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Schooling, Jobbing, Marrying, What's a Girl to Do to Make Life Better?

Empowerment Capabilities of Girls at the Margins of Globalization in China

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Bio Sketch

Vilma Seeberg is Associate Professor for International/Multicultural Education at Kent State University. She has previously been a teacher, a school principal, consultant with the World Bank, and a visiting professor in China. She has a long history of studying Chinese education and published, among others, 2 books on literacy and basic mass education under Mao. More recently, she has been reporting on field work in girls' education in remote Western China, e.g., "The case for prioritizing education for girls left behind in remote rural China" (Seeberg and Ross, with Tan, and Liu, 2007), "Girls First! Promoting early education in Tibetan areas of China, a case study" (Seeberg, 2008).

Abstract

Though Girls' education is a well-established part of the anti-poverty canon, its importance in the lives of girls on the margins of China's globalization is more complex than a utility approach might suggest. This paper uses a capabilities approach of empowerment (Sen, 1999) to understand what educational opportunities a set of multiply marginalized girls value, that is, might have reason to value. The paper foregrounds rural girls' voices to tell us what capabilities they treasure, how they develop agency, and what well-being they experience while living under severely constrained gendered socio-economic and cultural circumstances. Findings show that the opportunity structure is embedded in *how* and *what* the girls value in their world related to education. Hence understanding and strengthening the fabric of this embedded opportunity structure can lay the foundation for an effective educational development policy toward the Millennium Development Goals.

Findings showed that with schooling the girls gained confidence, psychological as well as cognitive control; some went against their parents' wishes to stay in school. After they "went into society" they continued to develop their voice and capability of making strategic life choices about school, work and marriage. They imagined social change in their relation to their birth families, though they accepted the prevailing son-preference, but they sought alternatives to marrying and returning to "grow crops" [zhong tien] and have babies. One early school leaver put it this way, "If I don't change, I won't make progress. It would be like living in the past (the village). I have to adapt to society (in the larger world)."

Powerless and poor girls make up the most disadvantaged group in education. -
United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (2010) *Dakar Declaration on
Accelerating Girls' Education and Gender Equality*.

Girls' education is the most effective means of combating many of the most
profound challenges to human development. UNICEF (2004) *World Children's
Report*.

I hope my daughter will be versatile. I think it's far from enough to gain
knowledge only from school in order to find a job and to get along in society (Ren
Qiqi, 2010).

Girls' education is a well-established part of the anti-poverty canon and initiatives to
reach the Millennium Development Goals, but why is it important to girls?[1] This question has
motivated my research in China for the past 10 years. In this paper, I am using a "capabilities
approach" (Sen, 1999) to identify what girls have reason to value regarding their educational
opportunities and how what they value contributes to their well-being. The girls in the process
of empowering are changing their relationship to those around them and their world changes, a
little at a time. To understand these processes I have been developing a framework based on a
substantive and growing literature on capabilities and empowerment, which has shown itself
useful in analyzing how gendered socio-economic and cultural factors interact with gendered
capabilities to produce the agency freedom achieved by, in this case, multiply marginalized girls.

At the Margins of Globalization in Western China

In the mountains of southeastern Shaanxi Province, forest covers the steep slopes leaving room for only tiny plots of crop land by any definition. Anjing village sits at above 2,000 meter altitude in a ravine twisting along a creek. Families were estimated to have an annual per capita income barely over \$150 and perpetually hovered on the edge of survival. For most of the families, birth registration of one or a second daughter, while waiting for a son to be born, was costly enough (RMB 7,000, approximately US \$1,100), adding on school fees for compulsory schooling through grade 9, was often prohibitive, and end only with marrying her off into another family. Globalization reached into the area via a one-lane road that was built in 2008, and charged to the villagers. The road made possible some access to low-skilled, often temporary employment in nearby towns and further. Since most of the households relied almost entirely on growing grain for food, working-age adults tended to stay close to home and did not join the “floating population” seeking better work as far away as the coastal regions of China. A small scholarship I instituted in 2000, which was named after my daughter Guanlan, assisted in keeping the neediest of village daughters in school as long as possible. The money did not cover all of the fees and could not offset the utility cost of losing a girls’ essential labor in the household. In many families this constituted a critical loss, because often the parents and grandparents were chronically ill, had high medical bills, and typically three children to raise. The scholarship girls, who called themselves the Guanlan Sisters, were multiply marginalized in respect to globalization by barriers of remoteness, cast in stone by the rigid Chinese birth-residency registration system [hukou], social class and gender, constrained by extreme poverty, traditional patriarchal culture, weather-dependent economic factors, and subject to the

vulnerabilities of their gender. Yet, despite harsh conditions, the Guanlan Sisters had been demonstrating a tenacious hold on schooling for ten years.

This paper presents an effort to understand the seeming contradiction between their lives and their desire for schooling by the Guanlan Sisters.

Theoretical Framework

The *human development and capabilities approach*, largely credited to the pioneering work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, is helpful in that it addresses the intangibles that play a role in the girls' lives. The approach advances understanding of global development beyond the dominant economic gross domestic product approach. For Sen (1992, 1999), participation in the educational processes develops "capabilities" and "personal flourishing" which denote collective human development and socially just change. The *human development and capabilities approach* understands education as a process, action, and outcome, all of which centers on empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). Empowerment here is seen as an individual process with collective consequences, so that the concept of opportunity structure is embedded within it rather than being a measurable proxy for it.

Amartya Sen (1999) posits that the "condition of being educated" or a girl's "capability" is circumscribed by her experiences and her capacity to imagine. Hence her "condition of being educated" consists of what a girl has "reason to value." These values are not intended to be analyzed from a perspective of equal rights, or what would be just, but rather from the perspective of enhanced "substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations or ...various lifestyles" (p. 75). For Sen enhancing a person's capabilities, a function of

schooling, is enhancing her “freedom to achieve: the alternative functioning combinations from which this person can choose” (p. 75).

Nussbaum (2000) approaches capabilities somewhat differently than Sen by asserting that basic rights and capabilities are necessary complementary concepts. Some substantive rights have to be insisted upon to forestall the worst exploitation. However, instead of calling for equal rights, calling for opportunities to achieve valued capabilities is a more substantive demand for resource allocation or policy (Unterhalter, 2007). It takes into consideration the participant to whom policy is addressed by providing her opportunities to achieve valued functions. [2]

The capabilities approach focuses on the subjective realm of empowerment, and in that it illuminates agency, or the well-spring of action -- within constraining opportunities and possibilities. For Sen the freedom to learn and the condition of being educated both are capabilities that an individual may have reason to value – outside of getting a certificate. Nussbaum adds that attaining parity with boys in education may be a girl’s right, but in itself does not indicate her benefit or any social benefit. Essentially, however, Nussbaum’s (2003) insistence that underlying a relativistic notion of empowerment must be a baseline of basic human rights and concern for social justice, and that political arrangements should “deliver to citizens a certain basic level of capability” (2000, p. 71) below which people should not systematically fall. The overarching dimensions of the framework are those that Sen (1999) developed for *Development as Freedom*.

