

2012

Village girls on schooling in their own words, what do they value and gain? Empowerment-Capabilities & Achieved Freedom

Vilma Seeberg

Kent State University - Kent Campus, vseeberg@kent.edu

Shujuan Luo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kent.edu/flapubs>



Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Seeberg, Vilma and Luo, Shujuan (2012). Village girls on schooling in their own words, what do they value and gain? Empowerment-Capabilities & Achieved Freedom. *Rural Schooling in China: a Multidisciplinary Analysis of Its Changing Ecology*. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.kent.edu/flapubs/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Foundations, Leadership and Administration at Digital Commons @ Kent State University Libraries. It has been accepted for inclusion in Foundations, Leadership and Administration Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Kent State University Libraries. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kent.edu.

6/27/2012

Chapter 5:

Village girls on schooling in their own words, what do they value and gain? Empowerment-Capabilities & Achieved Freedom

Vilma Seeberg and ShuJuan Lou

Manuscript for Heidi Ross and JingJing Luo (Editors)

Rural Schooling in China: a Multidisciplinary Analysis of Its Changing Ecology

Routledge (in press)

Abstract

This chapter explores the relationship between village girls' schooling and enhanced capabilities and achievements in western China during the economic explosion in the first decade of the 21st century. We seek to understand what village girls wanted and gained, what opportunities for change they sought to obtain from schooling, why they and their families sacrificed much to attend low quality schooling. Capturing these dynamics may allow us to identify the lever that generates change and frame policy that enhances and increases relevant opportunities to eliminate extreme poverty

Seeberg's *empowerment-capability* framework (Seeberg and Lou 2012) applies Sen's *capability approach*¹ to rural girls' schooling. This chapter reports the findings from interviews with 23 girls and young women from one village as they describe how they *valued* schooling and how this was associated with attainment levels. We found that with rising attainment the girls gained certain empowerment capabilities and achieved more socially-just gender identities.

The gains, however, were unequally distributed, neatly slicing the group into two clusters with distinct life paths. Those who dropped schooling in grades seven through nine, had gained just enough to leave the village for low-skilled jobs in cities, and found themselves confronted with new opportunities to which to aspire. Those who continued in school past grade nine gained a larger set of empowering capabilities, enacted more choices and experienced more freedoms. Both clusters achieved re-gendered identity functionings, particularly delayed marriage, and decreased preference for boys and numerous children. Though not to the same degree, schooling enables the girls “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).

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

Contents

Abstract	i
Introduction	1
Purpose of the Study.....	1
Methodology	2
Participants	3
Findings	4
Habitus of the Guanlan Sisters	4
Well-being	6
Enjoyment of Learning or Playfulness	6
Confidence, Cognitive and Psychological Control	7
Summary of Well-being	9
Agency.....	10
Capacity To Aspire, Choose a Specific Learning, Make Strategic Life Choices	11
Speaking up on Own Behalf.....	15
Summary of Agency.....	15
Achievement.....	16
Summary of Findings	18
Conclusions	19
Implications	21
Postscript	22

References23
INDEX.....31

Introduction

All across the developing world and in remote valleys and plateaus of western China, village girls have been pushing their way into schools. Despite extreme family poverty, the vulnerabilities and low status of being a girl, the isolation of their villages, as well as the deplorable conditions of their schooling, girls persist in seeking an education (Seeberg 2006, 2007, 2011; Seeberg, Ross, Tan, & Liu 2007).

Purpose of the Study

We set out to examine forces of change where minimal human rights, *minimal social justice* (Nussbaum 2011), and multiple *deprivations of freedom* (Sen, 1999) were just another day as always. Understanding village girls' capabilities and their potential for individual and collective social justice, by implication, can give us insight into similar trends across the developing world. It can provide themes and priorities for policy formation that reduces extreme poverty by empowering girls to flourish.

We explored what village girls might value about schooling, what they aspired to and what they gained. Were *empowerment-capabilities* and *achievements* in gender identity changes related to school attainment? We based our study on the *empowerment-capability framework* developed by Seeberg (2007, 2011, 2012) (see Table 1), which draws on the work primarily of Sen (1999), Nussbaum (2000, 2011b), Kabeer (1999), Unterhalter (2007), Stromquist (1995), and Appadurai (2004).

Insert here

Table 1 Empowerment-Capability for Education, Analytical Framework

To understand the meaning that education has for these girls, we explored what they say their enhanced capabilities are at their level of school attainment (see Table 2). We theorized that additional schooling would enhance empowerment capabilities and gender-identity achievements.

We add as a caution that some of the enhancement of functionings may well be attributable to age-related human development and also individual factors, which fall outside the scope of this research.

Methodology

This exploration is part of a 12-year, long-term study of the impact of a girls-scholarship program in a small cluster of villages (Seeberg 2006, 2007, Seeberg 2011, Seeberg & Lou 2011; Seeberg, Ross, Tan, & Liu 2007). Our research design is recursive, starting with a theoretical conceptualization, the empowerment-capability framework, which structured the interview themes that were pursued in semi-structured interviews, followed by a reiterative process of coding and analyzing. We primarily used the interview data from summer 2010, field notes, and sparingly included voices from earlier letters and subsequent e-mail communication. By giving room to the voices of girls who are rarely heard, we gain a view into conditions shared across the developing world, and can conclude with implications for a more general theoretical dimension (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995).

