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Learning by Ear, Understanding by Heart: Education of Blind Children and Its Achievements in Ming and Qing China

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Abstract

In traditional Chinese society, the visually impaired face severe structural exclusion and occupational segregation. This article foregrounds the subjective agency of Ming–Qing blind children who achieved deep social inclusion through alternative education. In the absence of institutionalized special education, these children leveraged sensory compensation—specifically "ear-learning" (auditory memorization and oral transmission)—supported by family capital and communal pedagogical networks. More decisively, the Confucian discourse of being "blind in the eyes but not in the mind" reconfigured physical blindness as a "heart-mind advantage," legitimizing non-visual learning as a refined path to intellectual excellence. Accumulating cultural capital through literature, medicine, and divination, these individuals secured recognition from state officials and local elites, transforming from marginalized subjects into respected knowledge producers. These cases deconstruct the medical deficit model, demonstrating that social inclusion depends not on physiological normalization but on a society's willingness to validate alternative epistemologies and redistribute cultural capital.

Keywords

blind children; cognitive reframing; ear-learning; education; sensory compensation; social inclusion

1. Introduction

In traditional Chinese society, the visually impaired have long been marginalized within the social hierarchy, facing severe spatial exclusion and occupational segregation. In the legal codes of the Tang and Song dynasties, the blind were explicitly classified as suffering from "critical disability," the highest level of physical impairment. This institutional definition constructed them into a vulnerable social identity. Ming scholar Lü Kun noted that, unlike widows or orphans, the blind "suffer[ed] injuries to hands and eyes when trying to

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work, and tumble[d] into ditches when begging for food," rendering them "the most helpless among the helpless" (Lü, 2008, Vol. 2). Survival pressure and deep-rooted prejudices forced most blind people into lower-class occupations such as fortune-telling or street performances. As Ming literatus He Qin observed, secular prejudice categorized the blind as "worthless," forcing many to "recite and practice obscene and absurd tales" for survival (He, 1544/1936, pp. 3–4). This structural exclusion constituted the universal predicament of the disabled community in ancient China.

However, during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912), in the absence of a modern Braille system and institutionalized special education, Chinese society presented a unique paradox of "inclusion": Some blind children were not trapped in marginalized social roles; instead, they successfully overcame physical barriers through specific mechanisms and entered the mainstream elite networks dominated by the literati class. Historical and sociological research on pre-modern disabled groups has long focused on dynastic welfare relief or medical coping models, rarely viewing the blind as cultural creators with subjective agency. Consequently, the micro-mechanisms and individual resilience of disabled groups achieving social inclusion in traditional society remain underexplored.

Existing scholarship has approached these issues from several directions, yet none has placed the education of blind children at its center. Studies of disability in Chinese history have largely adopted an institutional and welfare-oriented perspective: The pioneering survey by D. Lu and Inamori (1996) traces legal classification, state relief and occupational segregation from antiquity onward, and Guo's (2023) synthesis of the long-term transformation of Chinese special education concludes that premodern practice amounted essentially to "relief without education" (*yang er bu jiao*), with training for the disabled surviving only in scattered cases rather than as an institutionalized field (see also Xiao & Qu, 2019). Research on the blind specifically has concentrated on two endpoints of the longue durée: at one end, the officially organized musical training of blind masters (*gu meng*) in the high antiquity of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou, and their subsequent retreat into folk storytelling and balladry after the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE; see Guo & Ma, 2024); at the other end, the Protestant missionary introduction of institutional schooling and Chinese Braille from the 1870s onward (Guo, 2006). Scholarship on modern disability, notably Matthew Kohrman's ethnography of state biopolitics and advocacy in contemporary China, likewise leaves the cultural agency of premodern disabled subjects largely unexplored (Kohrman, 2005). The history of childhood and education in late imperial China has flourished without attending to disability: Hsiung's (2005) landmark study of children and childhood, together with Kinney's (2004) work on early China and Saari's (1990) work on the late Qing, reconstructed the emotional, medical, and pedagogical worlds of Chinese children, yet took the able-bodied child as the default subject. The rich literature on traditional education has established how literacy and classical learning structured social mobility (Elman, 2000) but has seldom asked how those barred from visual access to texts could participate in this world of learning. Research on Ming–Qing charity, notably Leung's (2013) study of benevolent halls and Smith's (2009) work on late-Ming philanthropy, has illuminated the relief institutions through which elites aided the poor and the infirm, yet framed the disabled primarily as objects of benevolence rather than producers of knowledge. Building on these bodies of scholarship, this article shifts the focus from institutions of relief to the mechanisms of inclusion: it examines how blind children in Ming–Qing China, through the widespread aural pedagogy of "ear-learning" and the legitimating discourse of being "blind in the eyes but not in the mind," actively accumulated cultural capital and entered mainstream literati networks—thereby revising the welfare-centered and medical-deficit paradigms that have long dominated the field.