This study is guided by the research question, how do various dimensions of empowerment, the capabilities the Guanlan Sisters value, manifest themselves in their education-related experiences? “We can learn, through interviewing ...how people perceived and how they

interpreted their perceptions. We can learn how events affected their thoughts and feelings. We can learn the meanings to them of their relationships, their families, their work, and their selves. We can learn from all the experiences and from joy through grief which together constitutes the human condition” (Weiss, 1994, p.1). It is the purpose of this paper to give voice to often ignored but quite determined young women regarding education and to propose an analytical framework to bring out how empowerment takes place and can be evaluated. In conclusion, I argue that addressing how and what people value in their world related to education, what economists call the intangible demand-side factors, is essential for effective educational development policy and movement toward the Millennium Development Goals.

Developing an analytical framework

In the present study we seek to understand the subjective experience of empowerment and do not seek to evaluate girls’ equal rights or gender parity in schooling. Nor do we seek to conduct a conventional cost-benefit analysis but to enumerate what matters intrinsically (Robeyns, 2006). Sen’s (1980) components of empowerment, *wellbeing*, *agency freedom* and *achievement of various valued lifestyles* provide useful dimensions of analysis.

To operationalize these dimensions of empowerment, more descriptive capabilities are needed. Nussbaum (2000), Kabeer (1999) and Unterhalter (2007) have guided my development of an analytical framework based on Sen’s three dimensions of empowerment. Nussbaum’s (2000) list of core basic capabilities mentions education as formal instruction per se, “being able to use imagination and thought, to develop emotional attachments, and have the freedom to sustain these, ... being able to develop a conception of the good through practical reason, develop the basis of self-respect, enjoy play and some sense of control of one’s environment” (pp. 78-80). Nussbaum (2004) adds that the functioning of learning involves a girl in “cultivating

‘mental space’ [to] draw out the value of her own humanity” (pp. 335-336). These notions characterize Sen’s term wellbeing. Kabeer (1999) and Unterhalter (2007) emphasize a girl’s capacity to exercise agency through self-expression, decision making, and participation in the distribution of resources in the collective arena of the family (p.106), which provide guidance for the three dimensions.

In my analytical framework (see Figure 1 below), the first dimension, *wellbeing*, can be observed and evaluated directly in a girl’s *self-expression* when it demonstrates a sense of self-respect (Sen, 1999), that she enjoys play or learning, and has some sense of control of her environment” (p. 77).

Sen’s second dimension, *agency freedom*, can be observed and evaluated by a girl’s expressed exercise of agency, which entails decision making, participation in the distribution of resources in the collective arena of the family (Unterhalter, 2007, p. 106), possibly with negotiation power (Kabeer, 1999), and making strategic life choices. For example, a girl might bargain staying in school in exchange for taking a younger sister to live with her in the market town.

His third dimension, *achievement of a valued lifestyle*, can be evaluated *achievement of valued outcomes*, such as educational achievement or attainment (Kabeer, 1999), or as Sen suggests it might rest on achievement of wellbeing such as a new capability or set of capabilities and therefore more choices of functionings.

Local situatedness is embedded in all of the above dimensions and capabilities. The barriers and scaffolding for girls seeking an education shape the identity they seek to articulate, the values that underlie their decisions, and what they imagine is feasible and valuable to achieve.

The three dimensions have embedded within them the resources that girls might reasonably expect to constrain or support them, particularly the resources of the family, and how these might be distributed. In the Chinese village, these have gendered attributes, or represent gendered actions, functionings and outcomes.

The framework that I propose using for analysis describes Sen's dimensions in terms of topics and breaks them down into themes reflective of the above notions [3]: (1) *Wellbeing* in relation to education is an intrinsic capability, such as affective and cognitive self-expression and reflection, which may include economic, and political considerations. (2) *Agency freedom* is described as decision making, again is an intrinsic capability that has cognitive, psychological, economic and political aspects and expression (Stromquist, 1993). (3) *Achievement of valued functionings or outcomes* can be analyzed in a variety of ways. Based on previous research (Seeberg, 2006, 2007), in this analysis the third dimension is composed of (a) instrumental outcomes, a political state of being or condition, e.g., standing in the family in regard to the distribution of resources; (b) a mixed intrinsic-instrumental topic, a subjective orientation or positionality such as a daughter taking on a son's traditional role in the family, and (c) an instrumental outcome within an external structure, such as achievement and attainment in school.

Empowerment Dimensions	Descriptive Topics	Themes, Examples
Freedoms (Sen)	Capabilities	Functionings, Tasks, Activities
I Wellbeing	Affective and cognitive self-expression (Unterhalter) and reflection, Intrinsic Cognitive, psychological (Stromquist, 1993), economic, and political aspects.	Enjoyment of learning; playfulness Confidence; self-respect Can develop insight, patience Can reason things out Curious about the larger world.
II Agency Freedom	Decision Making(Unterhalter) or Choosing a Functioning (Sen), as an expression of freedom (Sen), Intrinsic Cognitive, psychological, economic, and political (Stromquist, '93),	Making choices about education in difficult circumstances Speak up for self Making strategic life choices.
III Achievement of capabilities or aspirations that they have reason to value	(a) Political State/condition (Seeberg, Stromquist, '93) Instrumental; Structures (Narayan-Parker 2005)	Participation in the distribution of resources in the Family, constraints & supports for schooling; Community, constraints & supports for schooling;
	(b) Subjective orientation/positionality, (Seeberg, Stromquist, '93) Intrinsic-Instrumental Relational (Kabeer, 1999)	Ability to imagine social change for self & others (Unterhalter). Take on re-gendered identity, role model; raised level of social consciousness: Object to male dominance/preference, Family role pressures.
	(c) Objective State/condition Instrumental	Attainment, achievement, Valued awards; Late marriage; Desirable work.

