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# United States Department of State

2003 International Visitor Program

**CHEN Guangcheng and YUAN Weijing:  
Advocacy for the Disabled**

**People's Republic of China**

July 19, 2003 to August 17, 2003

United States Department of State  
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### **Perceptual Changes:**

Mr. CHEN Guangcheng and his wife YUAN Weijing truly represent the younger generation of the Chinese citizens who have different work styles from the older generations. They have the critical thinking ability, and are vocal and assertive. They also have a strong sense of entitlement of their rights.

In professional meetings, Mr. Chen always took in control, guiding the directions of the conversations. He had a good understanding of the importance of two-way communications. He was not shy asking questions or talking about himself. He was chatty and eloquent, often enjoying the dominant role as an active talker more than a passive listener.

As an advocate for the disabled in China, Mr. Chen observed very carefully of the treatment of the disabled in America, especially blind people. He didn't miss any chance to check details such as whether a building had Braille on the elevator, whether Braille mails were free of charge, whether disabled people could travel for free on bus, or whether the beep sounds were installed in crosswalks.

Being a political activist who has seen much injustice in his own country, Mr. Chen was very keen on meeting with his counterparts who were equally politically active. He demanded to meet with representatives from powerful political organizations such as the National Federation For the Blinds and the American Foundation for the Blinds. At the airports, he would prefer to be treated as a blind person on his own. In doing that, he wanted to find out what type of services would be provided to him.

He loved the meetings with the Independent Living Centers, the organization that help disabled people to take their cases to court. He told them that they should have their centers being established in China.

Mr. Chen is also very aware of the importance of networking. One of his major goals from this trip was to build up a bigger network. After every meeting, he'd ask for useful contacts and friends from the interlockers. In international organizations such as the United Nations and the Lighthouse International, he said how importantly he thought that they should care about the disabled in China, especially in rural China. Mr. Chen also had the ability to

identify the potential partners. After each meeting, he'd say this organization/person was useful or not so useful.

Mr. Chen wasn't shy. After getting phone numbers of some China experts from his Chinese friends, he called them up and requested meetings with them in his spare time. He called Andy Nathan from Columbia University, Perry Link from Princeton University, Orville Schell from the University of California at Berkeley, and the Chinese political dissident Liu Binyan. All of meetings actually took place and became quite effective.

Mr. Chen and Ms. Yuan are fast learners that they even pick up many English words during the trip. This four-week program allowed them to have a good understanding of the American Disability Act, the civil rights concepts, the enforcement of the laws, various governmental programs geared toward disabled people, the functions of grassroots organizations and NGOs, how these organizations are funded and managed, the difference between specialized school for the blind and the deaf vs. public school education for the disabled.

However, Mr. Chen could be belligerent, impatient and too demanding sometimes. He'd become unhappy sometimes if his interlocutors focused on explaining their own programs, instead of showing interests in his work in China. Sometimes, when other people were talking to his wife or others, not to him, he'd interrupt and said to his wife or me, "Let's go. Don't wait." Several times, he asked the organizations that he visited to send materials and information by mail to China. He'd tell them to do so again and again. After the meetings were finished, he'd ask me to translate: "tell them send those stuff RIGHT NOW!" He also requested the program agency to buy him a MD player and a digital recorder which was declined.

Another problem rising from various meetings was that sometimes Mr. Chen gave different answers to the same question and it was difficult to know which one was the correct answer. For example, at first, he told people that he lost his vision completely due to a high fever before he was one-year-old. Later, he changed the story to that he lost his complete vision when he was a teenager. Another example was related to the Newsweek article that featured him on the cover. At the beginning, he said it was a man who interviewed him. Later, he said it was a woman who

interviewed him. At the ending of the trip, he told me that no one really went to his village to interview him. They only sent a freelance photographer to take pictures of him.

