THE ROLE OF VOCATIONAL SCHOOLING IN THE EMPOWERMENT OF
RURAL MIGRANT GIRLS IN WESTERN CHINA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
ETHNIC MONGOLIAN GIRLS AND HAN GIRLS

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THE ROLE OF VOCATIONAL SCHOOLING IN THE EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL MIGRANT GIRLS IN WESTERN CHINA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ETHNIC MONGOLIAN GIRLS AND HAN GIRLS (190 PP.)

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Using Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Seeberg's Empowerment Capabilities in Education Framework (ECEF) as conceptual guides, this study examines how Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) expands or constrains the capabilities of rural migrant Mongolian and Han girls in western China. Employing an interpretive, qualitative two-case design, it draws on semi-structured interviews, observations, and field notes. In this context, empowerment can be understood as the expansion of capabilities, and ECEF provides a structured lens through which to assess whether TVET not only enhances substantive freedoms but also enables functionings that allow these girls to pursue lives they have reason to value—beyond mere skill acquisition and employment.

This research found although the capabilities development for both Mongolian and Han girls is constrained by factors such as a poor local job market, restrictive gender roles, family obligations, and cultural expectations, TVET offers a meaningful opportunity for empowerment within their current circumstances. Through TVET, both Mongolian and Han girls made informed choices and took action to enhance their skills, capabilities, and economic positions. The study also shows that cultural values and structural factors shape Mongolian and Han girls' TVET outcomes differently. Mongolian girls often wish to stay near pastoral lands, face less pressure to marry early, and therefore enjoy greater autonomy in pursuing personal aspirations. In contrast, Han girls typically avoid returning to poverty-stricken villages, seek better opportunities in urban areas, marry younger—sometimes under parental pressure—and prioritize family financial support.

This research addressed an important gap in the literature by examining how rural Han and Mongolian girls move from pastoral or subsistence-based livelihoods to expand their capabilities through TVET, enabling them to pursue the kinds of lives they have reasons to value in urban contexts. In light of the government's ongoing efforts to strengthen and promote TVET—particularly in ethnic minority regions—these findings are highly relevant for policymakers and educators. Moreover, the study's insights are useful in shedding light on TVET for rural populations in contexts that share similar constraints or circumstances.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Along with the historic social, economic, and environmental transformation of China, a flood of internal rural-to-urban migrants swept into Chinese cities starting in the 1990s (World Bank, 1997); and their continuously increasing numbers have become the hallmark of China's social changes in the last quarter century (Chan, 2010). An uneven regional development of China has generated an endless flow of laborers who have left agricultural work for cities to join the ranks of the low-skilled labor market in construction, service, and manufacturing jobs (Seeberg, Ross, Liu, & Tan, 2007). Starting in the early 1980s, decades of internal migration in China increased the urban-dwelling population by more than 30% (National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBS], 2020). In parallel, the number of migrant workers rose from 121 million in 2000 to 285.6 million in 2020, accounting for roughly 20% of the total population (NBS, 2020). This shift includes an estimated 70 million migrant children—54.5% of all children in the country—of whom 74% are from rural regions (UNICEF & NBS, 2021; NBS, 2013).

These two trends arose in part governed by environmental constraints. In most rural areas of western China, ecological degradation and the limited capacity to absorb labor forced farmers to migrate to cities (Zhang, 2003). Consequently, opportunities to gain more substantial income and access to better education have drawn hundreds of millions of rural residents to cities.These trends in rural-to-urban migration have also been shaped by China's education policies. The Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China was adopted on April 12, 1986, and took effect on July 1, 1986. This law established a nine-year compulsory education system, mandating that all children aged six to fifteen receive education, which includes six years of primary education followed by three years of lower secondary education.

The implementation of this law aimed to improve educational access and quality across the country (Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China, 1986). For rural families contending with environmental degradation, limited agricultural viability, and government policies restricting certain traditional livelihoods (as seen in Inner Mongolia), complying with compulsory education requirements—especially in remote pastoral regions that lack local schools—often motivates them to relocate to cities or nearby townships or send their children to urban schools, where the infrastructure and resources are perceived to offer better long-term prospects.

While education policies—such as the 1986 Compulsory Education Law—have driven many rural families to migrate or send their children to urban centers in search of better schools, the Chinese Hukou system remains a pivotal structural factor influencing these migration patterns. The Hukou, a mandatory household registration policy, has historically tied individuals to their ancestral regions and functions like a domestic passport, categorizing citizens by both their place of residence (户口所在地, hukou suozaidi) and their social classification ("agricultural"/rural or "non-agricultural"/urban). In the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), for instance, Mongolian populations in pastoral areas are formally registered under a "pastoral" (牧区户口, muqu hukou) category, which generally falls under the same classification as "agricultural" (rural) Hukou.

In densely populated regions, distinctions between rural and urban Hukou status frequently remain stark, significantly shaping individuals' access to essential services like education, healthcare, and housing (Chan, 2009). For example, rural Hukou holders who relocate to urban areas often face restricted enrollment options for their children in local public schools; more critically, they are often barred from having their children sit for senior high school entrance examinations, thereby severely limiting these families' educational and professional opportunities (Ling, 2015).

By contrast, in the IMAR, the pastoral Hukou is relatively less restrictive—no additional fees or taxes are levied on pastoral populations (Sohu.com, 2019). Rather than rigidly dividing citizens into rural or urban categories, this arrangement offers Mongolian pastoral communities more flexibility and mitigates some of the social stratification observed elsewhere in China.

Nevertheless, the Hukou system continues to impose severe constraints on many internal migrants, fostering a sense of alienation. Pun (2016) refers to their resulting condition as "incomplete," reflecting how migrant workers seldom enjoy the full rights and privileges of urban residents yet find themselves estranged from cohesive family life back in rural regions. As a result, many must navigate a divided existence, juggling urban employment opportunities with the realities of distant home communities.

Building on the role of educational policies and the Hukou system in shaping internal migration, it is also important to consider how gender-based inequalities intersect with rural and urban marginalization.

Intersecting with broader structural constraints are the gendered social expectations that disproportionately disadvantage girls and women. In rural China, longstanding son preference has led to discriminatory practices such as reduced investment in girls' health and nutrition, resulting in skewed, highly masculinized population sex ratios (Murphy et al., 2011). Consequently, migrant women and girls experience even greater marginalization than male counterparts, as they must navigate both gender-based norms and the systemic hurdles associated with migration.

I focus on girls because their disadvantage is twofold—they face marginalization both as migrants and as young women. Those who come unaccompanied from rural areas to attend vocational schools in cities are particularly vulnerable to heightened risks and discrimination. These vulnerabilities stem from overlapping factors: gender, age, regional identity, economic

status, and—crucially—ethnicity.

It is important to note, however, that these patterns are not uniform across all groups. For instance, Mongolian communities have shown comparatively lower levels of son preference (Seeberg, Na, Li, & Clark, 2019), which may influence how Mongolian and Han girls experience vocational education and training (TVET). This ethnic dimension is important to understand variations in girls' opportunities and constraints. International research shows that ethnicity plays a significant role in shaping girls' development and education. Studies emphasize how identity, socialization, and the intersection of race and gender shape their experiences and opportunities (Dunbar et al., 2017; Rogers, 2020; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2022). In western China specifically, a major cultural divide exists between the Han ethnic majority and the Mongolian ethnic minority, with the latter potentially facing additional or distinct obstacles. By exploring these ethnic differences, I can better illustrate the heterogeneity of rural migrant girls' experiences.

Numerous studies have provided evidence of the benefits of educating girls and women. In the international development community, however, educating girls and women is widely seen as being of primary importance not only for gender equity but also to protect women's welfare and contribute to the progressive development of the entire society (Lewis & Lockheed, 2006; Klasen, 2002; Klasen & Lamanna, 2009; Seeberg et al., 2007).

According to Peplau, Veniegas and DeBro (1999), social norms, social roles, social status, ideology, stereotypes, and values are key cultural elements that influence girls and women's experiences; however, girls and women's experiences are also dissimilar across cultures (Lewis & Lockheed, 2006; Stromquist, 1999). This variation is evident even within a single nation. In the context of western China, a major cultural division exists between the Han ethnic majority and the Mongolian ethnic minority, with the latter potentially facing additional and different barriers and constraints.

Problem Statement

In recent years, growing numbers of migrant youth previously excluded from the urban post-compulsory education system have enrolled in urban vocational schools (Koo, 2016). Their disadvantage goes beyond the limited quality of rural or migrant schools, as they often lack the social and cultural capital available to middle-class families in the city. This deficit can include fewer role models who have succeeded academically or professionally in urban contexts, scarce resources for extracurricular activities, and limited social networks to navigate school systems and city life. As a result, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) at the senior secondary and postsecondary levels has become a more viable option for rural migrant students.

