

Investigative Reporting

The Blind Masseurs

The Plight of People with Visual Impairments

Group Number:2

Chongqing Nankai Secondary School

Yueer Tang , Xiaoyue Zhang , Chenxi Yao, Xiaoran Liu

At one end of Dapingzheng Street squatted an old, shabby massage studio. Located near the Times Square, it seems incompatibly quiet and secluded. Some therapists, wearing a pair of dark glasses, are sitting by the massage bed, waiting for the first customer yet to come. Without vision, they are accustomed to feeling precisely through their hands each acupoint and the structure of skeletal muscle; after all these years of working, they have well comprehended the art of massage to deal with different aches and pains.

Liu, a 34-year-old massage therapist working in Yuanyuan Massage Studio, was serving his guest. He is the first of all the therapists here to get visual impairment. “At first, I couldn’t see clearly what teachers were writing on the blackboard. I thought it wasn’t a big deal. Many students had the same problems. But soon I became incapable of seeing the words even on the books. I didn’t expect my eyesight would get worse that fast! I was astonished ... and worried, of course. Then almost everything began to blur, so I finally realized that things could be worse, far worse, than a common myopia.”

Born in a rural area in Sichuan Province, Liu was the only child in his family. After he was diagnosed with partial blindness, Liu dropped out from the local junior high school and joined the village opera crew. “But it was difficult. I worked for a couple of months and it was hard to keep up with others (sighted people). So I decided to learn playing some instruments. But one

day, I heard on the video that a massage studio was recruiting...so...as you see, that’s the very start of my sixteen years as a masseur.”

As the case with many other blind masseurs, Liu came to Chongqing from nearby rural villages, seeking a better living condition. Recalling the past years, Liu deeply felt that his life had become “much easier”: The penetration of Internet enabled him to expand circle of social connections and make online shopping. And Liu was satisfied with the basic living allowance provided by government. “We have allowance. And apart from this, most workers just live in the studios. That’s because of the policy; it’s compulsory to provide workers with residence.” Liu explained, opening the door of a room next to the massage area, “We have a bathroom, a kitchen, and two bedrooms. So there is actually not only the place we work, but also where we live.”

The comfort zone

Commonly ranging from 50 to 100 square meters, the massage studio is blind masseurs’ comfort zone. Liu is not the only one who hardly step out of the massage studio. Even the masseurs working in Daping, one of the most busy commercial area in Chongqing, said that they went out less than twice a month.

The transportation system didn’t help. Tactile pavings are widely used to assist pedestrians who are visually impaired. Wikipedia shows that the volume of blocks

installed in China is second only to Japan. However, the tactile warnings hardly play a role. In one of Sohu News’ reports, *Why Blind People Are Hardly Seen on the Street*, the pictures of tactile pavings are astonishing: many of the pavings lead to a tree, the parked cars and even worse, a hole or a ditch.

Liu remembered the last time he went out was two months ago, “Same as you do, we have entertainment. We have a QQ group where many blind people make acquaintances. Two months ago we hanged out. When

we get together, we can guide each other and it was much more comforting.”

While “common sense” says that guide dog and white cane might be of help. Liu grinned, “No one around me is actually using that. We either go out with someone else as a guide, or we simply stay at home. I’m not saying that **nobody** is going out. People with courage definitely do exist! But not many! Believe me.”

Liu turned on his cell phone, sliding down his finger on the black-and-white screen. On the homepage, the functions are very limited. “I also have a computer. Everything you do, we can do as well.” The synthesized voice from the phone read out what he was clicking. He seemed to be satisfied with the special mode designed for visually impaired people. “The world is changing fast. Maybe it will become easy for us to go out even in ten years. Who knows?”



A therapist in Yuanyuan Blind Massage Studio was having a rest (Pic: Yueer Tang)

Prevalence or preference?

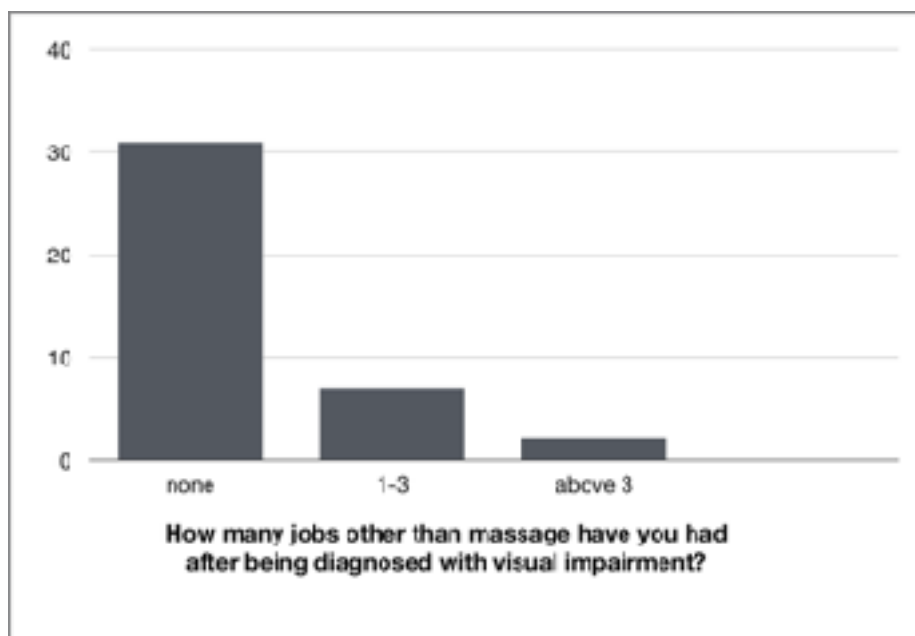
China has the largest number of visually impaired people in the world. According to the statistics provided by W.H.O in 2010, the total population with impairment in China amounts to 1344.9 million.