In professional meetings, he said only 5% of the blind people in China have education. But whether this percentage referred to the blind people in rural China or the overall blind population in China was unclear in his speech. Sometimes, he also said that 5% of the disabled people in China have some sort of education. The inconsistency and lack of accuracy makes the data he provided somewhat questionable.

In Berkeley, he had a meeting with Ann Fagan-Ginger from the Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute. Ms. Fagan-Ginger was a socialist who had different political views from Mr. Chen. When Ms. Fagan-Ginger suggested Mr. Chen that he writes a report of the violation of the rights of the disabled people in rural China, he promised that he would definitely do it and send it to her. He told Ms. Fagan-Ginger that if she didn't receive the report, it meant that Chinese government confiscated his letter. But after the meeting, he said that he'd never send any letters to Ms. Fagan-Ginger because he wasn't interested in her proposal at all. It was apparent that he misled Ms. Ginger during the meeting.

However, in general, Mr. Chen is a passionate, smart spokesperson for the disabled in rural China. His understanding of democracy and human rights is more sophisticated than that of most visitors from his region. He has collected a lot of written materials from the meetings. He has learned a lot from the four-week program which would definitely help empower his advocacy work in China.

**His major perceptual changes are:**

- ◆ American families are not close to each other.

Mr. Chen said that although there are a lot of things he can learn from America and there is injustice in his own country, he'd prefer to live in China. He said that American families are not close. American seniors become very lonely.

- ◆ America is in the stage of fighting for the equal opportunities for the disabled where as in China, they are fighting to unload the heavy duties illegally

imposed on the disabled by the government. China's situation is like America in the 1930s.

He said the ADA protects the disabled people's equal rights for education, employment and accessibilities to public places. His American counterparts are working on suing people who have violated such rights of the disabled. In China, however, he is fighting to get the money illegally collected by the local governments back to the disabled. Two countries are in different stages. China is like America in the 1930s.

- ◆ American governments from federal to local level try to help the disabled by giving money to different programs where as Chinese government, especially the local governments illegally collect money from the disabled who cannot work.

Mr. Chen was amazed at how many good programs federal and state governments provide for the disabled. He said in China, the local governments illegally collect taxes that should be exempted from the disabled and often see the disabled as the burden of the society.

- ◆ Many laws in America such as section 504, the Education Act was passed thanks to the political protests of the disabled people. It reflected the wills of the disabled people. In China, the Chinese Disability Law was passed because of the international call for equal rights for the disabled. The law was passed under the international pressure. In other words, it was due to the external force, China passed its own disability law.

Mr. Chen was very excited to hear how citizens in our country get their voices heard by sitting-ins and protests. He was impressed that people in the organization ADAPTED chained themselves in government buildings for days and organized sitting-ins for three weeks in order to have Section 504 passed. In China, he said that within three hours, the protestors would be arrested. A more effective way to push Chinese government to change is through international pressure. He said that U.S. should care about the Chinese disabled like we do for the Iraqi people.

- ◆ American government not only passed the American Disability Act, but also provides all kinds of funding to support the Act. Chinese government only has funding for educational programs. It makes the enforcement of the law difficult to take place.

Mr. Chen was very impressed to see that the government has technical assistance for the disabled at school and working places such as the talking software called JAWS, the Braille light for note-taking, etc.

- ◆ American government helps its disabled citizens to understand their rights protected by ADA and the different governmental programs that can help the disabled. In China, however, the local governments try to hide the information of their rights from the disabled.

In China, Mr. Chen said that the local governments lock the brochure of the Chinese Disability law in their drawers instead of distributing them to the disabled. They are afraid that the disabled would know their rights and demand their rights. In America, he found that the government works very hard to educate people about their rights.

- ◆ NGOs in America are often supported by governmental funding. In China, the government doesn't only provide no money for grassroots organizations. They discourage Chinese citizens to form their own NGOs.

