



Disability Acceptance in Asian Societies: A Literature Review of Culture and Philosophy

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 26 Jun, 2025

Revised 29 Sep, 2025

Accepted 06 Oct, 2025

Keywords:

Disability Acceptance, Culture, Asia, Stigma

ABSTRACT

This study explores how disability acceptance in Asian society through a literature review approach based on cultural and philosophical perspectives. This article reviews 17 research journal articles spread from various countries including Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and Brunei Darussalam. This article finds that disability acceptance is not only shaped by the legal system, but also heavily influenced by local norms, culture, religion and even language. These findings highlight how the stigma of disability is persistent in a belief in karma, a culture of shame and a meritocratic ideals that make acceptance of disability conditional. The research articles were reviewed using the help of NVIVO 12 software to conduct thematic analysis, by identifying themes based on sociocultural, religious and philosophical that shape the acceptance of disability in the societies of various countries in Asia. This article also found that the model of social acceptance for people with disabilities has shifted, from a paternalistic to a humanistic model that focuses on the dignity and diversity of the human body. This article contributes to inclusive issues in society by offering the importance of culture, policy and also community in encouraging disability acceptance.

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INTRODUCTION

Disability is the result of interactions between individuals with health conditions, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and depression, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support (WHO).

While Wright (1983) also explained that disability is not only related to the limitations of functions in life, but also related to the social stigma inherent in people with disabilities, this is not only related to their disability but also related to other characteristics. When faced with existing stigmas, one of the key factors in psychosocial rehabilitation and adjustment is the acceptance of disabilities (Wright, 1983);(Wright, 2004).

Acceptance of people with disabilities is an important indicator of social inclusivity in a society. In the Asian context, which is characterized by cultural diversity, collectivist values, and the strong influence of social and religious norms, the acceptance of disability becomes a complex and multidimensional issue. Although various Asian countries have adopted pro-disability policies and joined international conventions such as the UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), social practices at the community level still show entrenched cultural barriers and stigma.

In addition, in Indonesia itself, the stigma against disability is still a big challenge. People with disabilities often face negative prejudice, discrimination, and social isolation, which contribute to their low self-acceptance (Humaira & Alim, 2021). The social stigma against disability is not only felt by individuals with disabilities, but also by their families. Often, having a family member with a disability is considered a disgrace or a source of embarrassment, which can lower the dignity and dignity of the family in the eyes of society. This kind of view can cause families to feel isolated, confused, and even experience internal

communication disorders due to the social pressures they face. Conversely, the negative stigma that families receive can increase anxiety levels in mothers with children with special needs. Research has found that the higher the level of social stigma that mothers feel, the higher the level of anxiety they experience, which can have an impact on the overall quality of family life.

Research by Emerensiana Levi and Theresia Alviani Sum (2022) revealed that parents in Lante Village go through psychological stages such as rejection, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance in the face of the reality of having children with special needs. The rejection stage indicates a low acceptance rate at first. According to Zahrah (2019) The process of being able to accept one's state as a mother of a child with special needs is a difficult process.

The strengthening of this issue is also shown by recent studies of Asian countries that explain that people with disabilities still face social discrimination, problematic media representation, and limited access to education, employment, and public services. In many cases, people with disabilities experience not only marginalization, but also negative stereotypes that reinforce inequality. For example, in the Indonesian context, stigma is still strong both in the general public and in the educational environment (Tsaniyah et al., 2024; UNESA, 2025), while in China and India, certain cultural norms also limit acceptance of assistive technologies or the active role of persons with disabilities (Li et al., 2021; The Guardian, 2016).

The existing literature also reveals different approaches to disability, from medical models that emphasize individual limitations, to social models that focus on structural barriers (Shakespeare, T, 2008). In Asia, the transition from medical to social models is still slow, especially in countries with education and media systems that are not yet fully inclusive (Grech, S., & Soldatic, K, 2016). However, there have also emerged grassroots movements, educational interventions, and new media representations that have begun to break old stigmas and pave the way for a more humane and equal approach (Meekosha, H., & Soldatic, K, 2011).