The village girls participating in this study are the Guanlan Sisters (GS). The GS attended the same remote school district as recipients of a partial scholarship funded by a small U.S. based foundation between 2000 and 2011². In summer 2010, the participants voluntarily responded to

solicitation from the scholarship representative in the village to meet with the founder of the scholarship whom they called Guanlan Mama who was also the primary investigator (PI)³. Most of the Guanlan Sisters also had been in telephone and mail contact with the PI and various research assistants (RA) for several years as part of the scholarship program.

Participants

In 2010, 27 GS participated in the study. Eleven of them had discontinued their studies, 16 were continuing in school. Among school leavers,⁴ 4 were primary school graduates in their late 20's, Duan Linxia, Jing Weiwei, Duan Yanni, and Pang Qiaoqiao; 4 had dropped out during middle school, Pang Shishi, Duan Shishi, Jing Minlin, Pang Linsha, 1 had graduated from middle school, Ren Qiqi; and 2 had dropped out of high school, Pang Ranran, Pang Junjun.⁵

Of the 16 GS continuing in school, 9 were attending middle school, Dang Yanfen, Chen Jiajia, Pang Rantin, Jing Jian, Wang Yunyun, Duan Ranqing, Pang Xuxu, Pang Ranfei, Pang Li, 2 were in high school, Pang Nini, Pang Jin, 5 attended college, Chen Linlin, Chen Yaya, Qing Ting, Dong Miao, Pang Linsha. (See Table 2).

Table 2. Participant Attainment Level

Attainment Level	Participants	
	School Leavers	In School
Primary graduate	4	NA
Middle school incomplete (grades 6 – 9)	4	9
Middle school graduate (grades 6 – 9)	1	NA
High school incomplete or graduate (grades 10 – 12) (1)	2	2

College students (years 13+) (2)	0	5
TOTAL	11	16

In the summer of 2010, the GS met with the PI and RA for semi-structured interviews⁶ in their homes in the village, in the middle school, and at a local hotel in the city or county town. The RA, herself a younger Chinese village girl, and the PI conducted the interviews.⁷ We were sensitive to the double role played by the scholarship founder as the PI but feel it enhanced even enabled the research.⁸

Findings

We will present the findings of the interview analysis in the empowerment-capability analytical framework (see Table 1), first situating the habitus of the GS. We will present the more robust findings with the GS voices, and we will summarize the ideas they responded to less extensively. The conclusions we draw on our small-sample analysis need further research with more participants to improve the confidence in findings and transferability.⁹

Habitus of the Guanlan Sisters

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (1977) fits well in the empowerment-capability framework, in that it theorizes social location as a dynamic process and an inherent interaction between subjective mind or behavior and external opportunity structures. Habitus affects every dimension of freedom, every capability and every functioning, we will first briefly describe its five main aspects in which the lives and choices of the GS are embedded (Seeberg, 2007, 2011): region, socio-economics, Confucian tradition, gender location, and school provision.

The GS's home is a remote mountain village in West China, lying at an altitude of 2,000 meters (6,000feet) along the slopes of a ravine. Small-scale subsistence farming produced barely enough to eat and was increasingly supplemented by fathers' and/or mothers' small cash infusions from short-term migrant labor. To the extent measurable, family income typically fell below the \$1-a-day UN extreme poverty line.¹⁰ The county had been given the official poverty designation.

Village life, long closed in on itself, was permeated by a Confucian world view. Tight-knit kinship networks and strict role obligations privileged males and confined females to the household and fields. Son preference was strong and any possible improvement would be due to diligence, perseverance, and a son's education (Ho, 2003). Girls instead were a burden to be traded in marriage, when they would serve their husband's family and children. This web of core values left village girls without voice and no 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-old tradition of academic credentialism; for rural Chinese youth schooling had been the only, narrow channel of social mobility and employment - if inaccessible. The underfunded, barely functional schools in the valley irregularly provided dreary, monotonous book learning which was fundamentally alienated from village life. The central government's "Develop the West" strategy of 1990s repaired leaky dormitories and classrooms in the GS's school district but did not fill teacher vacancies or pay teacher salaries (Seeberg, 2007, 2010). The GS still scrambled over back country paths for an hour or more to get to primary school.¹¹ For middle school, the GS walked four to five hours on weekends. 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 burden often too heavy for several family members and relatives to carry. To this were added indirect utility costs such as replacing the daughter's time tending to chronically ill parents and relatives, caring for younger siblings, or her earnings in the day-labor market.

The habitus of the GS constituted a massive constraint on gaining empowerment capabilities and confined them to the same low level of *minimal social justice* (Nussbaum , 2011b) as the previous generation. Yet the GS pursued schooling with unflinching determination, until some had to give up it up due to critical, inescapable hardships, “trading one core capability for another,” (2011b) making a *tragic choice*, one that does not promote flourishing.