The Chinese central government has vigorously promoted TVET—especially in rural areas and ethnic minority autonomous regions—to meet labor market needs and spur local economic development (State Council, 2019). While this study does not explore the experiences of youth who pursue the academic schooling track or male youth in the TVET track, it focuses on the particular circumstances of rural migrant Han and Mongolian girls. Although TVET holds promise for strengthening human resources, significant disparities may still arise among rural migrant youth. In particular, rural migrant Han and Mongolian girls may experience TVET differently, with current policies not always recognizing or accommodating the cultural and contextual differences between these groups.

The absence of comparative data on the TVET experiences of rural Han and Mongolian girls restricts the ability of government and educational institutions to develop targeted, evidence-based improvements. Consequently, without a clear understanding of the distinct challenges faced by these two groups, efforts to promote educational equality (UNESCO, 2022) may be undermined.

To help close this gap, this research investigates whether TVET enhances or constrains

the capabilities and agency of Mongolian and Han rural migrant girls—or whether it simply reproduces systemic inequities. It also compares the cultural values that shape their notions of well-being, aiming to shed light on context-sensitive strategies for improving TVET. By illuminating these differences, the study hopes to guide more responsive, inclusive educational policies in alignment with the government's goal of promoting equitable access to quality education.

The study also focus on how these girls themselves experience empowerment relating to TVET. While the existing literature frequently centers on skill-building, job prospects, and economic outcomes, there is less attention to intangible dimensions like self-confidence, enjoyment, and personal agency. To address this gap, I employ the Empowerment and Capabilities Enhancement Framework (ECEF), which considers both instrumental capabilities, such as skills acquisition and access to employment, and intrinsic capabilities that contribute to well-being, including confidence, enjoyment of learning, and aspirations. These often-overlooked capabilities are essential for understanding the empowering potential of TVET from the girls' perspectives, as they reflect not only what they achieve but also the expanded agency and real opportunities available to them in shaping their futures.

Need for the Study

Rural Han girls' education in regions of extreme poverty remains critically underexamined in both research and policy. Existing data and scholarly work often fail to capture the nuanced realities of these marginalized communities, who persistently encounter multifaceted obstacles—geographic isolation, severe resource limitations, and rigid gender expectations.

A considerable body of literature addresses the challenges faced by rural migrant students in TVET settings (e.g., Engeström & Sannino, 2017; Keung Wong et al., 2007; Murphy, 2014; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Stevens & Vollebergh, 2008; Zhang et al.,

2015; Zhigang & Zhunfeng, 2006). Yet few, if any, studies focus specifically on Han girls or capture the experiences of minority women attending vocational schools, let alone the potential benefits these institutions may confer. This gap is particularly acute in remote, extremely poor villages where both majority (Han) and minority women make critical transitions from pastoral, subsistence-based life to modern, diversified economies.

Moreover, existing research on educational policy for ethnic minorities in China (L. P. Chen, 1999; Ha, 1990; H. Zhang, 1990) has not sufficiently investigated how macro-level socioeconomic shifts—such as urbanization, migration, and evolving schooling structures—affect these young women's educational trajectories. No comparative studies adequately address how majority and minority groups experience TVET differently. This lack of comparative analysis leaves systemic inequalities and areas for policy intervention obscured.

This study attempts to close these gaps by examining the experience of TVET, generational transition from rural and pastoral livelihoods to urbanized, vocationally oriented education among both Han and minority women.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The intent of this study is to understand and to compare how young Mongolian and Han women empower themselves through TVET. The two groups of girls come from comparatively left-behind rural areas in western China, one from pastoral area in IMAR, and another from rural Shaanxi, which are among the most materially underdeveloped regions western China.

This dissertation draws on the capability approach to examine how TVET influences rural migrant girls' empowerment, particularly in terms of their capability development, agency, and well-being. The first research question investigates how TVET expands or constrains the capabilities of Mongolian and Han girls, focusing on their real freedoms to lead lives they have reason to value. Addressing this issue is crucial to ensuring both groups

equitably benefit from improved employment opportunities and gain the functionings necessary for meaningful and valued lives. The Empowerment Capabilities in Education Framework (ECEF) is especially pertinent here, as it applies Sen's (1999) distinction between constitutive freedoms (well-being, personal confidence) and instrumental freedoms (action, social participation), capturing intangible factors such as enjoyment, self-confidence, and aspiration that go beyond basic skills acquisition.

The second research question addresses their agency—how they use their capabilities to make meaningful choices and take action—an essential element in achieving valued outcomes and expressing themselves. Understanding these processes requires attention to the cultural contexts in which these girls live, as cultural values and norms influence the formation of aspirations, the definition of well-being, and the opportunities available to them. Thus, the third research question draws on Sen's capability approach and insights into culture, to compare the values, aspirations, and well-being concepts of Mongolian and Han girls.

The following research questions guide the study:

1. How does TVET contribute to or constrain Mongolian and Han girls' capability development?

2. What agency do Mongolian and Han girls develop through TVET, and how does that agency contribute to their well-being?

3. How do cultural values influence the understanding and experience of well-being among Mongolian and Han girls?

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is the underlying structure, the scaffolding, or frame of a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 15). "No study is without some implicit framework" (Roberts, 2012, p. 128) and a well-defined conceptual or theoretical framework is necessary for a

dissertation. It helps the writer narrow the scope of the study. "The theoretical framework acts as a filtering tool to select appropriate research questions and to guide data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings" (Roberts, 2012, p. 130).

In this study the capability approach frames the research to showcase the central role of the ability of people to act as agents of their own lives, which to reason and to speak on one's own behalf requires acquiring an education (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). Sen (1999) pioneered the capability approach, and Nussbaum (2000) and Robeyns (2005) were early philosophical adopters as were scholars from many other disciplines. Sen (1999) proposed that the goals and means of development should be about enhancing people's freedom instead of increasing the GDP index. The capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and beneficial social arrangements (Robeyns, 2005). One of its core normative claims is that freedom to achieve well-being should be understood in terms of the capabilities of people, that is, their real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2006).

In essence, this dissertation focuses on the link between TVET and rural girls' empowerment, which is herein defined as an expansion of a person's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied (Kabeer, 1999). Sen's capability approach can facilitate an understanding of the process of empowerment as the process of expanding an individual's freedoms or set of valuable capabilities, a process that can be perceived as an empowerment process.

Using the capability approach as the theoretical framework is appropriate for the following reasons. First, the capability approach can facilitate the examination of girls' education beyond utilitarian aspects such as addressed in human capital theory (Seeberg, 2008). Second, the capability approach is a person-centered approach in which human agency takes center stage. The capability approach shares a normative perspective with feminist

literature on education and empowerment by valuing the agency of the person at the nexus of change (Seeberg, 2015). Agency is defined as the ability to act on what a person has reason to value; for women themselves to be significant actors in the process of empowerment is essential. Thus, this bottom-up approach allows examination of whether marginalized girls achieve some agency through TVET that enables them to do what they have reason to value. Third, the capability approach guides the research to answer the research questions. Seeberg (2011, 2014, 2015) developed the empowerment–capabilities in education framework (ECEF) in a series of studies that integrated the constitutive and instrumental aspects of freedom that Sen explicated in his seminal work "Development as Freedom" (1999) to understand the link between village girls and formal schooling. In particular, Seeberg's (2014) ECEF framework is helpful in answering Research Question One and Research Question Two.

Methodology

To acquire rich data in an under-explored problem area and to understand what role TVET plays in rural young women's empowerment, this dissertation adopts an interpretive, qualitative two-case study. Empowerment is understood in this study as essentially qualitative because empowerment is a process rather than an outcome, and the process of empowerment should be assessed based on women's own interpretations (Kabeer, 1997). Qualitative studies of empowerment can, therefore, capture the empowerment process through in-depth interviews and case studies that follow life changes experienced by specific women through retrospective narrative (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005).

Building on these considerations, my personal background of growing up in Inner Mongolia—along with witnessing a relative attend vocational school and the accompanying family perception that TVET was only for students who "didn't try hard"—first sparked my interest in examining whether these programs offer paths to empowerment or serve merely as

last-resort options with limited social mobility. During a field trip to remote mountain villages, I observed how financial constraints and inadequate education often hinder rural students from competing for academic opportunities in more urban settings. Motivated by these observations, I adopted a deeply immersed and reflexive role in this research, drawing on Hatch's (2002) participant-observer approach. I combined interviews with persistent observations in classrooms, dormitories, administrative offices, and local businesses, documenting findings in a research journal through real-time notes and photographs.

This research examines differences in the experiences of Han majority and Mongolian minority ethnic girls in post-secondary and senior secondary TVET education in two mid-size cities in Inner Mongolia and Shaanxi—Eu-Qi in East League in Inner Mongolia and SX city in Shaanxi—aiming to assess both gender-related and ethnicity-linked aspects of students' experiences and to explore the capabilities as well as the functionings they were able to achieve. The participants were all current or recent TVET students who had at least begun their secondary TVET studies, and they were recruited through a convenience sampling method. The data collection and analysis process are elaborated in Chapter III.

