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Xiaolong Lu

Interview with Mr. Guojun Zhang's Mother

Guojun Zhang, male, born in 1979. Only child. Grade IV intellectual disability. Has worked at a company in Hongkou District of Shanghai since 2008.

Interviewee: Cuixiang Kong (Guojun Zhang's mother)

Interviewer and writer: Xiaolong Lu

Interview date: October 23 and December 12, 2016

Interview place: The Hongkou District Disabled Persons' Federation, Shanghai

From a Beloved Little Daughter to an Iron Lady

Q: Hello, Auntie Kong, could you tell me a little about your family?

Zhang's mother: There are four people in our family, him (points at her son), me, his dad, and his paternal grandma. I was born in 1953 and his dad was born in 1954. I worked in the Xinhua Bookstore until my retirement, I used to be a director and store manager for a while. I needed more time to look after my son, so I applied to take a smaller role and became the business supervisor when the boy was in his early teens. His dad worked in a factory but retired quite early: he had polio disease when he was very young, and has a lame leg. My salary was the only family income at that time.

Q: How did you get to know each other when you were young?

Zhang's mother: Through a mutual friend, one of my good friends who was also a colleague of my husband. One time she invited me to attend an organizational activity at their Youth League branch, and I met him there. We were seeing each other for around a year before we got married. My parents and young sisters were against this relationship because of his lame leg and his poor family background. An old saying says "marry in your own class," but our relationship broke the rule. That's why my family didn't support me. We used to struggle to find a way to meet. I had to

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ask my sisters to go out with us, my parents wouldn't refuse if I was with them. So my sisters used to call themselves "the third wheel" on our dates (she has a sheepish expression).

My son was born in 1979, after we were married more than a year. There was nothing untoward throughout my whole pregnancy. I was looking forward to his birth and having a healthy baby, but I had an accident when I was delivering the baby; my waters broke and amniotic fluid choked his lungs which led to a fever, this damaged his brain. My son was born around six o'clock that day, but it took the doctor until 10 o'clock, almost 4 h, to save his life. My son spent 2 weeks, more or less, in hospital after his birth.

I had to look after both of us when we went back home. We didn't live with his dad because we didn't have married couple housing and had to rent a very small place that wasn't big enough for three people. So his dad used to visit us for a short while every day.

Q: Has his body been bad since birth?

Zhang's mother: He had to see the doctor almost every week with his lung problem and had fever, over 40°. I didn't have any other plan but to fight this disease. This problem always comes back sooner or later. With monthly pneumonia he had to go back to hospital every 2 or 3 days. I was the only person who could look after him. He was sick all the time from when he was born until he was 14 years old. High fever, pneumonia, and tracheitis, all of this was caused when my waters broke. It's hard to tell how many times he went to hospital, but he has been to all of the big hospitals in Shanghai and he's seen all the doctors who could help him. My son has had all kinds of medicine and injections, too many, and he's had so many injections of penicillin and other antichloristic drugs. Penicillin was the most popular medication back then.

When he was 14 years old, he got the fever again and we went to the community hospital. The doctor said: "I can't help you because he is dying." I was so scared. I fell over several times carrying him back, and I ran to another hospital. When I got there, the doctor was very kind and told me (speaks in a grateful tone): "Don't hurry please, I'll check your son out." Later, I was told he had pneumonia again.

How could I not worry? What a life going to hospital every 2 or 3 days! Well, it's really... (her eyes brimmed with tears). During his childhood, he was saved by doctors several times; otherwise he wouldn't be here with me, and probably would have died a long time ago. I got bad news from doctors so many times. Anyway, he had to stay in hospital at least twice a year and I was told that he was dying almost once every year. When I was told he is dying I couldn't do anything but cry. I was absolutely terrified.

There was no cure at that time. When he was 14, people would tell me your son is growing up and he needs extra nutrition to build up his health, especially something for his lungs; so, I fed him all kinds of supplements. Although he didn't grow taller, he did get bigger, and at the same time he became stronger with better immunity. I told myself I should be glad he was healthy. I was very skinny when he was ill all the time; just over 6 stone, after I had my son.

I was the only person who could take him to the hospital at that time; sometimes my sisters would take him if I had to work. My son would never want me to leave

him, so I would go after lulling him to sleep. In those days, we didn't have a private phone or a night public phone service; if he got sick at night, I was the only person who could carry him to the hospital.

I never talked about these things with his dad; anyway, he was nowhere to be found. I didn't mind looking after him myself; his good health was my only concern. I didn't want to dwell on other matters. His dad would come and visit him if he knew he was sick, but if he didn't know, that would be another story. At that time, we'd lived apart for quite a long time already, he would just come to see us after dinner.

He hardly took care of our child. But once I called him about a blood transfusion for my son, the doctor checked my husband's blood type match and let him donate his blood. Anyway, my husband didn't care about the child, so everything depended on me. The child has always lived with me, and he goes everywhere with me, even now.

My husband became kinder to our son when he'd grown up. His attitude towards the boy softened little by little. For example, my son would usually buy a souvenir from a trip or a Father's Day gift for his dad. I told my husband: "Have a look at our son, he is disabled, but still independent, while his healthy peers still depend on their parents." I also told him: "He is your son. Your scorn isn't helpful. It doesn't do anything to solve this problem at all." My husband couldn't hide his feelings, and everybody could read what he thought. He was upset because he wanted a healthy child, but had a disabled one. At the workplace, he always felt bad and wouldn't say a word when his colleagues talked about their children going to college. He turned against my son when he felt bad, but when I was upset, I would love my son even more. He treated our son slightly better after his boss told him to.

Q: Were you under heavy financial pressure back then?

Zhang's mother: Our salaries were 45 yuan for each person while the average salary was 36 yuan in the 1980s. We earned more than most people because both of us were professionals in our companies. In those years, my company, the Xinhua Bookstore gave their workers generous holiday and festival benefits, and this was very helpful for our family.

I never thought about looking for another well-paid job even though I had financial problems, because I'm a single-minded person and love whatever job I do. I saved every penny by cutting down my own meals even when I was well paid. After I had my son, I never had snacks or fruit like the other women. I never felt like fruit and I don't feel bad about that.

I didn't take a bus either even though the ticket was only four pence each way, but I spent several yuan on a raincoat and carried the baby when I walked to work on rainy days. Back then, I really appreciated the kindness of one bus driver, who would give us a free ride. I can't find him now, but if I could I would want to say "thank you." My son still remembers him. I didn't like taking the bus to save money, but this driver told me his timetable and would give us a free ride when he could. I really appreciated his help and kindness when my life was so difficult, especially when he took a risk and could have been punished by his company.

I never asked relatives for financial support and I didn't even say anything to them when I was short of money for the child's treatment. I said to myself, I mustn't ask

for help because I should take the whole responsibility for my marriage, especially when my parents didn't agree from the very beginning. I chose to get married and I have to pay the price. Finally, I made it without other people's support. I used to tell my son: "You must try to meet my expectations and let me be proud of you." I taught him everything a young man needs to know and trained him to be a real man. I hope he can make something of himself one day. I told him: "When people look down on you, be even more determined."

My husband took early retirement around 1989 and hasn't taken up other jobs since then. His colleague and friend invited him back to the company to take a part-time job, but he was too proud and didn't like other people's pity. His pension is higher than sick pay, but more than the minimum wage he received for years before retiring. So our family economics got a little bit easier afterwards.

Q: It sounds as though you took all the family responsibility on your own shoulders?

Zhang's mother: Oh, exactly. I'm the person who holds everything together in the family and it's why people used to call me the "iron woman." I'm not an iron woman at all, I just didn't have any choice (she has a forced smile).

My family was very wealthy when I was young, and my family background was much better than my husband's. Before the Cultural Revolution, our family could afford a maid and nobody needed to do any housework. But during the Cultural Revolution my parents had to send the maid away. At the same time, they couldn't take care of me and six other siblings who didn't have any life skills and needed looking after, so they had to pay neighbors 5 yuan, a huge amount of money at that time, to look after us.

When I got married, I didn't know how to do any housework, even wash my own clothes, but I learned everything step by step after I had my son and I became the one who looked after the family. All my neighbors said I was a good person and I treated my parents-in-law very well, even better than my own parents. I never forgot to buy them a gift for Mother's Day and Father's Day, even though they looked down on me all the time. The neighbors talked to my son and sometimes they'd say: "Your mom is a very good person, but she's has such a hard life since the start of her marriage up to now." I'm very friendly with my neighbors as well and I would never say no to them if they asked me for help. I not only support my own family, but also try to help the people around me. It's why they call me "iron woman." At work I always do my best. I don't care whether the job is only for strong men or too dirty.

