Girls’ Schooling Empowerment in Rural China: Identifying Capabilities and Social Change in the Village

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This study proposes an elaboration of the human development capability approach by theorizing empowerment capabilities as an essential aspect of the education of excluded village girls. Seeking to explain Chinese village girls’ demand for schooling, the article identifies intangible and instrumental capabilities that have often been overlooked and their indirect influence on social changes in gender roles, in the fertility and domestic transitions, accelerated educational attainment and urbanization. The linkage between village habitus and, one, the poor quality of basic and junior high education, and, two, the high cost of senior high school presented the greatest limitation, which cemented the urban-rural gap and inequality in urban employment. Policy to expand and regulate vocational secondary schools and non-formal skills education would counter the alarming increase in systemic rural-urban inequalities that disproportionately affect village girls and women, and would release pent up aspirations and agency of excluded village girls.

I hope my daughter will be versatile. I think it’s far from enough only to gain knowledge from school in order to find a job and to get ahead in society. (Ren Qiqi, age 16, grade 9, 2010)¹

Despite conditions of extreme poverty and deplorably bad schools, village girls in remote regions of China actively pursued schooling—at great cost to their families—and challenged age-old traditions (Seeberg 2011).² Substantial research on the conditions of girls’ schooling in Western China paints a bleak picture of the poor quality of rural education and the few chances it offers,
particularly to girls.\(^3\) The author embarked on a series of observational studies between 2000 and 2012 to explore the progress through school of over 50 village girls in Western China, here called the Xiangcun Sisters \(\text{[Village Sisters]}\), seeking to explain the phenomenon, asking what drove the girls, what benefits were they deriving, and what decisions were they making.\(^4\)

Research on Chinese rural girls’ education and international literature on girls’ and women’s schooling in developing regions has hit on empowerment as the decisive force and outcome of girls’ schooling. However, its conceptualization remains undertheorized, particularly in the case of village girls in extreme circumstances experiencing “severe exclusion” (Lewis and Lockheed 2006). The human development and capability approach (HDCA) takes into account a broad range of conditions by asserting the centrality of the person and the role of freedoms in countering deprivations. It understands education to be a central social arrangement that expands substantive human freedoms and brings about and supports other capabilities. I explore in this article how the capability approach helps us understand girls’ schooling empowerment; thus, this study is explicitly anchored in an emerging grounded paradigm. In order to proceed with the analysis, the capability approach was elaborated by taking an empowerment perspective on enhancement of substantive human freedoms applied in the field of education (see analytical framework in table A1).

The HDCA fits the search for an explanation of the phenomenon because it explicitly evaluates “activities . . . [for] their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive freedoms of individuals, seen as active agents of change” (Sen 1999, xiii). It asks what persons, in this case girls, value and act on, what they find feasible to achieve, with what capabilities are “the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible to achieve” (1999, 75) and freedom is defined as “the ‘capabilities’ of persons to lead the kind of lives they value—and have reason to value” (1999, 18).\(^5\) In this study, using HDCA, we ask what valued functionings do girls find possible to achieve and how do the achievements impact social arrangements around them.

Further, the HDCA framework makes it possible to avoid many of the pitfalls of a utilitarian, self-interest argument of a rational-choice approach.

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\(^3\) Noteworthy are the ethnographic studies of Chu and Ju (1993), Maslak (2008), Ross (2008), Kong (2009), the sociological large-scale data studies of the "Gansu Survey of Children and Families" and its careful qualitative follow-up case studies, led by Emily Hannum and her colleagues (Hannum, An, and Cheng 2011; Hannum 2003; Adams and Hannum 2005; Hannum and Liu 2005; Hannum, Kong, and Zhang 2008; Hannum, Sargent, and Yu 2006; Kong 2009), as well as evaluations of projects such as Rong and Shi (2001), and in-depth economic studies of rural poverty and well-being by John Knight and colleagues (Knight and Gunatilaka 2010; Knight, Song, and Gunatilaka 2011). Studies focusing on girls’ schooling include Zhou et al. (2001), Klasen and Wink (2003), Hannum (2005), Liu and Carpenter (2005), and Seeberg (2007).

\(^4\) See Seeberg and Zhao (2002); Seeberg (2004, 2011); Seeberg et al. (2007); and Seeberg and Luo (2012).

\(^5\) Functionings, beings, and doings can be understood as proxies for capabilities (Walker 2007). Capabilities consist of both enactments of agency and opportunities to enact.
“that overlooks the more affective-conative aspects . . . of the things we value most” (Kelly 2012, 288–89). In particular, it deconstructs the notion that economic growth is the means and end of education and instead illuminates empowerment of girls in the process of becoming agents of change. HDCA also includes an evaluation of culturally embedded subjective well-being, that is, “how people experience and evaluate their lives and specific domains and activities in their lives” (Stone and Mackie 2013, 1). Taking this broad and holistic a perspective opens up the field (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) of even the most deprived circumstances to observe how social change happens, at the hands of which agents, and what freedoms do persons—in the present case, girls—experience and pursue.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to explore how an elaborated HDCA framework applied to education can contribute to a better understanding of the intangibles of empowerment for severely excluded girls, those who are marginalized on multiple dimensions (Robeyns 2005; Alkire and Santos 2010) beyond the spaces of engineered development. I argue that analyzing empowerment associated with schooling in terms of actual capabilities, agency and achievement of individual and collective outcomes advances HDCA education and empowerment theorizing (Bogdan and Biklen 2003). The work specifically seeks to (1) identify capabilities gained in schooling (Robeyns 2003), in both constitutive and instrumental dimensions of freedoms and (2) “their indirect role through influencing social change” (Sen 1999, 296) that may be intangible and affects social arrangements.

By definition, empowerment of girls and women requires the reduction of their disadvantages, “unfreedoms,” and deprivations and, in that process, changes the externalities around those deprivations (Batliwala 1994; Levinson and Holland 1996). These changes constitute social rearrangements reflecting greater social justice or, as Sen (1999) titled his highly regarded book, Development as Freedom.

