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Tamara Jacka^a

^a The Australian National University

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Left-behind and Vulnerable? Conceptualising Development and Older Women's Agency in Rural China

TAMARA JACKA*

The Australian National University

Abstract: *Concern has been growing recently in China about the well-being of children, women and the elderly “left behind” on the farm when family members leave the village in search of waged work. Increasingly, the left-behind are portrayed in academic and policy discourse as a “vulnerable group” of passive dependants, sidelined by modernisation and abandoned by their families. This paper challenges this discourse, arguing that while attention to the well-being of the left-behind is vital, there is an urgent need for a shift in focus from their vulnerability to their agency. The paper focuses on the agency of left-behind women between the ages of 50 and 80. It aims, first of all, to point the way toward an empirically richer understanding of the social construction of older women's agency and well-being. The second aim of the paper is to suggest how different conceptualisations of “agency” and “older women” might contribute to more ethical and politically effective strategies for development and the improvement of women's well-being. To further these two aims, the paper draws on fieldwork conducted in rural Ningxia, north-western China, and on critiques of the “capability approach” to development expounded by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.*

Keywords: *agency, older women, rural China, the left-behind, vulnerable groups, capability approach, development*

In the last few decades, policymaking and scholarship relating to development in China has been dominated by an urbanist teleology and a corresponding marginalisation of the countryside and the people “left behind” there when family members migrate out. Since the 1980s, growing rural-urban disparities, combined with a thirst among burgeoning capitalist enterprises for cheap, manual labour, have led to hundreds of

*Correspondence Address: Tamara.Jacka@anu.edu.au

millions of rural workers moving off the land and out of the countryside, toward urban centres and export-oriented industrial processing zones. All the same, migrants constitute only a minority of the rural population. Most are young and middle-aged men and young, single women, who leave family members in the village and return months or years later. Until the early twenty-first century, however, little attention was paid to those back on the farm. All eyes were on the young migrants. The left-behind were referred to disparagingly as the “386199” or “women-children-elderly” work team, the numbers referring respectively to 8 March, International Women’s Day, 1 June, Children’s Day, and 9 September, which is a traditional festival often referred to as Seniors’ Day (*laoren jie*). The supposed “low quality” (*suzhi di*) of the 386199 work team was seen to be causing declines in rural economic growth (see, for example, Guo, 2008). The problems faced by rural women, children and the elderly themselves were rarely accorded attention by policymakers or scholars, either inside or outside China, until the twenty-first century.

Since then, however, there has been a shift in Chinese state discourse and the emergence of policy oriented toward achieving a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*), “people-centred” (*yi ren wei ben*) development and “construction of the new countryside” (*xin nongcun jianshe*). These initiatives have partly been a reaction to the growth in social unrest and protest generated as a response to huge and increasing rural-urban inequalities and rural disadvantage, but they are also driven by the belief that the next stage of capitalist growth will require a boost in domestic – especially rural – consumption. Consequently, the state has begun focusing less on how to extract capital accumulation from agriculture and more on ways to “give back” to the rural population and improve their incomes, buying power, living standards and quality of life.

Against this backdrop, since the mid-2000s a new scholarly literature has emerged about the difficulties and lack of welfare faced by the 386199 work team, now given the less obviously derogatory tag “left-behind” (*liushou*) women, children and the elderly. This literature is sympathetic to the left-behind and gravely concerned about their situation, but it does not overturn the urbanist telos: a telos that is at once also ageist and sexist. The agents of development continue to be perceived primarily as young men and women heading for the city. Left-behind women, children and the elderly are depicted not as agents, but rather as “vulnerable groups” (*ruoshi qunti*) who suffer insecurity, stress, loneliness, depression and ill-health as a result of their abandonment. As one leading researcher of left-behind women puts it:

With ever increasing numbers of male labourers leaving the countryside for work in the city, the problem of the left-behind woman has attracted growing concern from society... As a vulnerable group, [left-behind women] ... face security issues and bear a heavy physical and psychological burden. Consequently, the academic community has an important responsibility to strengthen research on this vulnerable social group, and to propose reliable and feasible measures to address their predicament (Xu, 2009, p. 55; see also Xu, 2010; Ye and Lu, 2011; Ye and He, 2008; Li and He, 2010).

One left-behind “vulnerable group” – the rural elderly – has become the object of particular concern, largely because the image of the elderly person as being frail and dependent on others is so strong, and because population control policies have

contributed to a rapidly ageing population, such that the proportion of the population aged over 60 is predicted to rise from 10 per cent in 2006 to around 30 per cent in 2050 (UNFPA, 2006, p. 3). The fact that the majority of elderly people live in rural areas where they have extremely limited access to pensions or other state support, combined with the perception that the exodus of young people from the countryside is threatening family support for the elderly, is resulting in a pervasive sense of crisis in elderly care.

This paper runs against the grain of recent elite discourse on the vulnerability of the left-behind. It draws on qualitative and quantitative fieldwork research conducted in Snow County (a pseudonym), a poor rural county in Ningxia, north-western China, and focuses on left-behind women's exercise of agency and the contributions they make to development. I am particularly interested in the agency and activities of women between the ages of about 50 and 80.¹ The paper is motivated by two concerns, both of which relate to the social construction of (lack of) agency. On the one hand, the vulnerable group discourse reproduces a stereotype of left-behind older rural women as abandoned, dependent, passive and weak; unable to look after themselves, let alone make a contribution to development. Like all stereotypes, there is a grain of truth here – some women, especially those who have been incapacitated by illness or extreme old age, do fit this picture, but as a general description of older left-behind women, it is empirically inaccurate and misleading. The first aim of this paper is, then, to highlight the gaps between elite vulnerable group discourse and the realities of most older women's lives in Snow County. On the other hand, elite discourse can play a powerful part in the social construction of development. In the case of the vulnerable group discourse, this may be a problem. The term "vulnerable group" was first promoted in the 1980s by the Commonwealth Expert Group on Women and Structural Adjustment in an effort to draw attention to the harm done to women and other disadvantaged groups by the World Bank's structural adjustment policies (Parpart, 1995, p. 228). Since then it has been taken up by the United Nations (UN) and its agencies and by activists everywhere, the rationale being that an emphasis on the vulnerability and neediness of a group can help to strengthen that group's claim to resources. As Jane Parpart notes, however, one effect has been a further entrenchment of a divide between First World, modern "experts" and Third World pre-modern, helpless female "victims" (Parpart, 1995, p. 229).