Opposite Attitude of Relatives in Two Families

Q: When did you discover your son had learning difficulties?

Zhang's mother: When he was at the senior kindergarten, I found out he couldn't learn like the other children. I had suspicions about this condition, but didn't take him for an intelligence test because I thought he was probably just a slow learner. We only found out about his problem after he did a test at the special school.

Q: Did you ever think about having him adopted when you discovered he had a disability?

Zhang's mother: Never! (Speaks in a firm tone.) I only wanted him to be a strong boy and never thought about anything else; I didn't ask the government for help either. If I had a child in the same situation today, I would definitely apply for help from the Civil Administration and the Welfare House.

I didn't think about having another child either, because I was worried about being able to treat two children equally, especially if the second was a healthy child. People usually prefer healthy and adorable children to a disabled one. So I decided to give all my time and love to this child and try my best to make his life better.

If the second child was a daughter, she'd look after her brother when she grows up, but you couldn't expect a young brother to do the same thing, especially after they get married and have their own family. His wife wouldn't agree to look after him, maybe even scorn the older brother. The young brother might not have a problem with his older brother, but who can tell what his wife would be like?

Q: Did you talk to your family and relatives after you knew about his condition?

Zhang's mother: Both families know what happened to my son, but I didn't explain to them how hard our life had become. I never complained about the problems we had when he was young. For myself, I couldn't accept the situation when I got the news, I didn't understand why everyone else could have a healthy child except me. Why? I didn't dare go out for a long time, because I was afraid of other people gossiping and criticizing me behind my back. I didn't dare to talk to my colleagues, because I worried they might talk about me behind my back. I only revealed my son's condition to my boss when I had to ask him for a role with less responsibility. I don't like people's pity or scorn. I might have a disabled child, but I can raise him without anyone's charity and pity.

My parents showed me more love than all their children because of my son. My older brother said: "I look after you more than my other siblings because they have a normal life and don't need any extra support." I have two older brothers, one older sister, and three younger sisters; all of them support me and never let me down. They understand how much I hurt inside. As my parents got older, my younger sisters helped me more and more. If I couldn't take time off work to care for my son when he went to hospital, my sisters would always help me. We're very close and always ready to help each other. You can ask him (points to her son who is sitting next to her), his aunts compete with each other about who will look after him if I'm too busy. They used to say to him: "You'll be comfortable with us until your mom is free." Their support has always been strong, even today (her eyes are tearful).

In my husband's family, everybody blames me for having a foolish child. For them, I'm solely responsible for my son's problem. They argue all the time about my son's right of inheritance and keep telling my husband not to give the family property to my son. They say: "If we give the house to you, one day you'll pass it down to your son, but why does an idiot need a property?" That is my husband's family! (She looks angry.) In any case, my husband doesn't have a property to give away. The place my husband lives in at the moment is the apartment I bought for my son, while my son and me live in an apartment that his paternal grandpa left to us. They still insist that my husband mustn't give the apartment that we live into my son, because a fool can't look after property and one day I might give it to my family.

Q: When did your husband's family start calling your son an idiot?

Zhang's mother: The year he went school, when we realized my son couldn't keep up with his studies. They started calling him an idiot and blaming me, and they've never stopped since, but we speak much less nowadays. The paternal grandma is the worst; she is always saying bad things about my son. This upsets me very much. I don't mind if she treats me badly, her behavior won't change my attitude towards her, she's a parent; but I'm so angry at the way she criticizes my son. However, because she's my mother-in-law it's my duty to care for her, even though people say to me: "Your mother-in-law totally lacks respect for you."

The paternal grandpa was totally different from her. He didn't say much, but he loved my son very much and treated him so well; a really heartfelt kind of care. Grandpa was never bothered about my son's disability. He liked to take him to all of his factory's events.

When my son was little, his grandpa took him to the staff children's day nursery when I was too busy. This place is only for the staff's children during the summer vacation, where some colleagues take on a teacher's role and look after the young children. It's one of the benefits for workers, but without his grandpa's help, my son wouldn't have been able to go there. My son spent every summer and winter vacation at that day nursery for years; he studied, played chess and other games with the other children, and they were looked after by the teachers. My son was very close to his grandpa, they shared all kinds of stories together.

When he was younger, he had some unpleasant experiences when we went out. I hated being looked down on by others and sometimes I couldn't control myself and argued with them. The only thing I could do is not go out so much. I felt so bad when we went out; I didn't dare lift my head when people pointed their fingers at me. One time, we were on a bus and he was curious of a woman's watch. At that time he wasn't very smart and he was very naughty, and he touched the watch strap without asking. Suddenly, the woman started shouting at him. I tried to explain that it wasn't worth shouting because my son couldn't understand what she was trying to say. She said: "What an idiot your son is." I was so upset and returned the insulted: "My son might be an idiot, but at least I love him. You're young, and maybe one day you'll understand what it's like to have a child." Anyway, this kind of discrimination used to happen on the bus and that's another reason why I didn't like to take the bus and walked.

I rarely took my son out when he was young, because I hated the way people laughed at him. After some years, when I had more free time, we went out more often together. He's had a change of mind too; 5 or 6 years ago, he didn't like to go out with me even if I asked him. In the beginning, he was worried about his problems with speaking and communicating; he hardly talked to other people. But when he could speak better and began to get bored staying at home, he changed his mind and asked me to take him out. Usually we just went to public parks, but if he told me he wanted to take a 2-day journey and spend a night somewhere, I wouldn't let him down. For example, on the National Day holiday, several days ago, we went to Guangfulin Heritage Park in the Songjiang District for a photography trip.

He Wasn't Good at Studying but Good at Doing Things

Q: Could you tell me more your son's experience at the nursery?

Zhang's mother: He went to an ordinary nursery and was the favorite boy of the teachers; they praised him quite often. The teachers thought my son was very cute, especially when he was imitating things. The teachers would applaud or reward him with a little red flower.¹ He was such an active child, he didn't talk too much, but he liked to hug or kiss the teachers and he was sociable with people all the time.

Before he went to school, he was fine, even if he wasn't talkative. Then a first-year teacher hit him, and after that he didn't dare talk and stopped replying to other people's questions. When he was 7 or 8 years old, in the first semester of first grade at the school, he was told to leave by a teacher. A child like him doesn't get any respect from the teachers because he could have a negative effect on the enrollment rate.

The teacher hated my son very badly at that time, because my son was the reason that he couldn't get an award for the class test results. Once the teacher hit my son with a book and gave him a bloody nose. The teacher insisted on throwing my son out because of his bad performance in class: he wasn't clever, he lagged behind, couldn't read, or do maths questions, we were terribly worried about him.

We didn't think he had any intellectual difficulty until he had an IQ test at the special school. Before then, we just thought he was slow-witted and clumsy, because we couldn't see anything wrong from his appearance. The test result revealed he had an intelligence score just slightly below average. The doctor told me his condition was almost the same as ordinary people.

Q: Did you look for legal support?

Zhang's mother: No, we didn't know anything about the law in those days. If we'd known the law, I would have sued the hospital over the accident at birth. A newborn baby choked by water is nothing other than a medical accident! We were different to people today; we were ignorant about the law. Fortunately, I knew an old retired teacher in her eighties, who was a very nice person and member of the district Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. What a shame she's passed away (there is an expression of loss on her face). She said to me: "Don't worry, let me see what I can do for you." She asked one of her students, who was the Director General of Hongkou District Education Bureau to visit us and listen to our problems with my son. Following that, he advised us to send the boy to a special school.

We didn't know anything about this school before and would never have thought about sending our son there. If I had known my son's condition was more complicated than him just being a slow learner, I wouldn't have let him go to the ordinary school. With this director's help, my son spent two extra years at that school, because I was too busy to keep him at home. The normal length of a child's education is the 9 years, but I asked the school leader to keep him there for a longer time. I didn't mind paying the extra tuition fees and we were lucky the school leader agreed to keep him for another 2 years.

¹ Years ago, in Chinese nurseries and primary schools, teachers would reward a well-behaved student with a red flower or a red flag, usually made of paper.