Figure 1 Capabilities and Empowerment Framework

Methodology

As the purpose of this paper is to learn how and what the Guanlan Sisters value in their world related to education and that I argue this is essential for effective educational development policy, I chose an ethnographic case study approach to foreground the voices of these excluded or marginalized girls who are rarely allowed to participate in policy design meant to alleviate their poverty or lack of education. Ethnographic work and thick description provide richness and authenticity that establish the value of findings. A case has character, it has totality, it has boundaries that go beyond a single source or measurement; it is a complex and dynamic system that interests us and more than one story can be told in the case” (Danzig, 2010, p. 402).

The human development and capabilities research approach makes possible that participants’ capabilities can provide the starting point in the design of interventions. The capabilities and empowerment analytical framework I am proposing is still emerging, building toward theory that can be used to formulate educational policy (Robeyns, 2003; Unterhalter, 2007).[4]

Analysis. For post-hoc analysis such as this, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) recommend a researcher analyze the data by focusing on types of text constructions: argumentation, theme, and topic. In this paper, argumentation is provided in the development of the analytical framework, the capabilities function are the descriptive topics, and the conceptual themes are found in keywords and phrases, or “situated meanings” in particular contexts.

The paper hopes to provide sufficient information to allow the reader to determine whether the findings may be applicable to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and through

retrospective generalizations (Eisner, 1991) allows a deeper understanding that may help to posit theory.

Limitation. The small number of participants in this study does not allow generalizing in the same context. What is evaluated cannot claim concept validity or representativeness. In exchange, the voices of the Guanlan Sisters, thrice marginalized yet eager to participate in this research study, are typically not heard or recorded and bring to us an awareness of change within intransience that we could not have anticipated.

This paper reports on field work which is part of a long-term study which has used interviewing, personal correspondence, one open-ended questionnaire, conducted among a total of 58 Guanlan Sisters over ten years between spring 2000 and summer 2010. In summer 2010, we interviewed over 36 Guanlan Sisters and 27 of their families from a small cluster of villages in the mountains of southeastern Shaanxi. The interviews were conducted by a native Chinese speaker and me in Chinese.

This paper focuses on ten former scholarship recipients (see Table 1), six of whom had dropped out of school prior to completing middle school, two dropped in the middle of their first year of senior high school, and two participants who continued on and were currently studying in post-secondary technical colleges. This subgroup was chosen because they had straddled the margins of globalization by migrating out of the mountains to the metropolitan city of Xi'an. They had changed not only their locale but their habitus. They were also chosen because they had previously made a decision and carried it out in relation to ending or continuing schooling, they had quit and left for work in the city, or finished high school and left for formal higher

education in the city. They were the subgroup among the Guanlan Sisters with the most definitive position on schooling and education.

The interview appointments were set up by a local contact, and several participants appeared together, thus were interviewed together, though we solicited their individual input for each question. They all worked in different establishments and were mixed together randomly based on their work schedules. The Guanlan Sisters,[5] Duan Shishi, Pang Shishi, Chen Ling, Jing Mingming, Pang Linshi and Pang Junjun were interviewed together, Pang Yanyan and Pang Qiaochan came together, as did Ren QiQi and Dong Mingming.

Table I. Participants by year of birth and school leaving/attainment year

Pseudonym	Year of birth	Middle School Achievement (grade)	School Attainment Level	School Leaving/Attainment Year
1. Chen Ling	1990	A	Post-secondary Technical College[6]	continuing
2. Duan Shishi	1993	B	Middle School 2*	End '08-09
3. Pang Shishi	1993	B	Middle School 2	End '08-09
4. Pang Yang	1993	B	Vocational High School 1*	Mid '09
5. Jing Mingming	1993	B	Middle School 2	End '08-09
6. Pang Linshi	1993	B	Middle School 2	End '08-09
7. Ren Qiqi	1994	B	Middle School 3	Mid '08?
8. Pang Qiuchang	1985?	B	Primary School 6*	Mid '02?
9. Dong Mingming	1990?	A	Post-secondary Technical College	continuing
10. Pang Junjun	1992?	A	High School 1	Nov. '09

* Primary school, grades 1-6, middle school grades 7-9, high school grades 10-12.

The interview questions were developed to elicit answers relevant to the Capabilities and Empowerment analytical framework, translated to Chinese and back-translated to English. The research team (see endnote 1) translated, replayed and discussed the cultural denotations of wording in several exemplary interviews, after which each translation was checked and corrected by a second native Chinese speaker.

After transcribing all of the interviews, reading and re-reading the transcriptions multiple times, and identifying the key words, patterns, ideas and themes, I coded the transcripts using the capabilities and empowerment analytical framework. Included in the text are an exhaustive list of citations of Guanlan Sisters' voices that is where there was overlap and repetition. Occasionally unique themes presented themselves and these are also included and so noted.

In including the text of the voices of the Guanlan Sisters, I have left intact some of the literal translation from Chinese where it adds a cultural denotation to the meaning. When the latter is not entirely clear, I have added brackets [meaning ...].

Findings

Given the purpose of this paper is to learn how and what the Guanlan Sisters value in their world related to education, the findings foreground the voices of these young women, so that they may become a part of the cross cultural literature on capabilities and empowerment for marginalized girls. I have organized the responses of the Guanlan Sisters by the analytical framework, the three dimensions of empowerment, and within them the themes that arose.

Wellbeing

The first dimension, wellbeing, is described by affective and cognitive processes of self-expression and self-reflection which are intrinsic to education. It has cognitive, psychological, economic, and political aspects. Some of the themes we wondered if we would hear the Guanlan Sisters express and reflect on are: Enjoyment and playfulness associated with learning; growing confidence and self-respect; growing ability to develop insight and patience, to reason things out; greater curiosity about the larger world.

In the course of the conversations with them, it became clear that the girls were perhaps hearing themselves for the first time pronounce their inner feelings on these issues that matter to them, itself an act of agency described by Unterhalter (2007) as building confidence and self respect, activities that constitute well being.

Enjoyment.

All the participants said they had “enjoyed” going to primary school, “We were young. We didn't know bitterness. So we were happy” (Pang Lishi). “I liked primary school best. In middle school, I felt the pressure about studying or other things... because as I became more mature I understood things better ... the more pressure I felt (Ren Qiqi).

Pang Junjun, the high school dropout, provided a nuance to the issue of enjoying learning, touching on issues of quality and relevance of instruction. “Starting from 3rd grade to 4th, 5th, and 6th grade, we began to learn something. We enjoyed learning... In high school, I was totally at [a] loss when listening to the teachers because I had never heard about those things before. It's just a waste of time. But I think I need to learn to get along in the bigger world [meaning “gain real-life experience”] after leaving school.... I want to read more books. I think it is helpful as well.”