Significance of the Study

The study is particularly important as it situates this comparison during two major transitions: nationally, as China intensifies its promotion of TVET while modernizing and urbanizing its job markets; and personally, as these young women seek new roles both within and beyond traditional familial networks. The research is especially relevant in light of the government's ongoing efforts to expand and promote TVET to reshape the nation's workforce, making the study's insights valuable for policymakers and educators alike.

This study seeks to reveal how this young generation both adapts to and confronts social and institutional structures that frame their lives during the contemporary critical socioeconomic transition. By focusing on gender and ethnicity, it reveals educational

inequalities that remain less visible in more homogeneous or high-level analyses and helps bring attention to the voices of marginalized groups. At the same time, it provides a timely examination of how differences between Han and Mongolian girls influence the extent to which TVET supports their empowerment.

Because the specifics of this research were guided by a theoretical framework tested in several studies (Seeberg, 2014, 2020) and locations (Li, 2023), readers may find its findings applicable to settings in other regions of the world. For policymakers, NGOs, and governments, this research can elucidate the type and limits of the role that TVET can play in the lives of women as they undergo rapid and profound disruptions to their life patterns. These women are seeking new paths toward economic empowerment and are renegotiating social relationships that both support them and, in some cases, limit their capacity for self-direction.The study thus illuminates how the current generation of young women is transitioning from girlhood immersed in traditional ways of life to adulthood dominated by globalizing economic policies and rapid urbanization.

Before proceeding to the literature review, several terms require definition.

Glossary

Western China: The China Western Development policy covers six provinces, Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan, five autonomous regions, Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet and Xinjiang, and one municipality, Chongqing (Xinhuashe, 2009). Economic development levels vary widely.

Capability: substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (Nussbaum, 2011).

Functioning: an active realization of one or more capabilities or being and doing that is the outgrowth of capability (Nussbaum, 2011).

Agency: a person's ability to pursue or actively realize goals that she or he has reason to value (Seeberg, 2014).

Well-being: the quality of valuable being and doing, the realization of one or more capabilities (Sen, 1985, p.197); for example, being well nourished, well sheltered, and educated; having a stable job, living in a secure environment; including intangibles like pleasure, fulfillment.

Youth and Young People: the UN secretariat uses the terms youth and young people interchangeable to mean age 15-24 with the understanding that member states and other entities use different definitions (United Nations, n.d.).

Peasant: 农民，nongmin in pinyin, a poor subsistence farmer of low social status or farm laborer who owns or rents a small piece of land for cultivation. The term peasant is used interchangeably with small farmer and does not subscribe to the pejorative connotation.

Muqu: 牧区，Pastoral or herding regions traditionally centered on animal husbandry, commonly found in rural areas such as Inner Mongolia.

Gacha: 嘎查，"village" in Mongolian.

Han: Han ethnic group or the Han people, the largest East Asian ethnic group and native to China, constituting approximately 90% of its population. (Zhang, F., Su, B., Zhang, Y. P., & Jin, L.,2007).

Poverty: the situation exists when people lack the means to satisfy their basic needs.

Migrant worker: the Chinese government recognizes migrant workers as those individuals who have a rural hukou (household registration) and who migrate to urban areas to work without changing their official hukou status to urban (Ministry of Human Resources of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

Hukou: The Hukou system is a household registration system in China, initially implemented in 1958, to regulate population distribution and resource allocation. A Hukou

serves as a domestic passport, categorizing citizens by their place of residence (hukou suozaidi, 户口所在地) and their social classification as either "agricultural" (rural) or "non-agricultural" (urban). It determines access to various public services, such as education, healthcare, and housing, based on one's registered location rather than their actual place of residence (Chan, 2009).

Rural Migrant Girls: Female minors who have migrated from rural areas and are typically of school-going age, engaging with new educational settings and adapting to the social and cultural differences of non-rural environments.

Rural Migrant Women: Adult females who have completed or aged out of formal schooling and have relocated from rural areas, often seeking employment, vocational training, or further educational opportunities while adapting to life beyond the classroom in new urban or non-rural settings.

City: A large urban area with a high population density and extensive infrastructure, serving as a major center for economic, cultural, and political activities.

Small City: A smaller urban settlement than a city, offering fewer resources and services while still functioning as a regional hub for the surrounding area.

Township: A smaller administrative unit, often semi-urban or primarily rural, with more limited infrastructure and fewer public services compared to a city.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter situates the present study within the larger scholarly discussions that inform its subject matter, perspective, research questions, and investigative goals. The chapter adopts a "funnel" strategy for presenting the study's theoretical background. It begins with the broadest possible lens: its general theoretical framework, the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1999). The approach's methods, assumptions, and outcomes of interest are presented alongside a multi-theory discussion of the concepts of empowerment and agency—the present study's first two concepts of interest with respect to the transformative potential of TVET. The theory's third concept of interest, well-being, is discussed in the next section, including how it has been measured within different research traditions and what aspects of people's lives, habits, circumstances, and psychology are most often discussed as important contributing factors.

The chapter then narrows its focus significantly to describe previous theoretical and empirical work on how TVET can serve as a pathway to empowerment and well-being, with particular attention to gender and international contexts. From there the chapter becomes yet more precise, addressing the main subject matter by providing an overview of the cultural, academic, and institutional context of Chinese TVET programs. The chapter's final section is more granular still, reviewing previous studies not just on the empowering or disempowering effects of Chinese TVET programs, but on how such programs are shaped and influenced by the specific context of gendered and rural/urban divides in rural China and Inner Mongolia.

Throughout, gender and ethnicity are consistently brought into the discussion of how vocational and technical training can produce empowerment by expanding students' capabilities.

The Capability Approach: Empowerment, Agency, and Well-being

This study frames the relationship between education and girls' control over their own lives and experiences in terms borrowed from the capability approach first articulated by Sen (1999). The approach offers conceptual and empirical tools to semi-systematically describe how changes in someone's capacities or abilities affect both that person's daily experience and the course of their life. This first section of the chapter introduces the capability approach, briefly describing its history and defining central concepts, before reviewing how it has been applied to similar subjects in the past.

Defining Empowerment

Given the goal of understanding the trajectories and varieties of social and economic empowerment using qualitative methods, this study was conducted within the framework offered by the capability approach to agency and well-being. The kinds of agency and empowerment at issue centrally include the education, expertise, and skills to reason and speak on one's own behalf (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). The capability approach, first articulated by Sen (1999) and developed by Nussbaum (2000) and Robeyns (2005), among others, offers a means of describing those qualities in a structured way. It holds that both the goals and means of development work should be concerned with enhancing people's freedom (i.e., agency) rather than increasing blunt, high-level measures of economic output such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Sen, 1999). Starting from that core assertion, the capability approach has been developed as a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of "individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society" (Robeyns, 2005, p. 65). It understands the freedom to achieve well-being in terms of an individual's "capabilities", that is, their real opportunities to do and be those things that they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2006).

In the context of TVET for Mongolian girls in rural China, the capability approach makes it possible to systematically compare how these non-traditional educational experiences have empowered young women—or failed to do so. Empowerment, the present study's first key concept of interest, is defined here as the expansion of a person's abilities to make strategic life choices in contexts where such abilities were previously denied (Kabeer, 1999). Phrased in the language of the capability approach, that type of empowerment is the process of expanding an individual's freedom or set of valuable capabilities (Sen, 1999). Here, empowerment is "the process of enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make purposive choices and then to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006, p. 10).Put otherwise: an expansion of capabilities means both the freedom to make previously unavailable choices and the power to have those choices produce real, material change.

Agency and Empowerment

The present study's research questions concern both empowerment and the closely related concept of agency, a second key interest of the research reported in Chapters III and Chapter IV. There is no standardized or generally accepted theoretical structure spelling out how they relate. Rather, empowerment and agency overlap considerably, both being closely linked to a network of other concepts and ideas that include action, power and causality, purposiveness or intentionality, the determination of objectives or accomplishment of particular outcomes, and various indicators and measures of both social and economic status (Alkire, 2008; Kotan, 2010).

This section of the literature review concerns prior work on achieving agency through vocational training, the focus of research question two. I provide a definition of agency and then delve into scholarly works that examine the empowerment potential of TVET programs, focusing on how these programs enable individuals to exercise agency and make choices that

shape their lives. I explore studies that emphasize the connection between agency gained through TVET and different dimensions of well-being, including economic, social, psychological, and personal well-being. Additionally, I pay particular attention to the specific experiences and perspectives of Mongolian and Han girls in relation to agency and its impact on their overall well-being.