This study explores the voices of a set of village girls, the Xiangcun Sisters (XS), as they describe their experience and enactment of capabilities (“being and doing”) and identify specific “functionings” that constitute freedoms that they value. Given their location in a traditional village beyond the margins of China’s breakneck economic growth and soaring inequality, their enhanced social freedoms may appear weak when compared to employment in the formal sector. However, the power of valued freedoms, intangible though they may be, that transform internalized externalities and externalizing internalities (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 72) is too often underestimated in favor of what is easier to measure.

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6 Further discussion of terms is provided in the sections where relevant.
The article concludes with implications of the findings and the empowerment-capability approach for policy formation. Millions of excluded girls in the developing world, including those among the 960.6 million Chinese living on less than $2 a day (Sumner 2012), face similar conditions of deprivation as the girls in this study (Lewis and Lockheed 2006) and would benefit from policies enabling their empowerment: “The costs of failing are tremendous in terms of lives lost and development opportunities missed” (Lewis and Lockheed 2006, 9).

This work analyzes and interprets findings using two guiding questions regarding possible enhanced freedoms and human development in this case study of the XS in Western China: (1) What functionings are valued by XS that they associate with advancing levels of schooling and education, and (2) what agency is enacted by the XS, that is, what achievements of the XS affected collective social justice change?

Need for a Study of the Capability Approach in Education of Excluded Girls

Though Sen (1999) has highlighted the role of education in the enhancement of freedoms central to human development, it remains rather “an uncontoured space, unmarked by contested power, history, or social division” according to Elaine Unterhalter (2003, 10), a leading scholar in HDCA and education. Relatively little empirical work on education has been published on the HDCA.7 This study intends to engage this gap.

A second area of need in the literature is to expand the range of work on critical empowerment8 to challenge the instrumentalist development discourse focused on empowerment’s economic and political outcomes, such as employment in the formal economy or agricultural skill sets.9

This article seeks to address the need of better defining schooling empowerment by filling in some of the contours of the space of education in village girls’ lives, a contested space within a harsh macroenvironment, and the subversive role of schooling that empowers women to act for transgenerational social change.

Analytical Approach

In the present study we integrated Sen’s (1999) taxonomy of the dimensions of freedom consisting of “constitutive” and “instrumental” roles of capabilities into the “empowerment-capability” analytical framework developed

7 For example, in the HDCA’s Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, Vigorito’s bibliography of 2010–11 on the approach lists only five that address education among 111 total publications in all major European languages, one of which is an earlier study by Seeberg.


9 See Caldwell (1979); Cochrane (1979); King and Hill (1991); Bicego and Boerma (1993); and Alsop and Heimsoth (2005).
earlier in the series of studies on the XS (see Seeberg 2011; see table A1). A brief review of the major conceptual dynamics of the HDCA follows.10

Sen characterizes “doing and being educated” as capabilities or freedoms to enjoy “the social opportunities that people have to improve the quality of their lives” (Drèze and Sen 2002, 6). Capabilities are experienced and enacted (being and doing) in the form of functionings that interact with political, economic, and social opportunities. Opportunities are defined as a range from deprivation (also called “unfreedoms” and “negative freedoms”) to enhancements or affirmative freedoms. It is the interaction of functionings with opportunities that constitute capabilities. Pierre Bourdieu’s very similar concept of habitus (1977) defined as the “dialectic of the internalization of externality and externalization of internality” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 72) elaborates the empowerment-capability framework further. Theorizing social location as a dynamic process of interaction between subjective mind, behavior, and external opportunity structures (Bourdieu 1977) thus avoids the complication of dividing constraints from resources and aspirations from opportunity structures.11 Adopting the concept of habitus allows us to explore the values and worldview of the girls in their social location and how they respond to it actively. It enables us to avoid the trap of judging their behavior on a scale of adaptive preferences.12

Appadurai’s (2004) concept of “aspirations” adds an essential clarification to the dimension of valuing freedoms associated with schooling—even in oppressive circumstances. He argues that ideas of the future are embedded in culture as norms, that “aspiration is a ‘navigational capacity’ in that it provides a map of norms that leads to future success” (69). Future-orientation and broadening of the student’s horizon is inherent in schooling and empowerment (see also Levine, Levine, and Schnell 2001). Our empowerment-capability framework brings into the capability approach the strong features of habitus and aspirations as essential to the practice of capabilities (learning) in education.

Since freedom “operates through values as well as institutions . . . public discussions and participation (and related to it, political freedom and civil rights)” (Sen 2013, 18), we use the capability approach “to identify influences on social change,” (18) which enables us to draw broad implications for policy.


11 Rather than separating regulating external structures from a response of adaptive preferences, “habitus” and “freedoms she has reason to value” constitute the dynamic of empowerment enacted by a girl as she moves from disadvantage and unfreedom to enhanced freedom.

12 Aikman (1999) observed that girls can learn to perform unfreeloms in school that can intensify and become “deformed” adaptive preferences thereby rigidifying disadvantages (Nussbaum 2000). The term preferences is used to indicate that the girl may not be aware of her counterproductive adaptation, describing it as a preference.
Constitutive Freedom or Intrinsic Well-Being

The role of constitutive capabilities of freedom is to enrich human life, well-being, and human flourishing, not simply happiness and wealth. At a minimum, constitutive freedom requires living beyond or being able to avoid deprivations at the level of starvation and importantly includes subjective well-being. For education, Nussbaum (2011) suggests this includes freedoms associated with literate, numerate, and uncensored speech. In this study, intrinsic, largely subjective capabilities of well-being relative to schooling were explored in the functionings of enjoyment and playfulness both individual and social, and confidence such as the ability to reason things out, which were derived from the literature on critical empowerment (for a fuller discussion of these functionings, see Seeberg and Luo 2012). In addition, we explored aspirations, a functioning that emerged very strongly in previous XS studies (Seeberg 2007, 2011; Seeberg and Luo 2012).

