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Village Girls' Schooling Matters: Attainment, Empowerment Capabilities & Achievement

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Village Girls' Schooling Matters: Attainment, Empowerment Capabilities & Achievement

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between village girls' schooling, their intrinsic capabilities and achieved re-gendered identities in western China during the tumultuous first decade of the 21st century.

Using an *empowerment-capability* framework developed by Seeberg (Seeberg and Lou 2012 forthcoming) which focuses Sen's *capability approach* on rural girls¹ schooling, we seek to explain what village girls themselves said they got out of schooling. In interviews 23 girls and young women from one village described how they *valued* certain *functionings* of *well-being*, *agency* and *achievement*, and how these were associated with attainment levels in schooling. We found that with rising attainment the girls gained empowerment capabilities and achieved more socially just gender identities. These gains were unequally distributed, neatly slicing the group into two clusters with distinct life paths. One cluster was composed of students who discontinued schooling in grades seven through nine and had gained a smaller set of empowerment capabilities and achievement, yet enough to leave the village for low-skilled jobs in cities where new opportunities allowed them to aspire to new functionings. The other cluster of girls who advanced through high school and college gained a larger set of empowering capabilities that they converted into more choices and freedoms and achieved more stable re-gendered identities. Both clusters achieved some re-gendered identity functionings, particularly some delay in marriage and decreased preference for boys and numerous children, which will enable them "to lead longer, freer and more fruitful lives, in addition to the role they have in promoting

productivity and economic growth or individual incomes” (Sen, 1997, p. 1961) than did their mothers and even 10-year older cousins. The boarder-middle school experience seems to inoculate the GS against the worst vulnerabilities of their gender associated with family life.

Key words: rural girls’ schooling, empowerment, capabilities approach

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Village Girls Schooling Matters: Attainment, Empowerment Capabilities & Achievement

Introduction

Village girls over the past decade in remote areas of west China, well beyond the edge of globalization, have been pushing their way into schools. Despite their triple marginalization, extreme family poverty, the vulnerabilities and low status of their gender, the remoteness of their villages, as well as deplorably poor schools, they persist in seeking an education (Seeberg 2006, 2007, 2011; Seeberg, Ross, Tan, & Liu 2007).

Internationally, a persuasive body of evidence has been gathered on the beneficial transgenerational effects of girls' schooling, delayed marriage, reduced number of children, improved family health care, and their children's well-being (for a summary see Seeberg and Ross, 2007). These studies tend to see girls and young women as "instruments" for development. Since the 1980s, development literature has shifted attention to the notion of *empowerment* to explain beneficial individual and social outcomes, most often from a human capital economic development perspective. In the educational development literature, other empowerment has become a sine qua non as both process and outcome of schooling, but the empirical literature is limited. UNICEF (2004) in its *World Children's Report* proposed improved confidence, sense of well-being, status in the family, and delayed marriage as elements of empowerment. Sen (1999), Kabeer (1999), Nussbaum (2000, 2011b), and Unterhalter (2007) suggest a different approach concerned with social justice that centers the girls/women as actors who seek to better fulfill their potential, to flourish. Stromquist (1995) has contributed valuable socio-political perspectives on empowerment. China's girls in remote villages, who despite experiencing double

marginalization, rise to the challenge of getting an education, can be seen to illustrate those “beings and doings.”

Seeberg (2011) developed a related empowerment framework which aims to identify pathways that expand “human freedom to live the kinds of lives that people have reason to value ... more fruitful lives” (Sen 1997, p. 1961). It intends to capture dynamic movement in educational *functioning* but does not specify thresholds or ranges of functionings. It can partially fulfill the evaluatory objective necessary for policy formation in that it characterizes the *functionings* that are *valued* by village girls and young women related to school. These *beings and doings* provide the motivation for continued schooling hence they are essential policy goals and implementation.

Purpose of the Study

Using an *empowerment-capability* framework (Seeberg and Liu, 2012 forthcoming) which applies Sen’s *capability approach* to rural Chinese girls’ schooling², we explore what village girls felt they got out of schooling, specifically what intrinsic empowerment capabilities and achievement they gained through schooling.

In the remote villages of western China, minimal human rights *minimal social justice* (Nussbaum 2011) obtains. Multiple *deprivations of freedom* (Sen, 1999) constrain girls’ attempts to develop capabilities, yet they struggle to break out. We set out to understand this process because it can show us how change occurs and what potential for social and individual social justice is embedded in the change.

Answering this question for village girls in western China through the lens of the empowerment-capability framework by implication can help us understand apparently similar trends across the developing world. It can also provide themes and guides and priorities for policy formation.

We ask in this study, which of the theorized functionings of intrinsic empowerment-capabilities of *well-being* and *agency* do the participants associate with schooling, and with what levels of school attainment? And, of the theorized *achievements* related to gender identity changes, which are associated with the participants' school attainment? As qualitative researchers we are interested to find the characteristics of the lived experiences and the interpretations the participants make and act upon, and, in particular, whether theorized functionings are empowering and can substantiate theorized empowerment-capabilities.

The Empowerment-Capability Framework

Theorized dimensions of freedom, capabilities and their related functionings need to be operationalized in relation to education and its empowering possibilities (Seeberg, 2007, 2011, 2012 forthcoming). The analytical framework proposed by Seeberg in Table 1. draws on the work of Nussbaum (2000, 2011b) Stromquist's (1995) , Kabeer (1999), Unterhalter (2007) and Appadurai (2004) in addition to Sen.

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Table 1 Empowerment-Capability for Education, Analytical Framework45

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Methodology

The present paper derives from a 10-year, long-term study of the impact of a scholarship program in a village. For this study we used interviews conducted in the summer of 2010, and sparingly included voices from earlier letters or subsequent QQ email. As is common of qualitative basic interview projects, our research design is recursive, starting with a theoretical conceptualization, followed by semi-structured interviewing, a reiterative process of coding and analyzing using the empowerment-capability framework. We conclude with an interpretation of the rich theoretical description and draw implications for a more general theoretical dimension or issue (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995).

Participants

The participants, known as the Guanlan Sisters (GS) resided in a cluster of villages and attended the same school district. They had been and some continued to be recipients of a partial scholarship support extended to girls in that district, which was funded by a small, U.S. based foundation, between 2000 and 2011³. The scholarship was founded and lead by the principal investigator (PI). In summer 2010, the participants voluntarily responded to solicitation from the scholarship representative in the village. Most of the participants had been in mail and some telephone contact with the PI and various assistants for several years as part of the scholarship program.

Of the 20 interview participants, 1 was a primary school graduate in her late 20's, 11 were middle school graduates (6) or incompleters (5), 4 high school graduates or incompleters, 4 college students (see Table 2 Participants' Attainment Level). In the analyses the data revealed that those continuing in schooling, 8 in middle and high school and 4 in higher education, and

those 8 who had terminated schooling, gave different answers, despite having attained the same level of education.⁴ Besides these 20 participants, there were 3 elder Guanlan Sisters from early cohort who were at the mid 20s. We didn't interview them based on the interview protocol like the other 20 younger GS but asked more questions regarding their family background and children. So we separated them from the who were interviewed mainly based on the protocol.