Agency, as described by Seeberg (2014), is the ability to take action based on what an individual values, highlighting the significance of active participation by women in the process of empowerment. Keïta (2014) and Dahl (2009) argue that agency also involves envisioning alternative possibilities and taking responsibility and accountability for one's actions, leading to positive transformations. This is broadly referred to as the "expanded choice" conception of agency, and it is widely used by practitioners of the capability approach, but—at least on the surface—it can be hard to distinguish from "empowerment." A helpful commentary is provided by Drydyk (2013), who writes that agency is fundamentally about "the degree to which one's activities are one's own, or, so to speak, the 'ownership' of one's activities" (p. 252). The distinction between empowerment and expanding agency is thus not a matter of two distinct concepts but rather a question of where the emphasis of a given exploration falls: on how a person's traits and circumstances can be changed to alter what they can do (empowerment) or on how much a person's personal attention, motivation, and preferences affect their actions.

Importantly, both of these aspects of power or control are important for well-being, the present study's third concept of interest. Sen's (1985) conception of well-being encompasses both valuable states of being and meaningful activities, which encompass various capabilities such as being well-nourished, having adequate shelter, receiving education, securing stable employment, living in a safe environment, and experiencing intangible aspects like pleasure and fulfillment. In the context of this study, well-being within the Education for Capabilities

and Empowerment Framework (ECEF) encompasses cognitive self-expression and reflection, enjoyment and playfulness, confidence, and affective and cognitive control. Agency contributes to well-being in multiple ways; within the ECEF framework, Seeberg (2011, 2014) defines agency capabilities as the ability to choose specific learning goals, make strategic life choices, express oneself, and participate in resource distribution within the family and social structures. Furthermore, Sen (1999) argues that individual agency, the ability of individuals to act and make decisions that shape their lives, is crucial in addressing inequalities and promoting well-being.

Therefore, agency needs to be its own research question because it focuses specifically on how individuals actively exercise their capabilities to make meaningful choices and act. Agency as a process of taking action based on perceived choices (Seeberg, 2014; Keïta, 2014; Dahl, 2009) is understood as a critical component in empowerment. It is both an intrinsic capability that encompasses a range of cognitive, emotional, and societal dimensions (Stromquist, 1993; Seeberg, 2011) and a practical construct that impacts real-world educational experiences and outcomes (Seeberg, 2011, 2014). In the educational context, for example, agency is concerned with how individuals utilize their capabilities to achieve valuable outcomes, engage in strategic life planning, and experience self-expression and reflection (Seeberg, 2011; Stromquist, 1993). Other capabilities may focus more narrowly on specific abilities or opportunities available to individuals, without necessarily involving such comprehensive personal empowerment and enactment.

Capabilities and Functionings

To further explicate the perspective of the capabilities approach, that view of empowerment as a positive endpoint—even as the primary desirable positive goal—of social development programs or interventions can be contrasted with a more utilitarian, exclusively economic mode of analysis. From such a viewpoint, development is more concerned with the

growth of productivity and population-scale economic indicators. The capability approach does not adopt such an attitude, however, instead of evaluating programs and policies with respect to how well they expand the ability to live a good life—i.e., how effectively they increase individuals' capabilities. It can thus be applied outside the context of traditional development projects so long as the focus remains on social change, organizing, or arrangements. The framework comprises an approach "to comparative quality-of-life assessment and to theorizing about basic social justice" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18). Researchers applying the capabilities approach thus treat each person as an end in themselves, asking not just about total or average empowerment and well-being but about the real opportunities available to particular living people. What counts as a positive outcome is therefore not defined by the goals of the scholar or the policymaker, but rather by the people affected—only they are able to determine what kinds of lives they want to lead, what they want to do and accomplish, and whom they want to be (Robeyns, 2005).

In order to help researchers structure their investigations and findings, the approach relies heavily on two core concepts: capabilities and functionings. A "capability" isthe substantive freedoms to achieve alternative functioning combinations. In other words, they are not just abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment. (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 25)

In fact, Nussbaum dubs these multi-component capabilities combined capabilities because they involve both individual and social or super-individual components. Notably, "personal abilities" are distinguished from innate qualities because the former are trained or developed through interaction with the social, economic, familial, and political environments.

Capabilities must be understood in relation to the closely related concept of "functionings" or "active realization of one or more capabilities…beings and doings that are

the outgrowths or realizations of capabilities" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 30). Capabilities are capacities to choose which functionings one wishes to instantiate; functionings are actual, current states of being and doing. The distinction between functionings and capabilities is between the realized and the effectively possible. Functionings are valuable beings and doings, of which common examples include working, resting, being healthy, being respected, and so forth (Robeyns, 2005, p. 95.)

Within this framework, capabilities are important for two reasons: (a) They have value in and of themselves as spheres of freedom and choice; and (b) they may lead to functionings. In other words, once people have the opportunities they need to act, they can choose the kind of life they have reason to value (Nussbaum, 2011).This framework is custom-built to study and assess empowerment as defined above. Recent scholarship makes the connection explicit: "Empowerment can be viewed as the process of people, in possession of various capabilities (opportunities), creating valued achievement (functioning) via enacting their agency and choice" (Wang, 2016).

The ECEF

In the context of the current study, the capability approach can foster an understanding of how girls' education affects empowerment if it is used to explicitly evaluate activities that enhance the substantive freedom of individuals (Seeberg, 2015). Note that, as mentioned above, the approach does not specify which capabilities should be emphasized in different fields and study contexts, and that open-endedness can create obstacles for researchers looking to apply it to a particular domain in which valuable functionings need to be identified and defined.

Fortunately, substantial work has been done to adapt the framework to an educational setting. Roughly, "education quality can be understood in relation to the extent to which it fosters key capabilities that individuals, communities and society in general have reason to

value" (Tikly & Barrett, 2011, p. 3). Working from that general perspective, Seeberg (2014) developed the Empowerment Capabilities in Education Framework (ECEF) based on Sen's (1999) work but accounting for contributions by Appadurai (2004), Kabeer (1999), Nussbaum (2000), and Unterhalter (2007) in studies relating to empowerment and education.

The ECEF is a taxonomy of dimensions of freedom specific to educational settings and activities (see Table 1). It consists of two sets of capabilities, the "constitutive" and the "instrumental" and allows researchers to analyze how empowerment relates to capabilities in different ways (Sen, 1999). Constitutive freedom refers to the expansion of substantive freedoms including "elementary capabilities like being able to avoid such deprivations as starvation, undernourishment, to enjoy political participation and uncensored speech and so on" (Sen, 1999, p. 36). Instrumental freedoms refer more to the effectiveness of freedom as a means--not an end in itself; it "concerns the way different kinds of rights, opportunities, and entitlements contribute to the expansion of human freedom in general, and thus topromoting development" (Sen, 1999, p. 37). It effectively adapts the general capabilities approach for learning-specific research, and—for present purposes—serves as an analytical tool to capture the capabilities most likely to be valued (and gained) by marginalized girls and young women as they engage with TVET. The framework is amenable to this study because it will help draw out the voices of marginalized young women as they speak about what kind of capabilities and functionings characterize their recent experiences. More than that, the ECEF is structured to help respondents define what they value and how TVET does or does not contribute to multiple dimensions of their well-being.

Below is Table 1, which lays out the ECEF in detail. In line with Sen's capability approach, each freedom dimension is categorized as either constitutive (well-being) or instrumental (doing/action), and each dimension is further broken down into specific capabilities and functionings that operationalize Sen's principles in an educational context.

Specifically, this table makes explicit how individual topics—such as enjoyment, aspiration, or economic facility—are understood as either ends in themselves (constitutive freedoms) or means toward broader goals (instrumental freedoms). Key scholarly references that have informed the development of these capabilities and functionings are also noted, illustrating the theoretical basis for each parameter.

Table 1.

The Empowerment Capabilities in Education Framework (ECEF)

Freedom Dimension	Capabilities	Functionings	Key References
Constitutive freedoms; well-being	Enjoyment	Enjoyment of learning and playfulness	Stromquist, 1993; Nussbaum, 2000; Seeberg, 2007
	Cognitive and psychological control and confidence	Confidence in learning and self; reason things out; acquire knowledge; cope with stress	Stromquist, 1993; Nussbaum, 2000
	Aspiration	Social change in one's village; advanced schooling; gender role; desirable work; children's future	Nussbaum, 2000; Appadurai, 2004; Seeberg, 2007, 2011; Seeberg & Luo, 2012
Instrumental freedom; doing and action	Political freedom	Speak up on one's own behalf	Kabeer, 1999
	Economic facility	Habitus; participation in resource distribution in the family; decent work	Kabeer, 1999; ILO, 1999; Narayan-Parker, 2005; Seeberg & Luo, 2012
	Social opportunity	Relations with school friends and teachers; work environment; lower son preference	Stromquist, 1993; Cleaver, 1999; Kabeer, 1999; Unterhalter, 2004
	Protective security	Delayed or late marriage	Kabeer, 1999; Seeberg & Luo, 2012

GQ II Secondary Analysis: How did the XS enact agency in achievement, how did it influence what kind of social justice change?