I argue that even as a short-term strategy for gaining resources, emphasising vulnerability is politically dangerous. Rather than leading to a more equal distribution of the resources needed for well-being, such a strategy risks inviting individualised, paternalistic welfare benefits that are likely to lead to a loss of self-esteem and an increase of passivity in recipients. Such welfare benefits may reinforce a perception that recipients are a costly burden, and generate a widespread sense that, rather than being enhanced, social support for such people should be kept to a minimum.² The second aim of this paper, then, is to highlight the potentially limiting effects of the vulnerable group discourse on left-behind older women, and to suggest how different conceptualisations of "agency" and "older women" might contribute to more desirable forms of development. To further these two aims, the paper draws on and critiques the "capability approach" to well-being and development expounded by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. This approach provides a broad, normative framework for conceptualising, evaluating and assessing individuals' well-being and social arrangements and policies relating to well-being and development (Robeyns, 2005, p. 94). Sen and Nussbaum reject

understandings of “well-being” that emphasise economic growth, income, consumption or living standards, and those that concentrate on people’s happiness or desire-fulfilment. Instead, they argue that an individual’s well-being should be assessed in terms of her achievement of “functionings”, defined as the ways of “being and doing” that she has reason to value, and her “capabilities”: that is, the potential and opportunities she has for achieving “functionings” (Sen, 1984; Robeyns, 2005). Nussbaum and Sen equate well-being, broadly speaking, with “human flourishing” and “a life worthy of human dignity”. Both see a close connection between dignity and agency. Nussbaum writes, for example, that “human dignity, from the start, is equal in all who are agents in the first place” and that “in a wide range of areas, ... a focus on dignity will dictate policy choices that protect and support agency, rather than choices that infantilise people and treat them as passive recipients of benefit” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 30). Agency here is understood as the ability and power to identify and choose goals and act upon those choices. It is an important functioning in its own right, as well as being necessary for the achievement of many, though not all, other functionings (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438; Sen, 1984).³

The capability approach is useful, first of all, because it pulls together several important ideas from the work of feminists and others coming out of and critiquing liberal political philosophy. Secondly, Sen’s version of the approach forms the theoretical underpinning of the UN’s advocacy of human development and its human development index, and as a consequence, has already become highly influential globally, including in China. There, the government’s new discourse on “people-centred development” has been partially inspired or at any rate legitimised by the UN’s human development discourse, as well as by the Confucian ideal of “(the good of) the people as the foundation (for governance)” (*minben*) (Jacka and Sargeson, 2011, p. 6). In this paper, therefore, I take the capability approach and critique of that approach as my theoretical starting point, in the hope that in so doing I might contribute to efforts to add value to “people-centred” development discourse.

Nussbaum (e.g. 2011, pp. 2–14) has used stories about individuals to shift attention from economic growth to human dignity and agency. In the next part of this paper I follow Nussbaum’s example by recounting a story about a 63 year-old woman in Snow County, Yang Yulan.⁴ In terms of vulnerability and agency, Yang is, as I will show, typical of left-behind older women in this area. The remainder of the paper draws on Yang’s story to challenge the notion that such women are a vulnerable group, to highlight their activities and agency, and to explore both the potential benefits and limitations of a capability approach to development that seeks to expand the agency and capabilities of older rural women, such as Yang, as opposed to dwelling on their vulnerability.

Yang Yulan’s Story⁵

Yang Yulan lives in a village in the mountains, about 2,900m above sea level. She has two adult sons and two adult daughters, all of them married with children of their own. She and her husband, Li Jianguo, share a courtyard housing compound with their youngest son, Hou Yinshi, his wife Zhang Zhaoxiong, and their 2 year-old son. Yang’s older

son and his wife and two young children have set up a separate household in another courtyard next door. Her daughters married into two different villages nearby.

Yang and her husband and Hou and his family share the same budget and eat together when they are at home, but Hou spends most of the year away from home. He works in Guyuan, a town two hours' drive away, for about seven months each year, coming home in July for the wheat harvest and again for the New Year festival in January, and staying through till April to help with the ploughing and crop planting. When they first married, Zhang was also a migrant worker, but since she gave birth, she has mostly stayed at home with her son. Twice she has left her son with Yang for a few months, so that she could find casual work in Guyuan. She also visits her own parents for a few days each month, sometimes taking her son and otherwise leaving him with Yang. Later this year, she plans to join her husband in Guyuan and from then on to stay there for most of each year, leaving her son in Yang's care.