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Table 2. Participant Attainment Level ... p. 45

The participants were contacted in the summer 2010 by the local scholarship representative, a fellow villager, and met with the interviewers voluntarily, at their convenience, and in their home, school, or a local hotel. The RA was close to them in age, herself a Chinese village girl, and the PI was perceived by them as a benevolent grandmotherly figure. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time during the interview. At no time were they pressed to respond.⁵ Because the participants chose their own timing and location and some came together, which may have affected their answers, depending on personality factors.

Interview Process

The P.I. and two R.A.s, both Chinese nationals, developed the interview protocol based on previous research (Seeberg 2006, Seeberg 2007, Seeberg, Ross, Tan, & Liu 2007), familiarity with cultural norms, and structured it around the empowerment-capability framework (see Table 1). The semi-structured interview included 45 open-ended questions. Some theorized functionings had to be explored by several questions, particularly those which were less

situationally and culturally relevant. As is common with semi-structured interview technique, some participants were asked all the questions while others with others some were skipped when they appeared confused or lapsed into silence or embarrassed smiles. However, it is important to remember in the interpretation that the lack of expression does not mean a negative or no answer exists. Particularly the younger GS did not appear to understand some questions along some of the lines of inquiry.

Limitations

A limitation on frank discussion with the Guanlan Sisters was introduced by the strict patriarchal order that silences girls. GS with a few notable exceptions were timid and slow to express themselves and did not easily claim empowerment-capabilities. The principal investigator and her assistant were both aware of these cultural restrictions and worked around them as much as possible. It should be no surprise that GS with higher school attainment were generally more adept at answering.

Positionality of the Researchers

We were sensitive to the double role played by “Guanlan Mama,” the scholarship founder, as the principal investigator. From our local organizer we heard that the GS were excited to meet Guanlan Mama and be interviewed. They treasured the long-time commitment and sincerity of their “mama”, a quality highly prized in traditional Chinese culture. We sensed that certain unspoken parameters would affect the interviews with GS.

At the time, only 8 of the 23 GS were still in school and receiving the scholarship for the coming school year, and might have hoped to receive scholarship for subsequent years. For these GS a conflict might have arisen in terms of wanting to please the interviewer; however, the

magnitude of the scholarship is so small compared to other resource-related factors in the decision to stay in school, and the interview questions were so low-risk and did not address resource availability, that we do not think the dual role compromised the answers in a specific direction. The fact that 15 GS of the 23 participants who were no longer receiving the scholarship volunteered for the interviews also militates against concerns with issues of power relations between the scholarship founder-PI and participants.

We consciously mitigated the dual role of the PI by having the RA conduct the oral interview with some assistance from the PI. It is likely that the GS believed that their scholarship “mama” did not understand much of their dialect or language, hence often spoke as if the PI were not present. In sum, the dual role of the PI made possible the interviews and disposed the participants favorably toward the interviewing process, and which the researchers and the participants shared.

The context of the scholarship gave meaning to the interviews and possibly restricted commentary unnecessarily to school rather than life issues in general. To lessen this narrowed focus, we often prompted them to express themselves more generally about life at school rather than schooling and learning itself.

We believe the research design and expertise of the researchers provide the foundation for credibility in these findings (Seeberg 2006, 2007, Seeberg 2011, Seeberg & Lou 2011; Seeberg, Ross, Tan, & Liu 2007).

The conclusions we draw on our small-sample analysis need further research with more participants to improve the confidence in findings and transferability.

Analysis

The interviews were translated from the sound record by a team of five graduate students in education who were cultural insiders and two trained in English translation. The RA who had attended all interviews, checked and edited the accuracy of all of the translations. To address concerns of credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), each interview was coded twice, once by the RA using NVIVO software, then checked by the PI. The coding framework the empowerment-capability framework (see Table 1), was established a-priori by the PI. The RA and the PI analyzed the coding summary, highlighting relevant and indicative phrasing and summarizing responses writing the draft analysis.

Findings

We will present the findings of the interview analysis in the order of the empowerment-capability framework, after first situating the deeply rooted habitus of the GS.

Habitus, the Guanlan Sisters

We adopted Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus in the empowerment-capability framework, because it theorizes social location as a dynamic process and an inherent interaction between subjective mind or behavior and external opportunity structures. We will briefly sketch five elements of social location: region, socio-economics, Confucian tradition, gender location, and school provision in which the lives and choices of the GS are embedded.

The GS's home is a remote mountain village in Western China, lying at an altitude of 2,000 meters (6,000feet) along the slopes of a mountain gorge. Subsistence farming was nutritionally inadequate and increasingly supplemented by fathers' and/or mothers' small cash

remittances from short-term migrant labor. To the extent it was measurable, family income fell below the \$1-a-day UN extreme poverty line⁶ Hence the county had received an official poverty designation by the PRC central government.

In the village climbing up the sides of steep slopes, long closed in on itself, the Confucian world view permeated village life, emphasizing tight-knit kinship networks and strict role obligations, privileging males and confining females to the household and fields. Son preference was strong in such a harsh, sparse environment. Girls were rather a burden till traded at marriage, a future circumscribed by mother-in-law, children and back-breaking field work. Success, if it were to be obtained, would come through diligence and perseverance -- and education (Ho, 2003). The successful person would be useful to society at large (Hieshima & Schneider, 1994). This web of core values did not incorporate girls, left them without voice, timid and without a way out.

In China, men are more favored than women ... and in remote rural areas like ours, some girls don't get the chance to go to school. I'm a country girl and a victim of this prejudice against women. (GS Qin Ting, 2007, grade 12).

China has a millennium-long tradition of academic credentialism; today the importance of high exam scores required for promotion to senior high school and higher education cannot be overstated. Rural Chinese schooling had been the only channel of social mobility and a narrow passage to employment. The schools in the GS's valley to the extent that they were functional focused on book learning and were fundamentally alienated from village life.

In the 1990s the Chinese central government began aggressively investing in schooling under its "Develop the West" strategy. In the GS's school district, leaky dormitories and

classrooms were repaired, and more remote schools closed in favor of improved, more centrally located schools. However, staff vacancies and severely late teacher salaries (Primary author, 2007, 2010) remained the norm. The GS still scrambled over back country goat paths for an hour or more to get to primary school. On weekends to and from middle school, the GS walked the only recently paved road for four to five hours each way. For most Guanlan families the annual fees and costs (approximating RMB 600 (2011 US \$92) for primary school RMB 1,700 (US \$262) for middle school fees and board, and RMB 7,700 (2011 US \$1,186) for high school tuition, fees and board, were a heavy burden often carried by several family members and relatives. In addition, the indirect utility costs were immense and often took the GS out of school for months at a time. Commonly parents and relatives were chronically ill, unable to perform productive labor, in debt for medical bills, and had younger children to raise.

We are considering the attainment levels of the GS in this study as a context factor, as part of their habitus, rather than as an achievement outcome. To understand the intrinsic meaning that education has for these girls and young women, we explore what they say their enhanced capabilities are by looking at their attainment level. The hypothesis is that enhanced capabilities and gender-identity achievements are associated with additional schooling (see Table 2).