This article fills this gap by exploring how Ming–Qing blind children transcended social exclusion and acquired cultural capital in an institutional education vacuum. The core mechanism lies in sensory compensation and cognitive reframing: "receiving through the ear and comprehending through the mind." Deprived of vision, blind children shifted to auditory learning, completing preliminary knowledge accumulation through family capital and folk education networks. Traditional culture endowed this non-visual learning with profound legitimacy. Since Han Yu first proposed "blind in the eyes but not in the mind" in the mid-Tang dynasty, the neo-Confucian tradition reframed blindness as a "mental advantage" that insulated learners from external distractions. Drawing on Ming–Qing local gazetteers, literary collections, and biographies, this article analyzes how visually impaired scholars used sensory compensation for knowledge construction, and examines their professional recognition and embeddedness as blind Confucian scholars, doctors, and poets. It argues that education was not merely a path to individual dignity but the key mechanism for overcoming social exclusion and achieving deep social inclusion, deconstructing the stereotype of disability as a "waste illness" and providing indigenous historical experience that transcends the "medical deficit perspective" for contemporary disability studies.

2. Navigating Exclusion: Sensory Compensation and Educational Adaptation via "Ear-Learning"

During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912), the absence of modern special education and Braille confronted blind children with two barriers: bodily constraints and social exclusion. However, this exclusion was not absolute. Driven by subjective agency, some blind children navigated an alternative educational trajectory. Through "ear-learning" (auditory memorization and oral transmission), they overcame physiological constraints and renegotiated their marginalized status. This journey served as the vehicle for deep social inclusion. Equipped with cultural capital from this adaptive education, they entered mainstream society as blind Confucian scholars, poets, and physicians, gaining recognition and integration within the literati-dominated elite.

Before proceeding, it must be emphasized that "ear-learning" was by no means a special pedagogy devised for the blind; it was a long-standing and pervasive mode of instruction in traditional China. In Song–Ming epistemology, knowledge acquired through the senses was termed "knowledge from hearing and seeing." The Northern Song philosopher Zhang Zai defined it as knowledge that "arises from contact with things" (X. Zhang, 1978, p. 24), a formulation that identifies hearing (*wen*) and seeing (*jian*) as the twin gateways of learning: Seeing was exemplified by reading texts, while hearing—realized through conversation, lectures, and oral instruction—was precisely what this article calls "ear-learning." Indeed, in an era when printed books remained costly and literacy was far from universal, teaching proceeded largely through oral transmission: teachers lectured, students chanted, and texts were committed to memory through the ear. The education of blind children therefore required no methodological invention; it drew upon the same aural pedagogy that served all learners, diverging from mainstream practice in degree rather than in kind. Whereas modern education treats the schooling of blind children as a "specialized" undertaking set apart from general education, in traditional China it lay on a continuum with mainstream pedagogy—and it was precisely this continuity, this article argues, that made the deep social inclusion of blind learners structurally possible.

2.1. Epistemological Reframing: Auditory Learning and Non-Visual Knowledge Systems

This inclusion relied on cognitive mechanisms stimulated by blindness. Prolonged absence of visual stimuli, combined with auditory training, enabled blind children to cultivate attentiveness and mnemonic capacities exceeding those of sighted peers. This "single-hearing memorization" constituted the cognitive foundation for overcoming educational barriers.

The late-Song writer Zhou Mi's Guixin Zazhi documented blind individuals with extraordinary auditory capacities, noting that the Southern Song blind man Chen Dubu "could identify anyone merely by hearing his voice," while Zhang Shenjian "retained tens of thousands of matters within his mind" (M. Zhou, 1988, p. 137). The Yuan scholar Hou Kezhong "listened to children reciting books and, within a single day, could completely memorize all that was taught" (Z. Wang & Feng, 2012, p. 2896). Similarly, Zhu Yujia, a Ming imperial clansman, lost his sight at age five but "memorized thousands of words daily through auditory learning" while his teacher traced characters on his palm (Tan, 2006, p. 255). Zhang Pei, younger brother of the late-Ming scholar Zhang Dai, had assistants read the *Compendium of Materia Medica* and hundreds of medical texts, all of which he "could commit to memory upon a single hearing" (D. Zhang, 2014, pp. 359–360). The Qing poet Ni Zaizhong memorized eight complex Yongshi poems by the Western Jin poet Zuo Si after a single recitation, "without a single error" (X. Ma, 2023, p. 162). Zhu Youzhi, blinded at age three, similarly "memorized texts with apparent ease upon hearing others read" (Ding, 2018, p. 5147).