Both Yang and her husband, Li, are in poor health. Yang has suffered from daily back pain, stomach pains, headaches and dizziness for several years and for the last three years arthritis has been giving her pain in her hands and legs. She hasn't been to the doctor because she feels her problems are not serious enough to warrant the cost and bother. Despite her health problems, Yang does most of the cooking and shares the other housework and care of her grandson with Zhang, and she is the main farmer in the household. When the weather is fine, she usually works for a few hours in the fields. Li helps her, but usually works for a shorter period. He does most of the heavy work: ploughing, planting the wheat, potatoes and linseed, and harvesting the wheat. In this, he is helped by his younger brother, who lives in the same village, as well as by Yang and Li's sons. Yang harvests the potatoes, with help from her sons. Last year, her sister's two sons also helped her in return for some potatoes. In addition, Yang raises a couple of chickens and a pig. Soon they will kill the pig for the New Year festival. Until recently, she was also raising two cows, but she sold them because her worsening arthritis has made climbing the hills to cut grass for the cows every day too painful.

The wheat and linseed that Yang and Li grew last year will provide them with their staple diet for the next twelve months. Last August, Yang sold 1,000 yuan worth of potatoes, and earned nearly 2,000 yuan from selling the cows. She also grows onions and other vegetables in the courtyard, and sells them on a seasonal basis at the local township market. As a result, Yang and Li can partially cover their grandson's needs as well as their own, and as long as they do not incur any large hospital costs, they need little money from Hou and Zhang.

This is just as well, because Hou only earns a net cash income of a few thousand yuan a year, and is still paying back relatives for the 50,000 yuan he borrowed a few years ago to pay a bride price to Zhang's parents. For her part, Zhang is loath to give her parents-in-law any more money than is absolutely necessary. There is a great deal of conflict between Yang and Zhang. Yang says that her daughter-in-law complains bitterly about her marital family's poverty and refuses to eat with her because she's "dirty". Previously, Yang responded by threatening repeatedly that she and her husband would move out and live by themselves, leaving Zhang to do the farm work and look after her son on her own. Hou tells us he avoided calling home so that he wouldn't have to listen to his wife's complaints. But Yang has now stopped talking about moving out. Her sister has advised her to stay put and be more conciliatory, because as she gets older she will need more support from her daughter-in-law.

Challenging the View of Left-behind Older Women as Abandoned

Yang Yulan, like other older women in Snow County, has a hard life, but her difficulties are mainly caused by interrelated problems of poverty, ill-health and a lack of affordable medical care, gender inequalities and family conflict, rather than by being abandoned and lacking care or support. In fact, not only is she supported by her son and daughter-in-law, however grudgingly, she and her husband are able to draw on extensive kin networks for help with work and for emotional support. This is typical.

Living arrangements give some indication of the family support available to older women in Snow County. The vast majority of older women whom we surveyed belonged to households that also included other adults. Around 43 per cent lived with one or more sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren, with or without their husband. The rate of outmigration among household members was high. As shown in Table 1, 329, or 45.6 per cent, of older women lived in households in which one or more adults had worked away from home for six months or more of the preceding year.⁶ However, only 101 (14.0 per cent) had *all* other adult household members working away from home for six months or more.⁷ The well-being of the small number of older women living for most of the year alone or just with young children is of concern. Yet, most people have kin living close by, in the same village or a neighbouring village, and as illustrated in Yang's story, a great deal of mutual assistance occurs between such kin. Contrary to common concerns about an attenuation of kinship ties and abandonment of the elderly (Yan, 2003, pp. 162–89), various forms of interdependence and mutual aid between older people and their kin are alive and well in Snow County.

Challenging the View of Left-behind Older Women as Passive Dependants

Contrary to the stereotypical image of the elderly as being primarily “dependants”, the story above shows that Yang Yulan is an active, able worker who makes a major contribution to her family. In fact, her son and daughter-in-law are as dependent upon Yang as she is upon them. Across rural China, a large proportion of agriculture and care work is undertaken by older left-behind women. Their work is crucial to their families, because it provides food security, as well as maintaining usage rights to land, which are important as a fall-back position when migrants lose their waged jobs or

Table 1. Women's Living Arrangements during the Preceding Year (July 2009–July 2010)

Household Living Arrangements	Age Cohort (Years)			
	51–60	61–70	71–80	Total
Lived alone for entire period	1	4	1	7
One or more (but not all) other adult household members away from home for 6 months or more	175	101	53	329
All other adult household members away from home for 6 months or more	61	24	16	101
Other living arrangements	128	102	55	284
Total	365	231	125	721

Source: Author survey, Ningxia (2010).

become too ill or frail to continue working as waged labourers. The women also provide childcare services that are otherwise unavailable or too costly for rural families, and this enables younger adults in the family to seek employment away from the village, which can bring in more cash income.

Declines in physical health meant that some women in their 50s with whom we talked undertook much less work than Yang, but we also talked with one couple in their late 70s who continued to spend several hours a day tilling their fields. As shown in Table 2, on average among the women we surveyed the heaviest workloads were borne by those aged between 21 and 60, but the workloads of those over the age of 60 were also substantial.⁸

Many older women gain a great deal of respect, self-esteem and informal power within the family from their work. Yang Yulan, for example, is proud of the contribution she makes through her farm work and the childcare she provides, and derives considerable bargaining power from her son and daughter-in-law's dependence on this contribution.⁹ In addition, rural women, including older women, commonly have a greater say in decision-making than either they or their men folk usually care to admit. In Yang's household, her son made himself out to be the main decision-maker, but Zhang said that when her husband came home for the New Year festival, he handed over his earnings to her and she decided how much would go toward paying off debts, how much would be given to her parents-in-law and how much she would keep for herself. It was also clear that Yang had a large hand in deciding how much fertiliser to put on the crops and what proportion of the potato crop to sell each year, as well as deciding whether or not to sell their cattle. She also determined how to spend the money from that sale and controlled the money that she earned through the year from selling the vegetables she grew. I have insufficient data to be certain, but it is probable that Yang's agency has increased as a result of being "left-behind" in the sense that, in