Agency	GQ 1	Analysis	NA
Achievements	GQ 1	Analysis	NA

Note. Adapted from Seeberg (2014).

Well-being in the Chinese and Mongolian Context

Efforts to measure well-being have ranged from suites of external indicators (wealth, socioeconomic position, employment, leisure time, quality of relationships, etc.) to scales intended to measure "subjective well-being" that ask about a wide range of psychological and emotional factors (Alatartseva & Barysheva, 2015). For Dolan and colleagues (2008) and Dursun and Cesur (2016), an assessment of participants' well-being often (but not always) relies on subjective self-report or other forms of descriptive evidence. For that reason, discussions of well-being can sometimes include more idiosyncratic or individual variation than analyses of empowerment and is sometimes described as depending to a greater extent on an individual's views of their context, environment, expectations, and culture.

However, it is difficult to generalize across both Mongolian and Han girls' on the subject of well-being, as the construct is intrinsically cultural and thus may vary from one community or group to another, even if objective factors (e.g., wealth, nutrition) are constant. For instance, Mongolian culture, with its nomadic roots, may emphasize values such as independence, resilience, and a strong connection to the natural environment as components of a life well-lived or as sources of satisfaction—values that parents may pass on to young Mongolian women (Graf et al., 2014; Rosenberg, 1998; Williams, 2002). In contrast, Han Chinese culture, deeply influenced by Confucianism, might prioritize social harmony, collective well-being (Han, 2015; Ogihara, 2022), and may place greater emphasis on traditional family structures or intergenerational hierarchy and filial piety as sources of stability, safety, or comfort (Zhan, 2012). Similar differences are likely to be obtained with respect to the relationship between well-being and empowerment, with similar themes

playing out in each case. Empowerment in a Mongolian context might focus on individual autonomy and self-efficacy (Flintan, 2008), as opposed to a more Confucian view of empowerment as the ability to fulfill one's role within a collective framework for the Han Chinese (Yip, 2004).

Extrinsic and Intrinsic Well-being

An important distinction in the study of well-being is the very broadly conceived distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic sources of well-being. As one example, Bespalov et al. (2017) explored the associations between aspirations, values, and foundational moral beliefs among Mongolian youth, reporting a positive association between life aspirations and intrinsic values. The authors argued, on the basis of their findings, that there are intrinsic life aspirations that focus on personal growth, relationships, and community, and which are associated with self-transcending personal values. They found that extrinsic aspirations, by contrast, tended to include the achievement of or desire for fame, wealth, and positive personal image, all of which were often related to values of self-enhancement and to a focus on personal achievement and recognition as factors of well-being.

Work and Employment

One recurring theme in the literature on well-being is how it depends on—or can be affected by—conflictbetween work and family obligations. Shui et al. (2020) studied the impact of work-family conflict on the subjective well-being of rural women in Sichuan Province, China. The article found that subjective well-being was generally high, with 70% of women interviewed saying that they felt "satisfied" or "very satisfied." The factor that most impacted subjective well-being was conflict arising from work interfering with family life. That was followed by work-family balance and then by confidence in conflict resolution. Conflicts that usually emanate from work and family have been previously highlighted as major causes of negative well-being (Winefield et al., 2014).

However, Shui et al. (2020) also reported that family size and structure affected the well-being of rural women more than work-related factors alone. The authors suggest that improving the education levels of women, promoting shared awareness of which family members were expected to serve which roles within the family, and establishing clear role expectations could greatly alleviate conflicts between family and work, enhancing the subjective well-being of rural women. Interestingly, research into the relationship between the distinct life domains of career and family and the well-being of college-educated women have found that having a family is associated with the greatest premium to life satisfaction as compared to having a career, having both a career and family life, or having neither (Bertrand, 2013). That is, while both career success and family life are associated with increased well-being, these findings suggest that in some situations, it may be difficult for women to enjoy the well-being benefits of both family and career at the same time. The percentage of college-education women who describe themselves as "very happy" is above 45% for those with no career but a family life, and approximately 40% for those with both (Bertrand, 2013) Similar patterns emerged for emotional well-being, with women who had both a family and a career reporting that they spent a larger share of their day feeling unhappy, tired, sad, and stressed.

Related work has explored cultural and contextual aspects of those same conflicts. Spector et al. (2017) conducted a study that compared work-family stressors, work hours, and well-being across three culturally distinct regions: China, Anglophone countries, and Latin America. The study highlighted the influence exerted by cultural factors on work-family dynamics and how those can affect well-being. The relationship between work hours and work-family pressure differed between individualist regions, such as Anglophone countries, and collectivist regions such as China and Latin American countries. The largest difference concerns the effect of increased work hours:

Moderated regression results supported [the] hypothesis … that Anglos view working extra hours as taking away from their families, which may provoke feelings of guilt and greater levels of work-family pressure. This may not be the case in China and Latin America, where employees and their families may view working long hours differently. (Spector et al., 2017, p. 135)

In other words, in a cultural environment that prizes the welfare and harmony of the group, not only might it be seen as appropriate to devote greater effort to the company's success, but the employee's dedication may also reflect well on their family, reducing the possibility of tension caused by absence from the home. Similar findings have been reported by subsequent research on work-family conflict as a predictor of subjective well-being in China (e.g., Hu, Jiang, Probst, & Liu, 2021).

That finding echoes other reports that particular aspects of employment can alleviate or worsen the ways that employment affects well-being as mediated by family conflicts and relationships. Barnett and Marshall (1991) studied the relationship between women's work and family roles and their subjective well-being and psychological distress. The findings of the study highlight the importance of work rewards and concerns, showing that mental health is affected by both the presence of work-related worries and the absence of associated rewards. Adelmann's seminal (1987) study of psychological well-being similarly found that occupational complexity, personal income, and control are all vital for psychological well-being in both men and women. The study hypothesized that a higher level of these occupational characteristics would be associated with a higher level of happiness, lower psychological vulnerability, and self-confidence, with those variables explaining a small but significant proportion of variance in psychological well-being even after controlling for age and education.

Later work built on those results, studying connections between time use, work intensity, and the well-being of working women (Floro, 1995). The author identified the need to consider the length and intensity of work time with respect to perceived wellness and happiness, commenting then-current standard-of-living measurements and household economic models overlooked the importance of time. Time pressures can be particularly acute for women faced with poverty. Floro (1995) found that high work intensity involving the simultaneous performance of multiple tasks was a more common experience for poor working women than for other groups, particularly when the wages are low, market prices are high, and the basic services are limited for them. In that study as well as follow-up work in multiple countries, the greater work intensity required by poverty was strongly correlated with reduced well-being (Arora, 2016; Floro & Pichetponga, 2010).In the context of the current study, it is important to note that migrant girls often confront similar conditions where they are deprived of basic services as well as low wages; thus, the impact of work intensity on their well-being is crucial.

Beyond intensity, other working conditions are important for the well-being of married women specifically. Lennon, (1994). compared employed wives and full-time homemakers on characteristics of their daily work activities and the consequences of these work conditions for psychological well-being It found that full-time housework allowed for greater autonomy, but also increased interruptions, physical effort, routinization of the day, and came with less responsibility for matters outside one's control as compared to paid work. These results emphasize the significance of working conditions in shaping psychological well-being—a finding the closely echoes other work emphasizing how economic power, and related factors such as autonomy and responsibility at work, can influence women's well-being. One major study of subjective well-being among Chinese urban residents found that work affects well-being through many channels, with the effects mediated by female gender, employment

status, party membership, low perceived relative deprivation, consumption of fashionable goods, marriage status, and income (Wang & VanderWeele, 2011). They found that women who had greater economic power, reduced work intensity, greater freedom in workplace selection, were able to consume fashionable goods, were held to higher socioeconomic status, and so on.

These findings are crucial in the context of the Mongolian minority and Han majority girls as they suggest that aspects such as employment, income, and perceived relative deprivation play a significant role in influencing their well-being. For instance, economic factors are responsible for helping the girls meet their basic needs and provide a sense of security and satisfaction.

Indeed, every aspect of work and family life is acutely relevant to the comparison of Mongolian minority and Han majority girls in rural contexts. Cultural norms and family structure are central parts of rural life, and family support is essential for accessing education—making family connections an even more vital component of well-being. The availability of family support and the influence of cultural norms that are related to gender roles and family responsibilities likely shape the well-being of the Mongolian minority and Han majority girls recruited for this project. The studies reviewed here also provides credible insights into work-related factors that have been previously linked to the well-being of poor young women. Those factors include higher income, greater socioeconomic self-control, occupational complexity, low levels of family conflict, and more. Achievement of economic stability, having challenges in work, and having a sense of control may all positively impact the well-being of Mongolian and Han girls.

In this theoretical context, it is reasonable to assume that TVET programs for migrant girls could play a crucial role in empowering them through the provision of skills and knowledge that can lead to a higher-paying job with better working conditions. The

magnitude with which TVET programs contribute to well-being of Mongolian and Han girls, however, may be different because of each group's current deprivation, relative status, and unique cultural circumstances as described above.