Mr. Chen has tried for three years to register a NGO, a legal aid center for the human rights of the disabled and has not been successful. He said the government doesn't OK the organization and it is difficult to raise funding without a legitimate organization. It is how the Chinese government controls and limits the development of NGOs in China.

- ◆ It's so green and clean here!

Both Mr. Chen and Mrs. Yuan are intrigued that our country has so many trees, grass and greenery, with little trash, flies and mosquitoes. In their region, mountains are barren with little plantations. Trees are logged.

- ◆ Few pedestrians on the streets.

By visiting to different cities, they were shocked that the downtown of each city is usually very quiet, without many pedestrians, whereas in their region, streets are packed with people.

- ◆ Most of the disabled people in America go to public schools and prefer public school to specialized schools for the blind and the deaf. In China, there is a heated debate on whether disabled students should be able to go to regular schools. Although many disabled people in China go to specialized schools, thing will change in the future.

Mr. Chen supports the idea of sending disabled students to regular schools. He thinks that because disabled students can go to regular public schools in America, many of them have the opportunity for going to college later on. In China, however, the opportunity for disabled people to go to college is rare due to the physical check-up system. Top universities only take regular students, not disabled students.

- ◆ Lawyers play an important role in American life. Some political organizations such as the powerful National Federation for the Blind was founded by a blind lawyer. His dream of becoming a lawyer in China is difficult to come true. He'd like to study law in America someday.

Mr. Chen said that American government and universities provide Braille textbooks and audio books for blind students so that they can get higher education. Those blind people who become lawyers fight very hard for their rights. In China, his chances of becoming a lawyer are thin. He hopes to come to America to study some day.

- ◆ Something is seriously wrong with American food and American agriculture.

Mr. Chen studied Chinese medicine in college. Living in the countryside, his family grows organic food and vegetables. He was not used to American food and said that chicken and beef here had hormone, which was bad for one's health.

#### **City-by-city descriptions**

Washington, D.C., July. 19 - July 24, 2003. Mr. David Kammerer and Mr. Peter Phrydas Meridian International Center

The programs were very successful in DC. In his spare time, Mr. Chen also met with his friends from Radio Free Asia and other organizations.

- ◆ Dr. Patricia Morrissey, Commissioner, Administration on Developmental Disabilities. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

"The best meeting took place in DC." Said Mr. Chen. The Administration on Developmental Disabilities is the federal agency that administrators programs for the nearly four million Americans with developmental disabilities. Mr. Chen was able to understand that developmental disabilities are severe, chronic conditions attributable to mental and or physical impairment which manifest before age 22 and are likely to continue through life. Mr. Chen learned about the three major federal programs the agency has in partnership with state and local governments. Dr. Morrissey was very interested in Mr. Chen's work in China and planned to invite him to a conference that would take place in Beijing next year. She also gave some suggestions for Mr. Chen on how to find good and powerful officials from the Chinese government to work with and how to turn such officials into allies.

- ◆ Gallaudet University

GU is to serve as a comprehensive, multipurpose institution of higher education for deaf and hard of hearing citizens of the United States and the world. Mr. Chen talked to three students from China. They compared their life in China to life in the States. They felt that they are much more respected as deaf people in America than in China. They enjoyed their school life in GU very much. Mr. Chen found that the three students were all from big cities of China and their knowledge of the disabled who lived in rural China was very little. He gave an introduction on the poverty that disabled people endure in rural China.

Burlington, Vermont. Ms. Radha Buko and Carol Casey.  
Vermont Council On World Affairs. July 24-29 2003.

Mr. Chen and Ms. Yuan loved the environment of Vermont very much. They learned about the local programs provided for the disabled. They also had the chance to have dinner with American families.

New York City, New York. July 29 to Aug 3. Mr. Jean Paul  
Turco. State Department.

◆ Ms. Christina Curry, Harlem Independent Living Center.