Table 2. Women's Workloads: Mean Hours per Day, during the Preceding Month (June–July 2010)

Type of Work	Age Cohort (Years)					
	16–20 <i>N</i> =26	21–35 <i>N</i> =373	36–50 <i>N</i> =893	51–60 <i>N</i> =365	61–70 <i>N</i> =231	71–80 <i>N</i> =125
Crop farming	2.5	3.9	5.1	4.5	2.8	0.6
Animal husbandry	0.1	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.3
Waged work	0.6	0.4	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other income-earning work	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.0	0.0
Cooking	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.2	1.0
Childcare	0.2	2.6	0.6	0.9	1.0	0.7
Elderly care	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0
Washing clothes	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.2
Sweeping	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.3
Other domestic work	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Total	6.4	9.8	9.1	8.2	6.3	3.3

Source: Author survey, Ningxia (2010).

her son's absence from farm production, she has taken a greater role in making decisions in that area, as well as doing more of the work. This may also be the case for other left-behind older women.

In crucial ways, however, the agency of both Yang Yulan and her daughter-in-law, and that of other rural women in China, is severely constrained by the gendered nature of some of the key institutions shaping their everyday lives. This is illustrated by the story of Xie Fenzhu, another woman whom we interviewed in Snow County. Xie – just a few years younger than Yang – is the main farmer in her household, but has only a small cash income of her own. Her husband used to work as a construction labourer, and still earns some money doing casual work around the village. As the head of the household, he has an account with the local rural credit cooperative into which the government pays an allowance for farm land that the household relinquished for reforestation. When their adult children give their parents money, they give it to their father. Like the vast majority of women in Snow County, Xie has no bank account of her own and cannot take out a loan. In most cases, the rural credit cooperative lends money to the male head of a household, and only very rarely lends to women.¹⁰

Xie's husband beats her frequently and has caused serious injuries. On several occasions she and her adult daughters have asked village government leaders to stop her husband's violent behaviour, but the officials have usually said that they cannot intervene in a private family matter. Xie cannot pay to have her injuries treated and her husband refuses to pay for her. He has agreed to the divorce that Xie requested. But Xie feels that she cannot go through with it because that would leave her without any land to farm. Under the virilocal marriage system which dominates rural China, a woman's land usage-rights are vested in her husband's household after marriage. Following divorce, it is usual in most parts of rural China for the woman to lose rights to land in her husband's village, but not to regain such rights in her natal village.

Re-conceptualising Agency and Well-being among Left-behind Older Women

Why is it important for theories and strategies aimed at improving well-being among older left-behind women to recognise their agency and the importance of their contributions to society? What can be achieved by this discursive move and what are its limitations? The answers to these questions are connected to understandings about citizenship. Despite very different political histories, in contemporary China, as in Western liberal and neoliberal societies, key social institutions have been built upon an implicit social contract. Moreover, the post-socialist Chinese state, like Western liberal and neoliberal states, has been reproducing a hierarchical distinction between some people considered model citizens and parties to the social contract who “deserve” or “earn” respect, power, autonomy and social entitlements, and others considered less deserving. Broadly speaking, in today's China as in the West, the model citizen is an able-bodied male adult, who earns an independent income and contributes to society through employment or self-employment in “productive” work. Those who do not or cannot earn an income and contribute to society through paid work have been marginalised, disadvantaged and regarded as inferior because they are deemed to be “dependent”, “unproductive” and lacking in abilities and agency.

People seen to belong in this latter category are, first of all, commonly considered less suitable for political life, and therefore their power to shape social and political institutions in ways that might improve their own and others' well-being is constrained. Secondly, any social support they receive is commonly not considered an entitlement, but rather a form of "charity", welfare "handout" or special help or protection. As Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon write, a contract-versus-charity dichotomy can be seen in many contemporary Western countries in the opposition between social insurance and public assistance programs (Fraser and Gordon, 1992). Both forms of social provision, they point out, are financed through "contributions", differing only in terms of where and how these are collected – through sales taxes or wage deductions, for example. But advocates of social insurance programs designed them

to appear "contributory", seemingly embodying the principle of exchange; recipients, originally intended to be exclusively white, male, and relatively privileged members of the working class, are defined as "entitled". Public assistance, in contrast, continued the "noncontributory" charity tradition, so that its recipients appear to get something for nothing, in violation of contractual norms (Fraser and Gordon, 1992, p. 61).

Today in the US, public assistance or welfare is highly stigmatising and deprives people of autonomy. As Iris Young (2002, p. 46) puts it:

Those who need help and support from others do not deserve equal respect, nor can they expect to be able to decide how they will conduct their lives. If you are dependent, then those on whom you depend have some say over the goals you set for yourself and how you will enact them.

Several scholars have referred to a "social contract" in Maoist China, with the state providing a range of welfare entitlements to citizens in return for their political compliance (Tang and Parish, 2000, p. 3). Yet this was not a contract involving some citizens "earning" entitlements by "contributing" to society and excluding others who were not "productive" or did not "contribute". All citizens were organised into state or collective work units or rural collectives, and, in theory, the means of production was owned by "the people", and goods distributed evenly among them. In practice, of course, there were inequalities both between work units and collectives and within them, but these inequalities were not a matter of exclusion from a social contract, or of individuals being seen not to "deserve" entitlements or respect because they were not "productive".