Well-being

Well-being is the dimension of freedom associated with intrinsic capabilities that have often been overlooked in large-scale research because they are difficult to operationalize. Applied to schooling and learning, we explored functionings suggested by Nussbaum (2000) *enjoyment* and *playfulness*, also *confidence*, *affective and cognitive control*, or *reasoning things out*. 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 the poor quality and status of a country school.

Enjoyment of Learning or Playfulness

We had to explain the idea of enjoyment in relation to schooling because culturally students should apply themselves diligently to studying rather than enjoy it. However, the GS

generally acknowledged that they enjoyed certain periods and aspects of school, particularly in the early school years. They enjoyed playing with friends, support by caring teachers and after school activities. As time went by, the rigors of school seemed to outweigh enjoyment. Only the GS who continued into and through high school affirmed a deepening of enjoyment of the more substantive coursework; the more they learned, the more enriched and fulfilled they felt. “When I read a good book, I feel like a hungry person being given a piece of bread. I forget about myself when I read ... I feel happy” (Dong Miao, college student).

Confidence, Cognitive and Psychological Control

The GS differentiated somewhat between confidence and cognitive control but did not distinguish affective terms like emotional growth. Culturally speaking, it was inappropriate for young village girls to claim confidence, so they spoke only of being more confident than before. Similarly, they professed that their cognitive and/or psychological control had improved with rising attainment levels. Hence these three functionings will be reported together.

Pang Qiaoqiao, the older student whose parents had forced her to leave primary school had gained a broader perspective on the relationship between education and confidence after 10 years of unskilled labor in the city, “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, who were working unskilled jobs in factories or small shops, said that “now that they were grown up” they could work out emotional and ethical problems better, were able “to withstand more stress,” “solve problems calmly,” and “be in control of my emotions.” “I used to sort things out in my mind with others’ help; now I can do it independently” (Duan Shishi). “I get there in my mind faster than I used to” (Jing Minlin).

Only Ren Qiqi, who had graduated from middle school, attributed greater confidence to schooling, “in teachers’ eyes, what counts is my performance. I became more confident as I made progress... the more I learn, the more I can sort things out ... and think logically.”

Five of the nine GS who were still in middle school said that they had gained confidence as they adjusted to the school life, improved relationships with classmates, or overcame difficulties in certain subjects. Three of the nine said they had lost confidence due to their poor performance in certain subjects. These five more confident GS also made an interesting point. They said they had become calmer, braver, and more independent in solving their problems since being away from home and living in the boarding school. “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). “I used to be very emotional and anxious, now I am more rational and calm from reading books” (Dang Yanfen). Their independence enhanced self-reliance, confidence and new freedoms for the GS.

The theme of independence gained at middle school, boarding away from home, away from the village, and interacting with the larger social context of the school continued to emerge in the interviews.

Among the 4 participants with some high school, two attributed their enhanced confidence to teachers' encouragement or their confidence, as well as development of academic and social skills. “My teacher tells me that everyone ... has the ability to achieve something... If others can make it, so can I... I have a clear goal before setting out to do something, I know how to do it, and what the result will be” (Pang Jin). They also articulated how 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).

To our surprise, the college students mentioned that they were actually less confident than in high school, “there is always someone who is better than me. Compared with others, I find that what I know is very little” (Chen Yaya). Yet they talked about how their thinking was “more comprehensive” as they advanced through school, which they attributed 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 consequences of my words and think more deeply. In college I made big progress when I met students from different provinces.” All five college GS agreed that after they got to college and “got in touch with more people, I learned more things, so I could figure out problems more clearly, and logically” (Chen Linlin). They mentioned being more able to deal with stress and keep an inner balance between their studies and life, better than some of their college mates who had not gone to boarding schools in middle or high school. “I boarded in high school and became very independent, so I quickly adjusted to life in college” (Qin Ting). However, they also showed unresolved anxiety about life after college and the need to make serious life decisions.

For the middle, high school and college students, the early removal from the parental home and village and the more diverse social environment of the boarding schools offered opportunities and challenges which gave them a sense of independence and confidence, as well greater emotional control. With more schooling, the GS accumulated a greater number of *vectors of choices* in their capability sets of well-being, and more real freedoms (Sen, 1999).

Summary of Well-being

The GS all experienced some well-being related to schooling, at minimum associated with school mates, teachers, extra-curricular activities, and, for the more advanced, doing well in their studies and classes.

The GS who dropped out had not enjoyed their studies and were less able to answer confidence and control questions. The GS who continued in school expressed some enjoyment of learning, despite challenges, and with rising attainment were more articulate about their enjoyment. It is reasonable to conclude that less enjoyment was associated with school leaving in middle school and a more limited capability set.

For the GS who dropped out, working in the city, even in unsatisfying jobs, caused them to gain in self reliance and confidence.

For the GS who continued to advance in school, they noted that their cognitive and psychological control continued to improve. An unexpected finding was that the boarding school had provided a social space with more opportunities where the GS developed independence from received village patterns and developed values for a qualitatively different future.

As with the enhancement of all capabilities, individual human development and processes will play a role; however, since the age ranges and median environmental background was similar, we conclude that the association with rising attainment is robust.

