

Adaptive Clothing Needs and Income Inequality in China's Disability Employment Sector

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Abstract:

This study investigates the intersection of income inequality and adaptive clothing needs within China's disability employment sector. Through a mixed-methods approach—including a survey of 120 individuals with disabilities and semi-structured interviews with 15 participants—the research reveals that while nearly half of respondents secured employment within 3–6 months, 72% earned below the national average wage, highlighting persistent economic exclusion. Contrary to initial assumptions, 53% of participants identified adaptive clothing as a critical workplace need, underscoring the role of “dressability” in professional integration. Additionally, disability-targeted job fairs were perceived as ineffective by 61% of attendees, pointing to a mismatch between policy initiatives and on-the-ground realities. The findings advocate for integrated interventions—including policy reforms, adaptive workwear innovation, and improved employment services—to address both economic and functional barriers faced by people with disabilities in China's labor market.

Keywords: adaptive clothing; disability employment; income inequality; workplace inclusion; functional design

Introduction

The employment challenges faced by people with disabilities (PWDs) in China remain a critical yet understudied issue, where systemic barriers perpetuate inequitable job access and economic marginalization. Despite legislative efforts to promote workplace inclusion, disparities persist in income levels, hiring practices, and accessibility accommodations. This research adopts a dual focus: examining structural

employment barriers (e.g., income inequality, discrimination) and analyzing how adaptive clothing—functional attire enabling independent dressing—facilitates workplace participation for individuals with physical disabilities.

Existing literature identifies income gaps and attitudinal biases as key obstacles (Zhang et al., 2021), but few studies explore how dressability impacts professional integration. China's underdeveloped adaptive clothing market disproportionately affects those with

mobility impairments. Preliminary survey data from 50 PWDs reveal that 53% require adaptive garments, with employment rates sharply declining by disability severity: 40% of respondents with moderate (Level 3) disabilities were employed, compared to only 8% with severe (Level 1) disabilities—suggesting unmet accommodation needs in hiring practices.

This study bridges two gaps: quantifying economic disparities through income/employment data, and identifying adaptive workwear design needs to enhance autonomy. Contrary to assumptions of prolonged job searches (predicted: 4 years), 46% secured roles within 3–6 months (albeit often low-wage), while self-employment (18%) emerged as an alternative pathway. By integrating labor economics with inclusive design, the findings offer actionable insights for policymakers and employers. Addressing employment inequities requires not only anti-discrimination measures but also innovations in assistive technologies like functional clothing to reduce environmental barriers.

Personal Story

A church conversation years ago appears to have transformed what might be characterized as my perspective on disabilities. Meeting a visually impaired person and a wheelchair user seemed to reveal that their daily struggles—like choosing clothes or dealing with what appears to be clothing wear—were substantially more nuanced than the transportation challenges I'd presumably assumed. What this tends to indicate is that these encounters inspired me to found CRW Clothing Studio, creating what seems to constitute adaptive designs like wheelchair-friendly pants and Braille-embellished garments.

Later, what appears particularly significant is how a Brown University program deepened my understanding of societal marginalization, and under Professor Khan's mentorship at Princeton, I researched what appears to represent employment barriers for disabled individuals in China. What these findings seem to point toward, within this broader analytical framework, is that progress requires more than seemingly solving physical obstacles: it appears to demand reshaping how we think, listen, and create opportunities for those who, given the complexity of these theoretical relationships, are typically overlooked in the majority of cases.

Literature Review

The Intersection of Design, Functionality, and Inclusion
Clothing design for individuals with disabilities has evolved from purely medical-oriented solutions to a more holistic approach prioritizing functionality, aesthetics, and

psychosocial well-being. This review synthesizes research on how adaptive clothing design influences the daily lives of disabled individuals, addressing gaps in accessibility, self-expression, and environmental comfort. Key studies highlight the need for interdisciplinary solutions that merge material science, ergonomics, and social inclusion. **Functional Design: Addressing Physical Accessibility and Mobility**

Adaptive Features for Locomotor Disabilities

Curtéza et al. (2014) emphasize that clothing for wheelchair users must balance ease of wear, thermal regulation, and durability. Their prototype of heated textiles using conductive yarns (e.g., DA5393 stainless steel-polyester blend) addressed thermoregulatory challenges faced by individuals with reduced mobility, showing that relief jacquard designs (V3) achieved optimal heating at 40°C with minimal power consumption. This highlights the potential of material innovation to mitigate physiological limitations like poor circulation.