In rural areas, older people benefited from collectivisation in three respects. First, production teams guaranteed remunerated work to all those who needed it and could contribute minimal labour. This meant a significant increase in economic security for older people who previously would have lost employment in competition with younger workers. Second, production teams distributed grain according to need as well as work. Each year, most teams first distributed 30–40 per cent of the harvest as subsistence grain to all team members, and only then divided the remainder, in the form of grain and cash, according to the number of workdays people had undertaken in collective labour. The cost of the grain distributed in the first phase was charged against the number of workdays earned by each household, but if a household was unable to pay for the grain they

needed, the charge could be carried over until they were able to pay. Of particular importance to the frail elderly who could no longer work, debts could be carried over for many years and were cancelled at death (Davis-Friedmann, 1991, pp. 19–20).

The third benefit of collectivisation for older people, especially women, relates to the fact that unlike younger adults who were required to work full time for the production team, men over the age of 60 and women over 50 in households with at least two other adults working for the team were allowed to “retire” to the private, “inside sphere” to do domestic work, grow vegetables on their household’s private plot and raise domestic livestock, which they could then sell for cash. Once they had grandchildren, most women withdrew from collective labour to work full time in the inside sphere. As remains the case today, the amount of work they did was often not recognised, but their contribution was nevertheless valued by other household members because it made it possible for daughters-in-law, in particular, to earn more by working longer hours for the production team. In addition, the work that older women, especially, put into tending the private plot and rearing a few domestic livestock commonly brought in a sizable amount of cash, amounting to 20–30 per cent of a household’s income (Davis-Friedmann, 1991, pp. 20–21).

In the 1980s, marketisation of the economy, destruction of the “iron rice bowl” of lifelong employment and welfare in urban work units, and the return to a household-based rural economy all contributed to rapid economic growth. However, they also led to heightened social inequalities, sharp declines in the provision of collective welfare and increases in the number of people without access to such welfare, and a greater reliance on families, and in particular, women’s unpaid care work, in place of social welfare provision. In rural areas, the status and well-being of older people, in particular, suffered with the removal of the “safety net” of collectively provided subsistence grain, as well as collectively-subsidised healthcare. In addition, older people’s (and women’s) ability to earn a cash income greatly diminished, due to heightened competition for the few opportunities for waged labour in and around the village, and because the profits to be earned from agriculture and agricultural sidelines, such as raising domestic livestock, declined sharply relative to the incomes to be earned in off-farm wage labour.

In the 1990s and 2000s, there have been improvements in the provision of social welfare by the state. Simultaneously, however, a dichotomy similar to that critiqued by Fraser and Gordon in the US has emerged in China between “noncontributory” welfare programs and “contributory” social insurance. With regard to the former, in the Maoist period, the urban “three withouts” (*sanwu*) and the rural “five guarantee household” (*wubaohu*) programs provided for the basic needs of a small number of destitute citizens without family support. Rural family values were such that to receive *wubaohu* payments was shameful, as it indicated a lack of descendants. The stigma may also have been associated with the fact that costs were borne by the local community – that is, the production team or brigade and its members. In the post-Mao period, the *wubaohu* program remains, but the “three withouts” program has been superseded by the means-tested minimum livelihood guarantee program (*dibao*), established in urban areas from the early 1990s and in rural areas from the mid-2000s. The *dibao* today is received by more people than the “three withouts” payments were previously, but still only by a small minority of the population. Furthermore, despite the fact that the programs are now funded by the state, receipt of *dibao*, as well as *wubaohu*, appears to be as stigmatising now as the *wubaohu* was previously. In Snow County in 2010–11,

some very poor households, including *dibao* recipients and non-recipients, were looked down upon by neighbours and local officials who saw their poverty as being caused by the laziness, incompetence and irresponsibility of household members. Some poor villagers complained, though, that they had been cheated out of *dibao* payments by corrupt local officials who had ignored their repeated efforts to have their entitlements recognised. Dorothy Solinger (2011) reports that, in the city of Wuhan, those who did receive *dibao* frequently complained that their allowances were not enough to pull them out of destitution, they were subjected to invasive and complex monitoring and verification procedures, and their continued receipt of even the most pitiful payments was uncertain.

With regard to “contributory” programs, the state has been developing and extending insurance schemes, to which employers as well as employees contribute, to help cover the costs of health and provide old-age pensions for wage earners and their family dependants. Today, rural migrant workers are legally entitled to participate in such programs, but flaws in the system mean that the vast majority do not. In rural areas, a program of collective medical insurance has been established and most rural residents now contribute, but the scheme only covers a fraction of their medical costs. As yet, only a small minority of rural residents participate in contributory elderly pension schemes; most households considering the costs of contribution too high and the benefits too low and uncertain. In the last few years, pilot schemes combining the contributory elderly pension with a flat, universal pension provided to all rural elderly by local governments have been rolled out in some areas (Cai et al., 2012, pp. 98–105). In future years, coverage of these schemes is likely to increase, but their viability and sustainability may be undermined by two factors: first individuals and families may consider buying into insurance an unnecessary expenditure, given the government’s provision of a basic pension and second, governments may be unwilling to increase the size of the basic pension to cover living costs. Both problems are likely to be exacerbated if the vulnerable group discourse continues to influence understandings about older people in rural areas. This is because it fails to recognise such people as workers, who contributed to society in the past and continue to do so in the present. It therefore makes rural elderly pension schemes seem less like “contributory” social insurance, and more like “noncontributory” welfare, similar to *dibao*, and potentially with similar consequences for recipients’ well-being.

