Empowerment of Excluded Girls in Schooling
Exploring Capabilities and Social Justice Change in China

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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 lovely books on the shelf. Books are the treasure of my life. They are like my close friends, growing up with me.

(Chen Jiajia, age 15, Grade 8, 2009)

Tens of millions of girls worldwide are deprived of schooling on the basis of their gender (Lewis & Lockheed, 2006), although many of them passionately aspire to gain an education. Such has been the case for the girls in the villages of rural western China. For over ten years, I have observed in a series of studies the daughters of one village at the very margins of globalization in the mountains of west China. The NongCun [Village] Sisters attended middle and high school between the ages of at least 13 and 17 to 18 years. These girls break with tradition and struggle against extremely harsh conditions to be in school. International development literature and the Millennium Development Goals declare that girls' schooling is one of the most effective means for fighting poverty, and that through schooling girls are empowered to reduce fertility and population growth and to contribute to the nation's economic development. However, few “if any evidence of attempts even to define what [empowerment] means in [girls’] own context” exists in mainstream development literature (Mosedale, 2005, p. 243). The NongCun Sisters series of studies aim to do just that: to identify empowerment in schooling of excluded school-age girls, as well as to explore implications of the girls’ empowerment for social change. In a previous study, Seeberg and Luo (2012) reported on the association between attaining higher levels of schooling and increasing empowerment from the perspective of the Sisters, establishing the linkage of empowerment and schooling. Their lives were plainly embedded in rigid constraints of multidimensional poverty, subject to ample deprivations. This chapter does not focus on measuring empowerment or disempowerment in and through school, but rather
attempts to contribute to a cross-cultural conceptualization of schooling empowerment and its impact on social change.

I argue that the contextual, person-centered human development and capability approach (HDCA) proposed by Sen (1999) provides a strong framework to investigate and analyze empowering capabilities and their “indirect role in influencing social change” (Sen, 1999, p. 296). I pose two guiding questions in the analysis of the NongCun Sisters’ accounts regarding their schooling and its context: (1) What functionings were valued by NongCun Sisters that constitute empowerment capabilities gained in schooling, and (2) what agency did the NongCun Sisters enact that achieved change in the direction of social justice?

In this chapter, I will first review literature on empowerment related to schooling of excluded girls and the empowerment-capability analytical framework applied in the NongCun Sisters studies. Second, I describe the setting of the NongCun Sisters’ community and schooling, followed by an analysis of their empowering capabilities in schooling and their impact on social change in family, school, and community. In the conclusion, I will interpret the findings on the adolescent NongCun Sisters’ schooling empowerment capabilities and associated social changes in a broader cross-cultural human development frame. I will answer whether and how the NongCun Sisters redefined their gender identities, roles, and life trajectories, and whether and how they drove social change.

CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT

Starting in the 1970s, feminist literature on empowerment in developing regions has focused on women as active change agents. The literature has been attentive to concerns of empowerment, social movements for equality, and structural change for social justice. Batliwala (1994) conceptualized empowerment as “a spiral, changing consciousness, identifying areas to target for change, planning strategies, acting for change, and analyzing activities and outcomes” (p. 132). For Kabeer (1999), empowerment is a process of moving out of disadvantage by means of converting resources. Mosedale (2005), Unterhalter (2003), and Vavrus (2003) explored concepts of empowerment of girls and women on the ground in developing countries. Stromquist (2002) saw empowerment as generated in “spaces of rupture of dominant gender norms” (p. 198). Much of my research has also included issues of empowerment (see Seeberg 2011). These many conceptualizations provide ample foundation to explore the school setting.

Schooling and Empowerment

Critical theory highlights the difficulties experienced by subordinated persons as they encounter persistent barriers of gender, race, ethnic, class, and regional injustices and domination (Bernstein, 1973; Bowles & Gintis, 1976;
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Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; among others). Schooling reproduces cultural and socioeconomic status and structures in such classics as Althusser (1971) and Apple (1979, 1982).