Q: Did you need to take him to school or could he get there by himself?

Zhang's mother: I took him every day until he graduated. Every school day, I took him to school before 8 a.m. and left after his class started. Then I went back to the school at 3:30 p.m., half an hour before they finished. I took him to my office, and we went home together when I finished work. He would work on his homework or handwriting practice at the bookstore.

Q: What lessons did he study at school?

Zhang's mother: Chinese, math, business, and some extras. At the special school, they don't offer much study of cultural knowledge because they are slow learners, but focused on practical abilities. In addition to the regular classes, they also had some extracurricular activities; for instance, spring or autumn picnics or radio calisthenics competitions. Compared to an ordinary school's teaching, I think the special school's timetable and activities were more suited to children like my son. They use different textbooks at the ordinary school; basically, the special school's textbooks are much easier.

He was very popular at the special school. All of the teachers liked him pretty much. When they went out for spring or autumn picnics and slept out at night, he didn't need to share a room with other students, and he could go to the teachers' place if he wanted. He was very sweet when he was a child; he would say hello to people all the time. Now, he still has a warm heart, but speaks much less. For example, if his teacher visited us, he'd ask the teacher to sit down, give him a cup of tea but wouldn't chat. That's how he is, a quiet person.

Q: Did he make some good friends at the school?

Zhang's mother: I don't think so. He didn't dare talk too much because he was a quiet child. He was worried people might find out about his condition when he started to speak. He was very introverted, so closed off, and he looked like he might have a form of autism. He was like that from the time he was beaten by that teacher until we joined the China Association of Persons with Intellectual Disability and their Relatives² in 2007. He became more relaxed when he joined those children who had similar conditions and became more and more open and talkative. Before that, he didn't dare to talk with ordinary people at all.

When he was a student, he never talked about his school life, even with me although I kept asking. He's just like other autistic children; they won't respond to other people even if you repeat yourself a hundred times. But gradually he became more mature and sensible at the same time. He understands me better and now he does more housework.

Actually, I never treated my son as an intellectually disabled person, and I was determined that he should learn everything an ordinary person would. He was always very good at housework from the time he was very young (speaks in a very proud tone). Why? I realized my son could never be a good student from the time he was in kindergarten when the teacher said to me: "You don't need to push him to study, he

²The English abbreviation is CAPIDR. The Chinese abbreviation is "Zhiqinhui". It is a corporate organization, a non-profit association affiliated to the China Disabled Persons' Federation, founded in 1989. There are grass-roots branches at all levels throughout China.

can do anything he likes, just make sure he's behaved and doesn't disturb the other students." I disagreed with him, and I kept telling my son: "You're not a smart boy, you might not be a good student, but you have to be good at housework and grow up to be independent. I won't be with you forever; you will have to live your own life after I die." (Her voice is choked.)

From when he was nursery age, I let him practice as much as possible and never spoiled him. For example, I didn't allow him to use a spoon to make eating easier. So he used chopsticks from a very early age and never used a spoon. I was very different from normal parents, how they like to let their children start with a spoon—because a spoon is easier to handle—and then learn how to use chopsticks afterwards. I taught my son to use chopsticks from the very beginning. I know, with a child like him, if he didn't learn these skills at an early age, he would never get a chance to pick them up later in life. In our group, some children have never been able to use chopsticks.

I used myself as an example and would say to my son, if your mother, who is much older than you, had to learn everything after I got married, you, a young and clever boy, must be able to learn these things quicker and better than me!

After I had drawn the bath water for him, I taught him to take a shower by himself. He also learned to tie his own shoelaces; I don't care if the knots were pretty or not, but he had to be able to do it himself. He started washing the dishes when he was smaller than the sink, so I gave him a stool. I was never annoyed if he said to me: "Mom, I've broken a bowl," because for me, letting him learn the skill was much more important than buying a new bowl. I even made him a small mop and taught him how to clean the floor every day, before he could use a full-size mop. He was quiet, but always tried very hard to learn the things I taught him. I taught him all sorts of housework bit by bit, until he became independent. These days, he works slowly, but he can bathe himself and wash his own clothes without any problems.

When he was little, he used to fall over so easily, but I never helped him up. This might be difficult for most parents to understand; for them, helping their children get up would be a very natural thing, especially for a disabled child, but I insisted doing this my way. Once, he slipped and was kneeling on the ground, I didn't help him up, but walked to him and stroked his head (pretends to stroke something): "Climb up!" A neighbor who saw us was shocked and asked me: "Wow, what's wrong with you, why don't you lift him up?" The thing I didn't expect was that night my son was in very bad pain. Later, the doctor told me that his leg was broken. The tears were rolling down my face as soon as I heard this news. But I only regretted stroking his head, not about training him to become independent. It was just a very rare accident, he could always stand up by himself after falling down, nothing like this had happened before or afterward.

I was very sad when I watched my son fall over, but I couldn't bring myself to help him (her voice is choked). The only reason I treated him so strictly was because I knew he needed to learn from his own mistakes to be able to grow up. I had to hold back my tears and stand away, telling him to get up even though it was very painful for both of us. That night, after I learned my son had broken his leg, I lost control and cried terribly, tears were running all over my face (her eyes brim with tears).

I don't beat my son very often, except if he's been very disobedient. For example, I would have to teach him a lesson if I told him to get washed and he refused. To be honest, I never feel good after beating him and couldn't help but cry afterwards. He was never punished when he was a little boy, because he wasn't as obstinate as when he was older. In his teenage years, he started to know his own mind, sometimes he would disobey me or even deliberately make me angry. Now, if I want to beat him, he'll hold my hand and stop me, but also, he understands my reasoning very well. I usually say to him: "Mom would never hit you without reason, I'll only do it if you've done something wrong." I care about him very much, I always check if he's swollen or has a red mark after I hit him (covers her face and weeps).

If I've had to hit him that day, when we get back home, I'll usually discuss what mistakes he's made, and let him think about what he did afterwards. If it was his fault, he has to say he is sorry to me, but I don't mind apologizing to him if he thinks Mom was wrong. It's a two-way thing, I would never beat him for nothing, I want him to be a better person.

I also trained him to be aware of social etiquette, for example, when he was very young, I was always telling him not to yell or speak loudly on the bus. When we get off the bus, he can talk to the people he knows, but nicely and gently. These days, if he takes a bus to his maternal grandma's home, I know he won't talk too loudly or behave in a rude way.

Outside, he has a very good sense of behaving in traffic; even my colleagues praise him for that. Sometimes "jay walking" across a traffic light for an adult is easy and happens often, even I crossed on a red light once when we were cycling, but he never does this. A red light means stop, and a green light is go; he never crosses on the wrong light. I have been strict and serious with this training. There can be no alternative. I keep saying to him: "One day, your mom will die and you will have to live on your own. If you learned all the things I teach you now, you'll survive in the future." I've repeated these words since he was very young; I have to set a very high standard for him, always.

Q: I heard your son is interested in cooking, does he cook at home?

Zhang's mother: He can cook, but he doesn't need to cook for me at home. To know how to cook is what I want for him. I ask him the same question from time to time: "You don't need to worry about food when we're together, but what would you do when your dad and mom pass away?" He says: "I'll buy noodles and cook them myself." He can cook some simple dishes, poached eggs or fried eggs, for example. If you let him cook at home, he might say to you: "I'm afraid you won't like my cooking, I'll only cook for myself if I need to."

He Is Efficient at Work and Very Capable

Q: What was your plan after he graduated?

Zhang's mother: After he graduated from the special school, he stayed at home for a while, but it was a difficult time and I had to lock him in the house when I went to work. I prepared some bread and malted milk for him before I left, but I didn't give him any hot food in case he hurt himself. I would come back home to a messy boy and house.

In those days, he was young and couldn't control himself and he usually did some crazy things. He cut up my best clothes and new shoes—it made me cry when I saw this ruined stuff. It had been a gift from my sisters who'd taken pity on me. I'm a very frugal person and reluctant to spend money on clothes. But I didn't have a choice; all I could do was hide the scissors and any other sharp stuff. On a day that he broke things, the only thing I could do was ask him to help me clean up. If you mess up, then you have to tidy up, that's my rule.

Two years ago, my friend opened a private bookstore. She's a friend that I met at the Xinhua Bookstore. One day, she said to me, if you like, I can give your son a job and teach him how to work. I took up this offer for him. My son has grown up in a bookstore, he was always at my workplace after school until I was off duty. So, he was used to a bookstore environment and after years and years of watching he knows how it all works.