In short, despite advances in social welfare provision as well as impressive economic growth and improvements in average living standards, contemporary Chinese policy makers, scholars and activists are faced with the same serious question as those in the US and elsewhere: How can one ensure that well-being, including agency, autonomy and respect, is maintained for people who fall outside the social contract because they do not earn an income or “contribute” to society through “productive” paid work? Feminists have sought to address this problem and specifically to enhance the well-being of women and increase both the entitlements and respect that is accorded them, primarily by advocating three approaches, each of which is apparent in Sen and Nussbaum’s work. First, they have promoted women’s involvement in “productive” work (Sen, 1990; Sen, 1999, pp. 189–203; Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 285–86). Second, they have challenged the notion that only work that is paid and “productive” counts as a contribution to society, and have highlighted other contributions made by women in unpaid “reproductive” work (Sen, 1990; Nussbaum, 2002). Third, Nussbaum and others have

challenged dichotomous notions of “independence” and “dependence”, arguing that *all* human beings are dependent on others in different ways at different times during the course of our lives, and that interdependence and mutual care must be recognised as the necessary grounds on which people build lives of autonomy and respect. From here, Nussbaum suggests a rethinking of social contract theory (Nussbaum, 2002; Nussbaum, 2006).

How might these three approaches operate and what could they achieve in the rural Chinese context? To address this question, it is necessary to first explain some shifts that have occurred in rural gender divisions of labour and gendered power relations in the post-Mao era. When possibilities for waged labour outside the village opened up, they were taken up first and foremost by men and young, single women. Meanwhile, there was a feminisation as well as an ageing of the population working in less profitable agriculture. Once considered predominantly masculine, productive “outside” work, agriculture, including both crop farming and the raising of domestic livestock, came to be seen as “inside” work, associated and done in close conjunction with women’s other “inside”, “unproductive” work, cooking and cleaning, and caring for children and the frail elderly (Jacka, 1997, pp. 128–42).

This gender division of labour, combined with a marked withdrawal of the state from efforts to directly promote gender equality, contributed to a disempowerment of women in both the “inside” and “outside” spheres. Thus, in villages across China, government bodies are dominated by men and by patriarchal interests. Women are very rarely elected to positions of leadership in village government because it is assumed that their “low quality” makes them unsuitable for the task, they are too busy with their “inside” work, and in any case, “good” women devote their energy to caring for their family and do not interact with people outside the family, especially men. Within the family, also, villagers and officials alike assume that men should be the decision-makers with respect to agricultural production and large financial investments and expenditures, both because it is believed that they are more capable and knowledgeable than women, and because they are the main breadwinners. In practice, as I have noted, women *are* decision-makers as well as capable workers in the family, but the assumption that they are not underpins institutions and practices that discriminate against women and limit their agency – for example by providing bank loans almost exclusively to men, and not to women such as Yang Yulan and Xie Fenzhu, whatever their needs or abilities.

A strategy of trying to enhance the well-being of women by increasing their involvement in waged work will do little to improve the situation of older women such as Xie and Yang. For one thing, the majority of industrial and service-sector enterprises do not employ women over the age of 40. Some older rural women work as manual labourers in road works and on construction sites, but the work and conditions are harsh, pay is low, and it is considered demeaning for women to have to do such jobs. For older rural women, then, a more realistic strategy for improving well-being might be to highlight the contributions they make in the “inside” sphere, including income-earning and subsistence farming, and domestic work. For example, organising older women into production cooperatives and providing microcredit would enable women to turn their work in animal husbandry or growing vegetables into more profitable, status-enhancing projects.¹¹ In addition, if Yang Yulan and other grandparents were to be paid by the local government for providing childcare services, this might enhance their economic standing and their agency, self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy more effectively than a

welfare payment. Enhanced self-esteem might in turn contribute to further improvements in their status and power in the family. As Sen and others have argued, a greater sense of self-esteem and a sense that she can achieve change make it more likely that a person will stand up for herself (Sen, 1990, p. 136; Nussbaum, 2000, p. 288; Bandura, 1997).

Greater appreciation of their agency might also enable older women to play a more active role in village government or in community groups. This might then enable individual women to work with others, not just to help themselves, but also to address gender inequalities, for example in land usage-rights, and thereby improve gender equality and the well-being of women generally (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 289). The potential significance of such an approach is suggested by the active role played by older women in several recent campaigns protesting against land expropriation and government leaders who pocket the proceeds from land development, rather than distributing them to poor villagers (Woodman, 2011; Sargeson and Song, 2010). Efforts that highlight and enhance agency and contributions to society *might*, then, enable women to improve their well-being, but on their own they may not be enough. Without more direct moves to challenge power relations, and without a transformative redistribution of resources, efforts that highlight and enhance older women's agency are likely, in fact, to result in their co-optation and exploitation rather than improvements in well-being. The case of older women protesting land expropriation in the village of Taishi in the Pearl River Delta provides a warning about this. Some accounts indicate that the women were primarily concerned about gendered poverty. Having lost their land, most of the village's men and young women had left in search of waged labour. Some of the middle-aged women left behind were able to find poorly-paid jobs doing farm labour, while other older women were forced into the highly demeaning work of sorting and hauling garbage to earn enough to live on (Woodman, 2011, pp. 199–202). Sophia Woodman (2011, p. 205) writes, however, that these women's protests were "translated" by younger, male activists outside the village into a struggle for rights and democracy and a campaign to recall the elected village leader, which ultimately failed. Paradoxically, the village contention "became a struggle for democratic rights in which the holders of those rights were largely rendered incapable of representing themselves – except in casting ballots – and others who spoke for them were transformed into the de facto leaders of the action". Woodman (2011, p. 206) argues that "creating a counter-hegemonic movement based on rights depends on transforming the identities of participants into rights-bearing subjects" and cites Merry as arguing that "poor women think of themselves as having rights only when powerful institutions treat them as if they do" (Woodman, 2011, p. 207). Evidently, she writes, this did not happen in Taishi (Woodman, 2011, p. 207).