Taking a more nuanced view, Aikman (1999) points out that girls can learn unfreeds from and in school of which they may be quite unaware, but which may result in “deformed” adaptive preferences that rigidify disadvantages (Nussbaum, 2000). Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) characterize education as a process and an outcome of compounding capabilities, tending in either direction as fertile or corrosive. Studies of early phases of educational transition in rural and socially highly restrictive contexts show that schooling may have few fertile and possibly harmful outcomes for vulnerable populations (Khan, 2012; Jeffery & Jeffery, 1996; Jeffery & Basu, 1996; Kendall, 2013; Unterhalter, 2003). Unterhalter (2003), for example, reported that in when HIV infection rates were soaring South Africa, the high incidence of sexual harassment and rape in schools meant that schooling “literally ends a girl’s life” (p. 16). Jeffery and Jeffery (1996) and Jeffery and Basu (1996) have documented rising violence against girls and women in early stage schooling efforts and literacy campaigns in non-literate locales. Unterhalter (2003) characterized schooling as a “space of contested power, history, or social division” (p. 10). Critical and empowerment perspectives both inform the present research, which takes the position that schooling spaces cannot be determined a priori to either promote or discourage empowering capabilities, but that the theorized empowerment effect of schooling must be explored from the perspective of the participants—in this case adolescent village girls.

The Empowerment-Capability Approach

The human development and capability approach (HDCA) has gained growing influence in academic development literature and practice. It shares a normative perspective with feminist literature on education and empowerment by valuing the agency of the person at the nexus of change. The HDCA, pioneered by Mahbub ul Haq (1995) and Amartya Sen (1999), takes a broad perspective and is explicitly critical of the dominant 20th-century development thinking that focused narrowly on economic growth or modernization (Sen, 1999). Sen (1999) proposes an “integrated analysis of economic, social and political activities . . . and institutions . . . in terms of their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive freedoms of individuals, seen as active agents of change” (pp. xii–xiii). He argues for the centrality of the person, on what she/he can make happen based on what she “has reason to value”. This latter pivotal point references the negotiation between the structural environment and subjective stance of the person. The HDCA construes human development as the movement out of deprivation and recognizes freedom as the goal and process of development (for a lengthy treatise, see Sen, 1992). This stance provides a fitting
point of departure for understanding the aspirations of the NongCun Sisters in gaining an education and challenging social, cultural, economic, and regional-geographic barriers and disadvantages. For Sen (1999), “doing and being educated” is a central social arrangement that expands substantive human freedoms, bringing about and supporting other capabilities that a girl may reasonably value. “Education not only causes freedom, capabilities and development, it is also constitutive of both” (Sen, 1999, pp. 41–42).

The capability approach evaluates the dispositions and practical skills required to negotiate within a particular set of opportunities and possibilities in order to achieve valued freedoms. “What is to be evaluated is realized functionings, that is what a person is and does” (Sen 1999, pp. 74–75). I will evaluate the dispositions and skills of the NongCun Sisters as they negotiate their way through the barriers and opportunities to go and remain in school.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is helpful in explaining the interaction between external opportunity structures and subjective dispositions, behavior, and skills. Habitus guides the choices a person makes. It is dynamic, being constantly remade by negotiations and choices (Calhoun, 2002). Taking the perspective of habitus, the NongCun Sister’s empowerment capabilities not only are directly observable in practices or functionings, such as attending school, or in social arrangements, such as initiating conversation with elders, but also are observable in the subjective expressions of the girls. Empowerment capabilities can be observed in the perceptions the NongCun Sisters have regarding their experiences, their aspirations, and their opportunities and constraints. Despite the central role Sen assigned to education in the enhancement of capabilities and freedoms, relatively few studies have been published on the application of the capability approach in education. Exploring dimensions of empowering capabilities of socially excluded girls, like the NongCun Sisters, is breaking new ground.