When he went to the bookstore, a place opposite to my home, the senior workers taught him how to arrange books and other things and he worked there for around 5 or 6 years. As a part-time worker, he only earned 400 yuan a month; it was only enough to pay for his own food, but there's two aunties who treated him very kindly.

Later, my bookstore needed a cleaner and the boss asked if we wanted this job. It was a job in the Putuo District's Xinhua Bookstore branches and covered three stores. Each store paid him 200 yuan, so he could earn 600 yuan every month. It was only a half day's job, he started at 8:30 a.m. and spent more or less an hour in each store. It wasn't a high standard job for him, but one store was quite far away and he needed to cycle there. For my sake, these stores knew about my son's condition and never mistreated him as long as the place was tidy enough. My son liked to help the other workers after he'd finished his own work, and he did this job for around 3 years.

Then, I talked to my manager—who was good to me—and told her my son had a problem and I couldn't look after him while I worked. She said: "Why don't you let me meet your son?" After she'd met my son, she said: "Your son looks fine to me. If he can pass a 1-month internship at the storehouse, he can certainly work for me." All of the workers agreed that my son's work performance was good that first month and since then until now, he's been employed part time.

Part of the Xinhua Bookstore's business is student textbooks and exercise books; my son is in charge of the exercise books. Here's an example, (she takes out an exercise book which she's carrying with her) we have all types of exercise books, and my son has no problem classifying and arranging them.

There are many kinds of exercise books in different style and color, each grade and subject has its own exercise book, vertical lines, horizontal lines, big grids, and small grids. My son learned from me how to classify and arrange all of them. He wouldn't be a good worker without my teaching! (Speaks proudly.) Actually I always teach him patiently whatever he needs to know. Other people might only need to be told once, but my son might need to be told 20 times.

His work schedule is Monday to Friday, but he can ask for leave if he needs to. The manager is a good friend, so I ask her to do him a favor if he has to take a day

off. Her husband likes my son very much because he works very hard and works quickly and correctly, he never shirks off work with excuses.

In the beginning, he wasn't a sociable boy, he didn't like to talk to colleagues except for greeting them. People asked me why he worked so hard but never talked, because he only focused on what he was doing and never responded to other people, whoever talked to him. He changed little by little after I told him not be so quiet. These days, he's quite close to the driver in his team and he likes to talk to his colleagues, too. His colleagues never leave him behind if they have a company banquet or trip; they treat him as an equal. But he only socializes with them and doesn't invite friends to come back to our place because our apartment is too small.

Q: What does he do with his salary? Keep it or give it to you?

Zhang's mother: He gives his salary to me, but asks me for some money when he needs it. Usually he only carries a 100-yuan note in his pocket which he can use if he needs some small things, but if he needs 500 yuan for something I won't say no.

Basically, he's a thrifty man, he doesn't like to buy bottled water or snacks, even when you tell him to. He always has his own flask with him if he goes out. Another example is if he misses breakfast at home, he won't buy one. He wouldn't do that, but if you bought some food for him, he wouldn't refuse. He only cares about the money in his pocket—"if the money isn't there, it can't be mine"—that's how he thinks. He likes to save money from snacks and other things, but spends it on what he likes.

Q: Do you still remember when he received his first month's salary?

Zhang's mother: The first month, when he worked for my friend who runs the private bookstore, I remember he got 450 yuan. He bought a gift for his paternal grandma, even though she doesn't like him very much. Actually, I was angry with his attitude towards his family; my mom loves him so much, but he never gave her a special gift. It's like he thinks that only my husband's relations are his family. For him, even though his paternal grandma treats him badly, she is still his family, and they belong to the same Zhang family. The paternal grandma lives next to us but rarely talks to my son, even though my son likes her very much. Actually, his paternal grandpa was very nice to him, but he died too early.

A Fanatic Football Fan Who Enjoys Sports

Q: I heard he took part in Special Olympics that were held in Shanghai years ago.

Zhang's mother: Yes, he did, when he was 26. He came second in a running race. It also was his first time to participate in a large-scale athletics competition. He won a lot of medals (takes out six sports medals). This is a gold medal, and this is a silver medal from the Special Olympic Games (describes the medals on the desk)... We have lots more medals at home, some bronze medals as well. He was also involved in the football tournament, bowling, running, and bocce in Special Olympics; all of these medals he won at Special Olympics or related sports competitions that year.

He was active in sports at school as well; he could give up all the other classes but not PE. He was involved with many sports at the school's annual sports meeting: football, basketball, running, long jump, among others; he didn't miss any of them.

This Friday, we went to a Unified Run³ competition, and this time won second place. Each team had 12 people, ordinary people/volunteers and disabled people, half and half. It's quite a difficult game—all the contestants stand in line and tie their foot to the person's next to them. During the game, they have to run with the same rhythm—everybody has to move their left foot when their partner moves their right. My son and I have been involved three or four times since the first Unified Run competition, and we plan to go to next year's game too (See Fig. 1).

The nice thing is, we met his good friend at the sports stadium and they were so close and excited. He is the friend we met last year at a family event in Shanghai; every district sends two families there. During the event, we got to know the boy and his mother, who come from Zhabei District, and found out that both boys love football. Since then, they've become best friends forever and keep touch all the time by WeChat or other ways.

We also have a small group at the district DPF center, which includes eight adults and seven children. We're very close friends just like our children with the other children. We usually hang out together. In our group, my son is a very handy man and can turn his hand to anything when we need him.

Q: Do you prepare for the competition before Special Olympics?

Zhang's mother: No, we don't prepare for the games. The first time, we received a very late invitation and didn't have time to prepare because Special Olympics didn't have enough advance publicity. So we started the competition straight after we registered for the games, without any preparation.

My son was young and could run very fast, so he performed very well that time. If we'd known about the competition earlier, we would definitely have done some preparation exercises. It was the same for the Unified Run; we received very late notice again and only had time to practice twice in this main hall.

At Special Olympics, he went to his game with the team's teacher and the parents were told not to go with them. He was very excited, shouted out loud and jumped very high when he knew he'd got second place in the running race. He didn't tell me very much when he got home, I think because I'm usually quite strict with him: If he didn't get a gold medal which he should, I wouldn't talk to him for a while.

I wish we could have a space, like a campus sportsground, to prepare for the games. We need more support for their practice so they can get better results. More notice and a practice ground are the things we need. For some exercises, we need the right kind of space. For example, the Unified Run needs a big ground for practice. The floor in this room isn't good, the athletes could be hurt if they fall over.

Q: Does he like playing football very much?

Zhang's mother: For sure, he likes to ride his electric scooter to the campuses—Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages, Tongji University, Shanghai University—to play football with college students. When he's at the sports ground, he won't hesitate for a second to join a game if other players ask him to. Sometimes I don't like him

³The Unified Run is a popular game with mixed teams of disabled and ordinary people. It is an extended event of Special Olympics and encourages two groups of people to cooperate and understand each other.



Fig. 1 Guojun Zhang and Yaping Deng, a former table tennis Olympic Champion

playing with other people because I worry that he might hurt others with the ball. I keep asking him: “Do other people know about your condition?” Anyway, if he was hurt by somebody else I can’t complain to them, but if it was the other way around I worry that the injured person might come and complain.

It’s why I don’t like him to play football there, but he never listens to me; he keeps going to play football secretly. He used to play quite frequently, several times a week, driving his electric scooter around the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages, Train

Head Stadium, and Tongji University. He's been going less in the last 4 or 5 years, I guess because he isn't as fit as before now he's getting older, he's 38 now. Another reason is that he knows that football players usually quit when they get older, so my son thinks he needs to do the same thing. He knows all of those players, the ones in the magazine.

Q: When did you realize your son had become a football fan?

Zhang's mother: It was in 1995, he went to Hongkou Football Stadium to watch a game of Shanghai Shenhua Football Team and he was chosen to be interviewed by a journalist from Shanghai Television. They thought my son looked like a big fan; he was so excited with the game and good at shouting team chants. The journalist asked him: "Where are you from, why do you support the Shenhua Team?" My son said: "I come here to support Shenhua because I'm their fan!" I didn't know anything about this until my sisters and her friends told me they'd see him on the TV. They said to me: "Wow! Jun is on TV!" (She looks very excited.) I never got a chance to watch this program.

