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Audio Describers in Mainland China

Insights from a Survey of Emerging Professionals and Unique Practices

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, audio description (AD) has experienced growth, often linked to legislative mandates enacted by numerous countries after ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [Greco 2022; United Nations 2006]. The growing demand helped establish and strengthen the describers' profession, as Perego notes [2022]. Nevertheless, the profession of describers is understudied, with few studies

examining it [e.g., Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost 2020; Perego 2022; Zajdel *et al*. 2024]. Perego's [2022] study explores describers through an online survey of 65 participants from 14 countries (UK, Spain, Italy, Poland, Germany, Slovenia, Slovakia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, South Korea, Netherlands, Russia, and Sweden), covering their education, training, skills, and competencies. Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost [2020] surveyed 53 describers from Mainland China to study professional profiles. More recently, Zajdel et al. [2024] studied describers' working conditions and job satisfaction, gathering data from 150 respondents across 22 countries (UK, Poland, Germany, Spain, Sweden, USA, Brazil, Netherlands, New Zealand, Italy, Austria, Belgium, Argentina, Australia, France, Canada, Chile, Finland, Iran, Ireland, Portugal, Romania, and Hong Kong SAR).

Despite the lack of legal requirements, AD has grown significantly in Mainland China over the past decade [Leung 2015] to provide access for its almost 17 million visually impaired citizens [Yu and Bu 2021]. Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost [2020] observed the emergence of grassroots volunteer movements offering AD services at venues, helping to foster the profession. However, their study, conducted several years ago, paints only a partial picture: over half of the 53 participants were based in Shanghai, and given the rapid growth of AD since then, their findings may no longer fully reflect the current situation. More recently, Zajdel et al. [2024] received six responses from describers in Hong Kong, but without a country-specific breakdown, their data only confirms that describers are active in this part of the Chinese-speaking world. Compared to other studies cited, their sample size was very limited, which restricts the generalizability of their findings.

In this article, we present partial findings from a more extensive study aimed at illuminating the landscape of the profession of audio describers in Mainland China. This article focuses on describers' profiles and professional practices, offering insight into the evolving landscape of AD in the region. In our data analysis, we refer to the previous findings of Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost [2020] to identify potential differences stemming from the development of AD provision and the broader geographical distribution of participants. We also discuss our findings in conjunction with the results reported by Perego [2022] and Zajdel et al. [2024]. This comparative examination aims to elucidate potential disparities between describers from the West and their counterparts from Mainland China,

taking into account the varied economic, political, and cultural contexts within which they operate.

2. Audio description in Mainland China

The development of AD services in Mainland China, while at a different stage than in Western countries, mirrors the Western trajectory in many ways. Although AD is not explicitly mandated by law [Liu 2023b], some national and regional legislation promotes accessibility [Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost 2020]. The growth of AD in Mainland China is largely driven by grassroots volunteers, user associations, non-profit organizations, and university initiatives [Liu 2023b; Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost 2020; Zhao and Li 2021].

AD services in Mainland China began with films, relying on live narration due to financial and copyright barriers. In 2003, the China Braille Press started narrating films every weekend as part of an online education program [Ma 2016]. In 2005, Wang Weili and Zheng Xiaojie founded Xinmu Cinema (xinmuyingyuan 心目影院) in Beijing, initially volunteering to screen and provide live narrations for films in a small 20-square-meter space [Liu 2023a]. By December 2023, Xinmu Cinema had expanded its reach to multiple cities in Mainland China with the support of thousands of volunteers, screening 1,200 films and benefiting more than 54,000 individuals.

Around 2010, many public libraries in China began offering live AD. In December 2012, the Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province launched the Feeling Images through Your Heart Program (xinlingganying 心聆感影), now offering live film, museum tours, training, and seminars [Sun Yat-sen Library 2023]. Similarly, the Guangzhou Library began its AD practice in 2009, starting with film screenings and expanding to TV, exhibitions, illustrated books, and museum tours [Lu 2020]. The Shenzhen Library has also provided live film narration since 2009 and has ventured into offering AD services for static painting exhibitions post-2019 [Chen 2020]. In 2011, the China Braille Library in Beijing established an AD department to consistently offer live film AD service weekly [Carroggio and Vercauteren 2020].