Summary. The habitus of the GS constituted massive constraints that confined them well below a level of *minimal social justice* as defined by Nussbaum (2011b). Yet the GS they sought schooling which often meant giving up one capability or freedom for another, making a *tragic choice* (Nussbaum, 2011b).

Well-being

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Condense well-being and agency
from 18 to 9 pages.¶

In the current manuscript, we were focusing on the *intrinsic empowering capabilities* and what functionings the GS associated with them. The two intrinsic empowerment capabilities are part of Sen's dimensions of well-being and agency. Both these two dimensions and the third, achievement, also are defined by instrumental capabilities, but these are not under investigation in this manuscript. For the dimension of well-being relevant to schooling for the GS we explored the following functionings of intrinsic empowerment capabilities, *enjoyment of learning*, *playfulness* (Nussbaum 2000), *confidence*, *cognitive control* or *reasoning things out* (Nussbaum, 2000, Stromquist, 1995), and *psychological control* (Stromquist, 1995). Our interviews explored other functionings such as *reflective insight* (Nussbaum, 2000) from the literature, however the data showed that they were not functionings valued by the GS. Analyzing their responses, we found that GS drew fewer distinctions between some of the functionings, hence we combined them followingly, a) enjoyment of learning and playfulness, b) confidence and cognitive and psychological control.

Enjoyment of Learning and Playfulness

When we asked the questions regarding enjoyment of learning, some of the 20 GS seemed confused and unresponsive. In the Chinese schooling context, traditionally and until the "suzhi jiaoyu" [quality schooling] reforms trickled down to rural schools in the first decade of the 21st century, the good student was to study hard, and put forth effort; "enjoyment" was not part of schooling. Indeed it seemed foreign to many of the GS. We had to translate "enjoying" [xiang shou], as "liking studying" [xihuan xuexi]. In addition, we circumscribed it as "making you feel happy or joyful."

Among the 12 GS with middle school attainment, school years 6-9, the single primary school graduate, Pang Qiaoqiao, and 3 middle-school GS, Chen Jiajia, Wang Yun, Dang Yanfen, were clear that they liked studying, liked learning "academic knowledge", which "enriches [my] life and makes it more meaningful." They were happy to share the subjects they liked best either because of the course content or the teaching. Another 3 middle school GS, Jing Jian, Pang Ranting, Duan Ranqing didn't respond clearly about liking studying but mentioned liking some subjects and doing poorly in other subjects in middle school. We inferred that they experienced both satisfaction and challenge in middle school. The 4 GS, Pang Shishi, Duan Shishi, Jing Minlin, Pang Linsha who had dropped out during middle school and the middle school graduate who didn't continue to high school mentioned enjoying only primary school, because there had been "no worries," no "pressure to study" and fewer courses. These 4 GS exhibited only a vague understanding of the enjoyment functioning, therefore we cannot say that they had enjoyed schooling and learning. We postulate that their lack of enjoyment may have been a contributing factor for not continuing schooling.

However, among the 4 GS with high school attainment, level 10-12, 3 GS expressed that they enjoyed learning the most in high school because they "learned new things every day," felt "happy and fulfilled." One student Pang Nini was explicit that social relations in high school enhanced her well-being and enjoyment, "I enjoy learning in high school; it brings me happiness. I learn a lot from my friends and teachers. They teach me wisdom about life experiences" . The only GS Pang Ranran who made it into a high school, a vocational one, also made her own decision to drop out after one year because, she said, she did not enjoy learning, the courses were a waste of time, the school was bad, and she was eager to find a job and "gain real life

experience.” For her, she said, not enjoying schooling was one of the biggest contributing factors to dropping out.

For the 4 GS with a 13+ attainment level, college, learning had been enjoyable especially in high school or middle school, and continued to be so. They "enjoyed reading," "studied diligently" and aimed at advancing in higher education. "I enjoyed studying in high school because it kept me busy and I learned a lot" said Chen Yaya. "In high school, all the students were studying hard. The atmosphere was very tense. Gradually I too took the initiative to study" according to Chen Linlin.

In order to get more directly at the notion of enjoyment we also asked 8 of the 20 GS who seemed to catch onto the notion whether they had experienced a sense of "playfulness" in school (Nussbaum, 2000). To get any response from the middle schoolers, we had to specify "what subjects and extra-curricular activities were fun for you?" Six GS, from different attainment levels, answered that extra-curricular activities only were fun, "music - I liked singing and playing table tennis and badminton ... at school" (Pang Ranting). "In high school we had volunteer activities... it was relaxing" (Pang Jin). Only two of the GS, Pang Nini in high school, Dang Yanfen who attended a relatively prestigious urban middle school, answered clearly, "primary school was the most fun... I played all day long with my classmates." For Dang Yanfen "chatting with classmates makes me happy. One of our teachers is very nice to me." Due to the variety of experiences regarding playfulness and relatively small sample, little can be told about how playfulness is associated with attainment level. We can conclude only that students experienced pleasure at playfulness in social relations at various levels of schooling. We can presume that playfulness may contributed to functionings such as confidence/emotional control

which are directly related to progressive school attainment, that is, retention. Only a few high school and college students had written in previous communications that they felt the joy of learning. Dong Miao, as a high schooler and an advanced college student at the time of the interview, had written “when I read a good book, I feel like a hungry person grabbing a piece of bread. I forget about myself when I read ... I feel happy.”

Confidence, Cognitive and Psychological Control

For this intrinsic capability function, we followed three lines of questioning, “are you confident? Do you think education has improved your ability to think? Do you think education makes it easier for you to figure out how to solve a problem? Do you feel you are more psychologically able to withstand stress and pressures?” Culturally speaking, it would be inappropriate for young Chinese girls, especially in the villages, to speak too openly about being confident; the GS admitted only to being more confident than before. They were more able to answer about the cognitive effects of schooling. Almost all participants who were directly asked answered these questions affirmatively. With advancing attainment level, the GS were more positive that their thinking had improved.

Five out of 12 GS with middle school attainment replied positively that they had gained confidence over primary school. Some became more confident as their studies improved, “in teachers’ eyes, what counts is my performance. I become more confident because I have made progress [in my studies]” (Ren Qiqi), others gained confidence as they adjusted to the school life, improved relationships with classmates and overcame difficulties in certain subjects. Three replied negatively that they had lost confidence during schooling, claiming poor performance in some subjects and failure to overcome the difficulties in their studies. Among these 3, Pang

Qiaoqiao, whose parents forced her leave primary school, and who was older than most of the other GS, had become disheartened during her 10 years of unskilled work experience in the city. She said that she had no confidence in herself due to her inadequate education. “Now that I’m working I see clearly that knowledge is power. I don’t have a solid educational foundation. What I know is very shallow and superficial, so I do not feel qualified in my work.” The other four middle school drop-outs, working unskilled jobs in factories or small shops did not express any confidence in themselves either.