My son watches the football program every day, and he likes to buy football magazines. Have a look at these magazines (takes out some football magazines from her bag). He spends a fortune on these things, some of the books are several hundred yuan each, like this set of World Cup books, which is published every 4 years. He doesn't care about the price, but he is obsessive about collecting these magazines, hardbacks, and limited editions. He can tell you the story of everybody that's featured in the books.

This book is around 80 yuan (points at the football book on the table), this one he bought recently and without me knowing, because he likes to take these books to work after he's bought them. But he buys fewer hardbacks than before. I won't stop him buying books that he really likes. At the same time, I'm sure he isn't a wasteful person, if he spends money on books, he definitely saves some money from elsewhere. So I never worry about him for this reason.

Some children in our group have quite loose hands with their money, but my son isn't one of them. He understands how difficult it is to earn money, so he's always very careful with his expenses and plans them carefully. For something expensive, for example, if he wants to buy a laptop, iPad, or iPhone, he will always discuss it with me first and only buy it if I agree with him. For some small things, like buying this magazine, he can make his own decision.

We also have quite a few footballs at home; some of them are gifts from other people. Once my niece went to Spain with her family and they visited the Real Madrid Club and bought a football for my son. It was so expensive, it cost several thousand yuan! I told them not to buy it or choose a smaller and cheaper one, but they didn't listen to me. They said the price didn't matter, because my son loves football!

In Pursuit of a High-Quality Life

Q: Does your son have a problem with recognizing the denomination of bank notes?

Zhang's mother: No, he doesn't have that problem, but he has a problem with big notes. For example, if he pays 10 or 20 yuan for something with a 100-yuan note, he can't work out how much change he should get.

Q: Do you worry about Internet fraud when your son is using his mobile phone and on social media?

Zhang's mother: No, I'm not worried. He doesn't use the Internet very often, but he plays some games online. He used to watch TV at home, so he won't be cheated too easily. On the one hand, he never missed an episode of *The Oriental 110*, he also likes to watch programs like *Law and Morals* every day. On the other hand, I usually tell him don't talk to those strangers who tell him suspicious stuff and walk away from them as soon as possible. My son listens to me and he doesn't talk to strangers if he can help it. He was much more relaxed when he went to the campus and played football with college students, because he knows these people won't hurt him. If some people who are not students invite him to go somewhere to play a game, my son won't go with them.

We have another rule: we don't check each other's phones, because we have to trust each other; but he needs me to teach him how to use the phone sometimes. For example, I taught him how to send a message to his teachers if something has happened. He usually learns this kind of thing very quickly and he doesn't need my help next time. He knows how to download pictures if me or some of his friends send them to him and he can share the pictures with us. With social media, he likes to tag a "like" to his sisters', brothers' and friends' Moments that they post.

He likes to play games and collect gaming equipment. He has lots of model guns, probably more than 100 already. Sometimes when we go out together, if he sees a model gun, he usually has to buy it. He also likes to collect pretty poker sets even though he doesn't play the game. Last time when we went to the Town God's Temple, he bought a poker set and put it in a drawer. Anyway, he likes to buy new poker sets.

My son is very different from the other children in our group. He likes brand clothes, but other intellectually disabled children don't even understand the meaning of brands. My son has to have them. The top he's wearing (holds up her son's clothes) is Adidas. How expensive is an Adidas top! Last time when we came back from a holiday in Tibet, he asked me to go to the Adidas store with him and choose this suit, which was over 1,000 yuan.

Actually, he has his own ideas about lots of things, like branded clothes and quality food. If my good friends go overseas and want to buy some gifts for me, I always say: "Please don't buy anything for me, but have a look if you can find something for my son." So all of my friends know my son likes big name brands and they try to choose something he might like. He just got a pair of New Balance sports shoes. I got a phone call yesterday from a friend who is in Japan at the moment, to ask what my son wants. My son is happy with me, because I have so many good friends (she has a satisfied smile) and all of them like him very much and buy all kinds of gifts he likes.

In fact, my son's mind is very different from the other children in the group, because he grew up with ordinary people from the time he was very young. He attended a regular nursery and school and since he was 18 months old, for 18 years, I took him to my workplace. He also stayed at the other bookstore when I changed jobs. Anyway, he lives with ordinary people and society in a regular lifestyle. When he first went to the district DPF center, he felt very awkward and was reluctant to go;

he only liked to talk with ordinary people. At that time, my sisters said the same thing to him: “You don’t need to go there because you’re much better than those children. Why do you need go?” My son said: “I don’t like to go, but I don’t have a choice because my mom insists!” For me, if you have a disability certificate, then you have to be a part of this group’s way of life. Let’s be honest, it’s not easy to communicate with another group of people after you are used to ordinary people. Anyway, eventually he agreed and started to go to the DPF center events regularly. There are three or four children with a light condition in our group; my son gets on with them quite well, they usually have a day out together during festivals and holidays. They like to chat about games or other interesting things, sometimes they go on a day trip to some places nearby like the Western Suburb Park or Qibao Traditional Town. They enjoy the old town very much, because there’re so many interesting things and street food.

My son doesn’t contact his cousins from his dad’s side by choice, because sometimes he feels too awkward joining their conversations, so he doesn’t talk with them often, but when his cousins talk to him, they will make it easier for him. In my maternal family, nobody discriminates against my son; his seven cousins are very friendly with him. If they go to a karaoke hall, they never leave my son behind even though he can’t sing, but they want to enrich his social experience and get him used to different public places.

Recently, one of my nephews arranged a day trip and he gave my son a lift. Under this family and group environment, my son has become more and more open and talkative, but the real problem is a poor ability to express himself. Sometimes he can’t explain himself properly. He can’t make complex conversation like you and me. So he prefers to talk to people who are close to him but it’s harder to talk with strangers.

Longing for More Sunshine on My Family

Q: How well do you think our society accepts disabled groups?

Zhang’s mother: Under the district DPF, there are five sub-associations: associations for the physically disabled, the mentally ill, deaf-mutes, blind people, and the intellectually disabled. The intellectually disabled group is the poorest; their members can’t speak for themselves and can be easily bullied by anybody. They always get the smallest budget and least attention in the group. So as parents, we’re urging society to give them more attention and care, because they don’t know how to appeal for better welfare. But the truth is, a “squeaky wheel gets oil” (if you make enough noise someone will pay attention).

Even so, we still receive some financial support from the district DPF office annually, a budget of 20,000 yuan a year.

If we want to take more trips with our children, our small group of seven families has to be self-funded. We usually take them somewhere twice a year; for example, we just went to Nanjing for a 2-day holiday. These children’s tastes are becoming more sophisticated all the time; they are choosing travel destinations by themselves. Last year we went to Hainan and this year they chose Zhangjiajie, but the parents have to pay for everything.

The district DPF office training group has a 2-month summer holiday from July to September and we usually take a long journey during this holiday. At the district DPF center, some parents and volunteers are the only people willing to take these children away.

Some parents still have a problem with embarrassment and don't like to go out with their disabled children. So, if they send children to our place, we'll arrange their trips for them. Right now, we're applying for a day trip to the Chongming District.

The children enjoy their trips so much and get so excited when they can go out. To my knowledge, some places outside Shanghai are more willing to give concessions to disabled people than Shanghai attractions. For example, a lot of attractions elsewhere are free, but few Shanghai places give them a half-price concession.

Q: What are your family's expectations for the future?

Zhang's mother: I hope our family life will get better over time, and the government will provide more social care for families like us with more than one disabled member. For the time being, the social benefit policy is weighted towards children with more severe and serious conditions; children like my son, who has a less severe condition receives a reduced subsistence allowance; few social care policies cover them and I don't expect too much. The good thing is since last year, the DPF office introduced a new policy, which has been very helpful for us: if a family has more than one disabled member, they will receive more money, so two people will receive 500 yuan, three people 600 yuan, and if there are four or more than four disabled people in a family, they will receive 700 yuan a month. I really appreciate our Chairman's work for this new policy. I told them: "It's the first time I feel sunshine on my shoulders."

I also want to ask the Bureau of Civil Affairs and other departments to treat all the different kinds of disabled people more fairly; those severely disabled people need allowances, but people with a milder condition need some attention, too! We do have a disabled certificate as well. For example, there are two disabled people in my family, but both of them can't receive a subsistence allowance because according to the welfare rules, the government will only help them find a job at an affiliated company. It's a social support policy made between the DPF office and companies; if the company accepts a social responsibility to give a job and minimum allowance to a disabled person, the company will receive some tax or policy benefit.