Stokes (2010) extends this by identifying practical barriers for teen girls with physical disabilities, such as difficult fasteners (buttons, zippers) and ill-fitting garments. Participants prioritized adaptive features like elastic waistbands and Velcro closures, which enhanced independence in dressing. The study underscores a critical tension: while functional designs improve usability, they often conflict with fashion norms, leading teens to avoid styles that revealed assistive devices.

Psychosocial Impact: Identity, Self-Expression, and Social Inclusion

Clothing as a Tool for Autonomy and Empowerment

Zike's (2025) qualitative study of women athletes with spinal cord injuries reveals how clothing intersects with disability identity. Participants described narratives of "embracing life without embracing disability," emphasizing the need for apparel that supports physical function without reinforcing a stigmatized identity. For example, adaptive sportswear that integrates assistive devices while maintaining stylish designs can empower individuals to reclaim active lifestyles.

Stokes (2010) further notes that clothing influences social inclusion: teens with disabilities avoided certain trends to conceal mobility aids, illustrating how design norms exclude disabled bodies. This aligns with Zike's call for "positive identity frameworks" in clothing design—garments that prioritize self-expression alongside functionality can reduce the psychological burden of ableism.

Technological Innovations and Accessibility Gaps

1. Digital Accessibility in Apparel Shopping

Nicolson & Ha-Brookshire (2025) highlight systemic barriers for people with visual impairments (PVI) in online apparel shopping, such as confusing product descriptions and inaccessible navigation. Non-compliance with WCAG 2.1 guidelines and the UN's Article 9 underscores a disconnect between physical design and digital accessibility. The study advocates for standardized product information (e.g., tactile size charts, audio descriptions) to ensure inclusive e-commerce experiences.

2. Thermal Comfort and Individualized Design

Research on thermal comfort reveals that disabled individuals exhibit higher individual variability in comfort needs compared to non-disabled counterparts (author, year). While gender differences in thermal perception are minimal, females reported cooler sensations in cold environments, and wheelchair users face unique challenges like poor limb circulation. These findings emphasize the need for personalized solutions, such as adaptive heating systems (Curtéza et al., 2014) and modular clothing designs that accommodate diverse physiological needs.

Critical Gaps and Future Directions

Intersectionality and Diverse Disability Needs: Most studies focus on physical disabilities (e.g., locomotor, visual impairments), neglecting sensory, cognitive, or invisible disabilities. Future research should explore how design supports autism spectrum disorders, chronic pain, or hearing impairments.

Aesthetics- Functionality Balance: While functional features are prioritized, studies like Stokes (2010) show that fashion conformity remains a key concern for disabled youth. Designers must integrate trendy aesthetics with adaptive features to avoid stigmatizing “medicalized” looks.

Longitudinal Impact and User Feedback: Few studies assess the long-term effects of adaptive clothing on daily life. Longitudinal research on how design influences independence, mental health, and social participation is needed.

Digital-Physical Integration: Nicolson & Ha-Brookshire (2025) highlight the need for accessible online shopping, but how digital tools (e.g., virtual fitting rooms, AI-powered recommendations) can enhance in-store experiences for disabled consumers remains underexplored.

Conclusion

Clothing design for disabilities has advanced from purely functional solutions to a paradigm that values autonomy, self-expression, and social inclusion. Studies show that adaptive features (e.g., heated textiles, modular fasteners) improve physical accessibility, while aesthetic considerations and digital accessibility address psychosocial and

systemic barriers. To move forward, interdisciplinary collaboration—between designers, material scientists, disability advocates, and technologists—is essential to create “universal fashion” that empowers disabled individuals in all aspects of daily life.

Hypothesis and Theory

1. People with disabilities face significant challenges in finding jobs that offer income higher than the average income in China.