Confidence.

Regarding confidence, the Guanlan Sisters provided a two sided picture. When asked if studying helps to improve her self-confidence, Pang Linshi answered, “Yes, a little bit. When we are walking with friends who went to high school, I feel they are much superior to us. I feel ashamed.” The older participant who dropped out after primary school, Pang Qiuchang, recalled: “After a day of study, I would feel happy if I learned something. But I would feel depressed if I didn't learn anything.... And it got worse and worse, and I had to give up in the end.”

One of the post-secondary students was encouraged about school. Dong Mingming: “In high school, I had quite strong self-confidence. My main task was to deal with the university entrance examination. I didn’t have setbacks then. In college, it’s different. The other day, my classmates and I got discouraged at the job fair when we saw requirements for a job said, ‘new university graduates with 3-5-year experience’”.

Ren Qiqi added a comment on the positive social effects of schooling:

Yes, with more schooling I became more confident. When in the village primary school, probably because of my poor family background, I didn’t feel confident when I was young. When in middle school, things changed for the better. In friends’ and classmates’ eyes, what counts is you as a person; in teachers’ eyes, what counts is your performance. It has nothing to do with your family background. It probably got a little bit better.

Cognition.

When we asked about cognition, could they think better, solve problems better, they first did not know how to answer but slowly some responded. Pang Linshi talked about English and math being helpful in her work, “because I work in a supermarket as a cashier. Sometimes the boss asks me to do some calculations.” Ren Qiqi volunteered, “The humanities courses make me understand things better, and courses like math make me analyze better and do things more logically.” The post-secondary student demonstrated a more holistic understanding when she said,

I think physics is useful in our life. I remember once my father was working on a valve. ...He explained to me how the U-shaped pipe connector worked and I remembered

we learned about U-shaped pipe connectors in physics class.... I think more in a more complex and comprehensive way compared with the past. In middle school, I thought in a simple way. I would say anything that came up in my mind. In high school, I would consider the consequence of my words. I thought more about the deeper content. It seems like that is a kind of progress.

Pang Qiuchang, the older participant, added, “to gain more knowledge (will benefit me)... But now when I think of a problem ... I cannot express myself.” Pang Yang was clear, “I think study is still important for me now. Especially for kids from the mountain areas like us, knowledge is [the means] to change our lives. The more knowledge you have, the better ... definitely.... In a conversation, the way you talk would be different if you have much knowledge. If you have no knowledge...”

Pang Junjun had a perspective that put schooling in a larger context, that they had developed curiosity about the larger world. From their nonverbal clues I gathered that some of the other five Sisters who had dropped out earlier might have shared but were not willing to admit it, and had come to rethink this. After getting to the middle school in the nearest township, down the mountain where there is relatively greater economic opportunity, the possibility of reaching out into the world became real:

I feel dropping out of middle school is not so much a matter of economics. I feel students are attracted by new and fancy things from the outside world. They feel isolated in the school and want to reach out. They think the world outside is better and want to see the colorful world.

Summary.

In sum, the Guanlan Sisters practiced self reflection during the interviews, they conveyed a sense of appreciation for education, and of functioning more confidently as they progressed through school, but the middle-school leavers also suffered a loss of confidence as it became too difficult. The post-secondary students, on the other hand, continually gained confidence. Both sets of Guanlan Sisters spoke of gaining confidence and psychological as well as cognitive control, able to reason things out, as their worlds expanded, as they “went into society.” Their interest in continuing to learn drew on earlier school experiences, on the one hand for purposes of gaining greater voice, on the other to meet practical objectives, both enhancing the freedom to exercise agency. Below, the Guanlan Sisters who had left school will show in their strategic life planning how they value education after school.

Agency Freedom

The second dimension, agency freedom, is also an intrinsic aspect of education with cognitive, psychological, economic and political characteristics. Send describes it as a freedom experienced in the educational process. It has extrinsic aspects as well as is clear from the major capability ascribed to it, decision making, or choosing a functioning. Themes we wondered if they would emerge from the interviews included making choices about education; speaking up for self; making strategic life choices.

Making Choices about Education in Difficult Circumstances.

We were well aware of the difficulties in staying in school encountered by girls like the Guanlan Sisters but wondered how their commitment to education was constructed. Three Guanlan Sisters gave unexpectedly decisive answers. Pang Qiuchang said,

Due to the home financial condition, parents asked us to stop going to school after we graduated from primary school. We began to study hard because we knew there would be some chance to continue in school if we were good at it... I started to study hard from 3rd grade in primary school on.

Most of the kids definitely want to go to school, but some of them know their families couldn't afford it anyway, so [they] don't take it too seriously."

The constraining influences for these village children lay on them like a heavy blanket.

Ren Qiqi explained,

It was also my own decision to quit school. I don't want to lay too much burden on my family... My mom and brother asked me not to think too much about money. But it was impossible for to me to ignore it. With that in mind, I couldn't absorb myself in study anyhow. I didn't quit school because of their words. It's my own judgment that it's better for me to learn while working.

Pang Junjun who had brought up that some girls drop out of middle school because they are attracted by the "shiny things" in the city went on with that thought,

As a result, they ruin their school life. But I think those outside things may not suit people my age (age 18-19). Many classmates dropped out at that time (M2 and 3). Now they feel quite uneasy when I meet them. I asked whether they regretted [it] or not. Lots of them regretted [their decisions].

Dong Mingming, the post-secondary student, who was an excellent student (see Table 1), suffered doubts despite her enjoyment of learning, but her parents prevailed,

I wrote a letter to [my parents when in middle school] saying that the family's burden was too heavy and I didn't want to stay in school any longer. No matter how hard [my parents] had to work, they wanted us to learn more and live a better life in the future. I still believe 'knowledge can change your fate.'

The Guanlan Sisters valued education within the context of their families' capabilities and their material context or habitus. As they perceived greater options from the vantage point of the middle school in a less remote town, six of 10 ended their schooling. The older Guanlan Sister had to drop out after primary 6 in 2002[7] already, and two dropped out in the first year of senior high school, when they weighed family pressures against the learning experience in their schools. Two of the better students and their families persevered and were continuing to study in post-secondary technical colleges. Perhaps it is relevant that both of these students grew up in villages in the valley close to the middle school located in the market town, a less remote, less impoverished area than the other Guanlan Sisters from Anjing Gou, perched on the mountain top.

Speaking Up.