Family Relationships and Filial Piety

While family connections are important in the context of workplace and employment experiences, they can also have their own independent—and powerful—effects on well-being. In the Chinese context, one especially important and well-studied variable is filial piety. The term "refers to unconditional material and emotional support for parents" (Cheung & Kwan, 2009, p. 180), and in the Confucian tradition it is broken down into specific attitudinal and practical duties, from showing love and respect to properly mourning a parents' death. Contemporary researchers typically operationalize the concept in terms of practical obligations, compassion and reverence, and the responsibility to continue the family line (e.g., Lum et al., 2016). Importantly, these patterns hold true across cultural communities within China; although it is outside the scope of this literature review to ascertain whether there are any differences at all between Mongolian and Han views of filial piety, its core elements are well documented in both groups (Liu et al., 2013).

In this manner the concept has usefully been deployed to analyze the structure of Chinese family ties and how they have changed over the last several decades. Much of this research provides context but is not immediately applicable to the present study's participants, as it focuses on the perspective of parents or of older generations more generally (see e.g., Yang & Wen, 2021)

There has been some research on how filial piety affects young people's well-being, however, Sun et al. (2016), for instance, studied the relationship between filial piety, relationship harmony, and life satisfaction among Chinese undergraduate students. They report clear correlations between higher reciprocal filial piety and enhanced life satisfaction,

where participants that strongly believed in reciprocal filial piety had higher levels of satisfaction overall. The study also re-analyzed previous work and concluded that there was likely a positive overall effect of filial piety on well-being. It emphasized the importance of maintaining positive parent-child relationships and interacting harmoniously and respectfully with one's parents. In Chinese contexts, these are not random behavioral recommendations—for many Chinese people, filial piety is deemed a fundamental ethical principle that can or should regulates the behavior of children toward their parents (Sun et al., 2016). Filial piety and relationship harmony are fundamental Chinese cultural values that are rooted in the collectivist culture of China. They might play a fundamental role in shaping the well-being of migrant girls from Chinese backgrounds, and the literature suggests that the current study should include questions on this topic.

Culture and Migration

There is some prior work supporting the idea that adjusting to local norms is an important source of well-being for migrants. Güngör and Perdu (2017) investigated the factors contributing to the psychological well-being of immigrant youth, specifically focusing on the roles of resilience and acculturation. They found that relatedness, school engagement, and autonomy were key resources contributing to the well-being of both minority and majority youth, emphasizing the significance of social connections, engagement in meaningful activities, and a sense of autonomy in fostering well-being. From a capabilities approach, this makes intuitive sense: one's facility with one's social environment makes it possible—or impossible—to realize a wide range of basic, everyday functionings, from enjoying interactions with strangers to easily resolving minor problems. That core idea is increasingly accepted in the study of international migration (e.g., Hendriks & Burger, 2020; Shang, O'Driscoll, & Roche, 2018) and helps clarify the complex relationships between acculturation and well-being, suggesting that the adoption of mainstream culture can enhance

the well-being of immigrant youth, especially when combined with communal and individual resources. This suggests that cultural assimilation is an important topic to explore during the present study.

For migrants who focus on intrinsic forms of value and reward, the pursuit of personal growth, community, and relationships offer potential sources of well-being even in unfamiliar environments where they might face social, cultural, or economic disadvantages. It is worth noting that TVET courses often incorporate modules intended to help in skills development and personal growth, which may help immigrant girls nurture their intrinsic aspirations, eventually enhancing their well-being.

One major finding in the literature on assimilation has to do with the so-called "immigrant paradox" (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017). As an illustrative example drawn from the literature on cross-cultural international migration, Van Geel and Vedder (2010) find that first-generation immigrants often show better adaptation outcomes than the native population despite facing substantial economic disadvantages. The authors examined the adaptation outcomes of first-generation, second-generation, immigrant adolescents, and national (local) adolescents in terms of self-esteem, behavioral problems, socioeconomic status, and psychological problems. Their findings showed that first-generation immigrant adolescents, despite lower socioeconomic status than their peers, exhibited higher self-esteem, fewer psychological problems, and comparable levels of behavioral problems compared to locally born, more affluent youth.

This finding challenges the assumption that economic disadvantage is a strong predictor of poor well-being among immigrant youth. It supports the idea, instead, that well-being is influenced by a complex interplay of factors in addition to socioeconomic status, including cultural factors, social support, and community connections. That conclusion is reinforced by studies showing that the overall, multi-dimensional well-being of rural-to-urban migrant

youth in China is harmed more by social exclusion than by economic exclusion (Li et al., 2022), although the latter can be a route to the former (Jiang et al., 2023).

Gendered Violence

One external factor with tremendous power to disrupt well-being is exposure to immediate physical harm or to violence. When discussing the lives of girls and young women, among the most widespread forms of danger is that posed by violence from domestic or intimate partners—an aspect of gendered well-being that is essential to any complete picture. Oke (2008) analyzed the experiences and well-being of Mongolian and Austrian women who have survived domestic violence. The findings show how women's experiences of violence can lead to a loss of narrative identity and a sense of continuity of self, underscoring the significance of emotional and embodied experiences and their impact on well-being. Domestic violence is linked to negative outcomes that include confusion, self-blame, depression, and anxiety. Recovery, too, is highly variable—Oke describes a process of "breaking down and breaking through" whereby women find new sources of inner strength and purpose to overcome violence they have faced, allowing them to reclaim their identities.

The actual prevalence and determinants of domestic violence in Mongolian women are varied (Oyunbileg et al., 2009). It is a pervasive problem: approximately 37.7% of respondents reported being affected by some form of domestic violence, whether physical violence, emotional violence, financial violence, or sexual abuse. That figure emphasizes the large role such violence plays in affecting the well-being of Mongolian women and girls, as well as the importance of tracing its risk factors. Oyunbileg et al. (2009) identified low income, low education levels, living in a rented house, and living with an unemployed partner who uses alcohol as the most significant risk factors.

The present study did not explore questions of intimate partner violence in detail, for reasons of interviewee-researcher social relationships and the study's focus on participants'

educational and workplace experiences. Like other forms of education, TVET may have the potential to help solve what is effectively an epidemic of intimate partner violence among some Chinese communities, and this question is worthy of further exploration in the context of well-being and educational policy.

Education and Well-being

Finally, there is a substantial body of existing work on the direct effects of education and vocational training on well-being. Maslak (2022) studied the importance of vocational education in China, where he focused on its significance for youth and working adolescents. They found that vocational education can help to provide a sense of competence and autonomy, as well as opportunities for skills development and career preparation. Such opportunities were found to be crucial in enhancing self-efficacy, self-esteem, and overall life satisfaction among working adolescents. The study further highlighted the importance of TVET to address the gap between government plans and the local realities in vocational education. This may mean that vocational education policy and interventions can be designed in such a way that they address the challenges and opportunities unique to marginalized students, such as migrant girls from poorer communities.

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TVET as Capability Development and Path to Empowerment

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A substantial body of research—some of it conducted in rural Chinese settings—has examined the empowering effects of vocational training and related educational programs. Work operating within the Capabilities approach has tended not to ask whether a particular type of program is empowering or whether it achieves a particular benchmark but rather, in line with the open-ended nature of the theory, explored how attending such programs changes students' perspectives, circumstances, self-understanding, and skills (e.g., Chaghari et al., 2017; Mormina, 2019; Seeberg & Luo, 2012). Quek (2019) offers a useful example, studying perceived self-efficacy as a primary outcome but asking students to describe the full range of

feelings, experiences, interactions, and strategies they adopt or employ in relation to feelings of confidence and success. The author concluded that certain kinds of self-talk were vital to belief in their own self-efficacy, and that a sense of collective self-efficacy at the institutional level was also a critical source of support. This emphasis on the institution echoes the discussion by Wang (2020) of tertiary TVET students' lack of confidence in their programs' usefulness when it came to securing high-quality work opportunities.

Broadly, however, it is clear from their curricula and design that TVET programs in rural China—like vocational training elsewhere—are intended to provide empowerment in the specific and narrow sense of advancing national or regional economic productivity. Whether they also allow for other kinds of personal growth and self-actualization is less clear. This chapter addresses both questions from three angles. The following subsection speaks to the stated goals of vocational training, economic empowerment, whether TVET enables students to develop economic autonomy, and whether it allows them to contribute to their local economic environments. The chapter's third subsection then speaks to other forms of power and capacity—social, institutional, reputational. The studies reviewed attest positive, if varying, effects of TVET on students' status and position. From there, the section adopts a gender-specific lens on questions of both economic and social empowerment, describing the complicated effects of vocational training on women's agency and capabilities.