Despite the central role that Sen assigned to education in the enhancement of capabilities and freedoms, relatively little empirical work has been published on the capability approach in education. Little work has been done to explore dimensions of capabilities that are empowering to socially excluded girls who have little access to modern infrastructure and institutions. Furthermore, the developmental literature that espouses the empowerment of women shows few “if any evidence of attempts even to define what this means in their own context” (Mosedale, 2005). When constraints are the focus of investigation in the critical theory literature, it is often posited that disincentives and harm outweigh incentives and empowerment through and for schooling. Further research in a variety of contexts of schooling on its association with empowerment, particularly of and by socially excluded girls, is needed, especially as it pertains to dimensions of empowerment capabilities related to schooling and education in general.
EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT CAPABILITIES

This chapter is based on a long-term observational study of the daughters of one village, the NongCun Sisters, starting in 2000. As a descriptive qualitative study, the voices of young girls are prioritized as they go through school and after. Capabilities approach researchers, like many feminist and ethnographic researchers (Geertz, 1973; Erickson, 1986), especially in rural developing country contexts (Collomb, Alavalapati, & Fik 2012; White & Pettit, 2004; Narayan, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 1999), have increasingly involved the persons whose behavior they seek to evaluate in defining what constitutes that behavior and how it relates to, in the present case, schooling. Between 2000 and 2010, 74 NongCun Sisters have communicated with me (see Table 11.1 in Appendix). Between 2005 and 2010, I received 130 letters about their lives. In 2008, 58 Sisters enrolled in middle and primary school answered an open-ended questionnaire, and in 2010, 28 NongCun Sisters volunteered for in-depth, in-person interviews. I conducted field observations with assistance from local informants between 2000 and 2010. These sources provide the data for the long-term larger study.

Over the time of the research, themes emerged in the communications from the NongCun Sisters that lead to the design of the current research project. The Sisters’ experiences associated with schooling countered common explanations offered by critical and adaptive preference theory and lead to the use of the capability approach as a design for the interview research in 2010. The 28 NongCun Sisters interviewed in 2010 had provided the most information over the years since 2000 and supply most of the data in the current study. The data is restricted to communications they submitted while in or about their middle school years, when they were between 13 and 17 years of age.

Although I have decades of direct experience in China, I am not an ethnic insider. I have collaborated with research assistants who were Chinese cultural insiders, particularly in the interpretation and denotation of communications with the participants. The research design, process, and expertise of the researchers (Seeberg 2004, 2007, 2011; Seeberg & Luo, 2011; Seeberg, Ross, Tan, & Liu, 2007) provide the foundation for credibility in these findings.

EXTERNAL HABITUS OF SOCIALLY EXCLUDED GIRLS

In the capability approach, external structures are not studied as separate impact factors on participants’ behavior but as part of the habitus, part of the negotiation between the participants’ subjective mind, culture, and other resources. However, I will briefly situate the participants in this study in their larger social context, including the conditions of their schooling.
The NongCun Sisters fit the definition of severely socially excluded girls. Lewis and Lockheed (2006, p. 4) differentiate severe exclusion, which has structural consequences, such as lack of school facilities and supplies, teachers, or roads, from cultural exclusion, which includes the vulnerabilities of girls, their low status, and reproductive roles. Both types of exclusion applied to the NongCun Sisters; they faced multiple structural exclusions due to their extreme poverty (annual household income in 2010 barely reached $260), the harshness and remoteness of their mountain home, chronic illness of elder family members, a legal, rigid household registration system, and social discrimination due to poverty, rural status, and subjugated gender in a traditionally highly patriarchal culture. For example, Dang YingYing, age 14, wrote, “My family has an average weekly income of a few dozen RMB (approximately US $5); but I still need to spend 14 RMB (approximately $2) to take the bus to school every day” (personal letter, October, 2012).

Schooling for excluded girls according to Lewis and Lockheed’s (2006) criteria typically reveals low-quality inputs and appears at least irrelevant, even detrimental, to elders in the community. In the NongCun Sisters’ village, schooling evidenced all these characteristics. Villagers described the local primary schools as inadequate, especially when compared to urban schools (inequality), as unable to prepare students for high-stakes examinations and ultimately gainful employment (low returns), and as depriving the family of needed labor in the home (high opportunity cost). The lower primary school (for ages 7 through 10 or 11) lay halfway down a steep mountain goat path an hour and a half away (unsafe and distant access) and was severely short of teachers, who were often absent, provided lackluster instruction consisting mostly of rote memorization, and neglected the girls. Facilities were poor and lacked heat, and textbooks were tattered. Fees were assessed without warning.

