Disability Rights and Cultural Contexts
Dynamics of Policy, Activism, and Socio-Economic Realities in East Asia

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Disability studies and its theories were mostly developed in European and North American contexts and expanded to the world along with the process of globalisation, especially the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). It is not new to say that whilst disability studies scholars see disability as a global issue, they nevertheless recognise that differing trajectories of economic and political development have shaped different disability politics (Priestley, 2001). Postcolonial disability studies approaches question the Euro-centred/centric human rights model and the effectiveness of the CRPD in the Global South (Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011; Soldatic, 2013; Chataika et al., 2015). Meekosha (2011) called for new models for the Global South. Meekosha and Soldatic (2011) suggest that disability in the Global South could be a product of past colonial oppression through war and colonial capitalism. Soldatic (2013) argues that the disability rights in the CRPD are primarily formulated by white-settler societies, the CRPD explicitly confines disability issues to the relationship between national governments and their citizens and does not address the oppression still occurring in the Global South due to global production chains. The discourse of “universal disability rights” is problematic because it implies excessive homogenisation, where the problems faced by disabled people in the Global South are understood solely in relation to the
barriers in the social environment faced by white disabled people in developed countries, ignoring the ways in which the character and experience of disability are shaped by local cultural, socio-political, and economic contexts.

Whilst the CRPD is critical of the dominant medical model of disability, in non-industrialised countries, the medical model may in fact be important for challenging the traditional stigmatisation of disabled people and their exclusion. Some studies have shown that the top-down approach of the CRPD might bring about unexpected negative consequences for local disability civil society and disabled people organisations (Meyers, 2014; Huang, 2020; Orr et al., 2021) or problematic governmental and social responses (Huang, 2020; Lin and Chang, 2023).

Beyond the dichotomy of the Global North and South, however, disability in East Asia deserves more attention. East Asian disability-policy “regimes” are varied, reflecting differences between countries and cultures. There are many distinctive dimensions that could be addressed. First, the legacy of multiple colonial powers and enterprises including Christian missionaries, the Japanese empire, and post-World War II Cold War politics and associated American imperialism. Chiu (2014, 2023), for example, shows that the development of education for blind/visually impaired students in Taiwan and Korea was influenced by Western missionaries and the Japanese colonial government, the differences in the ideologies in education and employment for people with visual impairments resulting in unexpected consequences.

Second, in the postcolonial period, East Asian regimes were known for rapid industrialisation and rapid socio-economic transformation. Whilst this process brought about economic growth and technological advancement, the social conditions and life experiences of disabled people were underexplored. There is minimal research addressing whether the rapid economic development and technological advancement are benefiting disabled people or furthering their exclusion. The welfare regimes of East Asian countries are categorised as either “productive welfare regimes” (Holiday, 2000) or “familialistic regimes” (Croissant, 2004). Whilst the discourse surrounding productive welfare emphasises the correlation between economic development and social policies, familialistic regimes focus on the influence of culture on social policies. These regime types have common traits: a lack of publicly funded social care and reliance on family-based care models, including in relation to disability/provision of disability support. In these systems, family members predominantly bear the responsibility for caregiving (Chou et al., 2013). Whilst in the “West” the post-World War II period saw the beginning of an (ongoing) struggle for deinstitutionalisation, this was less the case in East Asia. For example, Chang and Chou (2023) highlight that in post-war Taiwan government did not seek to develop more institutions for disabled people and instead responded to societal concerns about poor-quality private institutions and sought to improve their regulation. The state did encourage services for community living, but there was no de-institutionalisation process in the Western sense because more than 90 per cent of disabled people were living with their family.
Third, East Asian countries also vary in regime type and political openness. Civil society activism faces challenges in some East Asian countries due to government censorship, funding constraints, and cultural barriers. Chang (2007) has shown that in the context of Taiwan, the disability rights movement developed along with the democratic transition. In addition, regime histories shape the interaction and collaboration of disability advocates (lawyers) and social movements (Arrington and Moon, 2019). Arrington (2020) suggests that in the context of South Korea, it is the emergence of legal mobilisation structures in the process of democratic transition that provides the opportunity for disability activism to use litigation as a tactic. However, legal tactics may not always be an appropriate strategy for every disability rights movement in other East Asian contexts. In countries where civil society is highly regulated by the state, the introduction of CRPD has impacted upon the tactics of the disability rights movement in different ways (Huang, 2020). In certain East Asian countries (see Huang, 2020) it has been found to be problematic to use the term “human rights” in advocacy activities because the term is considered to be politically “inappropriate”.