Instrumental Freedom, Doing

The instrumental role of freedom concerns the way different kinds of rights, opportunities, and entitlements contribute to the expansion of human freedom and promoting development. Sen particularly considers five types of instrumental freedoms, political, economic facilities, social opportunities, protective security, and transparency guarantees, four of which we explored. The functionings related to the fifth capability, transparency guarantees (Sen 1999, 38–39), did not emerge in the data.

Social Change: Agency, Achievement

The second guiding question will be answered in a secondary analysis of the above findings which locates where the XS enacted agency and created social change.

Agency is a core capability and concerns a person’s ability to pursue goals that she or he has reason to value. Agency is needed in order to enhance capabilities or freedoms. An “agent” is “someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well” (Sen 1999, 19). Achievement in this context refers to patterns indicating collective change observable in the environment; it is the achieve-
ment of aspirations that village girls held for social change for themselves and others.

Critiques of the HDCA in Education

This work is mindful that competing analytical approaches to education have found it associated with deprivations, inequality, and negative freedoms (see, e.g., the literature on social reproduction of schooling). Critical theory has shown how difficult it is for subordinated persons to gain greater freedom under persistent structural conditions associated with gender, race, ethnic, class, regional injustices, and political domination. Nussbaum (2000) reminds us that traditions can constitute unfreedoms, which may be reproduced in schools and result in “deformed” corrosive functionings that rigidify disadvantages rather than fertile ones that secure further capabilities (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007). Empirical evidence has shown that in socially highly restrictive contexts, such as those that apply to the participants in this study, education may have very few fertile results (Khan 2012; Kendall 2013) and possibly lead to harmful outcomes (see Unterhalter [2003] on South Africa, and Jeffery and Jeffery [1996] and Jeffery and Basu [1996] on South Asian rural contexts).

Sen (1999) moves beyond the gridlock between corrosive and fertile functionings by not setting out absolute freedoms or human rights but instead calls for informational “broadening” (253) and “using reason to identify and promote better and more acceptable societies” (249) by means of political and social participation (148). Empowerment thus includes the adaptive preferences that shape a girl’s agency as she “is and does” education, as she moves from disadvantage and unfreedom to enhanced freedom of her own valuing.

Design and Methodology

The present study is a part of a 12-year participant observation of 42 girls in one village. Sen’s (1999) conceptual approach demands that evaluation be an internal political process in which the researcher is but one participant, that it be dialogic and democratic. Ethnographers have argued similarly for participatory research as far back as Geertz (1973), Erickson (1986), and Eisenhart (2001). Capabilities researchers—particularly in rural developing country contexts (Chambers 1997, cited in Collomb, Alavalapati, and Fik 2012)—increasingly involve the persons whose behavior they seek to evaluate

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16 See the seminal works by Althusser (1971), Bernstein (1973), Bowles and Gintis (1976), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), and Apple (1979, 1982).
18 Soaring HIV infection rates and a high incidence of sexual harassment and rape in schools “literally end[s] a girl’s life” (16).
in defining what constitutes that behavior and how it relates to, in this case, schooling.19

The interpretive approach requires an acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the researcher. To address researcher bias, a team of two to four research assistants was involved in gathering, analyzing, and interpreting the data. The team consisted of the principal investigator (PI), who has decades of direct experience in China but is an ethnic outsider, and several research assistants (RA) who are Chinese cultural insiders, though unfamiliar with the village conditions in the remote rural highlands of Shaanxi.

The present study followed a recursive interpretive process using the empowerment-capability approach (Seeberg 2011; Seeberg and Luo 2012) and findings from prior studies, which drove the interview questions (see table A1). Semistructured interviewing, analysis of letters, personal communication, and field-visit observations were part of a reiterative process of coding and analyzing (Wiersma and Jurs 2009), followed by secondary analysis that focused on situational social changes. This process locates the general in the particular (Barone and Eisner 2006) and suggests a more general theoretical dimension (Emerson et al. 1995) from which implications for policy formation can be drawn.

For the present study we used 27 participants and three data sets: interviews conducted in the summer of 2010, letters written between 2005 and 2010, QQ (Chinese Facebook, http://www.qq.com), or email correspondence between 2011 and 2012, and field visit notes of the PI. It was further informed by field observation by several adult villagers since 2000 and communicated to the PI (personal communication).

The intensive informal semistructured interviewing was conducted in as natural a setting as possible, usually in participant groups of two girls (by their choice), one session with six girls, and another session with two XS and their parents; these two deferred to their parents to answer most questions.20 The XS were interviewed voluntarily, at their convenience, and in a familiar location, such as their home or school, or at low-cost, local inns. Institutional Review Board procedures were followed throughout.

To evaluate the association of empowerment with schooling, the study analyzes the findings by educational attainment, so that the gains described by XS either explicitly or implicitly refer to the associated educational level.

Participants

The participants in the study called the Xiangcun Sisters (XS) resided in one cluster of hamlets at the upper end of an extended steep mountain gorge. They attended one school district in the Province of Shaanxi.


20 For a lengthy discussion of the interview methodology, see Seeberg and Luo (2012).
A total of 27 XS participated in this study. In the summer of 2010, 11 XS had discontinued their studies, another 16 XS were continuing in school. The 11 XS who were school leavers\(^{21}\) included four primary school graduates in their late 20s, four early school leavers who had dropped out during middle school, one middle school graduate, and two high school leavers. Of the 16 XS continuing in school, nine were in middle school, two in high school, and five in college.

**Delimitations and Bias**

It was clear that frank discussion with the XS would be limited due to the strict patriarchal order that silences village girls. XS with a few notable exceptions were timid and slow to express themselves and did not easily claim voice and specific empowerment capabilities. The PI and the research assistant were both aware of these cultural restrictions and worked around them as much as possible.