Live AD remains common, but recorded AD is becoming increasingly popular. On April 23, 2009, Mainland China showcased its first recorded AD film, *Turning Point 1977* (gaokao 高考1977), at the Shanghai Library, attracting 400 visually impaired attendees [Zeng 2012]. This event

coincided with the launch of the first barrier-free film studio, established by the Shanghai Disabled Persons' Association, the Shanghai Library, and the Shanghai Film Critics Association. Led by Jiang Hongyuan, the studio produces AD-equipped DVDs and offers lending and screening services for the visually impaired [Ma 2020]. In 2011, the project received support from the National Publishing Fund and was selected as a key audiovisual publishing project under the "12th Five-Year Plan," helping to promote barrier-free films nationwide [Pan and Li 2013]. In 2012, the Shanghai Cathay Theatre began monthly free screenings, a model that has expanded to 17 cinemas across Shanghai, offering over 650 shows and reaching more than 60,000 people by 2017 [Qu and Wang 2017].

In 2014, the China Braille Press launched the China Barrier-free Film and Audiovisual Publication Project (zhongguowuzhangaidianyingyinxiangchubangongcheng 中国无障碍电影音像出版工程). Since then, it has produced and distributed 590 barrier-free films for deafblind users in DVD and digital formats, supplying libraries and schools for the blind [Wang 2021]. In February 2016, Han Ying, an individual with acquired blindness, founded Shanghai Sound of Light (guangyingzhisheng 光影之声) with support from the Shanghai Disabled Persons' Association. This nonprofit AD organization recruits volunteers to produce around 50 AD films annually for local community screenings. To maintain quality, Sound of Light organizes annual seminars to share practices and improve production standards [Liu 2023a; Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost 2020].

Chinese university students have also played a key role. In late 2017, the Communication University of China (CUC) in Beijing launched the Ever-Shining Cinema Project (guangmingyingyuan 光明影院) in collaboration with Beijing Gehua Cable TV Network Co., Ltd. and Dongfang Jiaying TV Cinema Media Co., Ltd. Over five years, more than 800 student volunteers produced 700 AD films and two TV dramas, hosting screenings in 32 provinces, municipalities, autonomous regions, and Macao. These digital productions were also distributed to 2,244 special education schools nationwide. At the end of 2022, an on-demand module was launched on cable TV, reaching over 200 million households [Gao and Chen 2019; Zhao and Li 2021].

3. Methodology

We conducted an online survey using a questionnaire adapted from Zajdel et al. [2024], adjusting some questions to fit the Chinese context. Due to space limitations, a detailed discussion of all changes cannot be provided, but the full questionnaire is available in the open repository Zenodo [Jia *et al.* 2024]. However, we highlight the most significant adaptations, such as adding a "volunteer" category in the background information section. This addition addresses a key difference from Europe, where audio describers are more often paid professionals [Perego 2022]. Focusing only on paid or self-employed describers would overlook the major role of volunteers in China's AD scene. In the job titles section, we also included terms like "accessible filmmaker" (wuzhangdianyingzhizuozhe 无障碍电影制作者), reflecting the local practice, as in Mainland China, the term "accessible film" (wuzhangaidianying 无障碍电影) is often used interchangeably with "audio description" [Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost 2020].

The adapted questionnaire was translated[1] into simplified Chinese and tested through cognitive interviews with five audio describers from Mainland China. It was then uploaded onto the Qualtrics survey platform and pilot-tested with practicing audio describers. The final version included 36 closed-ended and two open-ended questions, organized into four sections: background information, working conditions, professional image, and job satisfaction. It was later translated into traditional Chinese for describers in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan[2].

We distributed the questionnaire through a targeted social media campaign, sharing the survey link and QR code via posters on the LinkedIn, X, and WeChat[3] accounts of our team members and research group. We also contacted potential participants by email, using contact lists from AD associations such as the Audio Description Association (Hong Kong) and Space for Acting (Macao). The study was approved by the Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities (SHW_2022_32_1).

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[1] All translations were done by the research team, including three native Chinese speakers, two of whom are trained translators proficient in both simplified and traditional Chinese.

[2] The survey was conducted in both traditional and simplified Chinese to reach participants from Mainland China, Macao, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, promoting accessibility and broader participation.

[3] WeChat is a messaging, social media, and payment app with over 1 billion users from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.