Mr. Chen and Ms. Curry had a sense of camaraderie. The nature of their work was similar. Both them had the same belligerent temperament and "enjoyed suing people and taking them to court" (citing Ms. Curry). Mr. Chen believed that Ms. Curry's political and legal experiences must make her center more effective serving the disabled population better than many other independent living centers.

◆ Mr. Jerome Cohen. Law Professor at NYU

According to Mr. Chen, this was the best meeting of the entire program and also probably the most useful contact he had during this trip. Mr. Cohen spoke Chinese and he took a strong interest in the lawsuits Mr. Chen and his legal friends and farmer friends presented against the local governments. Mr. Cohen believed these cases could be very useful research topics. They also discussed the Administration Procedure law in China. Mr. Cohen agreed to meet with Mr. Chen when he goes to China in October. Mr. Chen also wanted to talk about the possibility of coming to the United States to study law with Mr. Cohen when he goes to China.

◆ Andrew Nathan, Columbia University

Mr. Chen added this meeting through his personal contact. At the meeting, two staff members from Human Rights China and one staff member from Human Right Watch came. The topic evolved human rights in China, especially that of disabled farmers, a disadvantaged group that have been ignored. After Mr. Chen expressed the difficulty of his work, Human Rights China issued him a check of 1,000 dollars.

◆ United Nations

After arriving in New York, Mr. Chen called his friend in the United Nations who introduced him to the officials who were in charge of the disability issues. They gave him many useful contacts and talked about the International treaty for the rights of the disabled with him.

Cincinnati, Ohio. Aug. 3-6 2003. Ms. Marianne Crotty, International Visitors Council of Greater Cincinnati.

◆ Ms. Ginny Backscheider, Director of Programs Services, Cincinnati Association for the Blind.

Cincinnati Association for the Blind did a good job in the community offering comprehensive services from young children to older adults who lose vision due to age-related causes. Mr. Chen visited their computer access center, employment in manufacturing jobs, low vision service, radio reading room and talking book service. He thought such a tour was useful because he was able to see what specific programs were offered and how they were managed.

Austin, Texas. Aug. 6- Aug. 10, 2003. Ms. Pam Bohamed, International Hospitality Council of Austin.

◆ Mr. Ed Kunz, Criss Cole Center.

Criss Col Rehabilitation Center offers intensive vocational and independent living training to Texans who are blind. Mr. Chen found it was very helpful to build confidence for blind people by teaching them useful skills from woodwork to art crafts.

Spokane, Washington. Aug. 10-13, 2003. Spokane International Exchange.

◆ Maria W. Local chapter president of the National Federation of the Blind

This meeting was added upon Mr. Chen's request of meeting someone from either the National Federation of the Blind or American Consul for the Blind.

Mr. Chen enjoyed meeting with three blind activists from the region. They were excited meeting him as well. Mr. Chen felt that his interlockers had a strong sense of belonging in NFB. The feeling for NFB was almost religious. He realized how successful the NFB is as an organization. He was especially joyful to hear that NFB has its program stretched worldwide. He would like to start a NFB chapter in China someday. The local chapter gave him some useful materials for him to bring back.

San Francisco, California, Aug. 13-16 2003. Ms. Christa Peccianti, International Diplomacy Council

Since Mr. Chen arrived in San Francisco, he found that more people could speak Chinese and have been to China in this part of the United States than other cities he had visited.

- ◆ Ms. Susan Mizner and Mr. Ken Stein, San Francisco Mayor's Office on Disability.

The Mayor's Office on Disability works to provide accessibility to programs, activities, benefits, services and facilities of the city and county of San Francisco by people with disabilities including residents and visitors. This mission is consistent with the duties of the Mayor to provide mandated services to citizens and to assure those services are provided fairly and equally under the law. By talking to the staff members, Mr. Chen found the city has done a great job helping the disabled. He was introduced to a new talking device to help blind people identify building's names and locations.