Beyond auditory compensation, rare tactile innovations replaced vision. The Qing scholar Lü Shi commissioned iron molds and carved thick paper into distinct shapes: "square, round, curved, straight, slanted, upright, broad, narrow, long, short, blunt, and sharp," which he traced with his fingers to know the exact rhyme (Zhao & Zhang, 1987, pp. 319–320). By inventing cognitive tools, visually impaired individuals dismantled structural exclusion.

2.2. Domestic Support: Family Capital and the Tradition of "Ear-Learning"

Once blind children demonstrated auditory advantages, family networks became their earliest providers of "compensatory vision." This practice was deeply embedded in Confucianism, which mandated that fathers and elder brothers instruct and value "vocal teaching." The Southern Song philosopher Zhu Xi noted that "the ancients, before the age of fifteen, all imbibed the instruction of their fathers and elder brothers" (Zhu, 1986, p. 556).

The Ming-dynasty philosopher Wang Yangming advocated "guiding children through singing poetry…and enlightening their perception through chanting books" (S. Wang, 2018, p. 356).

This culture provided an inclusive space for blind children. Ritual ethics viewed oral transmission as a moral duty, and families displayed unwavering responsibility. The Ming-dynasty scholar Tang Ruxun of Huating, blinded at age five, depended on family oral instruction: "His father and elder brothers held him on their knees to teach him the Book of Odes and historical records" (Tan, 2006, p. 255). His brothers acted as his reading "eyes," reciting the Six Classics and histories through auditory means (L. Zhou, 2018, pp. 86–87). The Qing-dynasty Li Weiwen of Yidu, blinded at age three, was orally taught the Quli, Neize, Xiaoxue, and Tang poetry by his father (Mao & Li, 1859, Vol. 50). The Qing-dynasty Shen Zongxuan, great-grandson of Shen Xuanzai, lost his sight at age three and attended courtyard teachings alongside his siblings, mastering phonology and literature (Fang, 1750, Vol. 4, pp. 25–26; blocks repaired by R. Fang).

Extended kinship networks mobilized social capital. In Qing-dynasty Zhili, Zhang Yicheng received instruction in medicine and classics from his clan uncle (Hao, 1891, Vol. 9). In Qing-dynasty Anqiu, when Li Wo went blind at age ten, his brother Li Qin exhausted his inheritance to hire tutors and assisted by "tracing character shapes by hand," educating him into a scholar (S. Ma, 1920, Vol. 23). The Ming scholar He Qin defied prejudice, designating his blind nephew as his father-in-law's heir and teaching him to recite Zhu Xi's Xiaoxue, Donglai's maxims, and poetry on filial piety (He, 1544/1936, Vol. 1). Through this auditory compensatory mechanism, He Qin guided his nephew onto the orthodox path of Confucian social inclusion.

2.3. Beyond the Household: Auditory Access to Communal Learning

Neo-Confucian pedagogies fostered an aural-centered environment in *sishu*, enabling blind children to circumvent visual barriers. Since the Northern Song, scholars emphasized vocalization, recitation, and memorization. The Northern Song scholar Lü Xizhe argued that stressing the final character "makes memory firm" (as cited in Z. Wu, 2012, p. 71). Zhu Xi established rigorous standards: "In all reading, one must read with a loud and clear voice…recite it many times until it naturally flows from the mouth and is never forgotten" (Zhu, 2022, p. 374). The Yuan-dynasty educator Cheng Duanli pushed this to its extreme, stipulating that students must "read the text one hundred times and recite it from memory one hundred times" (D. Cheng, 1936, p. 2). By the Ming and Qing, vocal recitation had become standard, saturating *sishu* spaces with a high-density soundscape. Lacking a unified curriculum, these schools featured multiple reading paths simultaneously (Leung, 1994; Y. Lu, 2018, p. 106). The modern writer Lu Xun recalled, "Everyone read at the top of their voices, creating a truly tumultuous din" (X. Lu, 2005, p. 290). This overlapping recitation transformed visually fixed characters into shared aural resources.