Based on the importance of this issue, this article aims to review the existing literature on the acceptance of disability in Asian society. This article focuses on the social, cultural, and policy factors that affect acceptance for people with disabilities. Thus, this article is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of disability acceptance in Asia and provide direction for future research and policy.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a qualitative literature study with an approach Themat-Narrative, which aims to explore disability acceptance in Asian society, from a social and cultural perspective. The literature search strategy is carried out systematically through five main academic databases, namely Scopus, What is PsycINFO, SINTA (Science and Technology Index), PubMed, and Google Scholar. To obtain relevant literature, a combination of keywords such as: "Disability acceptance", "Asian", "Social stigma", "Cultural perception" and "disability inclusion". Boolean operators (AND/OR) are applied to expand search results, for example disability acceptance" AND "Asia" or "disability" AND "social stigma". Inclusion criteria in the article selection include: (1) articles published in accredited scientific journals, (2) addressing the issue of disability acceptance in the context of Asia, especially Southeast Asia, and (3) available in full-text form. Meanwhile, articles that are opinionated, editorial, or that only focus on the medical aspects of disability without socio-cultural relevance are excluded from the study (Page et al., 2021). The selection procedure itself is carried out in stages, starting from the selection of titles and abstracts to assess the initial relevance, followed by a full-text reading of articles that meet the inclusion criteria. The selected articles are then thematically analyzed using software CHAPTER 12, Through the process of open coding, categorization, and identification of the main themes that appear repeatedly. This analysis aims to explore patterns of meaning related to cultural constructs, social stigma, and the transformation of disability models in Asian countries.

FINDINGS

Culture plays an important role in shaping the way society understands, responds, and accepts the existence of people with disabilities. In the region of Southeast Asia rich in ethnic, religious, and value system diversity, acceptance of disability is often based not only on laws or policies, but also on the cultural norms that live in everyday society. Views related to disability are highly dependent on the culture of residence, so the presentation of thematic reviews of dominant cultural values in some ASEAN member countries is essential.

Indonesia: Between Nerimo and Gotong Royong

In the context of Javanese culture in Indonesia, there is a concept of "nerimo ing pandum" which means sincerely accepting everything that God has given, including disability. These values can create a peaceful and patient acceptance space (Syamsiah et al., 2022), but also risks normalizing structural injustice if it is not accompanied by a push for social change. On the contrary, the value of "mutual cooperation" that underlies the social relations of the Indonesian people can encourage community solidarity and support for

individuals with disabilities (Kuswaja & Ma'mun, 2020). The combination of the two shows that Indonesian society has a strong potential to develop social inclusion based on cultural values. Nerimo is closely related to spirituality, namely the concept of patience in Islam, this is associated as a strong and active force, not passive as a static surrender. In addition, in Indonesia, not only the value between nerimo and mutual cooperation, on the other hand, Batak culture has two models that explain this, namely the victim model that views disability as a result of the curse and sin of parents, families of people with disabilities. The second model is the blessing model which sees it as a gift and test from God, so that this is associated with the spiritual experience of the Batak people. However, it is undeniable, in many practices physical and mental disabilities experienced by an individual are still claimed as punishment for sin, this claim not only has an impact on the perspective but also how the human being is treated, so that in the environment, people with disabilities are faced with discriminatory attitudes or exclusion from society (Sinaga & Gulo, 2020).

Stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities themselves are also formed systematically, not only because of the conservative way of thinking, but often the term for people with disabilities is associated with the word "disability" which in Indonesian itself has a meaning that has a negative connotation which means reproach or disgrace (Taruk Allo, 2022). This then reinforces the social stigma that individuals with disabilities will always be faced with feelings of social inferiority and the right to be shamed. Even so, in religious and philosophical reflection, humans are considered to be God's perfect creation, not only humans with non-disabilities but also humans with disabilities. So disability should not make a human being to make himself inferior to others, because all human beings are considered to be in the same image as God (Imagodei) (Sinaga & Gulo, 2020). Therefore, in the field of religion and philosophy, disability is seen as a diversity of God's creation and not an aberration, so it is important to humanize humans as God's perfect creation.