In the interviews, we rephrased *cognitive thinking and reasoning skills* as an “ability to figure things out,” or “logical thinking, analytical skills.” Of the GS with middle school attainment, four were silent, but the others spoke about thinking through emotional and ethical problems better now that they were “grown up.” “I used to sort things out in my mind with others’ help; now I can do it independently,” though a few made the cognitive connection, “I get there in my mind faster than I used to,” “the more I learn, the more I can sort things out ... and think logically.” The answers of the high school GS referred to thinking through choices regarding the future, a more complex level of thinking which they attributed to both maturing and knowing more through school. All four college GS agreed that after they got to college and “got in touch with more people, I knew more things, so I could figure out problems more clearly,” and logically.

To explain psychological control functioning, we translated as the “ability to withstand stress,” “solve problems calmly,” and “be in control of one’s emotions.” Seven GS with middle school attainment were asked this question; 5 GS answered that since being away from home in boarding school they had become calmer, braver, and more independent in solving their

problems. "I used to be at odds with my parents over little things very often. But now I see that they have a point sometimes. I understand them better" (Pang Ranting). Dang Yanfen in middle school said she was more able to deal with stress, due to being able to make friends and play with them at school. Studying in the prestigious urban middle school, she averred, "I used to be very emotional and anxious, now I am more rational and calm from reading books." It is unclear from these statements whether being on their own in boarding school or schooling itself contributed to their increased psychological control. The most confident middle school graduate GS Ren Qiqi clearly stated that she was more optimistic than before. "Now I believe as long as I try my best, I can find a way out if any problem that comes up." These GS attributed their improved sense of psychological control to being away at school, getting help from friends and teachers, or participating in activities in school. The answers regarding confidence, cognitive and psychological control that we heard from the middle school GS, whether early leavers or completers, first made us aware of the factor of the boarding middle school per se as different from schooling. The boarding middle school was related to becoming independent and more confident.

Among the 4 high school participants, two were confident and attributed this to teachers' encouragement or the development of academic and social skills. "My teacher tells me that everyone ... has the ability to achieve something. What is different is the degree of hard work and ability. If others can make it, so can I" (Pang Jin). Pang Ranran who dropped out of high school found she had no vocational skills and had lost her confidence toiling in one menial job after another in the big city, "when I tell others that I come from small mountain village, they mock me, saying that even birds won't poop there."

Two of the high school GS, Pang Jin and Pang Nini answered positively that they had improved their cognitive thinking skills, “think more thoroughly” and “ have a clear goal before setting out to do something, knowing how to do it, and what the result will be.” The last GS Pang Ranran answered that she had had lots of new ideas and made plans in high school, though she wasn’t able to carry all of them out.

They also articulated how they were more able to withstand stress as they encountered more pressure. The fiercely-competitive atmosphere in high school pushed them to improve their ability to deal with pressure. “I read a psychology book and it helped me handle my stress about my studies” (Pang Jin). Similar to the case of the middle school students enhancing their psychological functioning in part due to the boarding school factor, the high school students’ experience with hyper competitiveness per se separately from schooling may have contributed to the achievement of valued functionings, enhanced intrinsic capabilities of well-being and more real freedoms.

To our surprise, the college students did not give an affirmative answer to confidence building. They mentioned that had been very confident in high school, but in the context of college, among a larger group of superior students, they had re-evaluated themselves and lost confident. “There is always someone who is better than me. Compared with others, I find that what I know very little” (Chen Yaya).

I used to live in a small circle and knew only a few people. Then I was confident.

But now, as my social circle is much wider, I know more smart people and I feel more pressure. (Qin Ting)

They did, however, talk about how their thinking was “more comprehensive” and “logical” as they advanced through school. They attributed this improved functioning not only to learning but also to socializing with more diverse people and to becoming more mature. Dong Miao reflected, “in middle school, I ... would say anything that came to my mind. In high school, I learned to consider the consequence of my words and think more deeply. In college I made big progress when I met students from different provinces.”

The three college students, like the high school students, mentioned being more able to deal with stress and keep an inner balance between their studies and life. They added that they were more able to deal with loneliness and adjusted better to college life than some of their college mates who had not gone to boarding schools since middle school.

I am more psychologically able to deal with problems or stress in college. Many young college students don't adapt easily college life because their parents were not around. I boarded in high school and became very independent, so I quickly adjusted to life in college. (Qin Ting)

As for the middle and high school students, for the college students, the early removal from the parental village home offered opportunities and challenges from which they gained independence and confidence, greater emotional control, accumulating greater number of vectors of choices in their intrinsic capability sets of well-being, and more real freedoms. However, they also showed unresolved anxiety about having to set post-college goals and make life choices.

Summary of Well-being

For the dimension of well-being, the functionings enjoyment of learning, playfulness, confidence, cognitive control and psychological control emerged in the voices of the GS. The

findings showed that all GSs experienced some well-being related to schooling, at least related to school mates and teachers, and particularly to attending boarding school in their middle school years.

In this set of intrinsic capabilities, a variation emerged associated with continuing in school or terminating in middle school. Those GS who dropped out of middle school did not articulate enjoyment in their studies nor did they appear to be able to answer the confidence and control questions. In other answers we did find that they did not show any kind of confidence in their later working environment. Those GS who continued in middle school and those who had continued to higher attainment levels remarked on improvement on several functionings as they progressed through school.

Most GS who were in school at all attainment levels expressed some enjoyment of learning, despite challenges, and with higher attainment a better ability to express how they enjoyed learning. This is likely associated with enhanced cognitive and psychological control at higher attainment levels and age.

The GS who had terminated schooling, mostly in middle school, did not express themselves regarding enjoyment of learning, but some did enjoy playing with friends, art and extra-curricular activities. It is reasonable to conclude that a low level of enjoyment functioning, lead toward a capability set associated with dropping out, or at least did not prevent dropping out. We conclude that advancing in school and greater enjoyment of learning are cross-related, one contributing to improvement in the other. Low enjoyment, on the other hand, is a significant contributor, to leaving school early - along with other school-related functionings.

Confidence was not a functioning the GS were easily willing to claim as valuable; it is not sanctioned culturally for girls in China especially not in the more traditional villages. Some GS related gaining confidence to support from teachers and classmates. All the GS conflated independence with confidence when they reflected on their middle or high school boarding school years. Only the college GS lost some of their confidence in their learning as they compared themselves to the many, very able college classmates. Even the college GS who claimed some loss of confidence compared themselves favorably on independence to classmates who had not been to boarding schools. The boarding school had offered more opportunities, triggered more choosing to achieve valued functionings. Their confidence peaked in middle and high school. The opportunities embedded in the middle school boarding experience enhanced the intrinsic capabilities sets of achieved well-being and more real freedoms than the confines of their village homes had provided.

As would be expected, with advancing attainment levels, the GSs gained in cognitive and psychological control functionings, which they attributed to a) schooling opportunities to learn more, to help from teachers, and b) to independence gained by boarding and socializing at school, away from their parents.

We add as a caution that some of the enhancement of functionings, for example independence and psychological control in the middle school years, is attributable directly to age-related human development, which we did not explore.