As early as upper primary Grades 5 and 6, the NongCun Sisters started boarding at school. The upper primary school was located another hour’s walk farther down the mountain, where they boarded in sparse, crowded dormitories during the week, returning home on foot for the weekends. The middle school, Grades 7 through 9, was located even farther down the mountain, a 5-hour walk or about 40 minutes by bus from the village, which some of the Sisters would be able to afford once a month; a few would get a ride from a father who owned a motorcycle. High schools were located either in the nearest town, three hours by bus from the middle school, or, for the academically brightest among them, in the provincial capital city, Xi’an, six hours by bus.

EMPOWERMENT CAPABILITIES: THE NONGCUN SISTERS’ SCHOOLING EXPERIENCE

The empowerment capabilities framework (ECF) (Seeberg, 2011; Seeberg & Luo, 2012; see Table 11.2 in Appendix) provides the structure for the analysis. I developed the ECF framework using the HDCA and the functionings
described by Appadurai (2004), Kabeer (1999), Narayan-Parker (2005), Nussbaum (2000), Seeberg (2004 2007, 2011), Stromquist (1995), and Unterhalter (2007). In this analysis, the ECF helps to identify and specify the nature, type, and kind of empowering functionings that the Nong-Cun Sisters experienced as valued, and the agency they enacted to achieve changes in their gendered roles, which impacted social change in the village. The NongCun Sisters studies revealed what their schooling meant to them, revealing not only their awareness of the difficulties and discomforts of the school facilities, but also their aspirations for moving ahead and feeling hopeful. Despite being hungry, cold, sometimes ridiculed, homesick when boarding in upper primary, ages 12 to 14; and despite the tedium and long hours of study, the difficult examinations, and anxiety about not studying well enough, the NongCun Sisters in letter after letter conveyed a singularly resolute spirit, determination, and confidence, even delight at learning and optimism. The below analysis of their accounts uses the major categories of ECF (see Appendix) as they apply to education, well-being, and agency, and their implications for social change.

A Sense of Well-Being in Schooling

Well-being related to schooling in the ECF is composed of themes of empowerment, self-expression, enjoyment and playfulness, cognitive and psychological control, and confidence-building. Jing Jian, age 13, wrote,

I’m a happy kid. I feel happiness in everyday learning. I’m learning knowledge from books. Why shouldn’t I be happy? . . . I will work very hard to learn and pursue my dream to learn about medicine to help people. . . . I believe I will reach my goal if I never give up.

(personal letter, June 2009)

Speaking of their middle-school years, Chen Jiajia, age 16, Wang Yunyun, age 13, and Dang Yanfen, age 15 in 2010 said they liked learning “academic knowledge”. Dang Yanfen continued: “it enriches [my] life and makes it more meaningful.” Among Sisters who were continuing in middle school in 2010, other aspects of school were enjoyable. “Music class—I liked singing and playing table tennis and badminton . . . at school” said Ranting, age 14 in 2010. Dang Yanfen, age 15 in 2010, appreciated the social aspects: “Chatting with classmates makes me happy. One of our teachers is very nice to me.”

Middle school, however, presented a fork in the road for the NongCun Sisters (Seeberg & Luo, 2012). In 2009, Pang Shishi, age 16, Duan Shishi, age 16, Jing Minlin, age 16, and Pang Linsha, age 17, all dropped out of middle school, but they thought fondly of their primary school experience: “there had been no worries,” no “pressure to study”, and fewer courses, and extra-curricular activities were fun. In middle school, courses increased
in number and difficulty, classes were crowded, and teachers provided less support. Jing Minlin, age 16, wrote:

I feel very conflicted. I almost gave up. My scores were not good at the beginning and are getting worse now. . . . My dream is getting even farther away from me. Even if I finish middle school, I know that there is no way that I can get into college. . . . Three of my friends from home have already dropped out.

(personal letter, February 2009)

Chen JiaJia, age 15, wrote on June 21, 2009, about her friend Chen Qian dropping out of middle school: “She is my age. Why does she drop her studies and derail her destiny so early? She wants to go job hunting, but we can always find a job later. Why does she throw away this golden period of education?” However, more than half of the NongCun Sisters continued to enhance their capabilities. Chen Linlin, age 16, wrote, “In school I read a lot of world classics and hear about many events happening around the world. Although studying is never easy, I’ve got my goal and am ready to challenge myself” (personal letter, March 2007).