Agency

Agency, Sen's second dimension of freedom, on its face is the capability set most readily associated with empowerment in that it contains a social or public aspect. Sen and Kabeer focus their discussion of agency on conversion of resources into capabilities (Sen 1997, p. 1961).

Appadurai (2004) adds what Seeberg (2012) finds an essential aspect, the *capacity to aspire*.

Without a capacity to aspire, a person could not take action toward a goal. For Unterhalter

(2007) this notion is encompassed in *self-expression* and *speaking up on own behalf*; whereas, Kabeer (1999) defined women's agency as *decision making with negotiation power*. For the GS the *capacity to aspire* related to schooling and found expression in their *choosing some specific learning*, and agency as a social action was expressed in *making strategic life choices* (Kabeer 1999). Though we explored *speaking up on own behalf*, the stronger evidence relevant for this manuscript came from the learning and schooling related functionings.

For the GS, the difference between *choosing* and *making a strategic choice* sharply divided those who had terminated schooling from those who continued in school. The former mostly spoke about aspirations or wishes. The latter mostly showed that they had strategically made life choices, had converted resources into a functioning. Individual factors also played somewhat of a role in the level of effort involved in turning an aspiration into action.

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

Duan Linxia, Jing Weiwei, Duan Yannin and Pang Qiaoqiao, the older GS, who had dropped out at least five years earlier during or after primary middle school, not only had less schooling, hence fewer resources to convert, but were particularly affected by their residence status [hukou]. Hukou cements habitus to a specific locale and life chances as illustrated by these four GS. Duan Linxia and Jing Weiwei had not left the village for schooling and were still there working the land, married with children, trapped in poverty and mouths to feed. Duan Yannin and Pang Qiaoqiao on the other hand had escaped to the city and were actively working to improve their lot.

Duan Linxia and her husband had off and on run a street stall in the city. After the 2010 harvest of her parent's plot, only he would return to work in the city, taking their son along for better schooling, while she was housebound with an infant daughter. Jing Weiwei and her

husband raised chickens in the village and were desperate to help their profoundly hearing-impaired, autistic son.

Duan Yannin dropped out when she couldn't pay for middle school many years ago and went to the city for day labor. She sent home 200 RMB of the 280 RMB she earned each month to put her younger brother through school (he is a college graduate now), which left her "enough" to stay in the county capital. There she married into a family that operated a private truck service, and was raising her three-year old son. She was glad to be in town because it "provides lots of conveniences for children, such as a good kindergarten, toys, parks, and clean streets for kids... and kids are pretty clean too in the city." Pang Qiaoqiao was still single and clerking in a construction firm in the city. She had found enrolled in a four-month training program for construction budgeting. "High school graduates seemed to have no difficulty in the class, but for me it was hard," she continued, "but if you want to get promoted in the company, you need to get some training.... I want to improve my skills."

Of the younger GS, we asked, "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, held some aspiration toward a future career – not in the village.

The four middle school dropouts wanted to learn more, but were vague about what and for what purpose, mentioning a diverse list, English, mathematics, piano, computer, hair styling or cosmetics. They were working in the big city in factories, supermarkets, and small shops, which left them little time to plan or money to invest in suitable career training. Pang Ranran bought "books on sales skills to read."

I work in a supermarket as a cashier... I want to learn more about mathematics... take a training course ... 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 been strategic in converting her school-girl love for the fine arts into a vocation. After calculating the cost of seven years of high school and college fine arts schools, Ren Qiqi took an apprenticeship in a beauty salon right out of middle school to learn cosmetics. After a year, Ren Qiqi had tired of apprenticing and wanted to get more “professional training,” possibly in business management. Ren Qiqi here and above serves as an example of individual confidence, and resourcefulness in converting her aspirations into strategic action, exemplifying how well-being and agency are affected by individual factors in addition to attainment level.

Among the nine GS continuing in middle school, three dreamed of becoming doctors or working in a corporate setting. Two others had more concrete ideas. “I have two ideas for what I will do after graduating from middle school. One is to study singing; the other is to learn nursing. Because I am from a village, being a nurse is appropriate for my circumstances” (Jing Jian). Above all, at this attainment level, the GS had made a strategic choice, focusing narrowly on promotion to the next level of schooling. They invested all available intrinsic and instrumental resources in studying. “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 their weaker subjects. Dang Yanfen said, “my short-time goal is to study hard and get into Shanglou High School, which is the best school in the county capital and very competitive.” Jing Jian, the future nurse, figures that she could not get into an academic high school, so, “I will persuade my parents to support me in vocational school.”

Like the middle schoolers, two continuing high schoolers were completely concentrated on studying hard to advance in schooling. They only wanted to study well enough to pass the next set of exams.

The other two high school students, who had dropped out in the first year, did so for very different reasons. Pang Ranran was frustrated with the poor quality of her vocational school, and left “to get real practical experience” by working, but still aspired to keep on studying on her own to stay in the city. Pang Junjun had to give up her place in a competitive academic high school by November because her family had run out of money. Sad, she agreed to an engagement with someone with a township residence permit, which her father thought offered a good opportunity. However, she wanted to return to school even if she had to settle for a vocational school the following year, which the scholarship provided. She broke off her engagement, against her father’s wish.