2. The appearance or attire of people with disabilities does not significantly impact their job performance.

3. It typically takes four or more years for people with disabilities to secure employment.

Methods

Method 1: Survey Research on Employment Challenges for Disabled Individuals in China

The survey component of this research aimed to quantify what appears to be employment barriers and adaptive clothing needs among disabled individuals in China. The survey instrument was what might be characterized as a 20-question mixed-methods questionnaire developed following consultations with two disabled advisors from The Bless Foundation, seemingly ensuring alignment with China's official disability classifications and real-world employment experiences. What seems particularly significant about these findings is that the questionnaire covered demographic details (age, gender, disability type/severity), employment history (job search duration, rejection reasons), and workplace accommodation needs, including a specific item on adaptive clothing for limb disabilities. Initially drafted in Word, the survey was converted to an online format using SurveyMonkey with logic jumps (e.g., skipping employment questions for unemployed respondents) and mandatory fields for what appears to be critical data. To accommodate visually impaired participants, what appears to represent a phone-interview version was created where questions were read aloud and responses recorded manually.

What the data seems to suggest is that data collection began with online distribution via SurveyMonkey, yielding approximately 30 initial responses. To expand the sample size, given the complexity of these theoretical relationships, printed surveys were distributed through HR departments at manufacturing, advertising, and construction companies across China, with completed forms scanned and returned digitally. What seems to emerge from these findings is that a reward system (20 RMB per survey, 5 RMB per referral) was implemented to incentivize participation. The final sample included 120 respondents (predominantly male at 72%, 28% female) with physical

(approximately 50%), hearing (roughly 4%), and other disabilities, where the majority of cases (85%) were employed. What the analysis tends to support, within these evolving conceptual parameters, is that quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics (SPSS 26) for job search metrics and chi-square tests to compare disability-type representation against national employment rates. What appears to warrant further interpretive consideration is that open-ended responses were thematically coded to identify patterns in what seems to constitute discrimination narratives and accommodation needs.

Method 2: Semi-Structured Interviews on Adaptive Clothing Needs

Building on survey findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore what appears to be the specific clothing challenges faced by physically disabled individuals. The interview protocol targeted 20 survey respondents who had indicated a need for adaptive clothing, with 15 agreeing to participate. What seems particularly noteworthy in this analytical context is that the interview guide was structured around three thematic areas: daily dressing difficulties (e.g., what seems to be fastener struggles, fabric issues), preferred adaptive features (magnetic buttons, stretch fabrics, pre-altered fits for amputees), and workplace impacts (e.g., what clothing appears to suggest about productivity during meetings). Given the complexity of these theoretical relationships, the guide was piloted with one respondent to refine what appeared to be question clarity before implementation.

Interviews were conducted over the phone (approximately 20–30 minutes), recorded with participant consent, and supplemented by field notes that seemed to capture non-verbal cues. Participants included 15 employed individuals (10 male, 5 female) with limb disabilities across what appears to be diverse industries. What the analysis tends to support is that qualitative analysis involved thematic coding of transcripts using NVivo 12, with two researchers independently identifying what might be characterized as motifs such as “excess fabric” for amputees and “modesty barriers” in workplace clothing. What the evidence appears to reveal is that inter-rater reliability was apparently established (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.82$), and codes were cross-referenced with survey data to validate what seems to constitute recurring themes.

What these findings seem to point toward, within these evolving conceptual parameters, is that both methods faced limitations: the survey sample ostensibly overrepresented employed individuals and physical disabilities, while interviews had what appears to be a small sample size and industry concentration (predominantly in manufacturing at about 60%). Considering the nuanced nature of these findings, ethical considerations for both methods

included informed consent, data anonymization, and approval from [Institutional Review Board Name], which tends to suggest what appears to be compliance with research guidelines for vulnerable populations.

Finding 1

Expected Findings

1. Income Disparities

The survey confirmed significant income disparities for people with disabilities. Only 34% of respondents reported earning 3,000 RMB or more per month—below China’s national average income of 3,268 RMB. An additional 38% earned between 2,001 and 3,000 RMB, indicating that a substantial majority (72% combined) fall short of the average wage. These results highlight persistent economic barriers, suggesting that people with disabilities face systemic obstacles in securing higher-paying jobs, whether due to discrimination, limited opportunities, or mismatched skills.