Data collection took place between May and October 2023, yielding 385 responses. In this paper, we focus on the 223 fully completed questionnaires from Mainland China (144 incomplete responses were discarded). Although we also collected responses from Hong Kong (10 responses), Macao (5 responses), and Taiwan (3 responses), we excluded them from the current analysis for two reasons: the large number of responses from Mainland China could overshadow insights from these smaller groups, and the low number of responses from each region prevents reliable quantitative analysis. We plan to present findings from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan in a separate, more qualitative article, as their perspectives can offer valuable new insights into this under-researched area.

For data analysis, we transferred the dataset into SPSS 29 to perform descriptive statistics. Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole or half number to improve clarity and readability. When totals exceeded 100%, the largest percentage was adjusted for consistency. In questions allowing multiple responses, we reported the number of responses, the percentage of responses, and the percentage of respondents, providing a more comprehensive view of response patterns and participant choices. During data processing, we identified seven participants who self-identified as blind or visually impaired in the voluntary commentary section, as this was not directly asked in the survey. This finding is noteworthy, as it reflects recent Western initiatives to involve visually impaired individuals in the AD creation process [Hirvonen *et al.* 2023; Romero-Fresco 2018]. While their responses are included in the main dataset, we also discuss them separately to highlight this unique subgroup. In these discussions, we report the number of responses for each question and do not conduct statistical analyses.

This study has several limitations. Although the sample size of 223 respondents is unprecedented, the scope could have been broader. In some provinces, we identified describers online but were unable to establish personal contact with them, mainly because of outdated contact details, low public visibility, or non-responsiveness to outreach efforts. The uneven regional distribution of responses—partly due to limitations in the researchers' networks—may affect the data's representativeness. In addition, the first author's background may have influenced the sample. As a journalist and active member of the describers' community in Beijing, involved in AD training and accessible events, the first author's professional connections may have led to an overrepresentation of describers

from Beijing and surrounding areas. This network bias could also have influenced the educational background and age profile of the respondents, as those connected to formal training initiatives may differ from describers working independently or in less connected regions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Demographic background

As depicted in Figure 1, which maps the locations of all respondents (n=223), participants are spread across China, including in some less developed western regions. This widespread presence can indicate the growing popularity of AD throughout Mainland China. Participants were unevenly distributed, with most based in Beijing (117), Shanghai (27), and Guangdong (26), China's most developed regions. The predominance of Beijing possibly reflects the uneven development of AD but could also be influenced by the research team's ties to the city. A similar pattern is seen among the seven visually impaired respondents, with three from Shanghai, two from Guangdong, and one from Tianjin and Henan.

Figure 1. Locations of all participants on a map of Mainland China (n=223)

Gender distribution among respondents shows a strong prevalence of female audio describers, who make up 72% of the sample (see Table 1). Among respondents with visual impairments, however, the pattern is reversed, with five males and two females. The age distribution (see Table 2) highlights another notable trend: in Mainland China, describers are predominantly young, with 62.5% aged 18–25 and 18.5% aged 26–35. This contrasts with previous findings [Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost 2020), where over half of the describers were aged 31–40. Our data suggest a clear shift toward younger age groups, likely driven by the rise in AD volunteering among university students. Mainland Chinese describers also appear significantly younger than their European counterparts, who are mostly aged 30–60, with an average age of 45.5 years [Perego 2022].

Table 1. Gender distribution of respondents

	Gender	**Number of participants**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=223)	Female	161	72%
	Male	57	25.5%
	Non-binary	2	1%
	Prefer not to say	3	1.5%
Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	Female	2	–
	Male	5	–

Table 2. Age demographics of respondents

	Age	**Number of participants**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=223)	18-25	140	62.5%
	26-35	41	18.5%
	36-45	18	8%
	46-55	21	9.5%
	56-65	1	0.5%
	<66	2	1%

Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	18-25	4	–
	26-35	–	–
	36-45	2	–
	46-55	–	–
	56-65	–	–
	<66	1	–

4.2. Professional background

4.2.1. Education

As shown in Table 3, 93.5% of respondents hold a bachelor's degree or higher, similar to the 96% reported by Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost [2020]. This aligns with earlier findings indicating describers are generally highly educated. Compared to 68% in the West [Zajdel *et al.* 2024], the education level in Mainland China is notably higher. This trend might result from the current situation, where the AD profession is not yet well established, and university-led initiatives are at the forefront of AD development.