Agency

The second dimension of freedom, agency, is on its face the capability set most readily associated with empowerment. Sen and Kabeer focus their discussion of agency on conversion of

resources into capabilities, or the ability to convert resources into valued functionings “that causally influence the effective freedoms that people actually enjoy” (Sen 1997, p. 1961).

Neither Sen nor Kabeer indicate a clear distinction between aspirations and concrete actions. We find that Appadurai adds a significant aspect to the concept of agency when he points out that individuals must have a *capacity to aspire* before they can pursue or act. In this study we defined the dimension of agency as consisting of the capability to *choose a functioning* (Sen, 1999), *decision making with negotiation power* (Kabeer, 1999), and the *capacity to aspire* (Appadurai, 2004). In relation to schooling, the interview questions asked about *choosing a specific learning, making strategic life choices* (Kabeer 1999), and *aspiration*, and about *self-expression* (Unterhalter, 2007) by using Kabeer’s (1999) *speaking up on own behalf*.

In the first pass over the data, we found that the first three functionings, *choosing, making, and aspiring*, were frequently confounded. Differences in these functionings sharply divided the GS into those still in school at various attainment levels and those 6 who had left school. Those who had terminated their schooling, largely spoke about aspirations or wishes. Those who remained in school on the whole had strategically applied themselves to making life choices, had converted resources into exercising agency functioning. Individual factors rather than attainment level also played a role in determining the level of putting aspirations into action.

Choose Learning Something Specific, Make Strategic Life Choices, Capacity To Aspire

Three GS, Duan Linxia, Jing Weiwei, Pang Qiaoqiao, had dropped out of before finishing middle school (Duan Linxia and Jing Weiwei were only partially interviewed), were 10 years older than the others. Duan Linxia and Jing Weiwei were married with children and farming in the village. Duan Linxia was confined to her birthing bed for her 2nd child, a daughter,

after doing migrant work in the city along with her farmer husband and first child, a son. She was in the village temporarily to take care of her old parents and children, but she and her husband planned to get back to the city when the so they could enroll in a better city school.

The other GS Pang Qiaoqiao had left the village right after primary school, working for years as a clerk on a construction site. She was still single and had enrolled in a four-month training program on construction projects budgeting. "If you want to get promoted in the company, you need to get some training.... I want to improve my skills," she said. Years of working in the city opened opportunities for her to make strategic choices to further her professional skills. However, her low school attainment level had limited her capability set, "even very simple problems taught in class, high school graduates seemed to have no difficulty solving, but for me, it was hard."

The 4 middle school dropouts spoke at length about how they wanted to learn more, though their interests were specific they were not necessary strategic, varying from English, mathematics, piano, computer to hair styling and cosmetics. They had found work in factories, supermarkets, and small shops and rarely had time to plan or enough money to realize suitable career training. Pang Ranran bought "books on sales skills to read." They had no family resources to convert into action. Their habitus and low school attainment constrained them to unsatisfying low-skilled jobs.

I work in a supermarket as a cashier... Sometimes the boss asks me to do some calculations. So ... I want to learn more about mathematics... in a training seminar ... or I can get some learning materials from the web [at an internet café]

... maybe spend 30 minutes or an hour every day to learn it by myself. (Pang Linsha)

Only Ren Qiqi had strategically converted her aspiration into a vocational choice that could advance her capability set. Due to the huge market for hair styling in urban China, many opportunities are available to those willing to work long hours as apprentices in tiny beauty salons. Ren Qiqi had loved fine arts in school, but after calculating the cost of seven years, high school and college fine art schools decided apprenticing in a beauty salon would help her become a cosmetician where she could use her arts. Ren Qiqi was already tired of apprenticing and aspired to more professional training, possibly in business. Ren Qiqi converted her intrinsic well-being functioning into an instrumental functioning wherein she allocated her resources to strategic life plan - agency exercised. This is one of several examples among these GS where individual factors clearly contribute more than attainment level to enhancing life-changing vectors of functioning.

All of the other 6 GS who were continuing in middle school were making strategic choices and investing all available resources in studying for promotion to the next level. First they belittled their performance and then vowed that through diligence they would progress. "I am not good at mathematics. But I can make much progress by doing more exercises and asking teachers and classmates" (Duan Ranqing). They "took every minute" to learn the subjects they were interested in or "purchase books", "ask classmates questions" on subjects they were poor at. Three of them specifically said "I never think of dropping out", and aimed at getting into good high schools via hard work. Dang Yanfen said, "My short-time goal is to study hard and get into Shanglou High School, the best in the county capital, which is very competitive." Jing Jian

estimated that she had little chance to get into an academic high school, but, "I will persuade my parents to support me in vocational school." Only Pang Yantin was less sure, "I will see what I can do after graduating from middle school." During this stage, going to high school was their prime goal.

Like the above 6 middle schoolers, the 2 high schoolers articulated their dedication to studying hard to continue schooling. The other 2 high school leavers, Pang Junjun and Pang Ranran, made different choices. Pang Ranran, frustrated with poor education quality in her vocational school, chose to leave school to get practical experiences in the work environment. However, she kept on learning by reading books and strived to plan a better future. Pang Junjun on the other hand was forced to leave school because she had run out of money and instead accepted an engagement. With the help of the scholarship she chose to go back to a vocational school and broke up her engagement. To conclude, GS in this stage of school attainment were clearer about what they wanted and turned their aspirations into strategic choices for their future.

The college students had already converted an interest in learning into a strategic life choice.

As I'm faced with graduation [with an accounting degree], I would like to learn something practical. In school, what we've learned is mostly theoretical, not so useful in the real life. So I plan to get something practical experience. (Dong Miao)

A year later, Dong Miao wrote that she had gotten an accounting job in Lhasa where there were more opportunities than in the interior provinces.

In order to learn about the GS' aspirations for the future, we asked the question, "what do you want to do in the future, do you have any job or further education plans?" All the GS who were asked the question, no matter at what attainment level, had some idea for a future career.

Three middle school GS's spoke of dreams of becoming doctors, nurses, or work in a large company. Two others had thought about their wishes more concretely. Jing Jian said, "I have two ideas for what I shall do after graduating from middle school. One is to study singing; the other is to learn nursing. Because I am a kid from a village, being a nurse suits me."

The high school and college GS aspired to becoming teachers, or office workers, aspirations that were related to their education. "I want to be a high school history teacher, because I am studying history in college" (Chen Yaya). "My major in college is marketing, so I want to work in a marketing company. Right now I want to find a part-time marketing job, so that I can get experience" (Chen Linlin).

Only two of GSs' responses exhibited the insight and reflection that Nussbaum (2000) attributed to an education capability. Since the responses were given by GS at the opposite end of the attainment levels, both of whom were older than most of the other GS, we conclude that these were individual age-related factors of human development. Dong Miaomiao, the college senior, wanted to create a new, re-gendered role for herself in society,

My schooling is to make me live a better life... With more knowledge, I can find a better job and be economically independent. I won't have to depend on a man. Otherwise, after I got married, I would have to depend on my husband and feel inferior to him.

