian charity and welfare logics that constrained blind citizenship. Instead, as one cadre put it, the CCP positioned blind people as "disabled but not useless socialist builders" (Sun, 1959). This class-based disability imaginary fundamentally altered blindness as a social category—shifting it from marginalization to integration.

This article also demonstrates, from a longer historical trajectory, that tactile literacy—initially a transplanted form of special education—entered a modern process of social education wherein multiple historical actors collectively shaped the articulation of blind citizenship. The intellectual quest for tactile literacy represented various agents and their expectations for the belonging of blind and disabled members in imagined communities. Protestant missionaries, Chinese reformist elites, and state authorities all sought to transform blind children's social conditions for greater inclusion in religious, social, and political spheres of participation. The missionary invention of tactile reading systems harbored a tension between Western humanitarianism and traditional Chinese attitudes toward blindness, with Braille functioning as a medium of religious inclusion largely outside the state's purview. In the early Republic, Braille's dissemination became central to local governments' efforts to establish political legitimacy and reform social mores. State interventions in blind people's livelihoods triggered a convergence between the spread of tactile literacy and social welfare solutions to lower-class survival. This convergence integrated special education into government relief agencies while sparking intellectual debates over special education as social education. During the Nanjing Decade, the Kuomintang instituted a national Chinese Braille system in blind schools and welfare agencies, forging a cohesive articulation of civic obligations and social participation for blind children.

The late Qing and Republican promotion of Braille as a constituent element of blind citizenship shaped a common language enabling class-based inclusion for blind members of Socialist China. Socialist inclusion of blind people, as N. Huang (1999, p. 144) argued, relied first on "advanced, scientific literacy tools" to secure linguistic independence against imperialist domination. In his *Building Chinese Braille With Chinese Characteristics*, Huang summarized the new system's advantages in three aspects. Using Pinyin to replace Zhuyin maintained "internationalized visual characteristics" in Chinese Braille's alphabetical form. Phonetically, the new system overcame regional dialect-based pronunciation that hindered the formation of

a national Braille system. In spelling, it incorporated vocabulary and grammar as foundational elements, establishing Braille as an independent phonetic system (N. Huang, 1999). The linguistic independence of Chinese Braille thus served as a prerequisite for blind social independence, while blind socialization required liberation of both body and gender. As a national language for the blind, Chinese Braille became rooted in Socialist development of cultural and productive capacities for “disabled but not useless” persons.

This article concludes with a reflection on literacy’s role in identity formation: How did blind children living on the margins of society learn to acquire tactile literacy as access to social mobility? Could Braille function as a symbol of blind empowerment for them? In addition to showing how disability was represented and managed by inventors and promoters of Braille, I have traced a few blind individuals who embraced tactile literacy amid changing social and political environments to turn marginalization into inclusion. In considering Braille and tactile literacy a medium for the articulation of blind citizenship, we should also attend to the barriers that such attempts create in the dynamic historical and social formations of disabled subjectivities. This article locates the development of Braille in social education, a field which itself had been contested, appropriated, and transformed under different regimes of inclusion. When Braille’s function as an access and means of inclusion for blind and disabled groups, the socially progressive implications of tactile literacy also risked being compromised through institutional assimilation of disabled bodies for other goals. As this article demonstrates, the power of tactile literacy lies in mediating contested forms of inclusion that positioned blind children as “para-citizens” within ableist citizenship projects at multiple institutional levels and across various political regimes. In particular, the imposition of “able-bodiedness” through tactile literacy—understood as blind people’s socioeconomic and political participation on equal terms with their sighted counterparts—reveals how dominant literacy ideologies can define disabled citizenship in ways that foreclose alternative claims to education and inclusion.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the journal’s two anonymous reviewers for their careful and constructive feedback. Research for this article was financially supported by the Peacock Research Fund of the Shenzhen Municipal Government (Project No. KQ002998).

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between The Chinese University of Hong Kong and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

This manuscript was edited with Claude (Anthropic) for grammar and language refinement only. The research, analysis, and content are entirely the authors’ own work.

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