Singapore: Meritocracy and the Efficiency Challenge

The deep-seated culture of meritocracy in Singaporean society prioritizes performance, efficiency, and productivity. This can cause people with disabilities to be considered "less competitive" in the social and economic system. However, as awareness of inclusion increases, the Singapore government has introduced various education and employment policies and programs that attempt to balance the principles of social justice with a meritocratic system. At the community level, the spirit of the kampong spirit is alive and becomes the basis for local support for those with disabilities.

The acceptance of disabilities in Singapore has been regulated in the government system, so that the government progressively already has inclusive policies such as the enabling master plan, as well as the integration of people with disabilities into employment that has been regulated through schemes such as the gig economy. Other research from (Hong, 2024) explained that the state of Singapore already has one concept, namely curative platforms that offer job opportunities for people with disabilities, but still maintain them in vulnerable and symbolic working conditions. Social acceptance of people with disabilities in Singapore is functional, meaning they remain accepted as long as they function productively. The form of social acceptance in Singapore is a conditional form of social acceptance on the basis of productivity, this is especially in the context of the market economy. (Hong, 2024) It also explains the issue of curative violence from curative platforms that claim to be a form of social healing but can also be painful due to the dependence on high-risk work without guarantees, no benefits if they are injured and no real structural improvements to support disabilities. Extreme merititration in Singapore is also illustrated by the acceptance with the above conditions, if the disability cannot be productive, it will be ignored.

Singapore is geographically a multicultural country of Chinese, Malays, Indians and others, with the influence of various religions such as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism. But even so, Singapore does not have the dominant cultural belief that disability is a curse or karma like other countries. In a comparative study of older people in the U.S. and Singapore, people with disabilities were better understood as functional physical limitations rather than as a consequence of spiritual or moral.

Despite Singapore's modern and law-based mannerisms, social stigma still arises in the form of avoidance or shame of inadequacy, this is due to East Asian cultures that prioritize perfection, productivity and dignity (Kiing, et al, 2012). Kiing's research also shows that parents in Singapore tend to delay reporting their children's developmental delays due to embarrassment or fear of public judgment.

Philosophical reflections on the human body in Singapore are already seen as part of body diversity. In the practice of art and therapy (such as in Disability Arts), there is a shift in understanding towards the acceptance of the human body in all its forms, including the body with disabilities. In the Singapore context, art and media have been used to challenge normal body standards and reframe disability as a legitimate and meaningful form of existence (Shuttleworth & Mona, 2020).

Brunei Darussalam: Divine Destiny in the Malay Muslim Monarchy Frame

Brunei holds fast to ideology Malay Muslims Monarchy (MIB) which places Islamic values and Malay customs as the basis of the life of the state. In this framework, disability is often understood as a

provision from God, which must be accepted and cared for sincerely by the family, in addition to that people's beliefs related to disability are associated with the test of life, not as a punishment from God. Despite the high level of spiritual empathy, this approach sometimes does not open up space for active participation for people with disabilities in public life, as they tend to be protected in the private sphere. Brunei's culture, which is a combination of Malay and Islamic values, sometimes displays a paternalistic or pitiful attitude towards disabilities, as society often avoids talking about disability openly because it is considered inappropriate or embarrassing, which reinforces the exclusion of people with disabilities. Research from deaf young people shows that the stigma against deaf people who are often considered unable to communicate causes them to be ignored in the inclusive education system. Cultural discrimination against people with disabilities is not only at the individual and group scale but also at the system, for example, they receive institutional harassment such as unequal job placement or education (Izzaty et al., 2023).