In terms of speaking up for themselves, finding their voice in their family, this seemed to be related to age and maturity rather than schooling, as Dong Mingming raised:

I think girls in middle school need more support to stay in school. The transition from middle school to high school is difficult. In middle school, girls tend to be docile, following their parents' words. What the parents say is the rule. At that stage, they need more support and encouragement. When in high school, they will gradually know their own minds.

I told my parents what was on my mind once. [In high school], I was usually quite docile and timid at home, often following parents' directions. I seldom said no to them. That time, I told them I wanted to quit school.

Ren Qiqi told a different story:

When I was young, my mother was ill and my father had to work hard all day, so they didn't have much time to take care of us. So I'm used to being on my own. I was timid when I was very young, but now I'm assertive. I know what's on my mind and I will stick to it. ... Probably from the 9th grade on [at the end of middle school when she left], I have become more thoughtful, more persuasive, and they listen to me ..."

After thinking for a while she continued: "My mother and I, we have also talked about work. She will let me make the decision. She won't force me into marrying someone."

Pang Yang offered, "I would say most of the situations I can make my own decisions [literally: 80%]. If my parents are right, I would follow their opinion; if not, I would discuss it with them. Pang Qiuchang, admittedly past the common marriage age, mentioned that she had discussed marriage, "but not very often, because my parents trust me in making decisions. They would let me to decide... They are too busy to listen to your trivial things ...very rare. They are busy with farming, and are seldom in the mood for discussion."

The Guanlan Sisters had shown (above) when talking about education that they were willing to speak up to be helpful to their parents. By and large they were obedient until after they were on their own, out of school, and not as dependent on their parents. What they did not say,

but we gathered from talking with several of their parents, they sometimes “spoke” with their bodies by going to the city despite what their parents demanded.

Strategic Life Choices.

All these Guanlan Sisters, the eight working in the service industry as well as the two in college, were planning for the future, making strategic choices, all but two are acting on or clear how to act on their plans. Pang Qiuchang as the oldest was most experienced with pursuing opportunities,

After I dropped out, I read some practical books. Besides, I find Chinese course is very useful. It improves my speaking skills... I got this job 3 or 4 years ago. If you want to improve yourself in the work, you need to have some training. If you get the certificate after the training, you will have better chances. I heard about this short term training program in construction accounting and went to find out about it... from my friends. It was my personal decision [to enroll]. I pay for it by myself.

If I transfer to another field, I would need to start from the beginning. Now I am in this field and I find it promising. I want to continue my training in project accounting. But I still find it tough. Besides, most of my classmates graduated from college, at least finished their high school. They are not like me. I just have primary education. My foundation is not solid. It is difficult for me. ... Perseverance is all I have now. (On the verge of crying)

When I first started to work...all the days were boring and confusing. But that's not the same now. Maybe getting older, I am beginning to figure out which direction I should take and what I want.

Pang Yang explained, "I choose to go to technical school after high school entrance examination because I didn't do well in the examination. ... I thought I could learn some skills in technical schools which may be helpful for my future job." However, what she was taught in the school was not practical or useful, and the school had a bad reputation for poor quality, so she quit after one year.

Ren Qiqi, though only 16 years old, had a firm idea of how to proceed,

I think in a more practical way now that I am working than when I was in school. For work ... I need to know how to do things well step by step... I believe as long as I try my best, I can find a way out if anything comes up. I think the environment in the city made me change... First, I should learn to do this job well. I don't mind starting from the very beginning. Mastery of good skills is the foundation. My dream will be realized step by step. I cannot get anywhere just by thinking."

Later, after I have worked for a while, if I get a job in a big advertising company, if I do a good job, it will be necessary to learn English... it's necessary to learn the professional skills. When I can afford it, I will sign up in night classes, in things related to doing make-up, brands of clothes. English as well. I don't want to do a low-skilled job all my life, so I work and study. It's good to rely on myself for further study without having to ask my family for financial support.

Jing Mingming, age 17, who had dropped after two years of middle school and been working for two years, was also a bit confused, “I try my best to earn money now, and then learn some kinds of skills, so that I won’t have to do this low-skilled work [*dagong* [8]] any more. But I don’t know what kind of skill. I’m too young.” Duan Shishi, same age and school history, was able to be more specific, “I think so too. I want to learn something with the money I earn. I think it will benefit me in the future. I want to learn how to do hair style and make-up so I can work in a beauty salon.” Pang Junjun, who had just had to drop out of the first year of academic senior high school due to financial reasons, was more strategic, “I want to start from the bottom, to earn some money. I read the books and magazines about hotel management and police schools. I have their contact information. I think I’ll go when the time is ripe.” Pang Linshi, same age and schooling as Jing Mingming and Duan Shishi, was quite clear,

I want to learn more about mathematics and English, calculating. I have little available time, but I think I can get some learning materials, upload them to the computer and learn it. I won’t quit my job because I love it (being a cashier in a supermarket). But I want to learn something. I can decide to spend 30 minutes to an hour every day and learn something by myself.

Dong Mingming, after her 3rd year in an accounting course in post-secondary college, was facing a year of job seeking and was less clear, yet her values shone through: “Right now I feel quite at a loss as to what I want to do for work. I want to work in Xi’an. Xi’an is also closer to my home. I’m the only child in my family still in Shaanxi.”

A theme that emerged while discussing life choices was their wish to take care of their own parents, whether they had brothers or not, though they understood that this was a son's filial duty (see more under aspirations, subjective positionality below). For example, Chen Ling just assumed a re-gendered responsibility as she talked about her strategic life choices, "I want to live together with them. My family situation was bad when I was young, so I hope I can make parents live in a good house in the future, even though I am a girl."

Summary.

The Guanlan Sisters did express agency, first in the decision they made about schooling and its fit within their families' capabilities as well as their material contexts. Despite being bound into closely into their families, as they became adolescents the Guanlan Sisters began to show independence in thinking and action. Some of them talked decisively with their parents about schooling, some went against their parents' wishes. As they stayed in the city longer, they became engaged in imagining new life choices for themselves, and some evidenced strategic planning and actions to further their plans. Most of them attributed this capability to the environment of the city. Ren Qiqi put it succinctly, "After I left the village [zai waimian] and began to work, I have become more optimistic. I believe as long as I try my best, I can find a way out if anything comes up. I think the environment in the city made me change. If I don't change, I won't make progress. It would be like living in the past. I have to adapt to society (the way things are)."