Access to the participants in this study was gained through a local agent of a scholarship project that had defrayed some of the XS’ school fees either contemporaneously or in the past. The scholarship and its impact is not a target of investigation, is not being evaluated, and is not relevant to the findings of this or previous studies of the XS.\(^{22}\) There were no differences in responses by the 10 current versus the 15 former recipients that could be attributed to the scholarship. The scholarship factor is a constant across all the participants in this study and hence constitutes a delimitation of the case.

In the interest of attending to and moderating bias in the research, several elements are noted. The scholarship was founded by the principal investigator and author of this study; hence, possible bias introduced by these circumstances was carefully considered and moderated throughout the study, particularly in the creation and implementation of interview questions. A favorable bias of trust may have been introduced by the years of mail and some telephone contact with the PI and various research assistants. On the other hand, a bias toward restricting answers to positive aspects of learning and schooling may well have been introduced by the role of the PI as the main donor behind the scholarships. As the study was not about school but about

\(^{21}\) Included in this figure are XS who finished compulsory schooling, graduated from middle school after grade 9, but did not continue on to senior high school (grades 10–12). According to PRC policy, middle school graduates are not early school-leavers. The XS, however, saw themselves as not completing schooling, a belief commonly held in the villages and cities at the time (personal communication, 2008–2010). Middle school graduation held value insofar as it was accompanied by a passing exam score for high school admission. It held little value in the job market. Students who calculated that their test performance would be below admission-cut scores would drop out usually in “middle 2” or grade 8.

\(^{22}\) This study does not investigate effects of a scholarship or any other inputs into schooling. Rather it investigates experiences and outcomes of education and schooling as told by the participants. As a qualitative study it seeks rich description rather than effects.
their subjective views of empowerment, the bias constituted a delimitation of subject matter which is appropriate to the investigation.

During the interviews, we consciously mitigated the dual role of the PI/sponsor by having the RA lead and ask questions. The XS directed their answers to the RA rather than the PI out of respect and because they believed that their scholarship sponsor did not understand their Chinese dialect. In sum, the scholarship factor was deemed not to have biased the research on empowerment.

Confidence in Findings

We believe the research design, the expertise of the researchers, the broad and well-developed discourse and empirical work on the capability analytical approach, and prior research studies (Seeberg 2004, 2007, 2011; Seeberg et al. 2007; Seeberg and Luo 2011) provide the foundation for credibility in these findings. The conclusions drawn on this small-sample analysis need further research with more participants to improve confidence in findings and transferability.

Findings

The data are presented in the order of the two guiding questions and organized by the analytical concepts of constitutive and instrumental freedoms (Sen 1999), followed by the secondary analysis for social change. This approach is helpful in representing the meanings of the acts and voices of the XS (Geertz 1973). Since findings on functionings and capabilities of instrumental and constitutive freedoms have been explored in previous publications, they will be briefly illustrated here, followed by the analysis of and findings regarding social change.

Instrumental Freedoms

The instrumental value of education is well documented in the development literature mentioned above. The HDCA approach on the other hand emphasizes that it “contribute[s], directly or indirectly, to the overall freedom people have to live the way they would like to live” (Sen 1999, 38), which Sen divides into four dimensions: economic facilities, political freedoms, social opportunities, and protective security23 (Seeberg 2011; Seeberg and Luo 2012).

The economic facilities or externalities of habitus of the XS were largely characterized by severe deprivation, at times obstructing well-being, any freedom to choose valued functionings, any opportunity “to utilize economic

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23 This work did not explore the fifth dimension, transparency guarantees, to avoid introducing risk to underage participants by pursuing a socially and politically sensitive line of questioning.
resources . . . owned or available" (39). For the underage XS, economic resources were located solely in the family (Kabeer 1999; Unterhalter 2003) and constructed by the macroenvironment of the village and school.

The remoteness of their village scattered along the steep slopes of a mountain at an altitude of 2,000 meters (6,000 feet) in West China circumscribed lives. Nutritional intake was minimal and protein-poor, and undocumented daughters were visibly undernourished girls (field observation 2010). Seldom did families have an ability to “choose” to spend time and money on “something other than survival” (Wheary 2009, 76), yet many held on to aspirations for their offspring (Seeberg and Zheng 2009). Some cash influx came from parents’ short-term migrant labor, yet family income typically fell below the $1-a-day UN extreme poverty line. Deprivation of economic resources was so severe at times that it obstructed well-being, freedoms to choose, and opportunity, confining the XS to a space of severe exclusion from social provisions.

Village life was permeated by a Confucian world view on strict role obligations that privileged males and confined females in tight-knit kinship networks. The XS were painfully aware how the patriarchal culture dismissed them as girls.

For the villagers, schooling represented an extremely narrow channel of escape, a choice signifying the possibility of social mobility, rigidified over the millennia by academic examination-driven credentialism (Dore 2000). The starting gate was the local, barely functional primary school with its haphazard instruction, located an hour and a half down mountain goat paths. Once in, the XS were subjected to dreary rote book learning that was fundamentally alienated from the village life of manual labor that they led.

School fees were continuously levied on households despite the 2006 “Two Exemptions and One Subsidy” (TEOS) compulsory educational policy that prohibited private tuition and textbook fees and granted a subsidy for rural schooling in Western China. Senior secondary school was not compulsory, and tuition and living expenses were privatized and exceeded the average family income several times. High utility costs of losing girls’ labor in tending to household, farming, younger siblings, chronically ill parents and relatives forced many XS to miss school (personal communications 2000–2010; Hannum, Sargent, and Yu 2006). The lack of resources for the XS to convert for schooling and empowerment cannot be overemphasized.

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24 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 (China Development Brief; Young 2007).

25 XS still had to raise fees of over RMB 600 (2012 US$94) in primary school (Pang and Chi, personal communication, 2009), and RMB 700 (US$110) in junior secondary school, as well as room and board.