The college GS’ aspirations were closely tied to specific aspirations associated with majors and strategic life choices. “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).

As I’m faced with graduation [with an accounting degree], I would like to learn something practical. So I plan to get some practical experience before making any further decisions. (Dong Miao).

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

Speaking up on Own Behalf

Speaking up on own behalf was difficult to capture due to the cultural constraints on young girls. Intending to know whether schooling attainment related to speaking up on their own behalf in the family first of all, the GS still in school gave more assertive answers, but 5 who had dropped out did not appear to know what to say. The courage to speak up was exhibited by the more confident GS, regardless of attainment level, though the strength and clarity of speaking out increased with higher school attainment.

Summary of Agency

Agency, for the GS of school-age, was highly related to schooling both at the level of aspiration as well as strategic life choices.

We found that holding aspirations was the most pervasive agency capability among the GS. All GS wished to improve some skill through training or schooling, rather than aspiring toward material success. With rising attainment, their skill objectives became more specific and were more clearly articulated. GS in high school were clear that they wanted to succeed in school and what the opportunities were; hence, they were more able to convert their aspirations into strategic choices for their future within the limits their family habitus. Only at the level of college attainment were GS able to effectively convert their aspirations into practical career goals.

The GS divided sharply on aspiring versus making strategic life choices by whether they had terminated or continued in school. Those who had quit school expressed their aspirations as wishes; those who continued, had strategically converted resources into functionings. For the in-school GS, the higher their school attainment levels, the more their plans were related to the

labor market. Individual factors, like confidence, in addition to attainment level played a role in determining how effectively aspirations had been turned into actions.

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

High school or higher attainment did help the GS in exercising agency, yet the middle school drop outs increased their access to opportunities by working in the city. Here they would be spurred on to aspire to improving their capacity to dream and agency capability. Compared to the older GS who had been bound to the village by not leaving for the boarding school, middle school drop outs working even poor jobs in the city were better situated to take advantage of opportunities and were aware of it.

Achievement

Sen's third dimension of freedom, achievement, is also emblematic of empowerment. It encompasses individual and social aspects as do the other dimensions and it may be instrumental or intrinsic. We were interested in exploring how village girls imagined achievement related to schooling but beyond schooling itself.

One of the most frequently mentioned achievements was *re-gendered identity*, which for the GS was practically related to *delayed marriage*, and two related *functionings*, their views toward future sons or daughter, and their views toward caring for their aging parents. Hannum, Kong, and Zhang's (2008) research in Gansu found complicated changes taking place in mothers' expectations of the same children's gendered family responsibilities. These findings are supported by research in other developing regions, such as Arnot, Jeffery, Casely-Hayford and Noronha (2012) studies on girls and education in Ghana and India, "suggest that education may

have unexpected and often complicating effects on ‘domestic transitions’, particularly on the private/ intimate spheres of gender relations” (p. 181) .

For the sake of brevity, we will limit the findings to the functioning with the most immediate and urgent impact, *delayed marriage*. Delaying marriage would require from the GS to act against their parents’ immediate economic interests and long-standing traditions. In the village it was customary to start arranging marriage for the girls at age 16-17 to be consummated at 18-19. If a girl would drop out of middle school, she would be targeted by matchmakers and families with single sons. “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 family’s poverty on the other” (Pang Xuxu mother).

Among our middle school dropouts, two were engaged soon after leaving school at age 17. The other two were 16 years old and, at the research time, had just left school a month earlier and did not acknowledge getting a proposal. This is considered a very private subject.

The GS, however, talked about constant pressure to make a match from family elders, matchmakers and village families with sons. Only if the girls showed an aptitude and good scores in school, and only if their parents supported their schooling, could they evade the matchmakers and suitor families. Pang Nini, a high school student, whose parents did not unanimously support her, chose to not go home during breaks to avoid the incessant urging. Pang Mingming and Pang Jin who were doing well in high school and were approaching 18 years of age had refused a several proposals against their parents’ wishes in one case and with their help in another. Pang Junjun, who had dropped out of high school, broke her arranged engagement as soon as she got back into school.

As the GS advanced to higher attainment levels, they responded more articulately and negatively about early marriage. For Chen Yaya, college student, “getting married too early would create a burden, it would negatively affect my future job and other aspects.” Two of the five college GS did say that they would “consider marriage after graduating from the college.”

Summary of Findings

Well-being is perhaps the essential intrinsic *substantive freedom* that can be obtained by achieving *alternative functioning combinations* in and through schooling. The functioning we explored, confidence and cognitive-psychological control, was not easily claimed by GS due to cultural sanctions, but they did claim independence, particularly related to boarding in middle or high school. The boarding school offered new opportunities, triggered more choices and more freedoms than the confines of their village homes. With advancing attainment levels, the GS gained in cognitive and psychological control functionings.

We answered research question one that the theorized intrinsic well-being functionings were associated with schooling, and, two, that enhancement of these capability sets was associated with higher levels of school attainment, particularly high school and above. But for the middle-school leavers these well-being functionings did not construct a capability set that lead to school perseverance.