Achievement of Capabilities

The third and final dimension of empowerment, achievement of capabilities or aspirations, that they have reason to value, in my analytical framework consists of three topics of

capabilities. The first describes the political state of condition of a person within a structure (Narayan-Parker, 2005), and instrumental value of education. This includes the themes that Unterhalter and Kabeer emphasize, participation in the distribution of resources in the family and community. This theme is embedded in the community, constraints and supports for schooling. The second topic is both an intrinsic and instrumental aspect of education as well as relational in nature. It entails the themes ability to imagine social change for self and others, taking on a re-gendered identity, a raised level of social consciousness, for example objecting to male dominance/ preference, and generally family role pressures. The third topic of capabilities is the objective state of condition, and instrumental outcome of education. This topic has been commonly explored because it lends itself to measurement, for example, years of schooling, achievement rank within school, or political status in larger units or levels of organizations.

The political and economic conditions within which the Guanlan Sisters function, both family and community constraints, have shown through in their comments on wellbeing and agency freedom, and have previously been detailed in quantitative terms (Seeberg, 2007). The poverty of the villagers can only be described as indigent, extreme poverty: Those whose income, including non-financial, is so low that it does not cover minimal nutritional standards.

Political State or Condition.

The first topic political state or condition of a person within a structure (Narayan-Parker, 2005), particularly the theme of participation in the distribution of resources in the family and community, emerged in the discussion under agency freedom, making choices about education under difficult circumstances in the community (see above). Pang Qiuchang pointed out two scenarios of how children participated in a tacit, unspoken manner regarding the distribution of

resources for their schooling. She and her classmates “knew” that most parents in the village would support only high performing students, so they began to study hard as of primary 3. She also knew that some kids did not try hard, because they knew that their parents could not afford to send them to middle school. In this group of Guanlan Sisters, no one told how they begged their parents to let them stay in school; half of them at some time asked to be allowed to stop being a burden on their family finances and livelihood. Sen’s phrasing that achievement of aspirations depends on what the person has reason to value is well to remember in the Guanlan Sisters’ case. The family livelihood is what they value and it is the cause and content of their achievement.

The material community constraints (see description of the village and economic outline above) made clear that the families in Anjing and surrounding villages were barely scraping by and any monetary outlay such as school fees, rations for school food, constituted an almost insurmountable obstacle (see also Seeberg, Ross, Tan, & Liu, 2007). The burden this placed on the pupils was all too palpable in their stories.

Subjective Positionality or Orientation.

The second topic of achievement capabilities, subjective positionality or orientation, is interwoven with political, economic conditions and the status of cultural traditions in the family but focuses on the participant’s subjective experience of same. In that sense it is both an intrinsic and instrumental aspect of education and substantively relational to others and the environment. The themes within it, such as ability to imagine social change for self and others, and taking on a new identity in the case of the Guanlan Sisters revolved around their gender as well as their rural

status. Previous research of mine and others' has pointed to the centrality of boy-preference in patri-lineal cultures like China (Seeberg, 2007).

For the Guanlan Sisters it directly impacts their participation in school. We asked whether in case of financial difficulties the family will support only their son's schooling and let the girls drop out, and the six Guanlan Sisters in the focus group, in one voice, broke out in hilarious laughter, "of course!" Chen Ling stated flatly, "Boys are more valued." Pang Junjun elaborated, "Some parents wanted sons. So they may give their daughters to others." They did not seem to object to male preference, they stated it as accepted fact.

We met many a second and third daughter in the village who had no birth registration [hukou], which meant they would not be able to get much schooling and no grain rations. In general the expectation in the village was to not bother with the girls' going to school as much. All the Guanlan Sisters confirmed as Ren Qiqi put it, "people in the village prefer sons to daughters. They think since a girl will marry into another family anyway, it doesn't matter whether she goes to school or not."

Yet, in quite a few individual cases among the Guanlan Sisters in general, older siblings, regardless of gender, had decided that they would sacrifice and help support their younger sisters and also brothers to stay in school. For example Ren Qiqi, the determined teenager, told us, "My brother quit school at age 15 when he was in the middle school 2 when my father died. My brother didn't want to stay in school because he wanted me to continue. At that time, I had just finished primary school and didn't want to go further. But he insisted that I continue into middle school, so I had no choice but go on."

Chen Ling, post-secondary student: “Our family situation is not good, so elder sister insisted on going to dagong after middle school. My younger brother also dropped out to dagong so that I could go to university. I feel they sacrificed their happiness and future in order to let me stay in school longer” (crying). Jing Mingming, who quit school after middle school 2, had a similar story, “I have one elder brother and one elder sister. They are much older than me and dropped out very early.”[9] These brothers did not fall into the general patriarchal mold, as did several of the fathers of other Guanlan Sisters. This was neither a unique or common phenomenon, hence at this time, without further research, we can only surmise individual factors were at play.

Dong Mingming mentioned other gender related aspects of their subjective position as girl students. She said, “Teachers usually like students with good grades. They like girls better as they are often docile and hard-working. Boys are usually naughty. But probably because of physiological reasons, boys are clever, and do better on tests. Though boys may play a lot, if they work hard, they can really learn fast; teachers believe they can catch up.” Though at first it seems that girls may benefit from supportive teacher expectations, in the end the traditional gender hierarchy reasserts itself by the ascription of almost magical capabilities to boys. Boys then benefit from teachers’ subjective higher expectations, which will contribute to higher scores on tests – the ultimate measure of who is admitted to better schools at higher levels.

Despite her recognition of boys’ better subjective position in schools, Dong Mingming (post-secondary student) had formed her own and less traditional perspective on girls achieving through schooling:

My schooling is to make me live a better life. Most people think there's no use for girls to go to school. I don't agree. With more knowledge, you can find a better job and you can be economically independent. You don't have to depend on your man. Otherwise, after you get married, you are dependent on your husband; you'll feel inferior to him. You won't feel good when you have to ask for money in case you are in need.

This self sufficiency represents a very strong new social consciousness on gender. Similarly, regarding their “strategic life choices,” the Guanlan Sisters showed a strong streak of independence as women. Taking on care and support of their parents, et al., and repaying them for their sacrifices, emerged as a strong and common theme, which, as pointed out above, signifies a re-gendering of their position in the family which they chose despite tradition.