2. Job Search Duration

The hypothesis that job searches would typically take four or more years was disproven. Surprisingly, 46% of respondents found work within 3–6 months, and 36% within 6–12 months. Only 2% required over a year. This suggests that while challenges exist, many people with disabilities secure employment relatively quickly. Possible factors include regional labor shortages, effective disability-inclusive policies, or respondents’ focus on industries with lower entry barriers (e.g., service roles). However, further research is needed to determine whether these jobs offer fair wages or career growth.

Unexpected Findings

1. Adaptive Clothing Needs

Contrary to the initial assumption that appearance and attire would not impact work performance, 53% of respondents expressed a need for adaptive clothing (e.g., magnetic closures, easy-access zippers). This near-even split (47% reported no need) reveals that clothing functionality is a priority for many—likely tied to specific disabilities or workplace demands. For instance, those with physical disabilities may struggle with traditional buttons or layers, while others find standard attire sufficient. This divergence underscores the importance of personalized solutions rather than universal designs.

2. Limited Efficacy of Disability Job Fairs

Despite expectations, only 38% of respondents attended disability-targeted job fairs. Among attendees, just 7% found them “very helpful,” while 61% deemed them inef-

fective. This low engagement and satisfaction indicate that such fairs may fail to connect candidates with meaningful opportunities, whether due to poor employer participation, lack of follow-up, or mismatched job offerings. To improve outcomes, organizers could collaborate with disability advocates to refine event formats (e.g., virtual options, skills-matching workshops).

3. Self-Employment as an Alternative Pathway

A striking 18% of respondents were self-employed—including the sole participant earning above 4,000 RMB/month. This suggests entrepreneurship may offer higher income potential and greater flexibility for people with disabilities, bypassing traditional workplace barriers. However, self-employment also carries risks (e.g., unstable income, lack of benefits). Policymakers could support this trend by expanding access to microloans, mentorship programs, and disability-friendly business tools.

4. Underrepresentation of Severe Disabilities

Only 8% of respondents had Level 1 (most severe) disabilities, compared to 40% with Level 3. This disparity implies that employers may be more willing to hire those with milder impairments, possibly due to perceived lower accommodation costs or biases about productivity. To foster true inclusivity, companies must address these gaps through universal design principles (e.g., flexible work arrangements, assistive technologies) and targeted outreach to individuals with high-support needs.

Finding 2

Key Insights from Clothing Survey

According to the survey, 53% of respondents indicated a need for adaptive clothing. Specific preferences and challenges were identified, with women favoring skirts due to ease of dressing, while men found pants to be more problematic. Respondents also found adaptive clothing items like skirts and raincoats particularly useful, although the lack of available options in China poses a significant barrier.

Additionally, some challenges unique to individuals with physical disabilities were highlighted, such as difficulties in dressing due to missing limbs and the lack of pre-altered clothing to address these needs. For example, amputees often face the issue of extra fabric in clothing items that correspond to their missing limbs, which they usually have to modify on their own.

Difficulties Faced on Rainy Days

Many disabled individuals, particularly those who are physically disabled and rely on wheelchairs, face addi-

tional challenges during rainy days. Security and mobility issues arise when traveling between locations, as raincoats and other clothing items are often not designed with their needs in mind. This highlights the importance of creating adaptive clothing that ensures safety and comfort for these individuals during inclement weather.

Discussion

The findings of this study appear to highlight what seems to be systemic barriers and unexpected nuances in employment experiences for people with disabilities (PWDs) in China. While income disparities tend to persist—with only 34% of respondents earning at or above the national average wage—what the data seems to suggest is that nearly half secured employment within 3–6 months, which appears to challenge what might be characterized as the assumption of prolonged job searches. What seems particularly significant about these findings is this discrepancy may reflect regional labor shortages or ostensibly effective localized policies, but qualitative insights suggest these roles typically lack career advancement opportunities. Within this broader analytical framework, such outcomes appear to align with Zhang et al.'s (2021) research on wage gaps but seem to contrast with studies in economies where remote work has apparently expanded access for PWDs. The concentration of respondents in low-wage positions (38% earned 2,001–3,000 RMB) appears to underscore what seems to be persistent structural inequities, potentially rooted in what might be characterized as employer biases or mismatched skills training programs.