Economic Empowerment and TVET

The broadest possible question to be addressed here is, roughly, "how useful are TVET programs in helping graduates increase their earnings, the quality of their jobs, and/or their economic productivity?" A baseline answer was provided by Shavit and Müller (2000), who offer a detailed high-level discussion of early-career vocational training, assessing its safety net and diversion effects. By their definition, vocational training provides an effective safety-net "if the unemployment rates of its graduates, and their rates of employment in unskilled

work, are lower than those found among graduates of non-vocational tracks at a comparable level of schooling" (p. 32). The diversion effect of vocational training is defined when its graduates attain "significantly fewer desirable occupations than those who had embarked on other tracks" (Shavit & Müller, 2000, p. 32). The authors focus on the mediating effects of institutions; variation in institutional quality and setting change safety net and diversion effects from country to country. They suggest that in countries such as the U.S. and Israel, where most vocational secondary education is very general, there are fewer diversion effects and vocational graduates do not attain significantly fewer desirable occupations than those who have pursued other paths. In countries where vocational education offers more specialized training, such as the Germany and the Netherlands, the safety-net effects of vocational education are stronger. That is, vocational graduates are less likely to work in unskilled positions as compared to graduates of non-vocational programs at a similar level.

The authors further argue that the link between schools and employers also substantially affects the economic utility of vocational training (Shavit & Müller, 2000)—employers need to be expecting TVET graduates to apply, to perform well, and to be a standard and valuable part of the workforce if the degree is to provide meaningful assistance. In Germany, for example, the courses offered in vocational schools are coordinated in content and are organized within the framework of a respected dual-track educational system (BIBB, 2006), within which employers "can trust vocational credentials to represent well-defined clusters of skills and will base their hiring decisions on credentials" (Shavit & Müller, 2000, p. 34). The general pattern is that where skill regimes in TVET are more specific and better understood, vocational graduates tend to have better chances on later careers (Dieckhoff, 2008). That question of cultural value is of vital importance: even in such well-developed vocational systems as that in Germany, the nature of the dual-track system positions one path—the academic—as being more valuable to the social detriment of the other (Kupfer, 2009). Some

countries are actively trying to combat these negative perceptions; China has passed a series of laws supporting TVET, and the U.S. enacted requirements for rigorous and challenging academic and career and technical instruction ensuring that vocational secondary schools prepare students for higher education if they want to pursue it (Giani, 2019).

These caveats aside, the underlying trend appears to be positive. A major systematic review (Tripney et al, 2013) examined the effects of TVET interventions on the employment and employability of young people in low-and middle-income countries (LMICs). Across the 20 interventions they evaluated, the overall mean effect of TVET on paid employment was positive and significant, despite significant heterogeneity between contexts. Separately, the interventions were found to have positive links to formal (vs. informal) employment and to higher monthly earnings compared to non-TVET-educated peers. Vocational training improves employability, in other words, benefiting agency in the form of expanded economic choice. Tripney et al. (2013) note that, across studies, TVET-trained participants reported greater sense autonomy thanks to their expanded range of options.

Other studies have adopted deep but narrow perspectives. Ghana's government-run Integrated Community Center for Employable Skills (ICCES) is focused on filling the gap in employment generation through the development of young human resources to fulfill the poverty alleviation goal of the government. In pursuit of that goal, the center operates a TVET program oriented toward poverty alleviation, intending to increase access to skills for young people and empower them to seek productive employment (Pongo et al., 2014). The results of the study suggest that participants in the program view it as helpful and beneficial on both individual and community levels, reporting that it allowed them to generate income despite the family, social, and financial constraints they faced. The participants also reiterated that their economic and social status had been impacted positively, with an increase in average household income and profound consequent effects on lives and livelihoods. Notably,

many also reported that they were no longer dependent on family, friends, or external institutions for baseline economic support.

Social Empowerment and TVET

Across contexts, the effects of vocational schooling are complex, affording some benefits but retaining significant drawbacks. Some scholars argue that TVET in rural settings provides only the barest minimum of educational preparation (e.g., Wang, 2016), pointing to poor school reputations, loose class schedules, and less qualified teachers. Others emphasize the potential value of integrated social spaces. It may even be the case that reduced educational quality can directly produce positive social outcomes: "the inferiority of vocational education puts migrant students and their local classmates on relatively equal terms, resulting in close interaction and strong bonding, rare in academic middle school" (Ling, 2015, p. 112). Such bonding and socialization were impossible for members of the students' parents' generation.

One common method for examining these kinds of social outcomes is to examine TVET students' aspirations, goals, or plans rather than longitudinally assessing economic outcomes. One study explored educational and professional aspirations of senior secondary TVET students in Chile (Aldinucci et al., 2021). All 28 respondents belonged to vulnerable socioeconomic groups and had experienced poverty. The authors reported five keyways in which TVET had affected their social positions and the lived reality of their day-to-day lives:

1. It provides opportunities for students to acquire practical skills and knowledge in specific vocational fields.

2. Through their engagement with TVET, students were able to reflect on their own beliefs and form clearer and more actionable professional goals.

Students gained a more accurate sense of their own capabilities, strengths, and limitations.

3. Students were able to critically assess their vocational preferences and make informed choices about their educational and career pathways.

4. Finally, vocational training exposed students to different social contexts, allowing them to challenge and potentially transform their habituated ways of thinking and acting.

The authors mention that some participants aspired toward specific fields of study, such as administration and logistics, electricity, mechanics and telecommunications, while others intended to pursue tertiary education in a traditional academic institution. In other words, the study attests the possibility for TVET to function as a highly effective form of empowerment, bridging the gap between experiences of early-life poverty and access to more stable lives in early adulthood.

Other studies provide crucial insights into the experience of people who join TVET institutions in China and have then sought work with international companies. One describes how China has been dedicated to ensuring its poorest provinces have access to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs (Postiglione & Tang, 2019). The authors focused their study on Gansu, China's poorest province, and report the successful implementation of a version of the German two-track model for TVET. The program resulted in improvements to graduate employment, internships, quality standards, poverty alleviation, cooperation with enterprises, and teacher upgrading. Indeed, across, LMICs, there is a multidimensional impact of TVET programs on young people's social capital, cultural capital, and health, all related to—but distinct from—economic benefits (Shi & Bangpan, 2022). In this context social capital refers to opportunities to build networks and relationships with friends and industry professionals, and thus includes access to valuable information and resources. Cultural capital, meanwhile, indicates practical skills related to specific industries and trades and the ability to understand various industry practices and professional cultures. Health impacts are the most directly dependent on earnings improvements, as they result

primarily from greater access to healthcare. Similar results have been reported for other

TVET programs and contexts, such as South Africa (Ngcwangu, 2018).

Quek (2019), meanwhile, explored the development of self-efficacy among Chinese

students in vocational education. The study identifies the major sources of self-efficacy

development as experiences of expertise, watching expert performance, positive verbal

feedback and encouragement, and experiences of physical well-being. These are in line with

existing theory (Terry, 2015), but Quek (2019) found that in the TVET context, self-talk was

an especially important encouragement strategy and a form of coping for overcoming

anxieties and stressful situations. The study emphasized the beneficial influence of

cooperative programs and workplace learning experiences (i.e., internships), and points to

cooperation as an important source of capacity development as well as motivation,

persistence in the face of challenges, and effort investment.

Other benefits of TVET programs operate at the community level. Tagicakiverata (2014)

explored how communities were empowered through international TVET collaborations and

networking, finding that they improved innovation, coursework quality, and overall

educational attainment. The study focused on two premier TVET organizations in the Pacific

region—Fiji National University (FNU) and the Pacific Association of Technical Vocational

Education and Training (PATVET). These institutions have collaborated to realize improved

innovation levels and training collaborations and have carried out various projects together,

bridging the gap between skilled and unskilled individuals through the collaboration and

quality of programs they have been offering in partnership. People that have graduated from

these institutions have benefited from gaining quality skills, knowledge, and improvement in

their employment prospects. Best practices have been shared between the two organizations,

including the exchange of knowledge and quality of training activities.

Gender and Vocational Training

Many of the studies described above report gender differences in their observed outcomes. Aldinucci et al. (2021), for example, found differences in the distribution of male and female students across different fields of study, and suggested that gender discrimination in the TVET sector may have influenced the aspirations of female students. This possibility represents a significant risk to the efficacy of TVET programs as a whole: secondary schooling occurs at a most critical stage in the lives of young women, coinciding with puberty and frequently with traditions of child or early marriage, with the onset of adulthood within many religious and cultural traditions, and with major, life-altering transitions in family, society, friendships, and work. Not least of these is the choice of paths that might lead toward or away from higher education (Muller, 2006, p. 355).

Access to education is vital for girls and young women who might otherwise have limited pathways for economic or professional advancement. In addition to protecting rural girls from early marriage, education—and especially secondary schooling—has been shown to have a strong association with women's empowerment (Muller, 2006; Parveen & Leonhäuser, 2004; Roy & Niranjan, 2004; Seeberg, 2014; Wang, 2016), which has been viewed as a process of enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make effective choices and then to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. It is, in a word, essential for both immediate agency and lifelong well-being.