- ◆ Ann Fagan-Ginger, Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute

MCLI's missions are to respond to calls for help from grassroots activists on how to raise the strongest legal issues in campaigns, to report to the United Nations about any abuse of human rights. Ms. Ann Fagan-Ginger was a socialist who criticized American government and its policy openly. As Mr. Chen criticized about the Chinese government, Ms. Ann Fagan-Ginger said that every government had problems. Some violations of human rights could take place in America as well. Because the different political views they had, Mr. Chen was quite defensive during the professional meeting and Ms. Yuan joined in the conversation and toned it down. Although later Mr. Chen said that it was good to hear alternative opinions in America which reflected the diversity of the society, he wasn't happy with the criticism from Ms. Ginger.

## Logistics

Logistically, this trip was dumpy and it had been an uneasy job for the interpreter. There were always new unexpected problems rising during the travel.

The first stop DC was perfect. After we arrived in Burlington, Mr. Chen didn't like the hotel we stayed. Being a blind person, he has a sensitive nose. He said that the hotel room he stayed smelled awful. We were placed in the rooms that face a noisy street. When he opened the windows to get fresh air, the room became noisier. He demanded the change of the room. I myself also found my room noisy. So I wanted to move too. I called the front desk and asked if we could move to other rooms. I was told there was no room available for us. Mr. Chen asked to talk to the local sponsor. I did. Then the hotel finally agreed to change the rooms, but we were given rooms with smaller beds. Mr. Chen sent his wife to see the new room. She wasn't happy. He asked me if it was okay to move to another hotel. I called the sponsor. The local sponsor suggested that she would buy ear plugs for them. Mr. Chen said for a blind person, his ears were important senses for him. He would rather be staying in a noisy place than having his ears blocked.

He felt that the local sponsor weren't trying to help. He eventually decided not to move because the bed was too small for both of them. As Ms. Yuan returned the key to the front desk, she said that she felt they were rude to her. During the next few days, they also reported to me that their rooms were not cleaned. I called the local sponsor, but got no reply. Eventually, on the check-out day, we were informed that on weekends, we'd pay \$65 dollar more per day. Normally, before we check in hotels, the front desk would ask us to initiate the rate. Because the local sponsor did the check-in for us when we were not present, we didn't know the difference in the weekday and weekend rate. The local program only printed the \$89 rate, but not the \$165 rate. But the front desk said that the local sponsor agreed the weekend rate. I then checked the program book, did find the two rates printed. But Mr. Chen and Mrs. Yuan refused to pay the difference. They said that they were only advised in the last minute. Nobody tried to explain it to them in Washington DC when the program opened or when they arrived here. They also did a calculation themselves saying that their per diem was given based on the \$89 rate, not the \$165 rate. Finally, they said that the hotel provided such a poor service and was so unfriendly, they didn't deserve more pay. I tried to call both the local sponsor and AED, but were not successful. The program officer was on a jury duty

that day. The local sponsor never returned phone calls. The hotel manager eventually agreed to charge \$89 per day.

The matter was settled, but Mr. Chen was still unhappy. Fighting was his nature. He said that he'd be willing to fight with the hotel toward the end. From this experience, we'd make sure that every time we arrived in a new hotel, we'd double check with the hotel rate before checking in. The same problem didn't rise again.

After we arrived in New York, Mr. Chen used up the phone cards and I took them to buy new ones. We visited at least five stores, but they wanted to compare the price over and over again, which took a very long time. They were looking for the cheapest rate. Mr. Chen said that his friends told him that to call China, it only cost less than two cents per minute. I went to China Town the next time to find the right cheap phone cards for them.

Mr. Chen called his friends in the United Nations and Columbia University. Two more professional meetings were added through the connections of his friends. The schedule in New York was tight. Mr. Chen also took a day trip on Saturday to meet his contacts at Princeton University. Due to exhaustion, he had a fever on Saturday night. I was awakened up by his wife at four a.m. on Sunday morning. She asked that I took Mr. Chen to the hospital. I checked Mr. Chen's health and bought them Advil over the counter.