Another kind of warning about the limitations of efforts to improve women's well-being by enhancing their agency without directly challenging power relations is provided by "participatory" community development projects. Elsewhere, I have discussed research that I undertook at the site of an overseas-funded participatory environmental protection and community development project implemented in Shaanxi by a leading domestic women's NGO. The project greatly increased the workloads of village women selected to be members of a new local Environmental Protection Association (EPA). Despite the project's aim of empowering women, it had no significant effect on gendered divisions of labour or control over the distribution of key resources in the

village. Instead, members of the EPA found themselves responsible for cleaning and picking up garbage around the village. Their other main task, overseeing a microcredit scheme, also did little to improve their own authority in the village or to empower other village women. The loans that were given out were largely appropriated by men, but in any case were too small to be met with anything other than complaints from villagers. Overall, the potential significance of this project was entirely overshadowed by the opportunities provided by the establishment of a mine and processing plant in the area, control of which was held by male village leaders in cahoots with the male mine managers. When a delegation from a Chinese charity organisation visited the village to determine the community's needs for funds, they were wined and dined by the male village Party secretary and the mine boss. The head of the EPA, an older woman, had no chance to talk to the visitors – she was too busy in the kitchen cooking their meal (Jacka, 2010, p. 109).

What, if anything, does the capability approach have to offer in the way of guarding against this type of co-optation and exploitation of women's agency and work? Both Sen and Nussbaum emphasise various aspects of the social constructedness of agency, capabilities and well-being. They give particular attention to the ways in which the institution of the family and gender divisions of labour constrain women's agency and capabilities and erode gender equality (Sen, 1990; Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 241–97), but they do not advocate any particular institutions or institutional change that might overcome these problems. Their capability approach provides a normative framework, but must be supplemented by deliberative processes to determine the institutions most likely to enhance well-being in different contexts.

It is instructive to compare the capability approach with human rights based approaches to development. Kate Carroll suggests that human rights based approaches, on their own, have generally been ineffectual in tackling structural inequalities, for they tend to focus on supporting individuals to achieve their rights, or on achieving legislative change rather than on the real attainment of equal rights or social justice. Focusing on the individual obscures questions about what others need to do to ensure that person's rights, while “legislation alone cannot tackle structural inequalities... Organisations must recognise that unless power relations have changed so that laws can be applied equally for all people, then the change will not impact on the majority” (Carroll, 2009, p. 2). Much the same challenges are likely to be faced by those attempting to implement a capability approach to well-being and development. To address these concerns, Carroll (2009, p. 2) argues, development policy makers and practitioners need first of all “a vision of a just society”. Arguably, this is one of the strengths of the capability approach. They also need to ensure that people's agency is increased, enabling “a critical mass of individuals [to] mobilise to hold duty bearers to account for policies which perpetuate injustice” (Carroll, 2009, p. 2). Again, this is a key emphasis in the capability approach. In addition, however, redistributive policies are required. To be effective, such policies must transform power relations: “Aid giving, intended to redistribute, may not address long term inequality if it is targeted towards short term ‘safety net’ measures” (Carroll, 2009, p. 3). To fully realise either human rights or capabilities, therefore, there needs to be a fundamental, long-term shift in the distribution of assets, access and power.

There is a second set of limitations associated with a strategy to improve people's well-being by highlighting and enhancing their agency and contributions to society,

rather than dwelling on their “vulnerability” and dependence on others. This relates to the fact that, however much we try to redefine and enlarge concepts of independence, productiveness and contributions to society, there are always likely to be some, such as small children, the severely disabled, and the frail elderly, who are extremely dependent on others. How does one ensure that such people can “live a life worthy of human dignity”? Nussbaum, like other feminists, critical gerontologists and those working with the disabled, emphasises that the dichotomy commonly drawn between those who are “independent” and “productive” and those who are “dependent” and “unproductive” is ideological. All human beings, she notes, are dependent on the care of others in different ways at different times over the course of their life-span (Nussbaum, 2002, pp. 188–89). Taking this into account, one might argue that small children and the frail elderly have a claim to respect as well as support, despite their dependence, because they will in the future be independent, productive members of society, or because they were in the past. In practice, this is a common approach, underpinning, for example, social investment in children and the provision of pensions to retirees. As Nussbaum notes, though, it seems a poor substitute for an ethics that respects and supports individuals as ends in themselves, rather than for their contribution to society in the past, present or future (Nussbaum, 2002, pp. 191–92).¹² Consequently, Nussbaum challenges the very notion of a social contract that necessitates individuals’ “productive” contribution to society. The capability approach, she suggests, provides a more ethical and politically desirable conception of personhood and social cooperation. It uses “an account of cooperation that treats justice and inclusiveness as ends of intrinsic value from the beginning and that views human beings as held together by many altruistic ties as well as by ties of mutual advantage” (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 158). Furthermore, it acknowledges “many types of dignity in the world including the dignity of mentally disabled children and adults, the dignity of the senile demented elderly, and the dignity of babies at the breast (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 193). With the capability approach, Nussbaum (2006, p. 160) concludes,

we do not have to win the respect of others by being productive. We have a claim to support in the dignity of our human need itself. Society is held together by a wide range of attachments and concerns, only some of which concern productivity. Productivity is necessary, and even good; but it is not the main end of social life.

