



## **Rising or Declining? Trends of Disability and Functional Limitation under Different Measurements in Chinese Older Adults**

Qiushi Feng\*

National University of Singapore, Singapore – [socfq@nus.edu.sg](mailto:socfq@nus.edu.sg)

Danan Gu

United Nations, New York City, USA – [gudanan@yahoo.com](mailto:gudanan@yahoo.com)

Yi Zeng

Duke University, Durham, USA – [zengyi68@gmail.com](mailto:zengyi68@gmail.com)

The indices of Activity of Daily Life (ADL) and instrumental ADL (IADL) have been routinely applied in the current disability trend studies. This study reviewed the use of ADL and IADL in disability studies, and analyzed trends of disability and functional limitation in the Chinese elderly population over 65 from 2002 to 2008 by using four measurements that are chosen to indicate different combinations of etiological pathways in the disablement model: 1) the self-reported dependency in doing ADL, 2) the self-reported difficulty in independently performing IADL, 3) the Nagi self-evaluated difficulty in physical functioning, and 4) the performance-based functional limitation. Under these four measurement schemes, we detected contrasting temporal changes in disability and functional limitations in Chinese older adults. The ADL or IADL-based disability trends had significant declines among Chinese elders from 2002 to 2008; however, these elders meanwhile had worse functional performances if observed objectively. The observed improvement in ADL and IADL could thus be largely due to substantial improvement in environment, facility and social support of daily lives of the Chinese elders instead of better physiological functioning. As disability trends based on ADL and IADL measures essentially indicate temporal changes of a mixture of disability components, both intrinsic and external, we call for a caution for health practitioners and policymakers when they apply these disability trends to infer changes of intrinsic functional health of older adults. This issue might be particularly relevant for developing societies, where rapid socioeconomic transformations may make disability trends more sensitive to contextual rather than intrinsic factors of disability.

**Keywords:** ADL, IADL, disability trends, China