Q: What do you think about marriage?

Zhang's mother: It would be his decision to marry or not and it depends on him. If he told me that he likes somebody, I would definitely support his decision. Anyway, I've bought a property for him already. My son isn't very interested in finding a girlfriend even though some of the teachers in our group have introduced girls to him.

Q: What are your plans for your son when you get older?

Zhang's mother: This is what I'm thinking: he's an adult already, I'll look after him and take him for as many trips as I can, but one day, when I can't do it any longer, my plan is to give the property to the old people's home and both of us will move into that place. I can't leave my son a homeless man, so in this way, after I die, the old people's home can keep the property and look after him. I know a disabled man who was a good child before his parents passed away. He spent some time with

his paternal grandma but became homeless after she died in her eighties. I was very upset when I saw this child, his situation was so poor. His story was a lesson that I need to find a better way of looking after my son in the future. I definitely won't leave him to wander around the world.

Q: Have you thought about letting your family or relatives look after him?

Zhang's mother: I can't let a second cousin look after my son, even though they seem like caring persons and they ask about me so often, but the truth is they are just the same as anybody else—they have their own family to look after—how could they pay attention to my son? One of my nieces once said to me: "Don't worry auntie, I'll take care of my brother in the future." But I can't depend on a promise, I have to sort out this problem by myself.

Q: Do your family agree with your plans for your son?

Zhang's mother: Yes, all of them agree with this plan, even my son. I pointed out those poor homeless beggars who never have a proper meal to my son and said to him: "If you can't look after yourself after I die, you might end up like that." My words made him take this thing very seriously. Anyway, I'll join the house-for-pension scheme, and let the old people's home look after him in the future.

Q: Thank you very much for your strong support of our oral history project of Special Olympics. I'm very pleased you could share your story with us. Your life is hard but full of happiness, and I wish you and your family a happy and healthy life.

Interview with Colleague of Guojun Zhang (I)

Interviewee: Mr. Liu (Guojun Zhang's colleague)

Interviewer and writer: Xiaolong Lu

Interview date: November 11, 2016

Interview place: Office of Guojun Zhang's company

He's a Good Colleague and Works Hard

Q: How do you get on with Guojun Zhang, Mr. Liu?

L: We've worked in the same team for years, but I became his driving partner about a year ago. Actually, we've known each other for over 10 years. I moved from the Northeast 12 years ago. When I came to the Xinhua Bookstore, he was the first person I met. We've worked together in the warehouse since then. Last year, I got a driving job and became his partner.

Q: Did you recognize he was disabled the first time you met him?

L: To be honest, I didn't realize it at all. The first time I met Junjun was outside the bookstore, before opening time. That morning was my first working day; I had just arrived in Shanghai and didn't know the city. I was starving after cycling a long way from Huangpu District. Junjun was the first to meet me and asked: "Are you the new worker?" I asked him where I could find something to eat and he took me to a breakfast store downstairs.

That's how we met the first time; I really didn't think there was anything different about him. He was the first person talk to me, I was a total stranger and had been told by HR to wait for somebody by the door and report to them.

Q: How did you find out he was different?

L: If I remember rightly, I got to know this from his mother. We were busy with our own stuff and only met at lunch time; he seemed fine to me, we chatted occasionally, usually at lunch time. So, it never occurred to me he was disabled as he was really good at his work, did things properly and quickly. In fact, I didn't know any disabled people before I met him. For me, Junjun is a very clever guy, his shelves of exercise books and paper are always tidy and organized.

Q: Do you treat intellectually disabled people differently?

L: To be honest, I don't. His mother was our colleague, and everybody is friendly to Junjun. He's a smart guy, very practical. When colleagues and I take a break for a smoke after we've finished some dispatching work, he prefers to clean up the place. In the warehouse, sometimes we have to move boxes that are over 20 kilos; it's not a job for one person and people always have to help each other. Junjun is always very generous, he'll come and give you a hand even before you ask for help.

Q: Does he like to talk with you about his work or personal life?

L: We talk about work all the time; for example, he has to tell me about delivery details before we leave. As his driver partner, I know how to get somewhere, but I can't work out the details of the delivery. If the factory we're going to has more than one gate he usually knows where to park. After we arrive at a customer's place, he's the person who will carry the stuff inside and hand over the documents to their salesman. If there's an electric whiteboard, he has to install the system for the customer as well. He has to deal with all of the delivery details himself, because as a driver I mustn't leave the car or lend him a hand.

Q: Do you ever do something together in your free time or when you are off duty?

L: Of course, we chat a lot when we're free. Sometimes we talk about football, or I'll ask him about a recent game. There are several football fans in our workplace, so we like to talk about this together.

Q: Do you enjoy working with Junjun?

L: It's pretty good; we cooperate well, because he's a reasonable guy. For example, before we load up the van, he usually checks the numbers and size of that delivery's boxes, and then sorts out the van in the best way; he won't leave any boxes behind or make mistakes like this. He likes to do some research about how to load the van and learns from the other workers when he's free.

Q: Have you ever had any arguments or problems with him?

L: No, I don't think so. There's never any kind of conflict between us, but sometimes if I can't park as close as he wants, Junjun might feel a little bit annoyed, that's all. It's nothing personal.

Q: I know Guojun uses WeChat—are you WeChat friends?

L: Of course, we follow each other on WeChat. Sometimes he likes to share some articles about healthy living or football or post his score if he won an online football game. He likes to send greeting messages to me during festivals and holidays.

Q: What do you think of him after you've worked together for such a long time?

L: He's a very good person, reliable, friendly, and hard-working. We're more like brothers than friends after working together for so many years, and we've gotten to know each other better since we've become partners.

Interview with Colleague of Guojun Zhang (II)

Interviewee: Ms. Hu (Guojun Zhang's manager)

Interviewer and writer: Xiaolong Lu

Interview date: November 11, 2016

Interview places: Office of Guojun Zhang's company in Hongkou District

A Nice Person and Good Stuff Member

Q: Do you remember when Guojun Zhang joined your company?

Hu: He's worked here almost 10 years, since 2008. He was a part-time worker at the Heart to Heart Stationery warehouse, which belongs to Xinhua Media Group, but the company closed when Xinhua Media planned to join the stock market. At that time, the stationery company was divided into four parts and they were sold by auction. My company and another three qualified companies won the bidding, which is why Junjun, his mother, and the rest of Heart to Heart Stationery workers joined us.

Q: Did you have any other disabled workers before him?

H: Do you mean "special" workers? No, he was the first.

Q: Were you concerned when he joined your company?

H: Not at all, as a company and part of society, we have a social responsibility. After the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008, my company donated a lot of schoolbags, stationery, and other goods to people in the disaster area through the Shanghai Federation of Trade Unions. I thought this was the right thing for us to do. We help others if we can, depending on our ability and situation.

Q: Do you remember the first time you met Guojun Zhang?

H: Of course. In fact, I knew him briefly before he worked for me, because his former company had business with us. But I didn't know anything about his personal life or working ability as I do now. I knew his mother for years, and she worked at the warehouse for a while too. I can never remember that his real age is 38, almost 40, because in my mind he still a child, but he's a sensible boy, even though he has an intellectual disability. He never misunderstands anything that you tell him. His only problem is he can't explain himself well enough, but his mind is much more mature than many other intellectually disabled people.

When he came to our company the first day, he was a cheerful fat boy wearing a T-shirt. He never called me boss or manager, he called me auntie from that day and until now (smiles). His main duty at the warehouse is to deliver orders with the driver.

As the Internet business boomed, our business was seriously affected by this trend as were other brick and mortar stores. So I started to sell some of our branches

to the Chenguang company. They were looking to float on the stock market and bought the stores. Now, after the downsizing strategy, we have no stores and fewer workers, but our distribution center still serves the Shanghai market for Hero, the famous stationery company. Junjun still works at the warehouse and deals with the deliveries.

Since last May, in addition to his main duty, I gave him another very important but difficult role and he does very well. I'm very fond of pets and I took in eight stray cats; Junjun looks after them. He insists on feeding and cleaning them twice a day and never forgets. I don't call him Junjun anymore, but "General Cat." He's never looked after cats before, but now he's learned how to communicate with them. The cats know he's coming before he's opened the lift, and know he's going to clean up the place and feed them. Except for some personal business or going outside Shanghai on a trip, he comes to the company to look after them every day, including weekends and public holidays. Junjun is a loving and caring child, I have to say.