Leveraging this soundscape, some blind children crossed educational boundaries by "sitting in," acquiring communal resources. The Qing-dynasty Sichuan blind physician Chen Zunxi completed his early literacy by sitting beside the *sishu* and listening to children recite. Fang Hengqu of the Qing dynasty, blind since youth, accompanied his brother to the *sishu* from age five, receiving instruction in parsing and classics by ear (Dai, 1853/2010, Vol. 4). In Qing-dynasty Gansu, Ji Hanzhang traveled to hear a master lecture; his profound comprehension earned him oral instruction in neo-Confucian texts (Zhe, 1763, Vol. 11).

Displaying subjective agency, some blind children actively sought others to read for them. In Qing-dynasty Hubei, Wang Kaide, blind since age three, would "hold scrolls daily and request others to recite and explain them, comprehending them immediately" (Y. Chen & Fan, 1794, Vol 8). The Qing-dynasty Han Ruxiao from Shandong would "ask people to sit at the desk and recite the classics and histories, grasping the content upon hearing it" (J. Chen et al., 1911, Vol. 12, p. 29). Zhang Pei had people read to him "from dawn to late night, listening tirelessly until the readers' voices grew hoarse and several substitutes were needed" (D. Zhang, 2014, pp. 359–361). This proactive engagement underscores the resilience blind youths employed to acquire cultural capital.

3. Philosophical Reframing and Cultural Legitimation: "Blind in the Eyes but Not in the Mind"

Sensory compensation and "ear-learning" alone cannot fully explain why the education of blind children in the Ming and Qing attracted such extensive commitment from kinship and community networks and

secured a place in mainstream scholarly circles. The decisive factor was that the Confucian tradition endowed this non-visual learning with substantial legitimacy at the philosophical and moral levels. Grounded in the discourse of being "blind in the eyes but not in the mind" (Z. Liu & Yue, 2010, p. 714), thinkers reconceptualized the cognitive capacities of blind learners and achieved far-reaching cultural legitimation (J. Lu, 2008, p. 471; Zhu, 2018, p. 539).

3.1. From "Worthless" to "Mind-Sight": Philosophical Reframing and Social Recognition

In traditional Chinese society, people with visual impairments were often equated with being "worthless," and their social value was severely discounted. From the mid-Tang dynasty, this prejudice encountered intellectual challenge from the elite.

In 814 CE, the Tang-dynasty writer Han Yu wrote on behalf of the poet Zhang Ji (who had a severe eye condition), proposing "blind in the eyes but not in the mind" (Z. Liu & Yue, 2010, pp. 714–715). Zhang Ji lamented that "with both eyes unable to see, I am of no use to the world," but refused to be relegated to the common run (Z. Liu & Yue, 2010, p. 715). He argued: "If a capable person should be discarded because of blindness, even if blind, a capable person should only be discarded among the mundane, but not among those who practice the Way of the ancients" (Z. Liu & Yue, 2010, p. 715). He directed his critique at the able-bodied: "Today, those who are blind in the mind are everywhere; as for me, I claim to be blind only in the eyes, whereas my mind can distinguish right from wrong" (Z. Liu & Yue, 2010, p. 715). Admittedly, the letter also betrays the very prejudice it seeks to overcome. Zhang Ji asks anxiously: "Musical artisans are all blind; might I be grouped alongside such men?" (Z. Liu & Yue, 2010, p. 715). This question reveals how deeply the occupational equation of blindness with musical service was entrenched. Yet it is precisely this rhetorical structure that lends the letter its force. Composed as a petition on Zhang Ji's behalf to a surveillance commissioner, the letter first voices the entrenched stereotype—the relegation Zhang Ji fears—in order to repudiate it through the counter-principle that human worth resides in the mind rather than the eye. The stereotype thus appears in the text not as the author's conclusion but as the foil against which his redefinition of blindness is articulated: By conceding that society habitually grouped the blind with musical artisans and then insisting that Zhang Ji's unblinded mind rendered such a grouping absurd, the letter at once documents the prevailing occupational prejudice and mounts an elite challenge to it, arguing for the admission of the blind into the literati field by virtue of inner intellect.

By the Song and Ming dynasties, this concept had evolved into a shared cultural trope. The Northern Song poet Huang Tingjian praised Peng Jingshan for having "stripped away all phenomena to see his true self," arguing that virtue and skill often reside within illness, and that the blind could gain distinct insights in "darkness" (Huang, 2015, p. 3176). The Northern Song official Chen Guan recommended the statesman Fan Chunren to the emperor, stating: "Although he has an eye disease, his mind is not blind," arguing that entrusting him with heavy responsibilities would "win the hearts of the world" (G. Chen, 2006, p. 9). This legitimizing narrative endowed blind scholars with the dignity to exist as intellectuals, establishing them as potential elites capable of moral and professional excellence.