Conclusion

Is this approach hopelessly unrealistic? Nussbaum (2006, p. 410) herself poses this question and responds that “only time and effort” will tell. Given the global dominance of capitalism and neoliberal ideology, it will take a great deal of effort to achieve a social order that meets all individuals’ needs for respect as well as other capabilities as ends in themselves, regardless of their productivity. Such a social order must be a core goal for development. For the time being, however, it also is strategically important for those concerned with the well-being of elderly rural women – or any other “unproductive” disadvantaged or “vulnerable” people – to retain the link between the claim to respect and “productivity”, but broaden understandings of what it means to contribute productively to society. Emphasising and enhancing the agency of “vulnerable groups” is crucial both to their own well-being and to broader development toward a just social

order. This seems to be the thinking underpinning the UN's (2002) Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, the aim of which is "to ensure that persons everywhere are able to age with security and dignity and to continue to participate in their societies as citizens with full rights" (UN, 2002, p. 7). The Plan states that "[o]lder persons should be treated fairly and with dignity, regardless of disability or other status, and should be valued independently of their economic contribution" (UN, 2002, p. 10). In a few places it mentions the vulnerability of older people to poverty, natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies, but its overriding emphasis is on the agency and contributions of older people, especially the work that older women do in caring for family members, subsistence production, household maintenance and volunteer work in the community (UN, 2002, p. 9). Article 12 of the Plan reads:

The expectations of older persons and the economic needs of society demand that older persons be able to participate in the economic, political, social and cultural life of their societies. Older persons should have the opportunity to work for as long as they wish and are able to, in satisfying and productive work, continuing to have access to education and training programmes. The empowerment of older persons and the promotion of their full participation are essential elements for active ageing. For older persons, appropriate sustainable social support should be provided (UN, 2002, p. 3).

With its socialist heritage and recent commitment to "people-centred" development, China is well placed to achieve the aims of the Madrid Plan, and specifically, to further development and well-being among older women in rural areas. I suggest that to meet these aims, policy makers, activists and scholars need to find an approach that incorporates three elements emphasised in this paper: an appreciation and enhancement of older women's agency; attention to the structural underpinnings of gender and age inequalities, the constraints these put on older women's agency, and the dangers of exploitation they pose; and a vision of justice that builds equality of agency and respect, as well as the fulfilment of other basic needs, into a conceptualisation of development.

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Notes

1. One reason for focusing on women aged 50 and over, rather than employing the more conventional definition of "the elderly" as aged 60 or 65 and above, is that the former approach is more in line with rural Chinese understandings of old age. For further discussion, see Pang, de Brauw and Rozelle (2004, p. 75). The well-being of rural women aged 50–60 is also neglected in recent literature on the "left-behind" because most of them fall in the gaps between the categories "left-behind women" and "left-behind elderly". They are too young to belong to the latter category, which is

usually defined as women aged 60 or more, whose adult children have migrated out of the village. Yet most do not belong to the former category, which is defined as married women aged 60 or less, whose husbands have migrated out. Few women aged over 50 have migrant husbands, but many have migrant children.

2. Iris Young describes how this has occurred in the US (Young, 2002).
3. This is my own interpretation and condensation of conceptualisations of agency articulated in different ways in a range of writings about the capability approach, especially by Sen. There are some differences in the ways in which Nussbaum and Sen conceptualise “agency” and “well-being” and the relationship between them. For discussion, see Crocker (2008) and Nussbaum (2011, pp. 197–202). These differences are not important for this paper.
4. All names in this account are pseudonyms.
5. This account draws on semi-structured interviews conducted by myself and two research assistants. Over three trips, in July 2010 and January and April 2011, we conducted a total of six separate interviews with Yang Yulan, her son and her daughter-in-law. These formed part of a total of around 147 interviews, conducted with 54 rural women in Snow County, as well as some of their household members and a small number of non-related returning migrants and village officials.
6. The findings in Tables 1 and 2 come from a questionnaire survey conducted in July 2010, with assistance from the Snow County Bureau of Public Health. We surveyed a total of 2,013 women in seven villages across two townships. In each township, we selected villages closest to the township centre and surveyed every woman aged 16–80 in each village who was available and willing to participate, until we reached our target of around 1,000 women in each township.
7. The figures in Table 1 for “All other adult household members away from home for 6 months or more” probably overestimate the number of older women in multiple-member households living alone for most of the year, as there are likely to be some households in which the adults migrating out did so at different times. The figures for “Other living arrangements” point to the variety of living arrangements among older women. They include those living in households in which one or more adults are away from home for 1–5 months of the year, as well as those whose adult children have established separate households elsewhere but whose young grandchildren live with them.
8. The total workloads indicated in the Table are likely to be underestimates for three main reasons. First, these figures are the sum of hours worked in the various tasks listed in this Table, but some tasks are not listed. These include collecting dry grass and twigs for fuel, and cutting grass for domestic livestock (the government prohibits the grazing of domestic livestock on mountain slopes). Second, women tend to underestimate the number of hours they spend in domestic work, especially childcare and elderly care, in part because much of it is conducted at the same time as other work. Third, it rained unusually heavily in the month preceding this survey. This meant that women did less field work than they would normally do in the summer months. In the winter months, much less time is spent in the fields, but more time is spent on indoor tasks, such as preparing for weddings, which are often held around the time of the New Year festival in January or February.
9. Gender divisions of labour tend to mean that in old age, lack of authority, respect and self-esteem are greater problems for men than for women: Even after they have become too frail to work in the fields, women continue to be appreciated for their domestic work and childcare, whereas men, once they are no longer able to work either in waged labour or on the farm, lose their respected role as breadwinner.
10. Among the 54 women with whom we conducted semi-structured interviews in Snow County, all lived in households in which a loan had been made from the rural credit cooperative, but only one had taken out a loan in her own name.
11. These are common elements in poverty alleviation and participatory development projects in China and elsewhere across the developing world. However, they are usually targeted at younger women and men, and to date have very rarely included older people (Ewing, 1999, p. 39).
12. This approach also gets us no further in enabling “a life worthy of dignity” for those who are severely and permanently disabled.

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