

Reviews

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Jing Xu, *Chinese Urban Poor Older People's Life: An Agentic Approach*, Peter Lang Bern, 2012, 234 pp., pbk £46.00, ISBN 13:978 3 0343 1117 5.

This book draws on a doctoral research project that aimed to examine the life experiences of 25 older people living in poverty in Beijing, China. In particular, it challenges the dominant assumption that older people are passive subjects by demonstrating how they actively exercise agency to transcend their limitations and fulfil their aspirations. Xu's discussion is based on the premise that 'agency is culture specific' (p. 199), and thus the strategies her informants use to challenge poverty are all embedded in Chinese traditional collectivist culture, which values interdependence and relationship harmony.

The book is organised in eight chapters. The first four of these provide the reader with a discussion of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, a detailed account of the methodology employed, and a description of the Chinese socio-historical context in which these poor older informants had been brought up. In the following three chapters, Xu presents her empirical analysis through extensive use of the informants' personal narratives. In my view, this is where the real appeal of the book lies, as it provides a very engaging cultural account of older people 'as social agents who are capable of utilising various strategies to pursue lives that they have reason to value even when constrained by social adversities' (p. 195).

The focus of Chapters 5 and 6 is on the informants' strategies to negotiate material, social and emotional resources within and outside the family. For instance, it becomes clear that for most of the informants the family is in fact 'where they experience various deprivations and exploitations, such as an unguaranteed material livelihood and a lack of concern, care, recognition and respect' (p. 138). This situation further motivates these older people to try to develop their informal relationships network (*i.e. guanxi* or mutual-aid exchange); engage in underground or irregular forms of economic activity (*e.g.* unlicensed street-peddling, scavenging); or negotiate official support from the government. All these themes are discussed in great detail against the background of the decline of traditional cultural expressions underpinned by the impact of societal modernisation and economic reform in China. For example, the conversion to Christianity by some of the informants emerged as an interesting finding, which certainly deserves further exploration. According to Xu's analysis, most of those religious conversions are embedded in the informants' efforts to develop new social spaces in order to secure both material and affective support. One of the informants even admitted 'that she found it hard to believe in

Christianity . . . but she had to pretend to believe in public because she was afraid of disappointing and losing her good friends' (p. 161). In other words, the underlying motivations are social and not necessarily spiritual or religious, which echoes the findings of gerontological studies in the West that discuss the role of religion in old age.

In Chapter 7, Xu ties together the informants' experiences of poverty and their own understandings of old age. The main argument here is that poverty alone cannot define these people's lives. The fact that this generation of older informants grew up subject to hardship and famine explains why most of them constructed a narrative of satisfaction regarding their current material life. Still, in the emotional domain, some of these older people ascribe to feelings of inferiority and discrimination. However, Xu claims that despite their limitations these people are actively engaged in a process of meaning construction such as seeking personal pleasure, remaining useful or enacting their spirituality.

The final chapter offers a summary; a further theoretical discussion of the main findings; an overview of the limitations of the research; and directions for future studies. As in previous chapters, Xu highlights the relevance of a culturally sensitive approach to the study of poor older people's agency that considers their individual socio-historical and familial locations as structural forces shaping their ageing experience. Drawing on the informants' lived experiences, the author goes on to propose three specific intervention programmes to address older people's poverty: (a) intergenerational integration programme (*e.g.* training services, family therapy and workshops aimed at promoting older people's rights); (b) elder-friendly re-employment programme; and (c) elderly people's mutual help associations programme.

In terms of form and style, I appreciated the chapter summaries. However there are also section summaries every so often that make the text a little repetitive. Overall, the study does achieve its aim of stepping out of the negative construction of old age and revealing how older people themselves perceived and challenged their limited material and emotional resources in order to 'achieve what they conceived of as happiness' (p. 194). This book will be most appealing to cross-cultural gerontologists who have a particular interest in China's ageing society and to researchers interested in a fresh insight into the interplay of poverty and old age.

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Naomi Feil and Vicki de Klerk-Rubin, *The Validation Breakthrough: Simple Techniques for Communicating with People with Alzheimer's and Other Dementias*, third edition, Health Professions Press, Baltimore, Maryland, 2012, 304 pp., pbk \$34.95, ISBN 13: 978 1 932529 93 7.

This is the third edition of a book first published in 1993 intended to deliver techniques for communicating with people with Alzheimer's disease and