Pang Qiaoqiao, the older primary school graduate, thought of herself as having few prospects, but held an aspiration for the next generation,

I would want my future daughter to go to a more advanced big city to seek self-development. If girls stay in our village where everyone lives in the same way, they won't have any motivation to improve themselves.

Speak up on Own Behalf

Intending to know whether and when the GS would speak up on their own behalf, we found that most of the GS still in school gave us more assertive answers, but 5 who had dropped out did not appear to know what to say. Ren Qiqi, the confident and out-of-school middle school graduate, raised an interesting point.

When I was young, my mother was very sick and my father had to work hard all day, they didn't have much time to take care of us. So I'm used to being on my own. Now I'm assertive. I know my own mind and I stick to it.

Two of the continuing middle school participants answered that they became more able to express themselves in middle school and won more respect in their family. Pang Ranting said "when discussing something about our family or about me, before my parents did not always take all factors into consideration. Now they ask for my opinion." Dang Yanfen proudly told,

My parents have asked for my opinion in decisions on family issues, and sometimes my dad has accepted my advice. For example, my dad quit smoking because of my advice. I encourage my mother not to be depressed about her illness.

At middle school attainment level, the in-school GS were only somewhat more outspoken than the out-of school GS.

Of the 4 GS in high school, 3 spoke up more bravely at home, even when relatives disagreed with them. Pang Nini was one of the more outspoken,

Actually since I went to high school, I argue with my parents more often and tell them my own point of view. If my opinion is reasonable, my parents, especially my father, will agree with me, but not often.

Right after I graduated from middle school, they introduced me to a lot of boys from our village, and asked me if I was willing to get engaged? I said no, I want to go to college, and I don't want to get married to someone in the village. They listened to me.

Of the 4 GS in college, 2 spoke up at home with very different stories about how their parents disagreed with them.

In middle school, I didn't dare tell my parents what I wanted. But in high school, when my mom said it's not necessary for me to get more education because I'm a girl, I argued with her and told her I wanted to go to the university. (Chen Yaya, college student)

One time when I was in high school, I did speak up. I wrote a letter to my parents, that I didn't want to stay in school any longer because the financial burden was too heavy on the family. My parents didn't agree and told me that they believed "knowledge can change your fate," and I stayed.

The courage to speak out seemed to be associated with the more confident GS regardless of attainment level, though the strength and clarity of speaking out increased with higher school attainment.

Summary of Agency

The dimension agency is the most overtly related to empowerment capabilities. The data for *choose a specific learning, make strategic life choices* (Kabeer 1999) *capacity to aspire* (Appadurai, 2004) overlapped strongly, hence we analyzed them together. *Speaking up on own behalf* showed different and more common relationship with attainment in schooling.

The GS divided sharply on the functioning, *aspiring-choosing-making* by whether they had terminated or continued in school. The former largely expressed aspirations or wishes, the latter had strategically converted resources into exercising agency. For the in-school GS, higher the school attainment levels, were related to greater clarity of aspirations and plans. Individual factors rather than attainment level also played a role in determining the extent of transforming aspirations into action.

We found that holding aspirations was one of the strongest functionings among all the GS, that it was often put into improving skills or learning rather than materialist objectives. Only with college level attainment were GS able to effectively convert their aspirations into practical career goals.

Speaking out on own behalf was a functioning not highly endorsed by GS. In general they were reserved and as one said, docile at home. Individual variation on confidence was co-associated with speaking out, such that strength and clarity of speaking out increased with rising school attainment.

Achievement

Re-gendered identity, late marriage

Almost all the GS at all attainment levels showed a strong re-gendered identity in two *functionings*, one, their views toward future sons or daughters, two, their views toward caring for their aging parents. Most of them hoped for only one child in the future, regardless of daughter or son. Some GS preferred a daughter, which goes against the traditional male-preference still prevalent in the village. Most families in the village were still having at least two and more children because they kept wanting sons. The Guanlan Sisters expressed concern with being able to care properly for more than one child.

The second functioning was that they gladly accepted the responsibility of caring for their parents, whether with or without their brothers. The tradition deeply rooted in the village was that sons should shoulder the full responsibility of caring old parents, while daughters should help their husbands to care for parents-in-law. This custom is one of the underlying reasons for current village parents preference for a son and investing in a son's education.

The GS unanimous and fervent willingness to take more responsibility or help their brothers, indicates a strong re-gendered identity. Schooling attainment levels made a difference only insofar as greater articulateness about their aspirations for their parents. Chen Linlin, the college GS, "would try my best to make my parents live in a good house in the future. In the city, I see many old people will go to the large park to dance, do Taiji (slow boxing), practice calligraphy in the morning. ... I will let my parents enjoy their lives in the city." Here the location of the GS in the city is a more important stimulus to her aspirations than schooling level.

GS also shows re-gendered identity in other aspects, where those with a higher attainment level were more articulate. GS with attainment 6-9 and 10-12 expressed that girls and boys should enjoy equal educational rights and support. But the college GS, attainment 13 or above, not only agreed with this point, but also stated that girls are equally capable and achievement oriented. Chen Yaya's uncle wanted her to drop out because a girl was unlike boys who have an "indomitable spirit." Chen Yaya recalled that she audaciously answered back to her elder, "why can't girls have an indomitable spirit," and refused to leave school despite continuous nagging from her mom. She avoided going home throughout her high school years until she was finally accepted by a university, displaying a strongly re-gendered identity and indomitable spirit. Dong Miao, also a college student, wanted to get a good job so she would not have to depend on a man as future husband, although her mother was trying to marry her off to a man with good economic background.

However, the GS also articulated some traditional opinions regarding their gender identity. Some of the middle school dropouts hoped to get married early because "after marrying someone, you don't have to make a living 'outside.'" A few of the lower attainment GS also felt that boys did better on the exams than girls, although they did not study well, and that they were better in science in middle school.

The second achievement functioning we explored is delayed marriage, and we found that the longer a GS stayed in school, the more likely she was to delay marriage. In the village it was traditional to start arranging marriage for the girls at age 16-17 to be consummated at 18-19.

Most of the GS who were still in middle school were too young to think about marriage. However, once they would drop out of middle school or early high school, they would be targeted by matchmakers or other families with single sons. The reason, given by one GS's mother was that "in a normal year, there are 5 to 6 young men in our small village who reach marriage age but cannot find a wife. This is due to the shortage of girls on one hand, and the young men's poor family condition on the other hand." Among our middle school dropouts, two were engaged soon after leaving school at 17 years old. The others were 16 years old and had just left school a month earlier at the research time and had not yet received a proposal.

The GS talked about the constant persuasion by family elders, matchmakers and other village families with sons to make a match. Only if the girls showed the aptitude to stay in school and only if their parents supported them, would they evade the matchmakers and suitor families. Pang Nini, a high school student, whose parents did not unanimously support her schooling, chose to stay in the boarding school dorm during breaks so as to avoid the incessant urging. Two other GS who were doing well in high school and were approaching 18 years of age had refused a couple of proposals either through sheer determination against their parents' wishes or with their help. One GS who had to drop out of high school for a semester, broke her engagement as soon as she got back into school.