Myanmar and Thailand: Karma, Harmony, and Social Stigma

In Myanmar and Thailand, it is heavily influenced by the teachings of Theravada Buddhism and a strong local belief in karma. The teaching of karma itself is that the current state of life is the result of past deeds, often used to explain the existence of disability. Villagers in Thailand believe that disability is the result of the accumulation of "bap" or sin and is part of life's suffering (dukkha), so those with disabilities are considered to bear the moral and spiritual consequences of the past. This concept poses a dilemma: on the one hand, there is a high attitude of compassion (karuna), but on the other hand, there is a stigma that disability is a negative consequence of a previous life.

Its institutions and philosophies dominate daily practice and guide the arrangement of social life. Karma is the understanding of cause and effect, which in colloquial parlance is called kam, which is the main moral concept among Buddhists. Karma influences daily actions by giving rise to the idea that 'doing good will produce good' (positive reward or bun) and 'doing bad will produce bad' (negative reward or bap). Evidence of good and evil includes material, social, interpersonal, and spiritual life. Wealth, status, and personal education are examples of bun accumulation; so are God-blessed marriages, successful children, and good health. In contrast, negative rewards in past or present lives can be reflected in financial and other disasters, family disharmony, business venture failures, and injuries and illnesses to individuals or others in their immediate family. Physical and cognitive impairment is caused by negative reward (bap). As a result, disability is considered negative.

In addition to karuna, the songsarn culture, which is also an attitude of compassion and compassion in another article, explains that it is a response expressed by the community towards people with disabilities. Even so, songsarn itself is not a form of true empathy but a reaction to differences and inferiority, so that people with disabilities are considered different and in a lower social position, this actually strengthens marginalization even though it is wrapped in pity or compassion. According to Roeder (2000) songsarn is an empathy, not an unrelated compassion, as caused by the distress or 'accident' of others.

Not much different from Indonesia, parents in Thailand are aware of the social stigma that comes along with children with disabilities, this makes parents tend to hide or protect their children from public exposure for fear of bringing shame or embarrassment to the family. The spiritual and social failure of the family is illustrated by the presence of family members with disabilities in public spaces (Persons, 2017). Culture of social harmony in Thailand (values São Paulo and Sabai) also makes the issue of disability tend to be avoided so as not to create discomfort. This creates its own challenges in building critical and inclusive public conversations.

Philosophical reflection on the human body in the thought of Thai Buddhism, explains that it consists of appearance/physical and four non-physical aggregates. A person is considered normal if his body is made up of 32 basic elements of earth and water. Imbalances or deficiencies in these elements indicate the instability of the existence of humans. It also explains that disability is understood as "akaarn mai krob samsibsong" or the incompleteness of elements in the human body. Even so, Buddhism also emphasizes brahmavihara which explains that there are four noble qualities or four virtues that should be developed in the mind of every human being, namely metta (affection), karuna (true compassion), mudita (happiness and the happiness of others), and upakkha (inner tranquility). These four noble qualities of Buddhism emphasize that by developing these qualities, one can achieve happiness and inner peace, so this should encourage acceptance and respect for the diversity of the human body in Thai society or adherents of Buddhism as the majority of the teachings practiced in Thailand.

Vietnam: Between the Traditions of Confucianism and Modern Socialism

Although Vietnam has shown significant progress in inclusive policy frameworks for persons with disabilities, social acceptance of this group still faces various structural and cultural challenges. The country has ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2015 and ratified Law on Persons with Disabilities (2010) as a form of commitment to the principles of human rights and equal participation (Stein, 2022). The policy encourages the use of more inclusive terms, such as the shift

from "tàn tật" (disability) to "khuyết tật" (disability), which reflects the government's efforts to normalize the existence of individuals with disabilities in public spaces. However, the reality at the community level shows that acceptance of persons with disabilities is still highly normative and conditional, dependent on the capacity of the individual to "function" socially or economically, especially in the context of the world of work and education (Nguyen et al., 2025).