Table 3. Educational levels of respondents

	Educational level	**Number of participants**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=223)	Primary	1	0.5%
	High school	3	1.5%
	Vocational	10	4.5%
	BA/BSc	102	45.5%
	MA/MSc	85	38%
	PhD	22	10%
Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	Primary	1	–
	High school	–	–
	Vocational	2	–
	BA/BSc	4	–
	MA/MSc	–	–
	PhD	–	–

As in the West [Zajdel *et al.* 2024], most respondents studied arts and humanities, with 32.5% reporting multiple fields. A majority (57%) specialized in journalism or media studies—double the 28% found by Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost [2020], likely due to the first author's network. Other notable areas included literature (15.5%), film and TV (15%), and linguistics (10.5%). Visually impaired respondents also had varied, often multiple, backgrounds. A particularly interesting difference is that of background in translation. In Europe, 17% of describers have studied translation [Zajdel *et al.* 2024], as media accessibility is often taught within translation programs. In contrast, only 6% of Chinese respondents reported such a background, echoing Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost [2020], where just one out of 53 did. This distinction may help explain differences in AD practices, including content selection, scriptwriting, and voicing.

Table 4. Educational backgrounds

	Field	**Number of responses**	**Percentage of responses**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=223) All responses (n=320)	Journalism or media studies	127	40%	57%
	Literature	35	11%	15.5%
	Film and TV studies	34	10.5%	15%
	Broadcasting and hosting	33	10.5%	15%
	Language and linguistics	23	7%	10.5%
	Translation	13	4%	6%
	Science	7	2%	3%
	Psychology	6	2%	2.5%
	Computer science & IT	5	1.5%	2%
	Theater studies	2	0.5%	1%
	Other	35	11%	15.5%

Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	Computer and IT	2	–	–
	Science	2	–	–
	Journalism or media studies	1	–	–
	Psychology	2	–	–
	Broadcasting and hosting	2	–	–
	Theatre studies	–	–	–
	Film and TV studies	1	–	–
	Translation	–	–	–
	Literature	2	–	–
	Language and linguistics	1	–	–
	Other	4	–	–

4.2.2. Training

We looked into how describers entered the profession. Most respondents (74.5%) had received training, double the 36% reported in 2020 [Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost 2020]. While still lower than the 87% in the West [Zajdel *et al.* 2024], the increase points to a trend toward greater professionalization and attention to quality.

Table 5. Participation in training

	Training	**Number of participants**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=223)	Yes	166	74.5%
	No	57	26.5%
Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	Yes	5	–
	No	2	–

Table 6 outlines the forms of training received by respondents, showing a wide range of approaches. Workshops were the most common form of training, selected by 62.5% of participants. In-house training and university courses were also frequent, while vocational courses, internships, and one-to-one instruction were much less common. Some respondents also mentioned alternative formats, such as lectures, university projects, and

volunteer team activities. Among respondents with visual impairments, most reported having received training, with a notable preference for online courses.

Table 6. Training type

	Training type	**Number of responses**	**Percentage of responses**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants who had training (n=166) All responses (n=283)	Workshop	104	36%	62.5%
	Vocational course	8	3%	5%
	University course	47	16.5%	28.5%
	Internship	15	5.5%	9%
	In-house training	59	21%	35.5%
	One-to-one instruction	15	5.5%	9%
	Online course	22	8%	13.5%
	Other	13	4.5%	8%
Participants with visual impairment who had training(n=5)	Workshop	2	–	–
	Vocational course	0	–	–
	University course	0	–	–
	Internship	1	–	–
	In-house training	1	–	–
	One-to-one instruction	0	–	–
	Online course	3	–	–
	Other	2	–	–

Given the pathways into the profession and their educational background, we examined how describers perceive their professional roles (see Table 7). Many respondents selected multiple titles, suggesting a fluid or multidimensional identity. “Accessible filmmaker” (*wuzhangaidianying zhizuozhe* 无障碍电影制作者) emerged as the most popular title, chosen by two-thirds of respondents, while the standard term “audio describer” (*koushu yingxiang yuan* 口述影像员) was far less common. Other frequently selected titles included “AD scriptwriter” (*koushu yingxiang*

zhuangaoyuan 口述影像撰稿员), "narrator" (*jiangshuyuan* 讲述员), and "commentator" (*jieshuoyuan* 解说员). Among visually impaired describers, "commentator," "accessible filmmaker," and "AD scriptwriter" were the most common choices. Some also described themselves as "AD trainer" (*koushu yingxiang peixunshi* 口述影像培训师), "AD consultant" (*koushu yingxiang guwen* 口述影像顾问), or "accessible entertainment industry practitioner" (*wuzhangai wenyu congyezhe* 无障碍文娱从业者). Visually impaired describers mainly identified as "commentator," "accessible filmmaker," or "AD scriptwriter," and some used titles like "AD trainer" (*koushu yingxiang peixunshi* 口述影像培训师) or "AD consultant" (*koushu yingxiang guwen* 口述影像顾问).