A positionality theme emerged that we had not anticipated stemming from the remote location of their village. Even in the market township middle school the Guanlan Sisters were stigmatized as backward due to their “mountain” home. North Americans might call this the “hillbilly factor.” Pang Yang, after working in the city for two years, found: “People will show their contempt when they find you are from mountains. They will even look at you in a different way.” Pang Qiuchang continued, “I think so, too. They would ask me where I live. When I told them I live in the mountains where telecommunication is cut off, they would act as if I lived where no human could [literal translation, “even a bird wouldn't ‘poop’ there”]. When asked if her bosses treated her badly because of her mountain background, Pang Yang responded, “Some good bosses do not. But the narrow-minded ones think villagers know nothing and discriminate against them.” Ren Qiqi agreed, “When I got my first job in a store, me, being from the

countryside, compared to other people ... I was made to feel inferior by my co-workers from the city, consciously or unconsciously.” Even college student Dong Mingming experienced discrimination, “A little bit at the beginning,” but she was helped to understand her position in the larger society by a professor, “Later, an instructor told us in the psychology class that we students were all at the same starting line no matter whether we were from the city or the village. Regardless of the differences, we were classmates studying together. What would count was to find a good job after graduation.”

A third theme of positionality emerged strongly in connection with both jobbing and schooling, delaying marriage. At their age, 15 or 16, at the end of middle school 2 or 3 (grade 8 or 9) they were positioned between birth and future family. Parents started looking for go-betweens[10].

Pang Qiuchang, about 26 years of age and single, was clear, “About 15 or 16 years old girls are supposed to be engaged.” Ren Qiqi explained,

In the village, there are girls getting engaged at 17 or 18, some even get married at that age... Many people in the countryside believe it's not useful to go to school. The girls will work outside for two years and then go back to get married... If girls do not dagong, then they will get engaged early. Girls usually get engaged after they work for a while. Not many want to work for a longer time so that they can postpone their engagement or their marriage. Some people think it's quite tiring to dagong out here. After getting married, they don't have to work so hard because they will be supported by someone.

The villagers said there was no use going to school. It would be better to dagong and get married after several years. Such words really make me sick. Probably because we have stayed outside the village for long, we don't want to get married so young... My mother and I, we have also talked about work. She will let me make the decision. She won't force me into marrying someone.

Pang Junjun, who in 2009 had to drop out of a promising high school within the first six months of attending due to tragic family circumstances, was on the verge of getting engaged to a “good match,” a boy with a township residency status [hukou] which she could thereby obtain herself and leave the village for a better life after all.

When they spoke of marrying, their tone of voice indicated clearly that to the Guanlan Sisters this constituted an end to rather than an achievement of aspirations. The end of achievement would be to continue the life lead by their mothers, in the mountains, “working in the field” [*zhong tian*] growing crops and having several babies. Pang Lishi saw it this way,

It's much different to have many kids and have few kids, not just for education, but also for their appearance. A child with many siblings cannot have good support in terms of clothes, food, living and transportation. If you have only one child, she can have a better education.

Dong Mingming, in year 3 of college, saw marriage in the village from a remove: Now girls my age or younger than me back in the village, all are married, and their children have reached knee-height. As my mom said, though they earned some money after they quit school early by jobbing outside for several years, they

will stay in the village all their life. One girl who is two months older than me has two kids, one is over 3, and the baby is getting on one year old.

She took an independent position on her own marriage prospects, though she could not take full ownership of the position,

Surely [we] will find a mate by ourselves. My mother of course wants us to find a man from a good background to let us lead a good life. I don't quite agree. I think you do not know the man well no matter how good a family he's from. You do not know whether you'll get along with each other and it won't ensure me a happy life in the future.

The stories of other Guanlan Sisters who had returned to the village told that in the past five years or so village girls would drop out in middle school, work in a city for a few years while their parents arranged an engagement, and would return to the village at 18 to 20 to get married. A few had escaped what the 10 Guanlan Sisters in the city considered a fate to which they did not aspire, as their strategic life planning had indicated, but from which they had not liberated themselves.

Achievement as an Objective State or Condition.

The third topic under achievement capabilities, an objective state or condition, is often the proxy measure for the subjectively experienced and holistically conceived elements of the previous two topics. This instrumental topic includes themes of school attainment and awards, postponement of marriage and desirable work.

In terms of school attainment, as their capabilities expanded, the Guanlan Sisters weighed family pressures against their learning experience in the schools. Eight discontinued schooling before, during and after middle school, half of them not completing the compulsory nine years of schooling, and two of the better students continued to post-secondary technical colleges. From the records of the 58 Guanlan Sisters we know that in the early years of the 2000-2010 decade, most students attained only a primary 6 level if that, so the 10 Sisters in this sample achieved at a much higher level though their attainment was only two to three years higher. Achieving acceptance into middle school entailed changing habitus from the village to the market town and from the parents' home to the dormitories or rooming in with a township family.

Obtaining work in the city was a desirable due to its location rather than the nature of the work for eight of the Guanlan Sisters. One had planned and obtained work she desired and another had reevaluated her work as a desirable achievement. All of them were aware of their work and independent status in the city as a hedge against early marriage and all were engaged in strategic life planning to prolong their single status.

Summary.

For the Guanlan Sisters, schooling was intimately connected with achievement of a better life, not simply in that it may lead to a job or better work, but to an improvement of life for the entire family and the next generation. From their position jobbing or attending post-secondary college in a city near to their family, the Guanlan Sisters were able to imagine social change for themselves and others, specifically in their relation to their birth families. They objected to discrimination on the basis of their remote mountain village [hukou] and background. They took on a re-gendered notion of filial piety, and two of them saw in their brothers as role models who

supported their schooling against the overwhelmingly patriarchal ethos of the village. Despite their clear understanding that boys were still more valued by others, their own level of social consciousness was raised while processing the family role pressures, for example in relation to marrying. At least in the context of our interviews this summer, the Guanlan Sisters did not express objection to the prevailing son-preference, though they sought alternatives and were making strategic life plans outside of marrying and returning to “grow crops” [zhong tie] and have babies.

Conclusion

The empowerment dimensions as Sen proposes them, elaborated by Nussbaum, Kabeer, Unterhalter, and Stromquist, from which I developed an analytical framework served well to bring out and evaluate the voices of the Guanlan Sisters regarding how they made meaning of the education they accessed. We learned how and what the Guanlan Sisters valued in their world related to education, how empowerment takes place, which contributes to the growing cross cultural literature on capabilities and empowerment for marginalized girls. The functionings that the above authors proposed as essential elements of the concepts of wellbeing, agency freedom, and achievement of capabilities or aspirations, emerged as themes in the voices of the girls.