One of the biggest barriers to disability acceptance in Vietnam is the stigma that is strongly attached to society's social construction of different bodies. In local cultures that are still influenced by traditional spiritual values and beliefs, disability is often perceived as a form of "curse" or a consequence of past sins either committed by the individual himself or by his or her family. This perception reinforces the position of people with disabilities as "unfortunate" or "incomplete," deserving of charity, but not equal rights (assessing disability). As a result, many families hide family members with disabilities from social spaces out of shame or fear of negative societal views (Ngo et al., 2012). This stigma also has an impact on access to education, health services, and employment opportunities, further deepening the marginalization of people with disabilities in Vietnamese society.

Vietnamese culture based on Confucian values and collectivism reinforces the view that individuals who are unable to fulfill social or economic roles are considered a burden to the family and society. Values such as harmony, perfection, and family devotion that are pillars of Vietnamese culture encourage the emergence of ideal, fully functioning body norms. Therefore, people with disabilities are often seen as deviations from these social norms (Persons, 2017). In this context, much public policy is still based on an individualistic medical model, in which disability is seen as a personal problem that must be "cured", rather than as a social phenomenon that demands changes in the environment and societal attitudes (Tran, 2014).

In a more progressive philosophical framework, the bodies of persons with disabilities should be seen not as objects of shortcomings, but as part of equal human diversity. The shift from the medical paradigm to the social paradigm challenges the dominant perspective that equates health with normality and productivity. The latest quantitative study even shows that the perception of the quality of life of people with severe disabilities in Vietnam is still very negative, some people even consider the condition worse than death (Spiegel et al., 2021). This reflects the unpreparedness of society in acknowledging the existence of bodies that are not in accordance with normative standards. Therefore, philosophical reflection on the body must include an understanding that the existence of disability is not an abnormality, but rather a valid manifestation of human existential diversity, which deserves to be appreciated in all its forms.

DISCUSSION

Acceptance of disability in Southeast Asia is shaped by the complex configuration of cultural values, religious doctrines, economic structures, and political systems that govern social life. The study found that although countries have implemented inclusive policy frameworks, social acceptance of people with disabilities is still ambivalent and conditional. Reliance on spiritual, moral, and economic norms makes acceptance more often determined by social constructions of bodies and abilities, rather than by the principle of equality of rights.

In countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Brunei Darussalam, acceptance of disabilities is heavily influenced by local value systems and beliefs about the human body. In Javanese culture, the value of nerimoing pandum teaches acceptance of all fates, including the condition of disability. Although it reflects a strong spirituality, this value risks normalizing inequality if it is not accompanied by structural awareness. In Thailand, Buddhism emphasizes that a complete body is made up of 32 elements; Imperfection is considered a consequence of bad Kamma. The term pikarn represents the imperfect body as an inferior moral identity. The concept of songsarn, which etymologically means compassion, is also a hierarchical and paternalistic social mechanism, placing people with disabilities as objects of sympathy, rather than as equal social subjects.

On the other hand, in Brunei, the ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy makes disability a divine destiny that must be accepted sincerely. However, this also has an impact on the marginalization of the role of people with disabilities into the private sphere, and the lack of participatory space in the public sphere. This study shows that the meaning of the body of people with disabilities in Southeast Asia is often associated with the concept of spiritual imperfection, moral powerlessness, or social disgrace. In Vietnam, for example, the body of a disabled person is perceived as a curse, and is often hidden by the family in order to maintain honor. These narratives indicate that the understanding of disability has not moved towards existential recognition as ontological diversity (Devlieger et al., 2003), but is still defined based on a deviation from the normative body.