3.2. The Neo-Confucian Context and Epistemological Reversal: Transforming the Lack of Sight Into a "Heart-Mind Advantage"

Beyond literary and political discourses, Song-Ming neo-Confucianism provided practical paths of self-cultivation, reconceptualizing the lack of sight from a negative physiological condition into a positive "heart-mind advantage."

In traditional epistemology, the extraordinary memory of the blind originated from extreme concentration brought about by sensory compensation. The ancients mythologized that Spring and Autumn music master Shi Kuang "smoked his eyes to become a blind man" precisely to "block out all distractions and concentrate solely on astrological calculations and musical temperaments" (J. Wang, 1981, p. 78). The Northern Song diviner Wei Pu "recited multiplications and divisions without a single error" and "manipulated counting rods so swiftly that the human eye could not follow" (Shen, 2015, p. 175). Hu Zhiyu, a prominent statesman and neo-Confucian scholar of the early Yuan dynasty, summarized that because the blind "do not see objects of desire and thus do not divide their will," they paradoxically "achieve tranquility and therefore deliberate" (Hu, 2004, p. 250).

Song-Ming neo-Confucianism pushed this logic to its extreme. The Southern Song philosopher Lu Jiuyuan developed the Warring States thinker Mencius's dictum that "the office of the heart is to think," advocating "closed-eye sitting" to gather body and mind (J. Lu, 2008, p. 471). He argued that ears and eyes "do not think and are obscured by things," blocking the manifestation of principle; only by closing the eyes for inner contemplation can one apprehend the "principles of the heart." Zhu Xi's late-life turn provided powerful confirmation. After a lifetime of arduous study severely impaired his vision, he ceased reading and turned to quiet sitting. He realized he had "always been immersed in words, causing this entire mind to race among the pages…which was too fragmented" (Zhu, 2018, p. 539). He came to realize that "only by nurturing the original mind to be empty, tranquil, and luminous can one perceive the subtle," remarking, "I rather regret that blindness and the abandonment of reading did not come earlier" (Zhu, 2018, p. 539).

In the cultivation system of "quiet-sitting and the reduction of desires" (*zhujing quyu*), shutting out external things became a refined method of "pursuing the Way." "Closing the eyes" was reframed as a natural condition for casting off disturbances. After He Kui, a Southern Song *jinshi* of the Jiading reign, lost his sight at forty, he "sat in quiet contemplation all day observing the mind, which became luminous after prolonged tranquility" (Z. Wang & Feng, 2012, p. 878). He reflected that before losing his sight, his mind had been obscured by the clamor of official service, constituting "blind while not physically blind," whereas after losing his sight, his heart-mind became clear, making him paradoxically "not blind while physically blind." This epistemological reversal provided encouragement for blind individuals, laying a value foundation for entering mainstream scholarly paths through non-visual means.

3.3. Self-Cultivation and the Reconfiguration of Sensory Knowledge

Blind scholars did not passively receive literati frameworks; they actively appropriated these resources, forging an inward epistemology grounded in their own experience. Qian Ximing and Feng Shizao exemplify this reconfiguration (Q. Chen & Zou, 1897, Vol. 3; Fang, 1750, Vol. 4, pp. 25–26).

The Ming-dynasty scholar Qian Ximing, who lost his sight at age three, articulated "learning not with the eyes, but with the heart-mind," adopting the style name "Mind Fisher" (Fang, 1750, Vol. 4, pp. 25–26). He delineated three stages: first, "listening to skilled readers recite" to "fish for the words"; second, "having knowledgeable interpreters explicate the chapters" to "fish for the meanings"; and finally, transcending written traces to "fish for the Way" through "thinking with spiritual acuity and comprehending with divine subtlety." Qian's theory challenged the ocular centrism of traditional education, demonstrating that blind individuals could rely on auditory attentiveness and inward realization to complete the process from knowledge acquisition to creation.

This concept became a means of resisting examination culture. After losing his sight in middle age, Feng Shizao (Qing dynasty) did not abandon his studies; instead, he "sat by his bed daily, silently reciting the books he had previously read, experiencing fresh insights each time" (Q. Chen & Zou, 1897, Vol. 3). He transformed sight loss into a pedagogical philosophy, warning disciples to discard the examination mentality and "not calculate for the sake of writing essays." He taught students to turn inward: "You must consider whether this sentence is useful to me. What will I use this sentence for in the future? In which sentence does my lifelong ailment lie?" Blindness released him from dependence on visual texts, freeing him from classical commentaries to reach the state where "heavenly principles originally reside in the human mind, achieving self-attainment beyond spoken and written words" (Q. Chen & Zou, 1897, Vol. 3).