A theme of increasing cognitive and psychological control and confidence-building related to schooling in the ECF flowed through their tales:

In primary school I would weep every time I made a mistake. But now I face the results no matter if it is a failure or success. In middle school . . . my teachers are supportive and encourage me to be braver. So gradually, I have become braver.

(Duan Ranqing, age 14, Grade 7, 2010)

With cognitive improvement came confidence:

Do men always do better than women? I don’t think so. I got first place in the calligraphy and writing competition . . . [and] standing on the award platform, I smiled happily. I proved that girls aren’t inferior to boys. I am aspiring to a beautiful future and wish to be a woman who excels in her work.

(Chen Jiajia, age 15, grade 8, 2009)

Sisters clearly valued these empowering functionings and associated them directly with their concrete experiences in school.

Many NongCun Sisters in primary and middle school in the village dreamed of “flying out of the mountains” to live in the city, where life would be “comfortable and colorful”. However, the early school leavers who had started working in the city no longer expressed such romantic dreams but were more realistic and practical: to get training or find less tedious and arduous work. Ren QiQi, age 16, said about her job in a small photo shop, “I want to learn to do the job well. But after that, I don’t want
to do the same job. Now my job is selling. What I’m interested in is arts. I
don’t mind starting from the very beginning as a cosmetician.”

Developing Agency Through Schooling

Agency related to schooling in the ECF can be described as the act of con-
verting resources into capabilities through opportunity. For Sen, agency is
a core capability, which concerns a person’s ability to pursue goals she has
reason to value. Despite the burden of Confucian patriarchal traditions and
a code of silence laid on young girls, the NongCun Sisters who were con-
tinuing in school past Grade 8 in middle school showed confidence and
optimism (Seeberg & Luo, 2012) to take action in their lives:

I know if I want to change my fate, I have to study hard and get out
of this remote area. Although our ‘quality’ is below that demanded by
society, I have a learning heart. I want to follow the development of my
country and change with the times. . . . I believe that I can create my
own situation and my own fate.

(Chen Yaya, age 17, Grade 11, 2005)

I never considered the villagers’ ideas about girls not going to school.
I stuck with my own ideas. I spent the summer after 9th grade getting
a job away from home to avoid my parents’ pressuring me to drop out.

(Pang Nana reflecting on middle school,
at age 21 in 2008)

The NC Sisters also enacted agency by participating in the distribution
of family resources.

Starting in 3rd grade through the end of primary, we really started to
study. We enjoyed learning. Due to our poor financial conditions at
home, we knew our parents would ask us to drop out after graduating
from primary school. So we studied hard because we knew that only if
we did well, would there be a chance to stay in school.

(Pang Qiaoqiao reflecting on her last primary

Not in all cases did agency lead to further schooling; Pang Qiaoqiao did
have to drop out after primary school. Pang Ranran decided at age 16, dur-
ing her first year in high school, that the vocational school was not worth
the tuition and cost of living for 3 years when compared to the immediate
opportunities and rewards in the labor market—against the advice of her
parents:

My parents found the vocational school for me after my middle school
graduation and supported my education there. When I told them I
wanted to drop out, they were shocked and tried to persuade me to persist in school. However, I didn’t feel I learned much in that vocational school. It’s a waste of money to stay in that school. So I dropped out and started working in the city.

SOCIAL CHANGES: EMPOWERED REGENDERED ROLES AND SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

Sen (1999) argues that achievement, “the actual living that people manage to achieve” (p. 73), extends the analysis of capabilities into social aspects. For Sen, individual freedom is a quintessentially social product; there is “a two-way relation between (1) social arrangements to expand individual freedoms and (2) the use of individual freedoms not only to improve the respective lives but also to make the social arrangements more appropriate and effective” (p. 31). The living that the NongCun Sisters “managed to achieve” then has implications for change in the direction of socially “more appropriate and effective” arrangements. However, interpreting social change regarding the Sisters during the ages of 13–17 and the relatively short term of the study (10 years) restricts my observations of the social changes to the realms of family, village, and school communities. The NongCun Sisters frequently and passionately recounted their changed perspectives on family: delayed marriage, lower son-preference, fewer children, and regendered filial duties toward their aging parents (Seeberg & Luo, 2012; Seeberg, 2011).