26 RMB 2,500 (US$395) plus fees reaching RMB 1,700 (US$268) in 2010–12.

27 RMB 4,000 (US$632).

28 Studies in many poor regions of the world recorded similar problems affecting girls but not their brothers (Mak 1996; Qureshi and Rarieya 2007).
The second dimension of instrumental freedoms, political freedoms, is commonly understood to involve access to civil rights and entitlements as well as freedom of speech in the public domain (Sen 1999, 38). The habitus of the villagers and, particularly, the adolescents included few expectations of civic guarantees; however, within the family and the school, rights, entitlements, and free speech constitute freedoms. Kabeer’s (1999) marker of empowerment, “speaking up on one’s own behalf,” indicates a level of political freedom within the family.

Some speaking up on their own behalf occurred in the homes of the XS, though they remained largely culturally appropriate, being reserved, even docile. Among the junior secondary school participants only some had become able to express themselves and win more respect from their family. The senior secondary school and college students even dared to disagree with family members; many vocally disagreed with the “backward” opinions of villagers (Seeberg and Luo 2012). Dang Yanfen was only in seventh grade when she successfully convinced her father to quit smoking.

Beside advanced schooling and age, individual character variation was also associated with courage, strength, and clarity in speaking out. “In middle school, I didn’t dare tell my parents what I wanted. But in senior secondary 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 was going to go to university—and I did” (Chen Yaya, 1st year higher education).

Sen (1999) regarded “protective security” as a “social safety net” that “prevents the affected population from being reduced to abject misery, and in some cases even starvation and death” (40) and hence instrumental to capability enhancement and freedoms. Within the context of the XS village, as shown above, there was little to protect anyone, particularly girls from abject misery; however, research showed that schooling did provide the XS with a particular protection—from an early arranged marriage.

Worldwide secondary schooling is known to delay marriage for even the poorest girls and provides protection against hard labor and forced marriage (e.g., Kendall 2013). In the XS village it was customary to start arranging marriage for the girls at least by age 16 to be consummated at 18–19. If a girl dropped out of junior secondary school, she was targeted by matchmakers and village families with single sons. “In a normal year, there are five to six young men in our small village who reach marriage age but cannot find a wife” (Pang Xuxu’s mother, 2010). Only the girls who showed good scores in school, and only if their parents supported their schooling, evaded the matchmakers and suitor families. Pang Nini refused to go home from secondary school on weekends and during breaks to avoid incessant nagging. Pang Mingming and Pang Jin approaching 18 years of age had refused several proposals. Pang Junjun was able to break her arranged engagement when she returned to school after a short break due to poverty. As the XS advanced
through school, they became more articulate and negative 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.”

The instrumental capabilities valued by the XS were severely affected by the deprivations associated with family, region, and schooling, and the gendered personal unfreedoms enforced by patriarchal traditions. Schooling did provide the only access to empowerment by preventing early marriage.

Constitutive Freedoms

In previous research (Seeberg and Luo 2012) functionings that constituted intrinsic substantive freedoms of well-being were strongly associated with continuing schooling: Enjoying Learning and Playfulness was mentioned by XS at all attainment levels in reference to early primary such as time with classmates, art classes, and extracurricular activities—despite academic challenges in school. XS who continued in schooling beyond the middle of junior secondary school were more affirmative: “There is an old Chinese saying, ‘In books you can find not only gold but also radiant beauty. You can drink the essence of knowledge, fill your brain and heart, and broaden your view by reading.’ I feel so happy when seeing the lovely books on the shelf. Books are the treasure of my life. They are like my close friends, growing up with me” (Chen Jiajia, grade 8, letter, 2009). A low level of enjoyment with school beyond the social and extracurricular activities was part of a capability set associated with the choice of dropping out before senior secondary school.

The functionings of confidence, and cognitive and psychological control were not easily claimed by the XS because culturally they were not sanctioned for girls especially in the more traditional villages. New relationships with friends and teachers though were inspiring, “in teachers’ eyes, what counts is my performance. I’ve become more confident because I’ve made progress [in my studies]” (Ren Qiqi, grade 9 leaver). Those who stayed into senior secondary school were able to “reason things out,” to broaden their horizons and aspirations. Advanced students professed that boarding in junior secondary school had made them calmer, braver, and more independent and had given them an advantage over nonboarding, urban senior high school students (Seeberg and Luo 2012). The junior secondary boarding school emerged as a space offering new options that triggered risk calculations and choices; some accepted the examination risks and costs of staying in secondary school, while others (a small majority) cited low scores, dubious schools, and family poverty as reasons to drop out and go to work.

Though they faced enormous social and school pressures and uncertainty about their post-school future, high school and college students felt more able to withstand stress and live up to challenges; early school leavers, on the other hand, appeared more stressed and insecure in their work situations.

Aspirations emerged in the discussion of findings on confidence; indeed,
holding aspirations was one of the strongest functionings among all the XS. It most often referred to a wish to improve skills or get advanced education rather than material possessions (Seeberg and Luo 2012). In many letters and interviews even very young XS wished they could go to university: “How I wish I could step out of the mountain and walk out my own sky . . .. I wish I could someday be in a senior secondary school, even college, to receive higher education, fulfill myself, and achieve my own value” (Chen Linlin, grade 9, 2006). Three XS in junior secondary school longed to become doctors, nurses, or work for a “large company.” Only two had formed more concrete career aspirations. Jing Jian (college) said, “For a village kid like me, becoming a nursing assistant is a real possibility.” All the XS dreamed of “walking out of the mountains” to see the “big world.” In general, the younger XS thought they could get there by staying in school; thus they studied diligently and “cherished” the opportunity. The early school leavers felt they could follow their dream directly by going to work in a nearby township and city, still close enough to return to their families often: “Though I love my hometown, I want to live in a big city and have a bright future. I have my own dreams and goals” (Pang Xuxu, grade 8, 2009). Pang Qiaoqiao, in her mid-20s, had been working in the city for over a decade, thought more long-term: “I want my future daughter to go to a more advanced big city than this to develop her potential. If girls stay in our village where everyone lives in the same way, they won’t have any motivation to improve themselves.”