Mr. Chen became much better after taking the medicine. In Cincinnati, he attended the professional meetings without any healthy problems. He even wanted to climb up the mountains in his spare time. But his wife Ms. Yuan worried and suggested I take him to a hospital to have a thorough checkup.

We went to the University hospital and stayed there for four hours. After hearing that Mr. Chen was from China, the doctors were very cautious. They had his chest x-rayed and two doctors examined him. They came to the conclusion that he was traveling and was exhausted, and just caught some flu virus. They gave him some IV and medicine.

After Mr. Chen became recovered, both Ms. Yuan and I felt sick. I was sick and fatigued in the next two days.

Thankfully, after arriving in warm Austin, we both felt better. Nothing emergent or bad came up in Austin in terms of logistics.

But when we arrived in Spokane, Washington, there were new problems. My luggage didn't arrive. When we checked in at the front desk, they were told that the hotel didn't take traveler's check. Because it was 9:00 p.m. already. Mr. Chen and his wife didn't eat lunch in order to save money.

They were very hungry after a day's travel. I used my credit card to guarantee their room. After they went to their room, Mr. Chen called and complained that the bathroom smelled. I called and asked them to change the room. Ms. Yuan went to the second room, and the smell she said was bad. I called the local sponsor and the hotel manager talked to her. Eventually, we were placed in another hotel under the same hotel chain. By the time we settled there, it was almost 10:00 p.m. We decided to eat at the hotel restaurant. They said that they wanted to eat noodles. The closest thing to noodles was pasta. So they order pasta, but didn't eat it because it was too much cheese in it. The only thing they ate was the bread. They were not happy and didn't pay tips.

The last stop San Francisco was nice. The hotel was very comfortable. But something expected happened on their last day at the airport. Mr. Chen and Ms. Yuan asked me to tell Northwest Airlines that they wanted to have better seats on the sides, not in the middle. So they checked their bag, and asked them to wait for the better seats and came back at 12:45. However, by 12:30 they came back, they were told to wait. Then at 1:00 p.m., they were told that the flight was oversold and they couldn't get on the flight. Because we checked in two hours before the taking off time, there was no reason for them not to get seats.

I immediately phoned the headquarter of the Northwest. This was how they settled the case after I talked to them: they apologized Mr. Chen and his wife and issued an 800-dollar check to compensate them. They placed them on the next day's direct flight to China, business class. They arranged them to stay at the Crown Plaza overnight and gave them \$60 worth of vouchers for lunch and dinner. The couple was very happy. Mr. Chen said that he would write the experience to introduce the good service of Northwest Airlines.

### **Diversity Goals**

In Burlington Vermont, Mr. Chen and his wife met with three couples with sighted wives and blind husbands. They had the experience of American family life and the daily life of the blind in America. In Middlebury, he had lunch with students from all over the world who were studying Chinese. In New York, he visited the Harlem Independent

Living Center and had a tour of Harlem, an area with concentrated Hispanic and black population. In Spokane Washington, Mr. Chen had dinner with middle-class couples who just finished their trip to China. In Berkeley, he was able to meet a socialist who offered different political views from others. The diversity goal of the program was achieved.

**Names/Addresses of Americans to receive Thank You note:**

**Dr. Patricia Morrissey  
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Washington DC 20201**

**Mr. Jerry Cohen  
Council on Foreign Relations  
58 East 68<sup>th</sup> St.  
New York, NY 10021**

**Ms. Ginny Backscheider  
Cincinnati Association for the Blind  
2045 Gilbert Ave.  
Cincinnati, Ohio**

**Mrs. Vicki Jones**

**Ms. Susan Mizner  
San Francisco Mayor's Office On Disability  
401 Van Ness St. Room 300  
San Francisco, CA 94102**

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