Delayed Marriage

Delayed marriage due to schooling was the trigger and nexus of the fertility and domestic gender transition among the NongCun Sisters. Many of the adolescent Sisters acted against their parents’ immediate economic interests and long-standing traditions by extending their schooling. In the village it was customary to start arranging marriages for the girls at least by age 16 to 17, to be consummated at age 18 to 19. Matchmakers and families with single sons in the natal village immediately targeted the NongCun Sisters who dropped out of middle school. “In a normal year, there are five to six 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 poverty on the other,” said Pang Xuxu’s mother. Hence, among the six NongCun Sisters who dropped out of middle school, two were engaged by age 17. Two others, who were 16 years of age, had just left school a month earlier and immediately went to work in the city rather than return to the village to get engaged, following in the footsteps of older NongCun Sisters working in the city. All the NongCun Sisters told of family elders constantly
pressuring them to make a match. Only those girls who showed good scores in school, and only those whose parents were positively inclined to their schooling in the first place, could evade matchmaking pressures. Pang Mingming, age 16, and Pang Jin, age 18, who were doing well in middle and high school respectively, had already refused several proposals; whereas Pang Junjun was forced to drop out of high school at age 17 because the family had run out of money and forced her into an engagement.

All of the NongCun Sisters were vocal about wanting fewer children than their parents’ generation. All NongCun Sisters had two to three siblings, and many families in the village had three or more young children in 2010 despite the two-child rural family limit (field observation 2010). Only two of four NongCun Sisters in their mid-20s, Duan Linxia, Jing Weiwei, Jing Xialin, and Pang Qiaoqiao, who had left primary school in Grade 6 at age 14 were married early, living back in the village with two children. Duan Linxia said, “Two kids are enough. I thought one was enough, but in a rural area, one child seems to be...so I gave birth to my second baby, my daughter.” The younger NongCun Sisters, still in their teens, wanted no more than one child. Pang Linsha (age 17, Grade 8 dropout, 2010), 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 NongCun Sister mentioned the “two-child policy” in effect for rural households.

In the older generations, son-preference was pervasive according to the Sisters, and this preference had affected them throughout their lives, particularly in the allocation of family resources. Son-preference had contributed to the high number of children per household. The “two-child policy” had caused many daughters to be born “out of plan,” subject to enormous fines and other abuses. “Black hukou” [household registration] classification deprived girls of legal status and resulted in compound disadvantages. In 2010 among the NongCun Sisters, however, none expressed any son-preference. Two said they would prefer daughters over sons, because daughters were closer to their mothers (for similar findings, see Fong’s (2004) rich description of an urban female-centered fertility transition).

The dispositional change to smaller families is consistent with the worldwide fertility transition that accompanies schooling for girls. “The private opportunity costs of children [due to schooling] have increased, and parents have been motivated to substitute child schooling for additional births” (Schultz, 2001). This transition will free the NongCun Sisters from the fate of their mothers, continuously bound by childbearing and rearing, and will give them greater opportunities to take on social and economic roles, which the adolescents were fully anticipating. The transition has raised the status of girls and their earning potential relative to men. In the village community the lower fertility rate decreases pressure on the land and contributes to the urbanization sweeping China.

Another transition had taken place already in the family dynamics of NongCun Sisters. Since primary school, many Sisters aspired to pay back
their parents’ sacrifices in sending them to school. One of the values that
their schooling held for them was the freedom they would gain to treat their
natal parents well in their old age through following the path to paid work.
Deeply embedded in Chinese tradition is the filial duty of the son to take
care of his natal family and the daughter to become a member of the affinity
family by marriage, with responsibilities to those elders, not her natal ones.
A cultural shift toward regendered filial responsibility was well underway in
2010 as the NongCun Sisters achieved a more empowered position in their
lineage family. The Sisters freely and gladly took on responsibilities for both
parents and younger siblings (see also Kong, 2009; Ma & Jacobs, 2010).

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 shared my opinion about this with other girls in
middle school. They have no preference as to who should take care of
their parents.