What appears to emerge from these findings is a striking contradiction to our hypothesis regarding the role of adaptive clothing. Initially assumed to be largely irrelevant to job performance, what the evidence appears to reveal is that 53% of respondents identified it as a critical need, particularly for those with physical disabilities. Given the complexity of these theoretical relationships, women seemingly favored skirts for ease of dressing, while men reported challenges with traditional pants—a gendered divide that tends to suggest what appears to be the importance of tailored design solutions. Amputees described what seems to be improvising alterations to address excess fabric, revealing what appears to represent a market gap for pre-altered clothing. What the analysis tends to support is that these findings bridge functional design (Curtéza et al., 2014) and workplace inclusion, suggesting that dressability appears to be an overlooked yet presumably actionable barrier. For instance, rainwear ill-suited for wheelchair users seems to exacerbate mobility challenges during inclement weather, which appears to directly impact job attendance and productivity.

What these findings seem to point toward are two unexpected trends that warrant further interpretive consideration. First, the 18% self-employment rate—including the study's highest earner—appears to signal entrepreneurship as what might be characterized as a viable alternative to discriminatory traditional employment. However, within these evolving conceptual parameters, this path carries risks, such as income instability, seemingly necessitating policy interventions like microloans or disability-inclusive business incubators. Second, what the investigation appears to indicate is that disability-specific job fairs, attended by only 38% of respondents, were deemed ineffective by 61%, which tends to point toward what appears to be a failure to connect PWDs with meaningful opportunities. What seems to emerge from participant feedback is mismatched employer expectations and inadequate follow-up, suggesting that virtual platforms or skills-based matching tools could apparently better serve this population.

The study's limitations appear to include what seems to be a sample skewed toward employed PWDs (approximately 85%) and what tends to be predominantly physical disabilities (around 50%), potentially overlooking what might be characterized as barriers faced by unemployed individuals or those with sensory/cognitive impairments. Self-reported disability levels and incomes may also introduce what appears to represent bias, while the urban focus seemingly masks rural disparities. Despite these methodological considerations, what the findings appear to suggest, therefore, is the need for concrete actions: what seems to constitute collaborative adaptive clothing design (e.g., magnetic-fastener professional wear), what appears to be redesigned job fairs with post-event support, and what seems to be policies promoting PWD entrepreneurship. What appears particularly significant about these findings is that future research should explore what tends to be longitudinal employment outcomes and intersectional needs, such as how gender appears to influence clothing accessibility. Within this broader analytical framework, by addressing both economic and design barriers, this study appears to chart what might be considered a path toward holistic inclusion in what seems to be China's evolving labor market.

Conclusion

This study explores the overlap of employment barriers and adaptive clothing needs for people with disabilities (PWDs) in China's labor market, uncovering three key findings: PWDs can find jobs relatively quickly (46% within 3–6 months), but 72% earn below-average wages, reflecting systemic economic exclusion; 53% of respondents show unanticipated demand for adaptive clothing, highlighting “dressability” as an overlooked workplace

barrier; 61% consider disability job fairs ineffective, indicating mismatches between policies and real needs. Implications include advocating policy reforms (wage subsidies, inclusive hiring quotas), design innovation (collaborative affordable adaptive workwear), and market interventions (restructured job fairs with employer training). Limitations like sample bias toward employed urban PWDs suggest future research directions, such as longitudinal career tracking and tech-integrated solutions (e.g., AI for apparel customization). The study emphasizes that addressing employment inequities requires tangible, multidimensional solutions—treating adaptive clothing as workplace infrastructure and centering PWDs' experiences to foster a more inclusive labor market paradigm in China.

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Appendix A: Survey

Dear Participant,

We sincerely appreciate your participation in this important survey. Your responses will help us gain a deeper understanding of the employment challenges faced by persons with disabilities, ultimately contributing to improved workplace environments and policies.

All information provided will remain strictly confidential and will be used solely for research purposes. Your honest input is invaluable to this effort.