Q: Did he ask you for this special job?

H: No, he didn't. In our company, everybody has more than one role, so his second job is to look after cats. By the way he does this, you can tell he has a very warm heart. Actually, he isn't a child anymore, he's almost 40 years old, but to other colleagues, he's still just a child. Sometimes he might think things are too simple but that's his condition, we can always see his loving and caring heart. He enjoys working here and his mother feels at ease with that, because everybody likes him and nobody discriminates against him or treats him differently.

Q: Did he have any training before starting work?

H: He didn't have any formal training in the beginning, but before he went out to deliver orders, he worked with two of the senior employees for 2 weeks. He's worked here for quite a long time now; two of the drivers have retired. He is highly regarded by our drivers and customers. When he was on holiday, some of the costumers called in and asked: "Why didn't the big fellow come this last couple of days?" The costumers treat him very well—he gets a cold drink in the summer and steamed-bread and a meat bun at lunch time. Other people, who covered the job for him while he was off didn't get the same treatment. So, there are a lot of nice and caring people with a positive attitude in our society.

Q: Has he got better at the job?

H: Yes, he has, he knows the job better than before. In the beginning, we had to teach him one step at a time, how to talk to the costumers, deal with the paperwork, and so on. But now, especially from this year, he knows this aspect of the business much better than anybody else. If he has to take a day off, the worker who covers his job has to ask him about the details of any deliveries. He really knows which department and which person he needs to contact, even though some companies are quite big. If you look at his ability at work, it's very hard to tell he's intellectually disabled, and he's different from other disabled people. There's a very big difference.

Q: Would you hire more disabled workers if they came for a job interview?

H: That would depend on their personal condition; if they are as clever as Junjun and don't mind taking a part-time job, they would be welcome to join us.

Q: Do you expect a high standard for his work?

H: I would say that I have a required standard for his job. His work looks simple and easy—he just needs the person in charge to sign the documents after the delivery is completed; in fact, his work is much more complex and difficult than we thought. Because there's a financial aspect with all goods deliveries, he has to be very careful with the documentation, signatures, and invoices. As a sensible worker, he knows when he needs to ask for help if he encounters some problems in his work. Generally speaking, he's improved a lot.

Q: Do you treat him and the other ordinary workers the same, as equals?

H: No, that's not possible. In the company, everybody has to clock in, but he doesn't need to, even though Junjun insists on doing this and reminding anyone who forgets to punch their card. We treat him equally most of the time, but because of his condition, we wouldn't let him do a computing job, that's his weakness, so it's best to let him work with deliveries.

Q: Did he ever make any mistakes at work?

H: He did, but only once; our accountant asked him to take a payment back with him after he delivered an order, but he forgot to take the money back. When I discovered the accident, I just told him not to make the same mistake again. He's a smart boy; he won't forget anything once you've reminded him.

Sometimes we've made mistakes together, it isn't his fault. For example, a while after I've taught him how to clean the cat house and feed them, he might start to miss things here and there. So I keep an eye on him and if I see that something isn't right, I just say to him: "Junjun, I think there's something wrong here, could you show me what you've been doing?" After that, I'll point out any mistakes and what he needs to do by showing him the process again. He'll remember the next time.

I must admit I'm impressed that he's never ever lost his invoice book. A lost invoice book could cause the company some serious problems, but it's never happened to him.

Q: Has he ever won an award from the company for his work?

H: Of course! He received awards for his hard work. In the company, everybody is busy with their own jobs, this includes cleaning up his own working area. Sometimes if somebody forgets to clean their area, Junjun will take the initiative and clean up the floor or sort out the shelves for him, even if nobody asks him to. Actually, I only ever asked him once: "Junjun, please help us clean the floor if we're too busy," and he's never forgotten that. Basically, he usually finishes the cleaning before we arrive, he works voluntarily and never complains. I guess it's his special way of paying back people's favors.

Q: Does he ever arrive late or leave early?

H: Never. He always arrives very early, we start at 9 a.m., but he's usually here before 8 a.m. If he has to take a day off, he usually lets me know in advance. Sometimes he forgets to ask me for a day off, but if I ask where he was, he'll explain why. I don't mind giving him some time off if he gives me enough notice and I can find a person to cover his work.

Occasionally if he forgets to clean up the cat house, I usually try to reason with him about the issue: "Cats are the same as us, they need to eat regularly and live in a tidy place. Think about how you'd feel if you didn't eat for a day and a night? Since

we decided to adopt them, we have to take responsibility.” After my explanation, he definitely remembers what I said and never makes the same mistake again. That’s why I feel quite at ease with him.

Q: What do you think about the way he interacts with you and the other colleagues?

H: About interaction... I always think the environment is the reason for the way things or people can change; this applies to Junjun as well. When he first joined us, he didn’t know us very well, especially me, so he usually avoided talking to us; but after working together for a long time, almost 10 years now, he will chat with us sometimes, chatting and joking. Now, he gets on with the group much better and sometimes he actively joins in our lunch time conversation and enjoys it.

Q: Do you change your way of speaking or subject when Junjun is with you?

H: Junjun has been a part of our community for so many years and we must care for him all the time and under all kinds of conditions. For example, we don’t use terms like “idiot” or “fool” in our company. Everyone who works here knows this. At least they don’t use these kinds of words when Junjun is with us. We do this for Junjun because he’s very different, like a smart child, and we really don’t want to damage his self-esteem.

Q: Are you WeChat friends?

H: Of course. If I post some moments, my colleagues usually tag it with a “like.” We also have a working WeChat group; sometimes I post the company’s notices there. For example, I usually update the pickup place and time and other details before we go on our annual group trip.

Q: What’s your opinion and evaluation of Guojun Zhang?

H: Generally speaking, nobody is perfect. With Junjun’s condition, in other words, his weakness, we don’t have a right to push him or challenge him to do something he isn’t good at—innovative or creative work, for example. He can’t do this kind of thing, but he’s fine with practical work. If he can stay at the top of his own job, that will be good enough for us. He’s a really nice and kind child.

We want to make sure we’re fair to everybody, so we manage his work in a different way. After many years at work, he’s never compromised company policy. If I have to say there is something different, it’s probably that as a part-time contractor, he doesn’t get any annual paid leave. When he needs to take a break for a district DPF event or group trip, I never disagree. We’ve had a conversation about his social life and I support him when he needs to do important events and activities, but for anything else, he has to choose carefully, because he has his duties here. Every time he takes time off, somebody has to take over his job, and he completely understands the meaning of the job. I try my best to keep a balance and support him. Once he took 9 days off for a long holiday with his mother; other colleagues and even myself covered his job, and everybody worked for him voluntarily.

Q: Thank you for your time and your support. I wish you the very best luck of with your business and a successful career.

Interview with Guojun Zhang

Interviewee: Guojun Zhang

Interviewer and writer: Xiaolong Lu

Interview date: December 12, 2016

Interview place: Disabled Persons Federation office of Hongkou District

Work Hard to Be the Best You Can Be

Q: Do you remember anything impressive from your time at school?

Z: When I studied at the Special Education School, it was a long commute and my mom had to take me there and back every day.

Q: Do you have any school friends left who you still keep in touch with?

Z: No, I don't.

Q: Why is that, do you think, is it because of the kind of person you are or you didn't want to get know people?

Z: Neither of these problems, I lost touch with some of my friends after they moved away.

Q: So you did have some friends at school, did you take the initiative to chat with them?

Z: Yes, I liked to talk to them.

Q: Did they like to tell you about their personal issues or something close to their hearts?

Z: No, they didn't. We usually talked about school life or study.

Q: Have you ever invited your friends to visit you?

Z: No, I haven't.

Q: Why?

Z: Because our place is very small.

Q: Did you have some events at school?

Z: Of course, we had a spring picnic trip.

Q: Did your mother go with you?

Z: No, she didn't go with me, because we have to go by ourselves and we weren't allowed to go with our parents.

Q: What were your favorite courses at school?

Z: The cooking class.

Q: Do you cook these days?

Z: Yes, I cook sometimes, but it doesn't taste great.

Q: What other courses did you have?

Z: We had a PE class, too.

Q: Did you have a favorite teacher at school?