In the context of countries such as Singapore and Vietnam, acceptance of disabilities is strongly influenced by the structure of meritocracy and the market economy. Social acceptance is not shaped by empathy or entitlement awareness, but by the individual's ability to function productively in a flexible and efficient work system. This is in line with the concept Curative Platforms (Hong, 2024), where people with disabilities are acceptable as long as they are able to work in the gig or digital economy, but remain in

vulnerable and unsecured positions. This phenomenon reflects criticism (Shakespeare et al., 2018) about ableism, which is a value system that assesses individuals based on "normal" standards of physical or cognitive ability, and considers disability as a deficiency that must be corrected. Rehabilitation practices in this model tend to impose normalization, rather than supporting the uniqueness or life preferences of people with disabilities. As criticized by (Oliver, 1990)"What's so wonderful about walking?", this question challenges the dominance of function as a meaningful measure of life.

Further (Goodley et al., 2021) presents a more structural critique of meritocracy and neoliberalism. According to him, ableism is present not only in professional practice, but also in the ideology that governs modern life: speed, independence, financial success, and efficiency become the norms that determine "social feasibility". Disability, in this framework, is not only considered as a difference, but as a Unwanted life forms.

The concepts of "crip time" and "crip desire" introduced by Goodley challenged this logic. Crip time affirms the slow and non-linear rhythm of life, while crip desire validates the desire for dependence, emotional connection, and community life that is often considered invalid in capitalistic logic. In the context of Southeast Asia, these ideas challenge cultural norms that make people with disabilities a "burden" because they are unable to meet performative expectations, both economically and morally.

The study also confirms that the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) has not completely replaced medical and cultural models in Southeast Asian countries. The main cause is the strong influence of local norms that create the meaning of disability as suffering, disgrace, or spiritual limitation. Even when inclusive legal policies have been implemented, such as in Vietnam and Indonesia, public acceptance is still hampered by stigma and moralistic assumptions. In this case, the Rights-based needs to be expanded with a framework that is sensitive to the local cultural and philosophical context. Studies conducted in Indonesia explain that one of the important factors of acceptance of disability is the existence of good social support, this is supported by research from (Nasution et al., 2024) and also from (Putra & Novitasari, 2018)While (Nisa, 2021) explained that cultural narratives, the way people communicate are closely related to public stigma so that the role of the media and cultural narratives plays a very important role in reducing stigma and stereotypes in public discourse so that there can be a structural acceptance.

CONCLUSION

The study underscores that disability acceptance in Southeast Asia is shaped by the dynamic interplay of traditional values, religious beliefs, and sociocultural structures. While some countries such as Singapore have adopted functional inclusion based on productivity, in addition, countries such as Brunei and Thailand remain influenced by moral and spiritual interpretations of disability. Cultural constructs such as "Nerimo ing Pandum", "Karma", "Songarn", and "Gotong Royong" reflect an ambivalent attitude that balances between compassion and exclusion. Across the context, acceptance of disability is still conditional, whether based on spiritual virtue or economic contribution, rarely based on equal rights. The philosophical interpretation of the body still reflects the normative ideals of completeness and perfection, which continue to marginalize people with disabilities.

Therefore, transformative change requires not only policy reform but also cultural reconstruction. Society must shift from seeing disability as an adversity or burden to recognizing it as part of human diversity. Instilling inclusive values in education, religious discourse, and media representation is essential. Further interdisciplinary and intersectional research is needed to amplify voices of disability and guide the development of socially and culturally responsive inclusion strategies.

SUGGESTION

The next direction of research needs to be recommended on in-depth ethnographic studies that explore the life experiences of persons with disabilities in indigenous communities, religious minority groups, and rural communities. This qualitative approach is important to uncover local, symbolic, and emotional nuances that are not reached through mere literature or policy analysis. In addition, future studies should pay attention to the dimension of intersectionality, namely the relationship between disability and factors such as gender, age, social class, and ethnicity in order to understand that the experience of disability is neither singular nor homogeneous. Furthermore, to enrich the theoretical foundation, it is necessary to develop a conceptual framework rooted in Southeast Asian cultural values, as a critical response to the dominance of western theories in disability studies. This includes philosophical reflections on the body, existence, and spirituality in local contexts, which are able to make an epistemological contribution to the development of a more contextual, plural, and inclusive perspective on disability.

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