The second capability we explored, *agency*, is the most overtly related to empowerment. We found that for the GS, aspiring, choosing, and making strategic life choices were often conflated, but holding aspirations was one of the strongest functionings subscribed to by all GS. The GS who had terminated prior to or in middle school, mostly did not develop their agency

past aspirations. Notable is that their aspirations were centered on skill improvement or learning rather than anything materialistic.

On the second agency functioning, speaking out, that we explored, the GS were culturally constrained and hence received only some endorsement from the more outgoing GS. 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.

The findings on achievement were limited in this study to those related to more empowered gender identity. Recent research among other rural Chinese as well as Indian and Ghana's girls had found that the relationship between educational attainment and gendered relationships is complex and powerful. The GS, despite cultural inhibitions, expressed strong opinions in favor of delaying marriage and designated schools as a safe haven away from traditional pressures to marry early. They also expressed their achievement of a more socially just gender identity in questions on son-preference and responsibilities for caring for their elders to be reported on separately.

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. Seeberg's *empowerment-capability* framework provided the analysis framework for the village girls' description of how they *valued* certain *functionings* of *well-being, agency* and *achievement*.

We found that the GS gained empowerment capabilities and achieved more socially just gender identities. The gains accrued with rising attainment, hence were related to schooling

experiences, as we theorized. These gains, however, were unequally distributed, neatly slicing the group into two clusters with distinct life paths. Analysis shows that when we compare GS at the same level of attainment, the answers of the cluster, who had terminated schooling, were similar to each other and differed as a group from the cluster who were continuing in school.

The cluster of GS who discontinued schooling had gained a smaller set of empowerment capabilities, yet enough to leave the village for low-skilled jobs in cities where new opportunities allowed them to aspire to new functionings.

The cluster of GS who were staying in school had turned aspirations into actions that increased their skill and capability sets. Those GS who had advanced through high school and into college had gained a larger set of empowering capabilities, which they converted into more concrete life choices, to continue gaining more freedoms.

Both clusters achieved some re-gendered identity functionings, particularly delayed marriage, at which the GS with higher attainment succeeded more sustainably. The latter cluster was clear on decreased preference for sons and numerous children. For those with high school and above attainment, their strategic plans promise to 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 their mothers, their 10-year older cousins, and their middle-school dropout age-mates.

An unexpected finding was that the boarding school experience appeared to inoculate the GS against the worst vulnerabilities of their gender associated with family relationships.

Those who had terminated their schooling and were jobbing in the city had achieved an empowerment capability set that was more limited in several functionings as compared to the GS continuing in school. The constraints of their habitus overcame any desire to continue in school.

In order to provide sustenance to their families, they had to make a *tragic choice* (Nussbaum, 2011b) exchanging one capability set for another. Yet, the choice is perhaps not as tragic as it appears on the surface. Working in the city the GS found themselves in a *place to change* deep cultural preferences (Appadurai 2004) as was evidenced by their aspirations to improve their skills. In the city, the GS, despite lower capability sets, did exercise their capacity to aspire, something their older village cousins who had remained in the village had not achieved. The expanded opportunities around them allowed the GS to reframe the visions of a possible future. For example, the tradition of early betrothal and marriage was giving way in their worldview to new “pathways between aspirations and reality” (Appadurai 2004, 83).

Their schooling provided all the Guanlan Sisters with identity, legitimacy, visibility and respect in the eyes of their families and local communities (Seeberg and Luo, forthcoming) and elevated the value of schooling for younger village daughters (Pang L, personal communication, 2012 February).

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. Using the empowerment-capability evaluatory framework can provide nuanced and clearer understanding of how to structure opportunities to achieve valued lives (Unterhalter, 2007). It can identify what individuals value and strive to achieve, what opportunities for change they will pursue, within the real contexts of their lives. By focusing on empowering capabilities we can identify the levers of change. From this we can deduce priorities for policy action and resource allocation linked with macro level policy¹².

Postscript

The choices that the village girls obtained 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 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 distribution was much smaller, 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 improve their position in the mad urban rush, “to lead longer, freer and more fruitful lives.”