Table 7. Job titles used

	Job title	**Number of responses**	**Percentage of responses**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=223) All responses (n=343)	AD Scriptwriter	61	18%	27.5%
	Audio Describer	31	9%	14%
	Narrator	42	12%	19%
	Commentator	39	11.5%	17.5%
	Accessible Filmmaker	150	43.5%	67.5%
	Interpreter	6	1.5%	2.5%
	Other	14	4%	6.5%
Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	AD Scriptwriter	3	–	–
	Audio Describer	2	–	–
	Narrator	1	–	–
	Commentator	4	–	–
	Accessible Filmmaker	3	–	–
	Interpreter	1	–	–
	Other	3	–	–

In terms of self-identity, the respondents in our study once again diverge from their Western counterparts. As the development of AD in Mainland China is mainly film-based, "Accessible Filmmaker" (wuzhangaidianyingzhizuozhe 无障碍电影制作者) emerges as the most widely used job title. However, no consensus as respondents prefer several other job titles to AD practitioners based on their professional experience and educational background. There will probably be a long debate for Chinese describers to agree on how to call themselves alongside the AD professionalization process.

4.3. Professional practices

4.3.1. Experience and Employment

Given the lack of official recognition of the audio describer profession and the absence of AD legislation in Mainland China, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of respondents (88.5%) are volunteers (see Table 8). This marks a clear increase from the 71.7% reported by Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost [2020], reflecting the growth of volunteer-driven initiatives over the past five years. Only a small share of respondents reported being employed or working freelance. Among visually impaired describers, most are also engaged in voluntary work.

Table 8. Employment status

	Employment status	**Number of participants**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=223)	Paid: employed	9	4%
	Paid: freelancer	17	7.5%
	Not paid: volunteer	197	88.5%
Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	Paid: employed	2	–
	Paid: freelancer	–	–
	Not paid: volunteer	5	–

This landscape differs significantly from Europe, where most describers (89%) are paid, with only a small share receiving nominal compensation or working voluntarily [Perego 2022]. This points to a more mature development of the profession in Europe. However, one similarity emerges:

freelancing remains the most common form of employment among paid describers. Data from Mainland China align with findings by Zajdel et al. [2024], who reported that freelancers made up 82% of describers and employed describers at 18%.

Regarding professional experience in AD (see Table 9), only a small number of respondents (2.5%) reported having more than 11 years of experience. This suggests that while the tradition of AD in Mainland China is longer than often assumed, the profession is still in its early stages. Most respondents (over 90%) have less than five years of experience. Among visually impaired describers, one participant reported over 15 years of experience, while others had between one and ten years.

Table 9. Years of professional experience

	Years of experience	**Number of participants**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=223)	<1 year	71	32%
	1-5	133	59.5%
	6-10	14	6.5%
	11-15	4	2%
	<15	1	0.5%
Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	<1 year	–	–
	1-5	3	–
	6-10	3	–
	11-15	–	–
	<15	1	–

The results from Mainland China again contrast with Europe, where audio describers have an average of 8.3 years of experience [Perego 2022]. Zajdel et al. [2024] also found that 60% of Western describers have over five years of experience, compared to only 8.5% in Mainland China. This raises important questions about the long-term commitment of newcomers—whether their involvement in AD represents a sustained career trajectory or a temporary engagement linked to their studies. The lack of stable remuneration and formal employment pathways may further discourage long-term participation, reinforcing the risk that AD remains a transitional activity rather than a viable profession.

Regarding the types of AD respondents engage in (see Table 10), film clearly dominates in Mainland China, with 92.5% of participants indicating this medium. Television and live events follow at a much lower rate, while museums also attract some engagement. Theatre and opera remain marginal. These results align with Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost's [2020] findings, where film was also the primary focus. In addition to the predefined categories, some respondents mentioned working with photo exhibitions, animated films, advertisements, and intangible cultural heritage arts.