Intrinsic subjective capabilities’ functionings including aspirations, in sum, were associated with advancing levels of schooling, and habitus and individual variation in learning ability played a decisive role at middle school age. Important and not necessarily expected is that intrinsic well-being associated with schooling as early as primary was valued by the XS.

Summary of Findings

The exploration of constitutive and instrumental freedoms found that the XS experienced schools as incubators of some freedoms that were otherwise absent from their village lives within a harsh context of unfreedoms.

Gained freedoms included enjoying wider social contact, support, and nurturance; entertaining a chance of being able to fulfill their aspirations to live a modern, urban life; growing levels of confidence, cognitive and psychological control; and converting these resources into feasible life trajectories. Instrumentally, they began acquiring political and economic status in their families; for many, schooling empowerment could not overcome the demands of poverty. Even so, schooling acted as a gateway to improved work options, relocation to a township or city, more opportunities to gain further capabilities, and social opportunities. A salient finding is that schooling provided protective security against early arranged marriage.
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Social Change Analysis

Having identified empowerment capabilities that are both constitutive and instrumental of freedoms gained by XS in schooling, our secondary analysis asking what their “indirect role through influencing social change” (Sen 1999, 296) might be explores the collective dimension of empowerment. The enhanced capabilities and freedoms are expected to produce social change in the direction of social justice for the individual and the collectivity (1999). Batliwala (1994, 2013), like Sen (1999, 2013), stipulates that action for social justice requires participation in institutions of the community and democracy, which for the XS meant the family, the village, and school communities.

In our earlier studies on Chinese girls’ schooling, we found that their participation in schooling produced a regendered identity effect of a social position in the village, in family relations, and in several freedom dimensions over the life-course. Taking this as the base, I conducted a secondary analysis for patterns of agency and achievement of freedoms that demonstrate collective social justice change in the village.

Agency

As noted above, an “agent” makes a choice to take an action that indirectly changes relationships with and in her or his environment. The XS’ passion and rigor in pursuing education in spite of gendered norms that dictated against this choice is a prime demonstration of their exercising agency. After entering the space of school, the XS continued to enact choices as Levinson and Holland (1996) argued, “through the production of cultural forms, created within the structural constraints of sites such as schools, subjectivities [identities] form and agency develops . . . people creatively occupy the space of education and schooling . . . transforming aspirations, household relations, local knowledges, and structures of power” (14).

Up through compulsory junior secondary school families were mostly supportive of schooling. However, with the exorbitant cost of senior secondary school parents became reluctant, and the XS became active in decisions about the limited resources: “In my family, my mom . . . only supports my brother . . . I insisted on staying in school and asked her to support me . . .. Whenever I asked her, she complained and wanted me to drop out” (Chen Yaya, 1st year higher education). Among eight dropouts, three XS were forced out by parental pressure, five XS, even some high achievers, dropped out on their own to contribute to the family resources instead of competing for them, making what Nussbaum (2000) calls “tragic choice” to earn quick money in the present. However, the XS were clear in their calculations that their long-term goals dictated they drop out because either their school performance was not good enough, their class rank too low to be accepted into senior
secondary school, or their vocational secondary schooling was defective and not productive. Despite good performance and against her parents’ wishes, Ren QiQi calculated that “it takes at least 7 years to finish school, 3 years in senior secondary school, and 4 years in college. I can’t put that burden on my family. It’s good to rely on myself for further study without support from my family.”

Vocational senior secondary school students and college students made informed choices to enhance their knowledge, skills, and capabilities. Pang Junjun, majoring in construction finance in senior secondary school, sought out internships on construction sites in the summers, where she was hired after graduation (personal communication QQ, 2012). Qing Tingting majored in nursing in college and also found an internship in a hospital “to get practical experience and found that there are not enough doctors there,” so she changed her major to medicine (personal communication QQ, 2012).

These patterns of enacted agency have implications for the institutions of family, village, and schooling: Fewer young marriageable women remain in the village, village families have more cash income, and families of secondary and tertiary graduates have potentially substantial increased resources.

Achievement of Social Change

This article adopted Sen’s (1999) characterization of achievement as “the actual living that people manage to achieve” (73). Both school trajectories, whether ending in junior secondary or higher, due to the location of the school or jobs, involved the XS moving away from the village to the county township or the city becoming part of China’s massive urbanization movement. The jobs the dropout XS got in the city were far from what the International Labor Organization (ILO) considers “decent work.” Though they were generally not satisfied serving as wait staff in street-side noodle shops, cashiers, hair dresser assistants, low-skilled manufacturing, or in construction, they much preferred to stay in the city with its modern amenities. It also presented them with a tableau of opportunities that might be hard to reach but inspired them to work hard and seek more openings to improve their skills. Pang Ranran (grade 10) found books on careers on supermarket shelves. Pang Qiaoqiao (grade 6) enrolled in a short-term training course that would get her promoted. The higher the school attainment level, the more opportunities they found for decent work in the city. Two college graduates moved to cities in far away provinces (personal communication, 2012).

29 In 1999 the ILO established a definition of “decent work” in its Conventions which has been incorporated in the Millennium Development Goals. We have adopted a somewhat more limited definition for the XS research that includes sufficient income for a good life, which also provides a chance to develop the self, safe working conditions, and no child and forced/bonded labor (ILO 1999).
Fertility Transition

The XS attitudes on having children had changed drastically from their parents’ generation and contemporary villagers in their mid- to late-20s. Each XS had two to three siblings. In the village even young families had more than two children in 2010 (field observation). Three of the older XS who were married in the village had given birth to two children each, and as Duan Linxia, G6, said, “Two kids are enough. I thought one son was enough, but in a rural area, one child seems to be . . . [implied inadequate] so I gave birth to my second baby, my daughter. It’s perfect to have a boy and a girl.” The younger XS, still in their teens, on the other hand were clear on plans to have only one child. Pang Linsha (G8 dropout) who worked as a supermarket cashier said, “One is enough. It’s too costly to raise more than one; you can’t get them the toys and clothes they need.” Not one XS mentioned the “one-child policy.”