(Pang Nini, Grade 12, 2010)

As NongCun Sisters redefined their gender identity by developing their
capabilities in schooling, they adopted deeply felt regendered values and
new possibilities in regard to their lineage families, childbearing, and valuing
their future daughters. They were fully engaged in the fertility and domestic
transitions, changing gender roles and restructuring social arrangements in
the village community along androgynous lines.

Work and Urbanization

All of the adolescent NongCun Sisters in 2010 were headed unidirection-
ally toward towns and urban areas in their future, whether due to the loca-
tion of secondary and tertiary schools or due to finding work for pay after
dropping out. Whether due to forced choice or agency, the youngest of the
school leavers, ages 14–16, could only find low-skilled jobs with few oppor-
tunities for advancement. However, these jobs relocated and kept them
in the city, where they experienced enhanced and substantive freedoms of
independence from restrictive gendered traditions back in the village. Their
new urban identities changed as they renegotiated their habitus in new
social arrangements and information sources, which embodied potential for
advancement and presented them choices for life trajectories:

I want to learn English and Math. A math skill is required for my job.
I work in a supermarket as a cashier. Sometimes the boss asks me to do
some calculations. So if possible I want to learn more about mathematics,
calculating and English in the training club. However, I may not
have time. I have very little spare time.

(Pang Linsha, age 17, 2010)
I want to learn something with the money I earned. I think it will benefit me in the future. I want to learn how to do hair style and make-up so I can work in a beauty salon.

(Duan Shishi, age 17, 2010)

CONCLUSION

This study began by adopting two principles regarding the notion that a girl in and through education can “enhance capabilities . . . to achieve various lifestyles” which she “has reason to value” (Sen, 1999). I posited, one, that this enhancement of capabilities is by definition an empowering process, what Sen calls a substantive freedom, the capability to choose a life one values or “the capability set of alternatives that a person is substantively free to do” (Sen, 1999, pp. 74–75); and, two, that empowerment as both process and goal is a building block of social change.

The study confirmed, identified, and specified the functionings that Seeberg’s empowerment-capability framework adapted from cross-cultural literature of schooling empowerment. In terms of the intrinsic capabilities (HDCA), more than half of the NongCun Sisters continued to enjoy social, artistic, and academic aspects of schooling (well-being). They gained confidence and independence, particularly when they were boarding in school away from home. They clearly gained and appreciated their improved cognitive and psychological control as they advanced through schooling, gaining in instrumental well-being and cognitive psychological control enacted agency based on reasoned choices and valued aspirational outcomes, both intrinsic capabilities. As they were more able to express their aspirations, they exercised instrumental agency that changed the family power structure. On the other hand, a few of the NongCun Sisters were deprived of substantial freedoms due to extreme poverty by being forced to drop out of school early and bring income to the family.

As the NongCun Sisters advanced in schooling, they redefined their identities and gained more substantive freedoms to make choices that were less tied to traditional restrictions on their gender. They made changes in their intrinsic, subjective orientation and political status (habitus); forged new relations based on regendered roles, and objectively achieved more socially just and free living conditions. The same dimensional changes apply as well to those who went to work early; however, it involved different functionings and more restricted freedoms.

The fact that the Sisters attained advanced educated status that their mothers had not, had lower son-preference, desired for fewer offspring, and adopted filial responsibilities in their lineage family combined to imply social changes in the realms of family, village, and school communities. They realized that their status and power in their lineage families increased, giving them more freedoms to make choices they valued. Bolstered by their personal achievements through schooling, the young NongCun Sisters were
forging ahead at the leading edge of a domestic and fertility transition, gaining greater social justice for their gender.

The normative imperative of the capability approach, to center understanding of the human development process on the adolescent NongCun Sisters, and the empowerment-capabilities associated with schooling situating social change in a social justice frame. By giving voice to the NongCun Sisters as they redefined their gender identities, roles, and life trajectories, we were able to take account of the subjective perceptions as well as observable practices that together changed their habitus and drove social change. Thus we were able to observe how the NongCun Sisters wove a new social fabric that consisted of greater gender equity—and a sustainable domestic and fertility transition.