Table 10. Types of AD in which participants engage

	AD type	**Number of responses**	**Percentage of responses**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=223) All responses (n=326)	Film	206	63%	92.5%
	TV	41	12.5%	18.5%
	Live events	36	11%	16%
	Museum	22	6.5%	10%
	Theater	5	1.5%	2%
	Opera	1	0.5%	0.5%
	Other	15	4.5%	6.5%
Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	Film	6	–	
	TV	2	–	
	Theater	2	–	
	Live events	4	–	
	Museum	3	–	
	Opera	–	–	
	Other	3	–	

When compared to Zajdel et al. [2024], our findings similarly show film as the dominant medium (83% in their study). However, Zajdel et al. [2024] reported a much stronger specialization in theatre (38%) and opera (15%), which suggests a more advanced stage of AD development in the Western context compared to Mainland China.

4.3.2. Workflows

Regarding the stages of the production process (see Table 11), most respondents in Mainland China are involved in scriptwriting (87%), while 58.5% engage in voicing. Around one-third participate in recording and post-production, and half are involved in quality control. Translation remains the least common task, with 10% of respondents reporting this experience. Among visually impaired describers, most are involved in scriptwriting, voicing, and post-production, with all participating in quality control. Their broad engagement across different stages highlights strong digital skills and a valuable contribution to improving the final product.

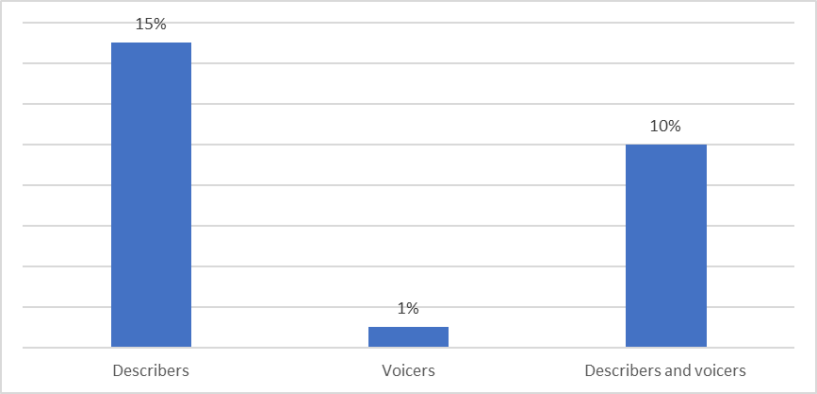
Table 11. Stages of the audio description process

	Stage	**Number of responses**	**Percentage of responses**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=223) All responses (n=634)	Script writing and/or revising	194	30.5%	87%
	Script translation	22	3.5%	10%
	Voicing	130	20.5%	58.5%
	Assisting in recording	83	13%	37%
	Mixing	80	12.5%	36%
	Quality control (script and/or audio)	113	18%	50.5%
	Other	12	2%	5.5%
Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	Script writing and/or revising	3	–	
	Script translation	1	–	
	Voicing	4	–	
	Assisting in recording	3	–	
	Mixing	4	–	
	Quality control (script and/or audio)	7	–	
	Other	4	–	

As mentioned earlier, audio describers are mainly responsible for writing and sometimes voicing scripts. However, these roles often overlap

depending on national practices. As shown in Figure 2, only 15% of respondents focus solely on scriptwriting, 1% exclusively on voicing, and 10% combine both roles. This suggests that audio describers in Mainland China tend to take on multiple tasks, similar to previous findings [Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost 2020].

FIGURE 2. Single and multifaceted tasks mainland respondents involved (n=223)



For visually impaired describers, three are involved in scriptwriting, while four are involved in voicing. Of the three who write scripts, one respondent participates in every production stage, and two serve as both scriptwriters and voice talents. their involvement in post-production is as high as four out of seven, showing this group's high digital literacy and skills. All visually impaired participants participate in the quality assessment stage of the process, reflecting their valuable perspective in enhancing and optimizing the end product.

Compared to Mainland China, Zajdel et al. [2024] report that 100% of audio describers are involved in scriptwriting and 17% in translation, but only 25% participate in post-production. Other aspects of AD work show similar patterns across both regions. A key difference lies in task specialization: in the West, describers usually focus on separate tasks, while in Mainland China, they often handle multiple stages of production. This may reflect the educational backgrounds of Chinese describers, many of whom have journalism, communication, or broadcasting degrees, equipping them

with the skills to handle multiple facets of AD work. Financial and staffing constraints may further encourage this integrated approach. Cultural differences also play a role, as Western workplaces emphasize clear role separation [Hofstede 2001], whereas in China and other Asian contexts, job responsibilities often expand beyond formal descriptions at a superior's discretion.