Z: Sure, I liked the maths teacher and the domestic science teacher.

Q: Why did you like them?

Z: They cared about me. One of them lived close to my place and usually gave me a lift on the way home.

Q: Now you have a job. Compared with school, which lifestyle do you like best?

Z: I like work.

Q: Why?

Z: Because I enjoy chatting with my colleagues in the workplace.

Q: Why didn't you like to go to school?

Z: Because I couldn't keep up with the pace of my studies.

Q: Who went to the company with you the first time, your father or mother?

Z: It was my mom, she walked me to the workplace.

Q: What did you feel that day?

Z: I'd worked before then, because I did some part-time jobs before joining this company.

Q: What was your first duty when you joined the company? Do you remember?

Z: I worked in the warehouse, helping people sort out stuff.

Q: Did anybody teach you how to do things in those first days?

Z: No, because I'd done similar work before.

Q: Do you ever feel tired of working here?

Z: No, it's not too bad.

Q: Have you ever made a mistake at work since you joined the company?

Z: No, I haven't.

Q: Manager Hu said you once forgot to take back a payment for a customer, and she talked to you about this when you returned to the company? Were you angry that time?

Z: No, I wasn't angry, because it was me who forgot.

Q: Is there anything very difficult about your work?

Z: My duty is to deliver orders, there's nothing too difficult about it, and I'm used to it by now.

Q: I heard manager Hu let you to look after some cats. Do you like cats?

Z: I don't like them, because cats have fleas.

Q: If you don't like cats, why didn't you refuse when the manager asked you to do this job?

Z: I didn't say no; I just thought I should give it a go.

Q: You've looked after those cats for almost 2 years, but you still don't like them?

Z (he has a broken smile): I've gotten used to them.

Q: You mean used to looking after them or now you like them?

Z: Just got used to them, I think.

Q: You mentioned you are very close to your driver partner; apart from him, do you have any other close colleagues?

Z: I get on well with everyone, but my partner is my closest friend.

Q: Apart from work and your job, do you talk about life or personal things with your partner?

Z: We talk about football games, because I like football.

Q: What time do you get up on your working day?

Z: Six a.m. in the morning.

Q: Where do you usually have breakfast, at home or out?

Z: I usually buy something to eat.

Q: When do you leave home and head to the company?

Z: I leave home around 6:30.

Q: How do you get to work?

Z: On my electric scooter.

Q: What time do you start work?

Z: Eight a.m.

Q: Do you need to clock in with the punch card?

Z: We do have a punch card machine.

Q: Have you ever been late for work?

Z: No, I've never been late.

Q: What time do you finish?

Z: Five p.m.

Q: Do you go home straight away?

Z: Of course, I go home directly.

Q: What do you usually do at home?

Z: I just eat, wash the dishes, then I'll take a shower. If there's a good program, I might watch a little bit of TV afterwards.

Q: What time do you go to bed?

Z: I might stay up late if I there's an interesting program to watch, or have an early night. My bedtime is usually around 10 p.m.

Q: So you work from Monday to Friday, and go to the district DPF training program on Saturday and Sunday?

Z: I stay here all the time.

Q: You're a big football fan, where do you usually play football?

Z: Just at the Foreign Languages University.

Q: Why do you go there?

Z: I just found that place.

Q: When did you get to like football?

Z: 1995.

Q: Why did you start to like football?

Z: Since I watched a football game on TV.

Q: Apart from football, do you like any other kinds of sport?

Z: I like basketball, but I can't play.

Q: Do you see anyone frequently apart from your parents and colleagues?

Z: It takes me time to get to know people.

Q: For example, did you get to know somebody from football or at the Foreign Languages University?

Z: It's something I'd like to try.

Q: Between staying at home or going out, which one do you prefer?

Z: I guess, I like go out, because it's boring staying at home. I like to go out and have a look around and play.

Q: I know you spent a while at home after you graduated and before you found a job. Which do you prefer between staying at home and working?

Z: Staying at home alone is quite boring. I prefer to have a job and it's also a way get to involved in society.

Q: What kind of housework do you usually do at home?

Z: Washing or fixing.

Q: Fixing? What do you fix?
 Z: Tighten a screw, or change a bulb, I can't fix more complicated things.
 Q: I saw the lunch box that your father made, last time, but you live with your mother. Does your father bring your lunch to work?
 Z: He comes over to cook in the evening and leaves afterwards.
 Q: When did he start making breakfast for you?
 Z: I used to eat at the company canteen before I came to this company, but we don't have a canteen here, so my dad started preparing lunch for me.
 Q: Do you think the difficult relationship between your parents has had an impact on you?
 Z: I don't think so.
 Q: Do you wish their relationship was better or are you not concerned?
 Z: I think it's better that they are living apart.
 Q: How do you get on with your father? Was there a time when you hated him?
 Z: Yes.
 Q: What do you think of yourself?
 Z: I really don't know, just so-so I guess.
 Q: Do you think you have a happy life?
 Z: No, I'm not happy (he's a bit choked).
 Q: But why?
 Z: Because my family, my parents are separated.
 Q: Even though you say you're unhappy, as an outsider, I think your life is very happy because you can live with your mother, go on trips from time to time and at the same time your father makes you lunch every day. That's the end of our interview. It's been good to meet you and thank you for sharing your happiness and sadness with me. I'd like to wish you a healthy life and successful career.

Observation of Guojun Zhang at Work

Observation time: 6:00–15:10, November 11, 2016
 Observation place: A company in Hongkou District, Shanghai
 Observer and writer: Xiaolong Lu

Time	Content	Observed activities
6:00	Arrives and clocks on	He doesn't have a fixed clock-in time
6:05	Takes cat food out of a bag and feeds cats	The manager keeps some stray cats and has found a room for them. Since last year, Guojun Zhang has the job to look after them, feeding the cats and cleaning the place

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Time	Content	Observed activities
7:00	Goes downstairs and has breakfast at a breakfast store on the street	He has two meat buns and one bowl of congee
8:00	Chats with colleagues and prepares for work	He is listening most of the time but rarely initiates a conversation
8:30	He introduces his collection of model guns, poker sets, football magazines, and his photos from childhood	He takes his collection and arranges them on a small shelf because he knows the interviewer will come today
9:00	Cleans the cat house	He cleans the place twice a day on a work day, and once during the holidays
9:15	Takes a roll of bubble paper from the storage area	It's part of his preparation for work, wrapping packages
9:20	Wandering around the office area and joking with the delivery man	
9:40	Goes to deliver stuff with the van	It's his daily job; usually branch stores or factories
11:26	Helps his colleague to pack stationary	It's not his job, but he comes to help voluntarily
11:30	Chats with colleagues, smoking	
11:40	Lunch time	His lunch has been made by his father; he needs to heat it up in a microwave before he eats
12:00	Plays with his iPad	
12:10	Smokes, sits there for rest	
12:15	Watches a movie on the iPad	
12:30	Plays with his phone	
12:40	Loads up the van and prepares for another delivery	
12:50	On the way to deliver stuff	Sits in the back seat to check the orders
13:40	Carries orders to the customer and checks the list with the customer representative on duty	Sends stuff to the branch store and opens the package with the director, then checks the category
14:50	Goes back to the company	
15:00	Smokes, rests and chats with colleagues	
15:10	Loads the van and goes out with the orders	
15:30	Unloads orders and opens the box for the customer to check	The delivery place is the office of a big company
15:46	Takes back some stuff the customer wants to return and goes back to the company	As a branch retail store, orders can be returned anytime if the customer wants to
16:00	Puts returned order back in the warehouse	
16:05	Helps colleagues to clean up the area and sorts out stuff in the rest area	

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Time	Content	Observed activities
16:27	Hammers a nail into the wall to mount a plug board	
16:30	Takes out some cat food from a bag and takes it to the cat house. Strokes the cat	
16:36	Sits at the desk and chats with his mother	
16:40	Packs up his collections on the shelf	
16:45	He switches on the office light when a colleague asks	
16:48	Chats with a delivery man who comes for a package	
16:50	Sits down and takes his iPad out to play	
16:55	At the request of the manager, he cleans up the two cat rooms, and throws litter out	It's part of his daily job, but he forgets to do it this time
17:05	Takes a roll of clothes out	
17:10	Off duty	It's a fixed time, people aren't allowed to leave before 17:10. He needs do some overtime duty sometime

*Translated by Huili Meng.
Edited by Russell Murray.*

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