The fertility transition worldwide has accompanied increased schooling for girls and women. It has raised the status of girls and their earning potential relative to men’s (Schultz 2002). For the XS village community the decreasing fertility rate decreases pressure on the land as it contributes to the urbanization sweeping China. Freed from the demands of extended child-bearing and rearing years, the XS both in the city and the village will enjoy greater opportunities to take on new social and economic roles.

Son Preference

Though the older generation’s pattern of bearing more than two children despite high costs in legal standings and enormous fines31 if caught indicates a continued preference of sons, most of the XS did not express any preference for a son. Many of the XS before 2006 had lamented that gender bias and boy-preference at some point negatively affected decisions about their schooling (Seeberg and Zheng 2009). Pang Junjun elaborated, “Some parents who didn’t have sons would give their daughters to others to keep trying.” In 2010 several of the XS were clear that this was unjust and that they would not allow themselves to be subjected to these prejudices. Two XS said they preferred daughters over sons, because daughters were usually closer to their mothers (for similar findings see Fong’s [2004] rich description of an urban female-centered fertility transition). Traditionally, son preference accompanied the filial obligation to contribute resources to the family.

Regendered Filial Duty and the Domestic Transition

A pattern of a socioeconomic status change is evidenced by those XS who, as they joined the job market and earned a living, made greater resource

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30 Guo (2009) found that in China, on average, women with 6 years of schooling were likely to have one fewer child than those with less schooling, which was consistent with prior studies conducted in other countries.

31 See report of Plan China’s work in Shaanxi in China Development Brief (Young 2007).
contributions to their birth family and played a major role in the division of a family’s joint resources including insisting on supporting younger siblings through school (see also Kong [2009] about Gansu village girls; Ma and Jacobs 2010). All of the XS at some point yearned to give back and relieve their parents’ burdens, move them to a house, and so forth: “Villagers think that if I get married, my brother has to shoulder all the responsibility of taking care of parents, but I don’t agree. I will support one of my parents, and he can support the other. Or I can take care of both of them. I have exchanged my opinion about this with other girls in junior secondary school. They don’t care who takes care of their parents” (Pang Nini, grade 12).

Marriage Patterns

The traditional arranged marriage patterns in the village were weakening among the XS. As noted above, the XS saw schooling as keeping them from getting married too young. Among the five junior-secondary XS who went to work in the city in 2010, only one had gotten engaged at age 20 by 2012. By 2012, 15 XS continued into senior secondary school past the traditional engagement age. Among the four older XS, one had married into a township residency hukou [birth residency registration] and three had married in the village. A strong pattern of delayed marriage was in place. However, it remains to be seen (research forthcoming) how many of the XS would remain earning cash or returning to farming, given the hard and unstable work conditions in the city.

Miaomiao, a college senior, spoke for many of the XS about the protection and security education gave her versus being married in the traditional manner and pattern:

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

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.

It appears that the domestic transition in gender roles and breakup of the multigenerational homestead was well ensconced in the XS generation.

Educational Attainment

Staying in school had become a pattern of achievement influencing yet unknown dimensions of social change. Seeberg and Luo (2011) documented patterns of a rapid increase in educational attainment for the XS in the first decade of 2000, particularly after 2006. Part of the social change evident in
the XS’ advanced educational attainment is that less boy-preference in school decisions was seen in families.

Growing inequality between urban and rural schooling, however, may increasingly constrain XS in their village habitus and diminish their aspirations for more choices and freedom: “As the gap between urban and rural education grows, the general policy, tied to hukou, of ‘going to the nearby school’ results in tremendous advantages for urban children in terms of educational opportunities and resource attainment relative to their rural counterparts” (Zhou and Chung 2012, 67), while “as society and the economy develop, the effects of education on income are increasingly important” (69).

Social Justice Change Summary

In sum, the village social change effect influenced by the XS’ education centers on their much enhanced identity, legitimacy, visibility, and respect in the eyes of their families and community. This has had the indirect social effect of removing the traditional prohibition against girls’ schooling and the institution of early marriage, lower son-preference, fertility and domestic transition and urbanization.

Most of all, the changes have created spaces of “rupture of dominant gender norms” (Stromquist 1993) for the XS. Given the extreme poverty in these remote villages, families and daughters still have to make choices between the well-being and even survival of family members, which might reinforce old patterns. Bolstered by their personal achievements in school and in finding work, the XS were fully engaged in the leading edge of the China-wide domestic and fertility transition and urbanization.

Conclusion

The people-centered development imperative of the capability approach made possible a holistic perspective of social location, inequality, and subjectivities and identified engagement in transformative change. The empowerment-capability analysis provided this research with the “conceptual tools to help strengthen our vision of education as a force for empowerment and equality” (Batliwala 2013, 36).

This study found that even severely excluded girls experienced empowerment functionings through schooling, which constituted both a subjective process and instrumental goals that influenced changes in social arrangements expanding social justice. Further, the study discerned in the girls’ agency and achievement collective change in social arrangements related to gender role, fertility, and domestic transitions, including regendered filial duties, disruption of marriage patterns, accelerating educational attainment, and rapid urbanization.

The intent of this research was to identify empowering effects of schooling beyond those traditionally evaluated (Alkire 2002). The XS’ capabilities de-
veloped in connection with educational attainment in the space of school which served as a social “incubator” disrupting gender expectations, raising aspirations, enabling achievement of freedoms, and protecting liberties, influencing changes in the “gender terrain” (Batliwala 2013, 36) in the village and beyond.

Dercon and Shapiro’s (2007) cross-cultural analysis of longitudinal panel data on poverty mobility confirms the importance of girls’ drive for educational capabilities to emerging from long-run poverty. However, they note, and it applies to the XS village as well, improved exo- and mesocommunity characteristics, subject to national policy, such as roads and other infrastructure are also essential for remote or otherwise disadvantaged areas. These characteristics were seen as constituting the villagers’ habitus consisting of both constraints and opportunities.