As the GS advanced to higher attainment levels, they were more articulate about the bad effects of early marriage, as the college student Chen Yaya said, "getting married too early would create burden, it would negatively affect my future job or other aspects". GS in college had already reached the age of 20 without getting engaged. Two of them articulated a willingness to "consider marriage after graduating from the college".

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to understand a process of change occurring in remote western China, where minimal social justice is lacking. We sought to understand girls seeking and education and what the potential for greater social and individual justice may be. We used Seeberg's empowerment-capability framework applied to schooling as the lens for understanding. The framework is based in large part on Sen's human development and capability approach, wherein enhancing capability sets directly and indirectly benefits the "expansion of human freedom to live the kinds of lives that people have reason to value, ... more fruitful lives" (Sen 1997, p. 1961). We asked the following research questions. One, which theorized functionings of intrinsic empowering capabilities of *well-being* and *agency* are associated with schooling? And, two, with what levels of school attainment are these functionings associated? In this discussion section, we will draw conclusions about the nature of the relationship between schooling and empowerment capabilities.

Through the early stages of analysis, we identified the functionings as they emerged in the interviews. The voices of the GS told us which functionings associated with schooling were valued by the GS and what that pattern was. We continue to remind ourselves and the reader that lack of expression does not mean the GS had no response only that she did not answer at that time. One explanation of silence might also be constraints introduced by a patriarchal culture that silences girls.

Well-being is perhaps the essential intrinsic *substantive freedom* to be obtained by achieving *alternative functioning combinations*. We were curious to see if the GS associated well-being with their school experience given its traditional rigidly rote style, a curriculum

alienated from their village lives, and its inferior quality and status. The two functionings we identified as related to schooling were enjoyment of learning or playfulness and confidence, cognitive & psychological control. For the GS we had to explain the idea of enjoyment in relation to schooling, to transform the Chinese cultural precept that the value of education lies in achieving a certificate of completion by diligently applying oneself. However, the GS generally acknowledged that they enjoyed certain periods and aspects of schooling. In the earlier school years the GS enjoyed playfulness and lightheartedness, friends, supportive teachers and arts. As time went by, the rigors of school seemed to outweigh enjoyment. We began to notice a pattern of variation by continuing versus terminating schooling in middle school. Only the GS who continued through high school affirmed a deepening of enjoyment, that the more they learned, the more enriched and fulfilled they felt.

The second functioning of well-being, confidence and cognitive-psychological control, required further cultural translation. GS were not easily willing to claim confidence as valuable; it is not culturally sanctioned for girls especially in the more traditional remote villages. They did speak about independence instead particularly related middle or high school boarding school years. The boarding school, both middle and high, had offered a variety of opportunities, triggered more choices to achieve valued functionings and more freedoms than the confines of their village homes. As expected, the GSs gained in cognitive and psychological control functionings with advancing attainment levels, which they attributed to opportunities to learn more, help from teachers, and to experiences gained by boarding and socializing at school, away from their parents. Unexplored age-related human development can be assumed to also contribute to greater control.

We answered research question one, that the theorized intrinsic well-being functionings were associated with schooling, and, two, that enhancement of this capability set was associated with higher levels of school attainment particularly for those GS who continued in school through high school and above. We noted a related but sufficiently different pattern of association as well. For the middle-school leavers, either by omission, or due to less or no association with learning, these well-being functionings did not construct a capability set that lead to school perseverance.

The second intrinsic capability we explored, *agency*, is the most overtly related to empowerment. We found that for the GS, the three separate functionings we had theorized, aspiring, choosing, and making a choice were often conflated. Holding aspirations was one of the strongest functionings and expressed by most GS, and it was centered on skill improvement or learning rather than anything materialistic. Only those who had expressed the well-being associated with learning, had strategically converted resources into making life choices and exercising agency. The GS who had terminated prior to or in middle school, talked of aspirations or wishes rather than choosing a specific learning, or making strategic choices. These GS rarely had time, enough savings, any disposable family resources, and too little education to convert into strategic action such as suitable career training to leave behind their unsatisfying, low-skilled jobs.

The second agency functioning, speaking out, like confidence, was not culturally valued for girls, particularly village girls, and hence received only some endorsement for the GS. Again those continuing in school were more vocal than those who had terminated, but advancing school attainment was directly related to claims of improved ability to express oneself and gaining more

respect from ones family. For both functionings of the agency empowerment-capability set, individual factors and the well-being function *confidence* played a role in determining the achieved level.

Conclusions

This paper explored the relationship between village girls' schooling, their intrinsic capabilities and achieved re-gendered identities in western China during the tumultuous first decade of the 21st century, using Seeberg's empowerment-capability framework. Village girls described how they valued certain functionings of well-being, agency and achievement.

We found that with rising attainment the girls gained empowerment capabilities and achieved more socially just gender identities. These gains were unequally distributed, neatly slicing the group into two clusters with distinct life paths.

One cluster was composed of students who discontinued schooling in grades seven through nine and had gained a smaller set of empowerment capabilities and achievement, yet enough to leave the village for low-skilled jobs in cities where new opportunities allowed them to aspire to new functionings.

The other cluster of GS who advanced through high school and college gained a larger set of empowering capabilities that they converted into more choices and freedoms and achieved more stable re-gendered identities.

Both clusters achieved some re-gendered identity functionings, particularly some delay in marriage and decreased preference for boys and numerous children, which will enable them "to lead longer, freer and more fruitful lives, in addition to the role they have in promoting

productivity and economic growth or individual incomes” (Sen, 1997, p. 1961) than did their mothers and even 10-year older cousins.

The boarder-middle school experience seems to inoculate the GS against the worst vulnerabilities of their gender associated with family life.

Prospects for Achieving Substantive Freedom

Those who had terminated their schooling and were jobbing in the city had achieved an empowerment capability set that was reduced in several functionings as compared to the GS continuing in school. In the city the GS found themselves in a *place to change* deep cultural preferences (Appadurai 2004), and, their capacity to aspire intact, they needed only to garner some resources to convert into making strategic life choices between the expanded opportunities all around them. For example, the tradition of early betrothal and marriage was giving way to new pathways between aspirations and reality. Those GS who remained in school had achieved a larger set of alternative functionings that they converted into exercising agency and realize more substantive freedoms. The empowerment capability sets though were distributed unequally, neatly slicing this group of Guanlan Sisters into two sharply defined groups with different life paths.