Thus, it was not merely literary sympathy when Yuan Dong, a Qing-dynasty scholar, concluded that blind scholars were "superior to those with keen eyes" (Yuan, 1759/2002, facsimile ed., Vol. 15, p. 597), or when Kong Shangren, a renowned early-Qing dramatist and poet, sighed: "For those who are blind in the eyes but not in the mind, how can the people of the world use their own blurred vision to mock those who see clearly?" (Kong, 1688/1997, Vol. 9). The cultural legitimation achieved through philosophical reframing enabled blind individuals to attain spiritual autonomy and constructed the ideological foundation for them to overcome social barriers and achieve substantive social inclusion.

4. Embeddedness and Reciprocity: Knowledge Production and Network Integration Among Blind Scholars

Rather than retreating into isolation after childhood, Ming–Qing blind scholars who had received auditory education actively engaged in knowledge production and communal practice. These early-blinded individuals achieved distinguished accomplishments across literature, classical studies, medicine, and divination. Through such expertise, they reconfigured their social worth and established sustained reciprocity with local elites and state officials. This trajectory attests to the efficacy of early education and illuminates how they transcended barriers to achieve substantive inclusion.

4.1. Breaking the Barrier of Sight: From Childhood Education to Original Knowledge Production

In traditional China, textual scholarship and poetry were regarded as the exclusive preserve of the sighted literati. Yet certain early-blinded individuals shattered these ocular barriers in adulthood. The late-Ming Huating scholar Tang Ruxun, blinded at age five, relied entirely on oral transmission by his father and brothers to complete his elementary education (Tan, 2006, p. 255). He later produced the *Tangshi jie* (an interpretation of Tang poetry), a work of substantial scholarly weight. When annotating texts, Tang displayed remarkable philological rigor: He strictly adhered to the principle of "classics before histories," and

when a term appeared in both Qin and Han sources, he "invariably drew upon Qin materials rather than privileging Han ones" (L. Zhou, 2018, pp. 86–87). His annotation of Du Fu's line *gouhe shufang* (ravines and unrestraint) traced it precisely to the fu-rhapsody of the Wei-Jin writer Xiang Xiu—a feat that the late-Ming literary leader Qian Qianyi praised as "something no predecessor had achieved" (Q. Qian, 1985, p. 1738).

In poetic composition, the auditory sensitivities and inward reflection cultivated in childhood were transformed into a distinctive sensory aesthetics. Han Ruxiao, a Qing-dynasty Shandong poet blinded at age seven, acquired broad learning through listening to others recite. Unable to realize his talents due to his disability, he channeled his aspirations into poetry "for self-consolation," producing the *Zongqing Yin'gao* (*Drafts of Unrestrained Chanting*), which local literati acclaimed as "a marvel of brush and ink" (J. Chen et al., 1911, Vol. 12, p. 29). Ni Zaizhong, blinded at age six, received his entire education through oral transmission of Tang poetry. Possessing an auditory memory that retained every word after a single hearing, he engaged in linked verse with scholar-officials and composed lines such as: "Without seeing the breadth of earth, how can one know the celestial warp and weft?" This is a philosophical vision contrasting inner clarity with worldly darkness (X. Ma, 2023, p. 162; Z. Qian, 2004, p. 2322). Such accomplishments transformed early-blinded individuals from passive recipients of education into active producers of culture.

4.2. Technical Reciprocity in Practical Sciences

Beyond establishing their reputation in the humanities, blind individuals who had been blind from childhood during the Ming and Qing dynasties also pushed their early sensory compensation to its fullest potential in fields that relied heavily on logic and accumulated experience—such as medicine, calculation, and divination—thereby achieving substantive reciprocity with local society.

The emergence of blind physicians represents a paradigmatic instance of the successful conversion of auditory and tactile compensation. Chen Zunxi of Jintang, Sichuan, in the Qing dynasty, lost his sight at age six. Having completed his early education by sitting beside a village school and listening to boys recite, he later turned to medical principles, committing the Ming physician Zhang Jiebin's *Jingyue quanshu* (*Complete Works of Jingyue*) to memory through auditory learning and comprehending the interconnection of medicine and "the Changes." Before he practiced medicine, the local medical culture of Jintang County did not hold Zhang Jiebin's teachings in high esteem. Yet after Chen began treating patients with consummate skill, local physicians came under his influence and elevated Jiebin's doctrine as "the orthodox text of the kingly way" (Xie et al., 1811, Vol. 5). A physician blind from childhood had, by his own efforts, transformed the medical culture of an entire county.