Finally, cultural perceptions of disability also influence attitudes towards inclusion, care, and support, with traditional beliefs often perpetuating stigma and dependency for disabled people. There are different cultural models of disabilities in Asia (Miles, 2000). Hayashi and Okuhira (2008) further suggest that even the meaning of independent living differs between Asian countries. Critics argue that Asian values can be used to justify authoritarian governance and suppress dissent, including advocacy for disability rights. However, research also shows that cultural values also shape political activism in different contexts (Chou et al., 2024). In addition, the Confucianism tradition can support disabled people and inclusion (Chang, 2007; Qu, 2022). Instead of seeing cultures as static entities, there is a need for more research, of a comparative nature, to understand how cultural values and disability policies interact with disability support (Qian et al., 2024) and political actions (Chou et al., 2024) in East Asian contexts.

This special issue selects papers that address the politics of disability activism in East Asia from various academic backgrounds and countries. The articles focus on different dimensions of disability and the experiences of disabled people. All apply disability studies perspectives. Mark Bookman, Frank Mondelli, and Setsuko Yokoyama consider the application of new technology in relation to disability in Japan. They explain how in Japan a “VR boom” has led to a proliferation of commercial virtual reality programmes, yet concerns arise regarding ableist and assimilatory tendencies within VR applications. Their research seeks to address issues of (in)accessibility and develop more inclusive and transformative uses of VR. They presented innovative approaches such as VR co-creation, centred around disabled content creators and developers forging disability-centred community spaces, and VR intersectional education, inviting students to recognise and address intersecting struggles within an ableist, cis-heteronormative, and patriarchal society.
Daryl W. J. Yang’s research illuminates the legal mobilisation of the CRPD in Singapore, where human rights activism can entail significant risks. His study analyses how a cross-disability representative organisation engaged in the CRPD monitoring process through ritualistic mobilisation of disability rights. Enabled by the CRPD’s obligations of conduct, this participation serves as a justification for activists’ involvement, potentially mitigating the risks typically associated with human rights activism in Singapore. This tactic of ritualistic mobilisation aims to entrench the human rights model of disability policy as the dominant political paradigm, a phenomenon termed the “ritualisation of disability rights”. Additionally, the research demonstrates that civil society participation and rights mobilisation may manifest differently in contexts that are other than Western liberal democracies.

Lake Yan Wu’s study examines the implementation of CRPD Article 13 for persons with disabilities, including those who are Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH), in Hong Kong. Since China’s ratification of the CRPD in 2008, Hong Kong has been obligated to uphold the rights enshrined within it. Article 13 of the CRPD safeguards the right to access justice. The research findings reveal significant gaps in the implementation of CRPD Article 13 for DHH individuals in Hong Kong. Institutional, communicative, and attitudinal barriers outlined in the CRPD are evident in the experiences of DHH individuals with the legal system. Moreover, a comprehensive framework ensuring the equal rights protection of DHH individuals is presently absent.

Tahsing Chiu’s research discusses the perception of disability in the Taiwanese indigenous community. In Taiwan, the domestication of the CRPD in 2014 marked a significant milestone in recognising the rights of individuals with disabilities. However, the need for culturally sensitive disability services within indigenous communities remains a concern. Traditional approaches to disability in indigenous communities have evolved distinctly from mainstream society, influenced by historical legacies of colonisation and geographic diversity. Through ethnographic records, literary analysis, and personal narratives, Chiu’s research explores the nuanced relationship between disability experiences and historical developments within Taiwan’s indigenous communities, aiming to inform culturally appropriate services for indigenous people with disabilities.

Kasumi Ito’s study sheds light on the participation of individuals with psychosocial disabilities in global movements. Through her research, she shows that the development of movements of those with psychosocial disabilities in East Asia defies simple categorisation within the North-South dualism, particularly due to varying experiences of deinstitutionalisation from psychiatric hospitals across the region. East Asian movements exhibit characteristics of both the North, since they involve mental health professionals, and the South, as they are rooted in disability rights advocacy. The study suggests a closer examination of East Asian movements could reveal alignments with both Northern and Southern movements, ultimately fostering a more nuanced understanding and potentially transcending what Ito suggests is an unhelpful, dualistic framework.
Disability in East Asia is a complex phenomenon shaped by colonial historical legacies, socio-economic transformations, state interventions, familial welfare systems, civil society engagements, cultural perceptions, and contested human rights discourse. These studies represent diverse East Asian countries and interdisciplinary perspectives, and consider the experiences of people with different disabilities (impairment groups). This special issue invites readers to engage in a dialogue that honours the richness of cultural diversity and institutional variations and the resistance of individuals with disabilities across East Asia. Whilst progress has been made in some areas, significant challenges remain in ensuring the rights, inclusion, and well-being of disabled individuals. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-dimensional approach that considers historical context, socio-economic realities, political dynamics, cultural sensitivities, and human rights principles.

Considering the variations, complexity, and richness of the East Asian region, it might be too early to suggest an East Asian Model of Disability. Perhaps this special issue, however, might represent a beginning – a call for further collaboration and research on disability in East Asia and the opening of a space for fresh dialogue and deliberation.

REFERENCES