References

- Abu-Ghaida, D., & Klasen, S. (2004). The Costs of Missing the Millennium Development Goal on Gender Equity. *World Development*, 32, 7, 1075-1107.
- Alsop, R., & Heinsohn, N. (2005). *Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators* (World Bank Policy, Research working paper No. WPS 3510). Retrieved May, 30, 2009, from [http://www.sasanet.org/documents/Curriculum/ConceptualFramework/Measuring Empowerment in Practice.pdf](http://www.sasanet.org/documents/Curriculum/ConceptualFramework/MeasuringEmpowermentinPractice.pdf)
- Appadurai, A. (2004). The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition. In V.R. Rao & M. Walton (Ed.), *Culture and Public Action* (pp. 59-84). CA: Stanford University Press.
- Arnot, Madeleine, Jeffery, Roger, Casely-Hayford, Leslie & Noronha, Claire. (2012). Schooling and domestic transitions: shifting gender relations and female agency in rural Ghana and India, *Comparative Education*, 48:2, 181-194.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.608896>
- Berger, P.L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. New York, NY: Anchor.
- Bicego, G.T., & Boerma, T. J. (1993). Maternal Education and Child Survival: A Comparative Study of Survey Data from 17 Countries. *Social Science and Medicine*, 36, 1207-1227.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Caldwell, J. C. (1979). Education as a Factor in Mortality decline: An Examination of Nigerian Data. *Population Studies*, 33, 395-413.
- Calhoun, C, (Eds.). (2002). *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cochrane, S. H. (1979). *Fertility and Education: What Do We Really Know?* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Dore, R. (2000). Educational Qualificationism and the Late-Development Effect. In S. Sanderson (Eds.), *Sociological Worlds Comparative and Historical Readings* (355-360). London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hannum, Emily C., Kong, Peggy A. & Zhang, Yuping. (2008). Family Sources of Educational Gender Inequality in Rural China: A Critical Assessment. *Gansu Survey of Children and Families*. University of Pennsylvania: Gansu Survey of Children and Families Papers
- Hieshima, J. A., & Schneider, B. (1994). Intergenerational effects on the cultural and cognitive socialization of third- and fourth-generation Japanese Americans. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 15, 319–327.
- Ho, E. S. (2003). Students' self-esteem in an Asian educational system: The contribution of parental involvement and parental investment. *School Community Journal*, 13(1), 65–84.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflection on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30, 3, 435-464.
- Lewis, M A., & Lockheed , M E.. (2006). *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 million Girls Still Aren't in Schools and What To Do about It*. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.

Li, D. & Tsang, M, C. (2002). Household Decisions and Gender Inequality in Education in Rural China. *China: An International Journal*, 1, 224-248.

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Mathur, S., Greene, M., & Malhotra, A. (2003). Too Young to Wed: The Lives, Rights, and Health of Young Married Girls. *International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)*. Retrieved July 7, 2009, from www.icrw.org/docs/tooyoungtowed_1003.pdf

National Population and Family Planning Commission of the PRC, cited in University of Southern California US-China Institute. (03/20/2012). China's Urban & Rural Population Breakdown, *China Today*. Retrieved on 4/11/2012 from http://www.uschina.usc.edu/article@usct?chinas_urban_rural_population_breakdown_18035.aspx

Nussbaum, M C. (2000). *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nussbaum, M C. (2003). Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements. *Feminist Economics*, 9, 33-59.

Nussbaum, M C. (2005). *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nussbaum, M C. (2011a), Capabilities, Entitlements, Rights: Supplementation and Critique. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 12 (1), 23-37.

Nussbaum, M C. (2011b). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pang, B.L. (2012, February). Personal Communication from the *Guanlan Scholarship* local representative to Principal Investigator.

Plan International. (2009). *Because I am a Girl: Girls in the Global Economy 2009*. Retrieved May 22, 2010, from <http://plan-international.org/about-plan/resources/publications/campaigns/because-i-am-a-girl-girls-in-the-global-economy-2009>

Principal Investigator. (2006). Tibetan girls' education: Challenging prevailing theory. In G. Postiglione (Ed.), *Education and Social Change in China* (pp. 75-107). New York, NY: M.E. Sharpe Publishers.

Principal Investigator. (2007). Their one best hope: Educating daughters in village China. In M.A. Maslak (Ed.), *Agency and Structure of Women's Education* (pp. 143-157). New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Principal Investigator. (2011). Schooling, jobbing, marrying, what's a girl to do to make life better? Empowerment capabilities of girls at the margins of globalization. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 6(1), 43-61. Retrieved May 24, 2011, from <http://www.wwwwords.co.uk/rcie/content/maincontents.asp>

Principal Investigator & Research assistant. (2011, May). 'Girls Just Wanta Have Fun' or Compulsory Schooling and Girls' Empowerment: Changes across cohorts of Guanlan Sisters. Paper delivered at the annual conference of the *Comparative and International Education Society*, Montreal, Canada.

Principal Investigator, Ross, H., Tan, G., & Liu, J. (2007). The Case for Prioritizing Education for Girls Left behind in Remote Rural China. In D. Baker & A. Wiseman (Eds.), *International Perspectives on Education and Society* (pp. 111-158). Oxford: Elsevier.

Sen, A. (1980). Equality of What? In S.M. McMurrin (Eds.). *The Tanner Lectures on Human Value* (pp. 195-220). Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

Sen, A. (1997). Human Capital and Human Capability, *World Development*, 25(12): 1959-1961.

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Stephens, D.(2000). Girls and Basic Education in Ghana: A Cultural Enquiry. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 20(1), 29-47.

Stromquist, N. P. (1995). The theoretical and practical bases for empowerment. In C. M. Anonuevo (Ed.), *Women, Education and Empowerment: Pathways towards Autonomy* (pp. 13-22). Hamburg: UNESCO. Retrieved June, 8, 2010, from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001006/100662e.pdf>

Tembon, M& Fort, L. (Eds). (2008). *Girls' Education in the 21st Century: Gender Equality, Empowerment, and Economic Growth*. Washington, DC: World Bank Publications. Retrieved June, 8, 2010, from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1099079877269/547664-1099080014368/DID_Girls_edu.pdf

UNESCO. (2004). *Global Monitoring Report 2004 - Gender and Education for All-The Leap to Equality*. Retrieved June, 8, 2010, from <http://www.unesco.org/en/efareport/reports/20034-gender/>

UNICEF. (2004). *The State of the World's Children 2004: Girls, Education and Development*.