Zhang Pei, the younger brother of the late-Ming scholar Zhang Dai, lost his sight at age five. He then devoted himself to listening to hundreds of medical texts and works on pulse theory. Not only could he diagnose illness "with a touch of the hand," but he also prepared medicinal ingredients according to ancient methods, and for years dispensed medicine gratis to commoners, "giving away hundreds of prescriptions without stint." His medical virtue and skill eventually won him the deep respect and admiration of local society (D. Zhang, 2014, pp. 359–361).

In the field of calculation, Liu Wo of Nanling, Anhui, blind from childhood, composed the *Suanxue sanfa* (*Three Methods of Mathematics*), distilling complex computational principles into direct and accessible methods (K. Wu & He, 1878, Vol. 226). Zhang Yicheng of Fengrun, Zhili, who lost his sight at age five,

mastered the computational methods of the *Jiuzhang suanshu* (*Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art*), manipulating counting rods with his ten fingers so that "not the slightest error appeared" (Hao, 1891, Vol. 9).

More striking still, for certain blind individuals who had received orthodox ethical education, the "lowly trades" of astrology and divination—despised by common society—were transformed into intellectual resources for adjudicating political legitimacy and engaging with dynastic politics. During the Kangxi reign of the Qing dynasty, the feudatory Geng Jingzhong plotted insurrection and sought with rich rewards the services of the blind diviner Sheng Hengzhi (known as Sheng, the Blind), who had lost his sight to smallpox at age three and had mastered astronomical computation through auditory learning. Sheng not only refused to provide him with a favorable prognostication but also employed orthodox learning in celestial field theory—"Jupiter having reached the position of Yin, and Yin being the celestial field of the capital"—to sternly condemn his act of usurpation, whereupon he took up his staff and departed, displaying profound moral integrity and acute political judgment (D. Chen, 1698/1996, facsimile ed., Vol. 9). Mao Sheng, a blind child of Changzhou in the Ming dynasty who lost his sight at age seven, had mastered the Huangji numerology through "listening to objects and sounds." Twice during the Yongle and Xuande reigns he was summoned to the capital by the emperor to provide counsel on affairs of state. Yet he remained indifferent to fame and profit, firmly declining eminent court offices and choosing instead to retire to rural life (G. Liu & Tang, 1618, Vol. 15). These cases demonstrate that blind individuals who had received sound early education acquired in adulthood the core skills necessary for the functioning of society and the state, thoroughly dispelling the stigma that the blind "recited and practiced only lewd and heterodox arts" (He, 1544/1936, Vol 1).

4.3. Embedding in Power and Prestige: Elite Recognition, Wealth Redistribution, and Communal Standing

Blind scholars, drawing upon the learning and virtue accumulated through early education, ultimately integrated into mainstream social networks. They were no longer marginalized outsiders but rather gained recognition from both state officials and local elites.

Within elite circles, the scholarly works of blind individuals repeatedly received affirmation from the centers of power. The *Suanxue sanfa* (*Three Methods of Mathematics*), composed by the blind calculator Liu Wo, received a preface from Qing official Zhu Gui, governor of Anhui Province, who actively promoted the work (K. Wu & He, 1878, Vol. 226). The *Yinpi dexian ji* (*Collection of Leisure Gained Through Blindness*) by Zhu Youzhi, who lost his sight at age three and was renowned for memorizing texts upon a single hearing, was graced with a preface by the eminent Qing scholar-official Ji Yun, who also saw to its preservation (Ruan & Yang, 2012, p. 930). The Qing-dynasty Yuan Weirui, who was blinded at fourteen and who traveled through the provinces performing tanci, had his *Liuyi xuan shichao* (*Poetry Drafts From the Six-Appropriateness Studio*) prefaced and printed by the Qing zhuangyuan (top-ranked presented scholar) Zhuang Xuehe (G. Wu & Zhou, 1866, Vol. 6). This recognition from dual centers of political and cultural authority significantly enhanced their social standing.

In local society, blind individuals who had been blind from childhood likewise practiced the ethical responsibilities of Confucian elites, winning broad communal recognition through redistributing wealth and participating in public affairs. Zhu Huafan of Wucheng, Huzhou, in the Qing dynasty, blinded in childhood, amassed considerable wealth through divination yet devoted his resources to relieving poverty, being

praised for "especially exerting himself in beneficent deeds" and honored by his community as a man of "abundant virtue" (Wei, 2003, pp. 794–795). The Qing-dynasty Wang Guangjie of Zhejiang, who lost his sight at age five, was broadly learned in classics and histories and actively participated in local affairs. When officials organized riverine defenses or compiled genealogies, he provided detailed and systematic plans, earning the deep trust of local officials and gentry (S. Liu, 2002).