4.3.3. Scripting language

Regarding the scripting language used by respondents (see Table 12), 96% work in simplified Chinese, while none use traditional Chinese. A small group (2%) scripts in English, and three respondents mentioned using Cantonese. Among the five scripting in English, two are involved in museum AD and three in film or television, with one also describing geoparks. This suggests that English is used to enhance accessibility for international visitors. Informal conversations also indicate that some describers create English AD for international streaming platforms.

Table 12. Audio description language

	Language	**Number of participants**	**Percentage of participants**
All participants (n=222)	English	5	2%
	Simplified Chinese	214	96%
	Traditional Chinese	–	–
	Other	3	1.5%
Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	English	–	–
	Simplified Chinese	6	–
	Traditional Chinese	–	–
	Other	1	–

4.3.4. Clients

Considering the audience base, it is not surprising that most describers in Mainland China (93%) work exclusively for domestic clients (see Table 13). One respondent reported working only for international clients, while 6.5% work with both. Among visually impaired describers, most serve domestic clients, with one also working internationally.

Table 13. Type of clients

	Client	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
All participants (n=223)	National	208	93%
	International	1	0.5%
	Both	14	6.5%
Participants with visual impairment (n=7)	National	6	–
	International	–	–
	Both	1	–

5. Conclusions

This study offers the first large-scale mapping of the professional landscape of AD in Mainland China. Based on a unique dataset of 223 fully completed questionnaires, our findings show that while AD provision has expanded significantly, it remains strongly volunteer-driven, loosely structured, and closely tied to the film sector. Describers are overwhelmingly young, highly educated, and shaped by media and journalism backgrounds, with "accessible filmmaker" emerging as the dominant self-identification.

Compared to the Western context, the Mainland Chinese AD sector presents a peculiar development path. While Western models are marked by clearer role specialization and professional recognition, Chinese describers often combine multiple tasks across the production process, reflecting both educational training and resource constraints. In addition, the primary reliance on domestic clients and the use of simplified Chinese point to the current localized character of AD provision.

At the same time, recent legislative changes, including the ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty and the passing of the Barrier-Free Environment Creation Law, suggest a gradual shift towards more formalized support for accessibility services. Whether this will trigger a broader transformation of the AD profession remains an open question.

Our findings also lay the groundwork for future research. Two forthcoming studies build on this survey: one explores job satisfaction and working conditions among audio describers, offering deeper insight into career sustainability; the other provides a bibliometric analysis of AD research in China, showing rapid growth in two parallel academic streams: communication studies and translation studies. This dual-track

development mirrors the hybrid nature of AD practice in Mainland China, situated between media production and linguistic mediation.

Research on AD should also extend to Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the AD landscape across the Chinese-speaking regions. Our preliminary data already suggest that AD practices in these areas differ from those in Mainland China, warranting a dedicated investigation. Additionally, replicating this study in the future would offer valuable insights into the historical evolution of AD development across Mainland China, helping to capture the dynamics of professionalization over time. Taken together, these findings suggest that Mainland China may serve as a laboratory for alternative models of AD professionalization, shaped by distinct cultural, educational, and socio-economic dynamics. Understanding these evolving models is crucial not only for supporting accessibility within China but also for broadening global perspectives on how accessibility professions can emerge and consolidate under diverse conditions.

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Abstract

Over the past decade, audio description (AD) practice has grown across Mainland China despite the absence of explicit legal mandates. Volunteer movements have helped expand AD services and shape the profession of audio describers. However, our understanding of this profession in this region remains limited. This paper aims to address this gap by reporting on the results of a questionnaire answered by 223 describers. The findings highlight a notable growth in the profession, characterized by a predominantly young demographic profile and a practice driven largely by volunteers. We confirm earlier research [Tor Carroggio and Casas-Tost: 2020; Liu: 2023a] on the distinct professional identity of describers in Mainland

China. Many of them, trained in journalism/media studies, identify as "accessible filmmakers" rather than "audio describers." Moreover, our study reveals differences in professional practices. Chinese describers are involved in a wide range of tasks, which contrasts with the more specialized, single-task roles typically found in the Western world.

Keywords: Audio describers, China, media accessibility, professional profiles, survey study.