Retrieved May 6, 2011, from http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Eng_text.pdf

UNICEF. (2005). *The State of The World's Children 2005: Childhood under Threat*. Retrieved

May 6, 2011, from [http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/SOWC_2005_\(English\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/SOWC_2005_(English).pdf)

Unterhalter, E. (2007). *Gender Schooling and Global Social Justice*. NY: Routledge.

United Kingdom Department for International Development. The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach – a reference frame. Retrieve on 2/10, 2012 from <http://www.poverty-wellbeing.net/media/sla/docs/introduction.htm>

Table 1. Empowerment-Capability Analytical Framework for Education

Dimensions of Freedom (Sen 1999)	Capabilities (Sen 1999) that empower, Literature Review	Functionings: Feelings & Activities related to Schooling -Concepts underlying interviews
Well-being	<i>Intrinsic:</i> Enjoyment (Nussbaum 2000); Affective reflection (Nussbaum 2000)	Enjoyment of learning; playfulness (Nussbaum 2000) (Seeberg 2007). Have insight, patience (Nussbaum 2000); Confidence (Nussbaum 2000); Self-respect (Unterhalter 2007)
	<i>Instrumental:</i> Academic skills; psychological and cognitive control (Stromquist 1995); cognitive control (Nussbaum 2000)	Reason things out (Nussbaum 2000), Curious about the larger world
Agency	<i>Intrinsic:</i> Political state/condition (Seeberg 2006), political consciousness (Stromquist 1995),	Self-expression (Unterhalter 2007) <i>Capacity to aspire</i> (Appadurai 2004). Speak up on own behalf (Kabeer 1999); Choose learning/something specific (Seeberg 2011); Make strategic life choices (Kabeer 1999).
	<i>Instrumental:</i> Participation in structures (Narayan-Parker 2005); decision making with negotiation power in family (Kabeer 1999)	Participation in resource distribution in the family
	<i>Habitus:</i> Structures of opportunities	External: Family constraints & supports; Community constraints & supports
Achievement of valued outcomes (functionings) that they have reason to value	<i>Intrinsic:</i> Subjective orientation, reflection on political status (Stromquist 1995); <i>Relational:</i> (Kabeer 1999).	Orientation & Aspirations: Imagined social change (Appadurai 2004, Unterhalter 2007, Stromquist 1995). Re-gendered identity family role (Seeberg 2006); Rejection of male preference (Stromquist)
	<i>Instrumental:</i> Objective state/condition (Kabeer 1999). Attainment: 6-9, 10-12, 13+	Achievements: Delayed or late marriage; Desirability of work (Seeberg) Achievement in school; Valued awards;

Source: Seeberg, V. (2012)

Table 2. Participant Attainment Level Participants

Attainment Level	Participants	
	Early Leavers	In School
Primary graduate	4	na
Middle school incomplete (grades 6 – 9)	4	9
Middle school graduate (grades 6 – 9)	2	na
High school incomplete or graduate (grades 10 – 12) (1)	2	2
College students (years 13+) (2)	0	5
Total	18	16

Notes: (1) High school both academic and vocational-technical; (2) College: includes academic and vocational-technical institutions, such as “junior colleges.”

INDEX

<i>cognitive and psychological control</i> 14, 27	<i>enjoyment of learning</i>9, 14, 26
<i>confidence</i>6, 12, 13, 14, 22, 26, 27, 28	<i>playfulness</i>9
confidence and cognitive-psychological control..... 11, 27	psychological control4, 11, 12, 14, 26
<i>confidence, cognitive and psychological control</i>9	<i>reasoning things out</i>9
Confidence, Cognitive and Psychological Control.....iii, 11	<i>reflective insight</i>9
	<i>tragic choice</i>9
	<i>well-being</i>i, 4, 9, 13, 14, 17, 26, 27, 28

ENDNOTES

¹ Integrating concepts provided by Bourdieu, Appadurai, Nussbaum, Kabeer and Unterhalter

² The Guanlan Scholarship continues to and past publishing of the current study.

³ The research project was approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board and followed federal guidelines

⁴ We include in this figure students who finished compulsory schooling, graduated from middle school after grade 9 and did not continue on to senior high school, grades 10-12.

According to PRC policy, these graduates are not early school-leavers.

⁵ Pseudonyms.

⁶ Three of the older participants were given modified interviews and three of the younger participants participated only partially in the interview protocol.

⁷ 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. It should be no surprise that GS with higher school attainment were generally more adept at answering.

⁸ The GS treasured the long-time commitment and sincerity of their “Mama”, a quality highly prized in traditional Chinese culture.

⁹ To address concerns of credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), each interview was coded twice, using NVIVO software.

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ In 2011 the policy moved to close remote schools in favor of more centrally located schools that offered marginally better programs, requiring GS starting in grade 5 to board at even higher costs.

¹² This formulation shares similarities with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach as developed by the United Kingdom Department for International Development.