The schooling provided all the Guanlan Sisters with identity, legitimacy, visibility and respect in the eyes of their families and local communities and has elevated the value of schooling for future daughters in the village (Pang personal communication, 2012 February). The expanded empowerment capability sets will help the GS “to lead longer, freer and more fruitful

Deleted: We conclude that the GS obtained an *empowerment-capability set* by achieving the following *alternative functioning combinations* in the following patterns of association across levels of schooling:¶
<#>Greater enjoyment of learning and progressive school attainment are cross-related, one contributing to advancement in the other; ¶
<#>Low enjoyment of learning is a significant contributor, to leaving school early - along with other school-related functionings;¶
<#>Greater confidence and independence were functionings achieved by all GS through the mechanism of boarding at middle school;¶
<#>Improvement in speaking up on own behalf was directly related to progressive school attainment;¶
<#>Confidence and indeterminate individual factors were implicated in determining the achieved level of speaking up functionings in the agency capability set. ¶
Schooling at any attainment level, at minimum removed young girls from the encapsulation of their village world and exposed the GS to opportunities and challenges that enhanced their empowering capability sets and substantive freedoms. ¶
In middle school, differentiation in the empowering process of schooling came into high relief. The poverty of their habitus weighed strongly against their aspirations and strategizing about life choices. A very limited set of opportunities forced a high stakes choice, whether to attempt the steep narrow path of the high school-college route, or to escape to the temporary labor market in the nearby cities to help the family manage, only to risk eventually returning to the village and a life like their parents'. The burden of the choice rested mostly on the GSs' thin shoulders, as their parents were ill-prepared for it. The less than minimally just socio-economic location and habitus imposed this *tragic choice* as Nussbaum (2011b) called it on about half of the ... [1]

lives, in addition to the role they have in promoting productivity and economic growth or individual incomes” (Sen, 1997, p. 1961),

Implications

Since the sample and the context are richly and specifically described and analyzed, we believe the findings of this case study may well be transferable to carefully evaluated similar settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), for example, other Han villages at the margins of the Chinese economy, who are the hardest to reach of the poor. The findings from using a empowerment-capability empowerment-capability evaluatory framework can provide nuanced and clearer understanding of how to structure opportunities to achieve valued lives (Unterhalter, 2007). Using a capabilities-empowerment framework of evaluation can provide a clear picture of what people value and strive to achieve within the real contexts of their lives. By focusing on empowering capabilities we can identify the lever that generates movement. From this we can deduce priorities for policy action and resource allocation linked with macro level policy⁷.

Postscript

The choices that the village girls gained through schooling occurred in a macro context that describes a wide and strong vector of social change, urbanization. Between the year 2000 and 2010, the duration of the larger study of which this is a part, The rural population, though it grew, dropped precipitously owing to massive rural-urban migration. Where it 307 million individuals were registered as rural [hukou] and 458 million urban in 2000, just ten years later the numbers were very close, 674 million rural and 666 million urban residents (National Population and Family Planning Commission of the PRC, 2012). As urbanization is expected to

continue, it is likely that each subsequent cohort of Guanlan Sisters will push for more schooling to better prepare themselves to get swept along in the urban rush.

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Table 1. Empowerment-Capability Analytical Framework for Education

Dimensions of Freedom	Functionings: Feelings & Activities related to Schooling - Literature Review	Interview Questions (line of questioning)
Well-being	Enjoyment of learning; playfulness (Nussbaum 2000) (Seeberg 2007).	What do/did you enjoy about your schooling? Teacher role model? Courses? In the different levels of school? What do/did you like best or very much about life while in school?
	Confidence (Nussbaum 2000); cognitive & psychological control (Stromquist 1995), Affective reflection and cognitive control; reason things out (Nussbaum 2000).	What did you learn in school that you value? Do you feel you can reason problems out more easily, step by step? Are you/did you gain in confidence when in school? Do you feel more confident about yourself more now than before school?
Agency <i>Choosing a Functioning</i> (Sen 1999)	Choose learning something specific (Seeberg 2011) or make strategic life choices (Kabeer 1999) or capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004).	If you don't test into academic high school will you consider vocational technical school? If you don't test into academic high school will you stop going to school? If you stopped, what was/were the reasons that you had then? Was that a good decision as you reflect on it now?
	Speak up on own behalf (Kabeer 1999); self-expression (Unterhalter 2007); participation in resource distribution in the family (Kabeer 1999); participation in structures (Narayan-Parker 2005).	Are/did you gain in strength to tell others, like your family, about what you want to do in life? Does/did education make you more able to tell others what you want? Have you talked to them about your views towards marriage?

Table 2. Participant Attainment Level

Attainment Level	Participants		In School
	Number	Proportion (%)	
Primary graduate - middle school incomplete or graduate (6 – 9)	12 (1)	60	6
High school graduate or incomplete (10 – 12) (2)	4	20	2 (4)
College students (13+) (3)	4	20	4
Total	20	100	12

Notes: (1) In addition, two older GS, who were functioning as adults, are occasionally referenced where they responded to the protocol. (2) High school both academic and vocational-technical; (3) College: includes academic and vocational-technical institutions, such as “junior colleges.” (4) One GS returned to high school in 2011.

ENDNOTES

¹ by integrating concepts by Bourdieu, Appadurai, Nussbaum, Kabeer and Unterhalter

² by integrating concepts by Bourdieu, Appadurai, Nussbaum, Kabeer and Unterhalter

³ The Guanlan Scholarship continues to and past publishing of the current study.

⁴ In addition, we interviewed 2 older GS, who were functioning as adults. These interviews were partial as they could not recall answers to most of the protocol. In our analysis we occasionally include their reflections where they are relevant and throw an additional light on the issue discussed, although we did not conduct the full interview protocol where it did not apply.

⁵ The approved IRB review is on file with the Kent State University Research Council.

⁶ In a similarly poor region in the same province, the annual per capita income was about RMB 1,000 or \$0.35/day in 2006 according to Plan China (2007).

⁷ This formulation shares similarities with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach as developed by the United Kingdom Department for International Development.

We conclude that the GS obtained an *empowerment-capability set* by achieving the following *alternative functioning combinations* in the following patterns of association across levels of schooling,

Greater enjoyment of learning and progressive school attainment are cross-related, one contributing to advancement in the other;

Low enjoyment of learning is a significant contributor, to leaving school early - along with other school-related functionings;

Greater confidence and independence were functionings achieved by all GS through the mechanism of boarding at middle school;

Improvement in speaking up on own behalf was directly related to progressive school attainment;

Confidence and indeterminate individual factors were implicated in determining the achieved level of speaking up functionings in the agency capability set.

Schooling at any attainment level, at minimum removed young girls from the encapsulation of their village world and exposed the GS to opportunities and challenges that enhanced their empowering capability sets and substantive freedoms.

In middle school, differentiation in the empowering process of schooling came into high relief. The poverty of their habitus weighed strongly against their aspirations and strategizing about life choices. A very limited set of opportunities forced a high stakes choice, whether to attempt the steep narrow path of the high school-college route, or to escape to the temporary labor market in the nearby cities to help the family manage, only to risk eventually returning to the village and a life like their parents'. The burden of the choice rested mostly on the GSs' thin shoulders, as their parents were ill-prepared for

it. The less than minimally just socio-economic location and habitus imposed this *tragic choice* as Nussbaum (2011b) called it on about half of the contemporary Guanlan Sisters.

The other 8 GS who had over the years taken the narrow path through high school and into college, had developed a more complete set of empowering capability functions and appeared prepared to make beneficial life choices.

A strong strain of caring for their families' present and future shone through in their discussion of forced choices. Regardless of attainment level, many of the GS centered their aspirations on a better present and future for their families.