Weaving the themes into one collective story, the Guanlan Sisters, in moving from their remote homes to the middle school and in learning in school along the way, enhanced their capabilities and hence their freedom to achieve “alternative functioning combinations from [they] can choose” (Sen, 1999, p. 75), the definition of empowerment. The Guanlan Sisters developed a capability of self-expression and confidence, enough to formulate strategic life choices. They perceived the possibility of change and expected to invest boundless energy in new vectors of

functioning (Sen, 1999). Achieving access to opportunities to improve themselves, to delay marriage, shows that they imagined a re-gendered identity and achieved the freedom of a newly adapted social position in their birth family. These were the reasons they valued education as allowing them to flourish, to achieve in a broad sense. Similar to what Nussbaum observed (2003) of girls in southern Sudan, hope for empowerment is reflected in the stories they tell.

Empowerment is linked to the capabilities that any groups of girls develop within the contexts in which they live.

For the Guanlan Sisters, the restrictions of their birth and residency status in a remote mountain village, extreme family poverty, and their gender positionality with implications for marriage, remain as extremely limiting conditions. Within these the Guanlan Sisters actively negotiated their freedoms. However, as Monkman (1998) found in her analysis of training programs for women, a difficulty the Guanlan Sisters would encounter would be to sustain a sense of empowerment in the face of a harsh socio-cultural environment. They could sustain the “‘mental space’ [to] draw out the value of [their] own humanity” (Nussbaum, 2004, pp. 335-336) which they had cultivated along the way and pass it on to their children:

I think my future daughter should go to a more developed big city to seek self-development. If she lives in our village where everyone lives in the same way, she won't have any motivation to improve herself. If she lives in the bigger cities which are developing faster, she will be under the pressure and definitely motivated to improve herself. She needs to have a happy life and a comparatively better living environment (Pang Yang, 2010).

These hopes and achieved freedoms have collective consequences as the World Bank (2007) concluded from numerous cross-cultural studies, “keeping girls in school who otherwise would have dropped out did not only increase learning, but delay marriage and reduced [early] pregnancy changing the pattern in the villages” (n.p.). Monkman (1998) reminds us in turn that “experiences of a collective nature can be more dynamic and achieve greater results in empowering the participants and effecting positive social change” (p. 499). This theme is taken up in several other contributions in this special issue.

Of course the Guanlan Sisters explicitly valued economic improvement as an aspect of their aspirations for a better life. This has been the focus in educational policy in the international development community. World Bank president Robert B. Zoellick (World Bank, 2009) summed up a consensus among development agencies [11] in a press release launching a private-public initiative to empower adolescent girls “investing in adolescent girls is precisely the catalyst poor countries need to overcome poverty. Investing in them is not only fair — it is a smart economic move” (n.p.). Research has shown that control of resources by girls and women is fundamental to improving the wellbeing of girls and their families. Girls are central to supporting the transfer of wealth from generation to generation and breaking poverty cycles. Macro-structural and policy changes are the stage upon which adolescent girls act out their agency. The policies can provide the scaffolding for adolescent girls to enhance their capabilities and pursue the aspirations that they have reason to value.

This paper hopes to have increased our insight into how that process works so that policy may better apply levers and scaffolding in the right places. In conclusion, I concur with the argument by Sen and others that addressing how and what people value in their world related to

education, what economists call the intangible demand-side factors, is essential for formulating effective educational development policy and movement toward the Millennium Development Goals.

Post-Script

An example of a policy that might apply levers to lift marginalized village girls onto the path to achieve what they value is to provide them with the scaffolding to acquire more skills, or functionings as Sen (1999) calls it. The Guanlan Sisters' stories showed how unfunded mandates, such as English instruction from grade 3 without the provision of English teachers or enough funds for all kinds of primary teachers in remote rural areas, hinder girls from developing their capabilities in middle school, contributing to an early termination of formal learning. On the other hand, short-term and medium-term skills training applicable to the local economic context would be taken advantage of by middle school leavers like the Guanlan Sisters and would expand their of capability vectors (Sen, 1999). The training itself and the greater choices of functionings, jobs, would also keep young women from returning too early to the village to grow insufficient food and produce too many children too early to feed. Training would enable them to realize strategic life choices which would contribute to economic development in medium-sized towns to which they have access and possibly provide new resources in the depopulating villages of their parents' home, -- contributing to collective or national development in the developmentalist sense.

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Endnotes

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[2] The old adage, you can take a horse to the water, but you can't make it drink – unless it is thirsty, comes to mind.

[3] Other examples of the use of the human development and capability approach in large-scale development work in general are the UNDP's Human Development Reports, the Human Development Index, the Gender Development Index and the Gender Empowerment Measure, attempting global measurements of capabilities. Unterhalter (2007) points to the work of Alkire (2003) on Pakistani women's improved status and self-regard and Robeyns (2003) look at how capability approach evaluation for policy purposes can be constructed with local participation. Narayan-Parker (2005) has developed evaluation measures of empowerment in her work with the World Bank, as have Alsop and Heinsohn (2005). CARE (2006) uses a

framework to guide its girls' and women's education initiative that includes attainment, equality, empowerment and quality.

[4] Robeyns (2003) explored how a capability approach evaluation for policy purposes can be constructed with local participation. Unterhalter (2007) points to the evaluation work of Alkire (2003) on Pakistani women's improved status and self-regard and

[5] All person and local place names are pseudonyms.

[6] "Post-secondary college" and "post-secondary" will be used interchangeably in this paper. In international terms, these institutions did require entrants to take the national university entrance examination; however, as the institutions are locally administered, and we are not clear whether these Guanlan Sisters are enrolled in three-year certificate or four-year degree programs, the term "post-secondary" was chosen.

[7] Between 2002 and 2008 great changes reached the rural communities of western China due to government policy supporting universal compulsory schooling through grade 9 and the speed of infrastructure expansion bringing construction and industrial development to western China. The impact of the first 10 years' of changes on the village girls' lives will be explored in a forthcoming manuscript.

[8] Dagong 打工 translates literally to "to hit work," get a job; however, in the rural context it means to leave the village for work elsewhere, usually temporary low-skilled labor, and is classified as migrant labor. Dagong will be used from here on in this paper and sometimes translated as "jobbing."

[9] In these stories we also see reflected the changes in the first decade of the 21st century; older siblings tended to drop out earlier than middle school since it had not been emphasized as compulsory schooling.

[10] A go-between is an unofficial match-maker, rather a person who knows two parties, for example, a relative who lives elsewhere, a friend in another village, someone on a job.

[11] ExxonMobil's Women's Initiative, Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women initiative, Nike's Girl Effect, Clinton Global Initiative, CARE, Camfed International, Oxfam, Plan International, Vital Voices, Women for Women International.