Thus, blind individuals in the Ming and Qing dynasties who had received non-visual education in childhood, in adulthood, transcended the baseline of merely making a living through craft. Through original cultural production, consummate craft-based reciprocity, and exemplary moral practice, they successfully embedded themselves in the networks of power and prestige in local society, achieving a transformation of identity from marginalized individuals to social elites, respected by state officials and beloved by local communities.

5. Conclusion

The historical trajectory of visually impaired children in Ming–Qing China reveals a striking paradox of pre-modern social inclusion. In the complete absence of institutionalized special education and standardized Braille, certain blind children transcended profound structural exclusion—not through welfare relief, but through the synergistic operation of sensory compensation, familial educational investment, and philosophical reframing. By mobilizing the auditory mechanism of "ear-learning," these children converted physiological constraint into cognitive advantage, accumulating cultural capital that enabled them to enter mainstream literati networks as scholars, physicians, and poets.

This study makes three interrelated contributions to disability history and social inclusion studies. First, it foregrounds the subjective agency of disabled historical actors. Rather than treating blind individuals as passive recipients of dynastic charity or medical intervention, the evidence demonstrates their active role in constructing alternative epistemologies—whether through "single-hearing memorization," tactile phonological tools, or the philosophical appropriation of "mind-sight" (*xinyan*). The blind scholar Qian Ximing's theory of "fishing for the Way with the mind," or Feng Shizao's pedagogical resistance to examination culture, exemplifies how disabled intellectuals reconfigured sensory knowledge on their own terms.

Second, the findings challenge the hegemony of the "medical deficit model" in both historical and contemporary disability studies. The Confucian discourse of being "blind in the eyes but not in the mind" did not merely offer moral consolation; it provided a robust epistemological framework that legitimized non-visual learning as a refined path to moral and intellectual excellence. When Zhu Xi, the towering architect of neo-Confucian orthodoxy, reflected that his failing eyesight liberated him from textual fragmentation, or when the blind physician Chen Zunxi transformed county-level medical culture, they demonstrated that physiological impairment and social disability are not ontologically equivalent. Social exclusion, this study argues, is historically contingent upon whether a society's cultural architecture recognizes alternative cognitive pathways as equally valid.

Third, these cases illuminate the micro-mechanisms of deep social inclusion. Inclusion was not achieved through top-down institutional benevolence, but through the dense interweaving of domestic "compensatory vision" (familial oral transmission), communal aural accessibility (the unsynchronized soundscape of the *sishu*), and elite discursive validation. This tripartite mechanism suggests that sustainable inclusion requires more

than physical accessibility; it demands the redistribution of cultural capital and the epistemological revaluation of non-normative sensory channels.

These historical insights carry urgent contemporary implications. Modern special education often over-invests in technological assistive devices while under-theorizing the cognitive and cultural dimensions of inclusion. The Ming–Qing legacy suggests that auditory attentiveness, tactile acuity, and inward concentration should be cultivated as distinctive intellectual assets rather than remediated as deficits. Furthermore, the historical primacy of family and communal networks in blind education warns against outsourcing inclusion entirely to isolated special education institutions. A genuinely inclusive ecosystem must integrate familial empowerment, mainstream pedagogical adaptation, and community-based resource networks.

This study is not without limitations. The literati-centric nature of pre-modern archival production inevitably skews the evidentiary record toward economically privileged male subjects. The lived experiences of lower-class blind children and disabled women—populations doubly marginalized by class and gender—remain largely obscured. Future research should expand the source base to excavate the intersectional exclusions faced by these subaltern groups.

Ultimately, the history of Ming–Qing blind scholars teaches us that social inclusion is not a unilateral act of charity bestowed upon the vulnerable. It is, rather, a reciprocal process of cultural recognition in which a society's willingness to validate alternative ways of knowing determines whether physiological difference becomes the basis for marginalization or for extraordinary intellectual achievement.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen).

Data Availability

The historical data supporting this study are derived from publicly available pre-modern Chinese sources, including local gazetteers (*fangzhi*), literary collections (*bieji*), and anecdotal records (*biji*), published during the Ming and Qing dynasties. These materials are accessible through major Chinese archival collections, including the National Library of China, the Shanghai Library, and digital repositories such as the Chinese Text Project (ctext.org) and the National Library's Ancient Books Database.

LLMs Disclosure

The historical sources, conceptual framework, and Chinese-language writing of this article were completed entirely by the authors. Artificial intelligence tools were used only for polishing and correcting the English translation of the manuscript from Chinese.

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