Implications for Policy, Externalities

The finding of greatest impact on limiting the expansion of freedoms for the girls and hence limiting social justice change is the linkage between the poor village and (1) the poor quality of basic and junior high education and (2) the high cost of senior high school. These exocharacteristics directly limited the XS’ chances of gaining access to academic schools and certification, cementing the urban-rural gap and inequality in urban employment. Expanding and regulating the quality of vocational secondary schools32 that prepare for technical careers present a more accessible, appropriate, and efficient policy link with urban nonformal skills education, especially in light of the massive need to increase and improve rural primary schooling.

A need for advanced education is underlined by high and growing urban unemployment rates of youth aged 20–24 years (22.1 percent of all urban unemployment in 2010; Liu 2012, 122). In addition, the precarious, low-skilled labor available to the female early school leavers assigns a great deal of their energy to merely making ends meet. However, the findings show that the XS who dropped out exercised greater voice and agency in many aspects of their lives and held aspirations for further training opportunities in urban locations. This population creates the demand for skilled nonformal training.

The findings on the empowering impact of schooling in this research speak to a “broader concept of freedom and quality of life” (Kelly 2012, 292), which is often overlooked but forms the normative core of the capability approach. Batliwala (2013) sets out a clear direction when she suggests that

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32 The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China reports that “in 2011, China’s 13,093 secondary vocational schools hosted a total number of 22,053 million students, who account for half of the student population in senior secondary education. A research report shows that 82 percent of students enrolled in secondary vocational schools were from rural families in 2012.” http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s5147/201302/148017.html.
as scholars we must evaluate “not just educational outcomes using conventional indicators, but the nature and intensity of the struggle that it generates for change, especially in terms of gender justice—the nature and intensity of women’s resistance!” (33). Future research including longitudinal studies following individuals and using hierarchical or vertical qualitative research could provide a more complete view of transformative social change.33

This research implies that Chinese national education policy needs to direct itself urgently to improving the quality and availability of vocational technical senior secondary and nonformal skill training in towns and cities and continuously to improving primary and lower secondary education in rural areas in order to counter the alarming increase in system-wide rural-urban inequalities that disproportionately affect village girls and women.

Whereas these broad policy formulations are in themselves not novel, the innovation of the empowerment-capability approach to policy formation lies in its power to discern social transformation power by individual’s drive to move out of deprivation and gain freedoms: “The underlying argument is that national policies should better balance growth in market production with considerations of equality, sustainability, and nonmarket dimensions of well-being that cannot be captured well by conventional ‘objective’ measures” (Stone and Mackie 2013, 1).

33 Dercon and Shapiro (2007) caution that beyond ever more panel studies “the future for understanding long-term mobility must lie in methodological innovations. These include an increasing focus on individual mobility and not just household mobility. It is clear that there are no simple shortcuts for this work, whether in quantitative or qualitative studies” (31).
## Appendix

### TABLE A1
**Empowerment Capabilities Analytical Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Freedom Dimensions</th>
<th>Capabilities</th>
<th>Functionings</th>
<th>Literature Review</th>
<th>Interview Questions, Selected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GQI: What functionings are valued by XS that constitute empowerment capabilities and freedoms that they gained in schooling?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutive freedoms, well-being</td>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>Enjoyment of learning and playfulness</td>
<td>Stromquist 1993; Nussbaum 2000; Seeberg 2007</td>
<td>What do/did you enjoy about your schooling? Your courses? What do/did you like best or very much about life while in school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive and psychological control and confidence</td>
<td>Confidence in learning/self; reason things out; get knowledge; cope with stress</td>
<td>Stromquist 1993; Nussbaum 2000</td>
<td>Are you/did you gain in confidence when in school? Do you feel more confident about yourself more now than before school? What did you learn in school that you value? Do you feel you can reason problems out more easily, step by step?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiration</td>
<td>Imagined social change: village, advanced schooling; gender role; desirable work; children’s future</td>
<td>Nussbaum 2000; Appadurai 2004; Seeberg 2007, 2011; Seeberg and Luo 2012</td>
<td>Do you think people in the village will live a better life similar to people in the cities? Do village girls want to go to university? What do you plan to study in the future? What do you hope for your future children; how much education, what kind of life? What kind of job would you like to have in the future?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental freedoms, doings</td>
<td>Political freedoms</td>
<td>Speak up on own behalf</td>
<td>Kabeer 1999</td>
<td>Are you braver or more able to tell others what you want? Are your parents more willing to listen to your opinions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic facilities</td>
<td>Habitus; participation in resource distribution in the family; decent work</td>
<td>Kabeer 1999; ILO 1999; Narayan-Parker 2005; Seeberg and Luo 2012</td>
<td>Have/do you tell your family what you want to do and what you need? If you want to go to vocational tertiary school but your parents say no, what will you do? Context of school cost; opportunity cost. What kind of job do you have now? How is the work environment? How many hours do you work? Do you like the job? How about the pay?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Dimensions</td>
<td>Capabilities</td>
<td>Functionings</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Interview Questions, Selected</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social opportunities</td>
<td>Relational: school friends’ and teachers; work environment; lower boy preference</td>
<td>Stromquist 1993; Cleaver 1999; Kabeer 1999; Unterhalter 2004</td>
<td>If your parents do not support you very much for going to school, what other encouragement have you found? Have other villagers and relatives tried to persuade or influence your parents not to support you or girls in general to go to school? How was/is your relationship with teachers and students? Teacher role model? Do you feel discrimination in urban environment against you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective security</td>
<td>Delayed or late marriage</td>
<td>Kabeer 1999; Seberg and Luo 2012</td>
<td>Are your parents eager for you to get married soon, early? Feel pressure? Have you put off plans to get married till after you have attained more schooling?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GQII Secondary Analysis: How did the XS enact agency in achievement influence what kind of social justice change?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social change</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>GQ1</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievements</td>
<td>GQ1</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—Abbreviations: NA, not applicable; XS, Xiangcun Sisters.
References


GIRLS’ SCHOOLING EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL CHINA


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