These findings do not deny or minimize the extent of socioeconomic and cultural deprivations that continue to disadvantage multiply excluded girls. Despite lacking the social and structural resources, which the economic growth-based development literature considers necessary to set off a beneficial cycle of development, the NongCun Sisters, by being and doing education, directly and indirectly created deep tradition-breaking and socially just change, likely setting off a beneficial cycle of empowerment and collective change.

Although these conclusions are drawn on a small-sample case study, further research with a larger number and variety of participants in several locations for an extended period of time would improve confidence in these conclusions and test the transferability of the empowerment-capability dimensions. A grounded empower-capability framework may lead to a modification of evaluatory criteria for policy formation that pick up on initiatives of social change often missed with overly economic and instrumentalist policy analyses. Chinese national education policy focused on access and allocation of resources for the rural West could benefit from observing how schooling engages empowerment and substantive freedoms that generate human development, not only for adolescent girls.
Table 11.1 Participants by Birth Year

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Table 11.1  (Continued)

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Note: P = Primary Grade 1–6; M = Middle School Grade 1–3 (7–9); H = High School Grade 1–3 (10–12); U = College Year 1–3; Out = Out of school.
### Table 11.2 Empowerment Capabilities Framework

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instrumental: Academic skills</td>
<td>Have insight, patience (Nussbaum, 2000); Confidence (Nussbaum, 2000); Self-respect (Unterhalter, 2007) Curious about the larger world</td>
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<td>Agency</td>
<td>Intrinsic: Political state/condition (Seeberg, 2006), political consciousness (Stromquist, 1995); Aspirations (Appadurai, 2004).</td>
<td>Reason things out (Nussbaum, 2000)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Instrumental: Participation in structures (Narayan-Parker, 2005); decision-making with negotiation power in family (Kabeer, 1999)</td>
<td>Self-expression (Unterhalter, 2007); Capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004); Speak up on own behalf (Kabeer, 1999); Choose learning/something specific (Seeberg, 2011); Make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999);</td>
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<td>Participation in resource distribution in the family</td>
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<td>Externally: Family constraints &amp; supports; Community constraints &amp; supports</td>
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<td>Dimensions of Freedom</td>
<td>Capabilities (Sen, 1999) that Empower Functionings: Feelings &amp; Activities Related to Schooling Fertile Functionings (Nussbaum, 2011)</td>
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<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Achievement of valued outcomes and changes in the direction of social justice</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Concepts underlying interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intrinsic: Subjective orientation, reflection on political status (Stromquist, 1995); Relational: (Kabeer, 1999); Instrumental: Objective state/condition (Kabeer, 1999); Attainment: Grades 6–9, 10–12, 13+</td>
<td>Orientation &amp; Aspirations: Imagined social change (Appadurai, 2004; Unterhalter, 2007; Stromquist, 1995); Regendered identity family role (Seeberg, 2006); Rejection of male preference (Stromquist, 1995)</td>
<td>Achievements: Delayed or late marriage; Desirability of work (Seeberg, 2011); Achievement in school, awards; higher attainment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOTES

1. I gratefully acknowledge the excellent assistance of Shujuan Luo on this research project over the past five years.

2. In many rural villages of China, girls do not enter school until age 7 and attend a minimum of 6 years of primary school with frequent repeat grades; they may go on to middle school as early as age 13, and again with repeat grades often do not complete 3 years of middle school until age 17.

3. For clarity’s sake, I will reference Sen’s influential book Development as Freedom, although many of the ideas were developed in earlier publications, such as “Equality of What?” (1980), Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984, Journal of Philosophy 82 (1985 April), Inequality Re-examined (1992), and many others, all of which he references in the endnotes of the book chapters.


5. To avoid awkward construction, she and he will be used interchangeably to indicate a single individual, unless gender is specifically noted.

6. For example in the Human Development and Capability Association’s Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, Vigorito’s bibliography of 2010–2011 publications on the approach lists only 5 that address education among 111 total publications in all major European languages, one of which is an earlier study by Seeberg.

7. Hukou [household registration] system fixed a person’s regional classification at birth for life. Few legal options existed for changing one’s hukou. Particularly legally disadvantaged was the “rural hukou” classification.


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

10. The handful of returnees were in their mid-20s in 2010 and one of the last age-cohorts to do so.

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Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 119–161). New York: Macmillan.