I. Personal Information

1. Name: _____

2. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

3. Age: _____

4. Disability Type:

☐ Visual impairment ☐ Hearing impairment ☐ Speech impairment

☐ Physical disability ☐ Intellectual disability ☐ Mental disability

☐ Multiple disabilities

5. Disability Level:

☐ Level 1 (most severe) ☐ Level 2 ☐ Level 3 ☐ Level 4 (least severe)

6. Contact Number: _____

7. Email: _____

II. Educational Background

1. Highest Education Level:

☐ Primary school or below ☐ Junior high school

☐ High school/vocational school ☐ College diploma

☐ Bachelor's degree or higher

2. Field of Study: _____

III. Job Search Experience

1. How long did it take you to find your first job?

☐ Less than 1 month ☐ 1–3 months ☐ 3–6 months

☐ 6 months–1 year ☐ More than 1 year ☐ Still unemployed

2. How many resumes did you submit during your job search?

☐ 1–10 ☐ 11–20 ☐ 21–30 ☐ More than 30

3. Which job search channels did you use? (Multiple choices allowed)

☐ Disability employment services ☐ Job websites ☐ Job fairs

☐ Social media ☐ Referrals from friends/family ☐ Other: _____

4. Have you ever been rejected due to your disability? ☐ Yes ☐ No

5. If yes, at which stage and for what reasons? (Multiple choices allowed)

☐ Concerns about work ability ☐ Workplace accessibility issues

☐ Perceived impact on team efficiency ☐ Lack of company policies for inclusion

☐ Other (specify): _____

6. What were your biggest challenges in job searching? (Multiple choices allowed)

☐ Lack of skills ☐ Limited job information ☐ Transportation barriers

☐ Employer discrimination ☐ Low self-confidence ☐ Other: _____

7. Have you attended job fairs specifically for persons with disabilities? ☐ Yes ☐ No

8. If yes, how helpful were they?

☐ Very helpful ☐ Somewhat helpful ☐ Not very helpful

☐ Not helpful at all

9. Do individuals with physical disabilities need adaptive clothing? (If applicable)

☐ Yes ☐ No

IV. Current Employment Status (If employed)

1. Type of employer:

☐ State-owned enterprise ☐ Private company ☐ Foreign-owned company

☐ Government/public institution ☐ Self-employed ☐ Other: _____

2. Does your current job match your qualifications or ex-

pectations?

☐ Fully matches ☐ Partially matches ☐ Slightly mismatched ☐ Completely mismatched

3. How satisfied are you with your current job?

☐ Very satisfied ☐ Satisfied ☐ Neutral ☐ Dissatisfied
☐ Very dissatisfied

4. Monthly income:

☐ Below ¥1,000 ☐ ¥1,001–2,000 ☐ ¥2,001–3,000
☐ ¥3,001–4,000 ☐ Above ¥4,001

V. Suggestions for Improving Employment for Persons with Disabilities

What recommendations do you have to enhance job opportunities and success rates for persons with disabilities? Thank you again for your participation! Wishing you happiness and success in your career!

If you have additional thoughts, please feel free to share them.

Appendix B: Interviewed Questions

Daily Dressing Challenges

1. What difficulties do you most frequently encounter when putting on or taking off clothes in daily life?

2. Can you describe specific clothing designs that frustrate you or are particularly difficult to use?

Adaptive Clothing Features

1. What specific features would you like adaptive clothing to have (e.g., magnetic closures, easy-to-use zippers, stretchable fabrics)?

2. Are there certain types of clothing (e.g., pants, jackets, shirts) that are harder for you to wear? What improvements would you suggest for these garments?

Work-Related Needs

1. How does the clothing you wear impact your daily work or productivity? Have you ever felt limited at work due to clothing issues?

2. In specific work situations (e.g., meetings, physical labor), would adaptive clothing make a significant difference for you?

Appendix C: Disability Classification Criteria

The survey adopted China's disability grading standards (《残疾人残疾分类和分级》), which defines:

Level 1 (一级残疾): Severe impairments requiring full assistance (e.g., total blindness, paralysis of limbs).

Level 2 (二级残疾): Significant functional limitations needing partial assistance (e.g., severe hearing loss with no speech capacity).

Level 3 (三级残疾): Moderate impairments allowing partial independence (e.g., mild cerebral palsy with mobility aids, partial limb amputation).

Level 4 (四级残疾): Mild impairments with minimal impact on daily activities (e.g., mild visual/hearing impairment, minor limb deformities).