“There is one with visual impairment out of every hundred people.” Yanling He, an ophthalmologist, estimates.

Indeed, unparalleled with this large population, the occupations they take up show a surprising uniformity. As China Daily points out, there are more than 40,000 professionally qualified blind masseurs across China. China Disabled Persons’ Federation also shows that, in 2017, 20,796 blind people received professional training in massage and 19,257 health massage centers were established.

Why is massage so popular? Students from Chongqing Nankai Secondary School conducted a survey, investigating 40 blind masseurs’ professional background. As the result shows, the majority of visually impaired people live on massage without ever trying to pursue other careers. And among the respondents, the first rank reason is “massage is easy to run” (largely because of free training and subsidies of opening studios provided by the government) , while “out of passion” and “self actualization” have least votes. Under this circumstance, is it objective to call a profession “popular”? In another word, is there no difference between being widely chosen and being welcomed?

“Do you like your job?” Faced with this question, Liu didn’t answer. Instead, he commented, “It gives me salaries. I can make a living.”



**Data collected by students from Chongqing Nankai Secondary School*

Hard work takes a toll on masseuses

“We massage customers to improve their health. And after they leave, we massage each other.” Liu said.

In a more realistic dimension, there are other concerns worthy of attention.

A research on Health Condition of Blind Masseurs and the Countermeasures published on the Journal of Changchun University contends, “Their health condition is poor, some of them suffer from occupational diseases or chronic diseases and even some senior masseurs die when they are young. The reasons lie in such factors as the poor working environment, the nature of work and the techniques of their own.”

The condition is not better in Chongqing. Another worker in Yuanyuan Studio explains, to them, the life and work are usually blended. That is to say, whenever the customer arrives, they begin to work. “Technically, we work from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. We don’t have weekends, though we can have two or three days off every month.”

If long hours of working and eating disorders severely impair the masseurs’ health by osmosis, the very nature of the profession is inflicting diseases in a much more direct way.

Since massage requires lots of techniques including push, take, lift and kneading according to meridians, the work itself is highly labor consuming. As the study shows, almost every masseur is afflicted with certain disease, ranging from cervical spondylosis to tenosynovitis. Notably, the prevalence rate among masseurs above 45 is even up to 95 percent.

How do these massage therapists cope with diseases? Commonly, their response is, “It’s inevitable. We just try to get used to it.”

In Chongqing, the average monthly income of blind massage therapists is about 4000 yuan, 3000 below the average. With poor financial condition, many of them choose to alleviate their disease by massaging each other.

One massage therapist says, “I would rather save money to cure my eyes.” According to her, one of her colleagues successfully regain the ability to see, though very vaguely. However, a series of medical treatment and operation cost up to 200 million. Who paid for that? The therapist fell silent. “We all think she’s the luckiest one. Even with the medical insurance, I don’t think I can raise that much.”

Health Condition of Blind Masseurs and the Countermeasures in Chongqing

表 2 长春市盲人按摩从业人员健康抽样调查结构统计表

病名 Disease	人数 Population	比例 Proportion
颈椎病 cervical spondylosis	139	92.67%
腰肌劳损 lumbar muscle degeneration	130	86.67%
腱鞘炎 tenosynovitis	121	80.67%
关节扭伤 joint sprain	147	98%
胃病 stomach illness	63	42%
心血管疾病 cardiovascular disease	32	21.33%
神经衰弱 neurasthenia	50	33.33%

Sources :Adapted from Ming Xu, Hongbo Chu’s Research on Health Condition of Blind Masseurs and the Countermeasures,2012



A masseur was giving a back massage. (Pic: Yueer Tang)

The Future

At sunset, Yuanyuan Blind Massage Studio had welcomed four customers. Having made up the massage table, Liu carried a chair and took a seat outside the door. Chongqing was in the dog days of the summer, yet he didn't care much about the high temperature. Speaking of short-term and long term objectives, Liu hoped that he could furnish his apartment by the end of 2018, which he hadn't achieved in the past three years, and study therapeutic massage for children. "I was desperate when I thought

that there were no paths for people like me to go. But things are not as bad as I expected— massage was the way out."

Nevertheless, there should be more ways and better ways in the future.