The capabilities that rural girls have reportedly achieved in TVET schools include enjoying wider social contact, support and nurturance; aspiring to live a modern, urban life; gaining more confidence as well as cognitive and psychological control; and converting these resources into feasible life trajectories (Seeberg, 2011, 2014). Schooling can also act as a gateway to improved work options, relocation to a township or city, and increased social opportunities. With secondary schooling, young women can participate more in household

decision-making and have a greater capacity to cope with household issues (Parveen & Leonhäuser, 2004).

Ebrahimi, Choobchian, Farhadian, Goli, Farmandeh, and Azadi (2022) indicate that TVET can contribute significantly to women's economic, social, and psychological empowerment, increasing income alongside confidence and ultimately leading to greater social status in the form of professional accomplishment, certifications, and other markers of success. Women's access to TVET has been linked to enhanced household productivity, food security, income-earning opportunities, and development that is environmentally sustainable (Meel & Gehlot, 2020). The study supports the provision of vocational training and skills to women as this enables them to become economically independent and confident. Notably, these gains in the workplace are also reflected at home, increasing productivity in both household tasks and in a broader economic sense (Diwakar & Ahamad, 2015). Their findings might be summarized by saying that vocational training appears to contribute to women's capability development by improving their employability and ability to adapt to changing technologies and labor market demands.

That impression is reinforced by a series of in-depth interviews conducted with women studying engineering at a TVET college in South Africa (Matenda, 2019). The conversations give accounts of various challenges these women students faced, including sexist comments from lecturers, feelings of alienation, sexual harassment at school, excessive workloads, and limited opportunities for participation in the learning environment. Among Matenda's (2019) most interesting contributions was a list of capabilities that her participants valued: individual autonomy, aspirations for a better future, having a voice, gaining knowledge, and learning skills. These are capabilities that TVET programs can be positioned to support. In other studies, researchers have found that TVET is sometimes neglected in rural areas, with government focus and funding directed instead toward basic education, resulting in a lack of

technical expertise and too few craftspeople to meet local economic needs, according to a broad review of multinational data from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (Hartl, 2009). The authors write that when vocational trainings is available, they often fail to meet the specific needs of women due to restriction to gender-stereotyped occupations. As both consequence and cause of that situation, women are frequently under-represented in cohorts of TVET students, at least within the IFAD-supported programs in Uganda, Ghana, Sudan, and Nepal thatHartl (2009) discussed (these programs were implemented between 2000 and 2007).

This raises an important consideration. TVET programs, if they are to meet the needs of women students, must consider issues not only of access but also of the employability and post-graduation productivity of participants, alongside better targeting of curriculum development, selection industry-relevant skills, and follow-up support. Where Hartl (2009) suggests working toward these priorities and objectives by embedding TVET interventions within the broader context of poverty reduction efforts, Chaudhary (2017 and Ahamad et al. (2016)'s study in India demonstrate the potential positive outcomes implementing gender-sensitive pedagogies and fostering partnerships with local industries Their work examined how TVET programs can empower women by addressing the specific training needs of women and providing such skills to improve their productivity, employability and income. Chaudhary (2017) studied a group of participants who worked mostly in domestic settings or as subsistence farmers, low-paid seasonal laborers, and home-based micro entrepreneurs. These roles largely failed to equip them with the skills they needed nor the financial independence they craved (Chaudhary, 2017). TVET changed that, allowing them to acquire entrepreneurial skills and achieve a greater degree of financial freedom. Even stronger results have been reported in the case of programs that combine traditional TVET with a gender-inclusive approach, leading to synergistic women's empowerment and transformative

learning in rural Indian communities (Sheshadri et al., 2020). The programs also helped

address cultural and structural barriers that otherwise hindered access to TVET. Similarly,

Ahamad et al. (2016) found that TVET programs that targeted women through the use of non-

discrimination policies had markedly improved results. Not only did they build confidence

among women by eliminating gender stereotyping in the vocational courses, they succeeded

in encouraging female students to participate in non-traditional occupations such as

technology based fields.

These benefits extend to both empowerment and agency, as defined above. TVET

training programs produce higher access to better employment opportunities which led to

improved labor marker outcomes and higher income level for the women (Dey & Devi,

2019), a form of economic empowerment, while also granting participants greater immediate

control over their own lives and choices—both employment-related and in connection to

daily and family life. Some studies emphasize that these effects are most pronounced when

TVET is made available to members of impoverished communities. In these contexts, the

programs' ancillary benefits—such as improved confidence, opportunities for socializing,

chances for self-reflection, and willingness to take on the risks of entrepreneurship—can have

just as much impact as actual skills training (Johnson, 2015).

These broad findings have been replicated across many distinct socioeconomic settings.

Garbuja and Pasa (2016) carried out research among women in rural Nepal, demonstrating

that TVET provided self-employment opportunities to the women and also encouraged

agency among their family and personal lives. The women who were involved in the TVET

programs often depicted a heightened ability to make decisions that improved their well-

being. Specific positive outcomes included enhanced leadership skills and abilities,

education, and they also became agents of change within their communities. Similar results

have been reported in Palestine (Hilal, 2017, 2019), Indonesia (Tohani et al., 2019), and in

refugee camps in Jordan (Jabbar & Zaza, 2015). All of these research projects found that TVET, through a combination of social, academic, and psychological benefits, resulted in increased confidence, stronger workplace and entrepreneurial skills, better access to income, and—inspiringly—greater hope for the future as a result of these multiple forms of expanded agency. Tohani et al. (2019) describe the vital and potentially life-saving effects of TVET availability for women in disaster-vulnerable areas, a finding that is of immediate relevance in the face of climate change. Jabbar and Zaza (2015), for their part, emphasize that impact of vocational programs extends beyond individual economic benefits, altering cultural attitudes and gender roles within refugee communities. Between these cultural shifts and economic empowerment, they found that TVET was associated with lower mortality rates and increased educational opportunities.

The theme of gender-related cultural change has been studied explicitly by other scholars. Rai and Joshi (2020) focused on the contestation of agency and patriarchal power in the context of women's liberation. TVET fails to challenge the under-representation of women in the workforce when available courses are dominated by men—a point also made by Hartl (2009)—but it can begin to undermine patriarchy by increasing women's agency in the form of their motivation, commitment, willingness, and knowledgeability. Rai and Joshi (2020) argue that women who participate in TVET have a chance to navigate the power dynamics after graduation as they found within themselves the will to make choices regarding their career paths—and thereby to gain access to the income needed for economic self-determination.

The Context of Chinese TVET

Formal vocational schooling did not emerge in mainland China until the late 19th century. The opening of the famous Fuzhou Navy Academy (福州船政局) is believed to represent the initiation of China's contemporary vocational education. During the nation's

Republican period (1912–1949), vocational education developed continuously but unevenly. In the midst of social unrest and multiple wars, the widespread establishment of modern vocational education was difficult to achieve, and development of vocational schools lagged in ethnic minority areas (Hansen, 2011).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, government priorities shifted to industrialization and modernization. Vocational schooling has broadly been encouraged to help address a shortage of skilled workers. In 1963, secondary vocational schools were introduced in urban areas (Tsang, 2000) and in-service training programs were instituted and run within individual plants organized by the industrial ministry (Seeberg, 2000). However, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) the educational system was disrupted at all levels and TVET programs declined, although work programs were a part of most schools with daily hours allocated to work. As the Cultural Revolution came to an end, the central government shifted its focus from reform to development and vocational schooling was restored (Seeberg, 2000). The period from 1980 through to 2010 saw the most rapid educational development in China's history, with nine years of compulsory education— up through junior secondary school—established as a national right in 1986 (Stewart, 2015).

TVET secondary schools expanded more slowly than traditional academic counterparts despite their lower cost until China's central government made the development of TVET schools a higher priority at the turn of the millennium. In 2002 and 2005, the State Council underscored the importance of TVET in building a skilled labor force that would power China's economic growth. Senior secondary education, of which TVET programs are a subset, rose from a gross enrollment rate of 42.8% in 2002 to 84% in 2011 (Yuan, 2013). By the 2010s, approximately 50% of senior secondary school students attended vocational schools rather than academic schools intended as preparation for university (Stewart, 2015).

The extreme speed of educational expansion, however, meant that existing regional

disparities in economic and intellectual resources were reflected in the new educational system. The most notable gaps in quality were between the developed cities of the East coast and less wealthy regions in the country's Center and West, as well as between rural and urban areas (Stewart, 2015). In 2016, the State Council issued the Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Educational Development in the Midwest, aimed to reduce regional, urban, and rural gaps by investing in vocational schools and increasing subsidies for vocational students from impoverished areas and rural families in midwestern China. In 2019 the National People's Congress of China accentuated the importance of TVET in contributing to China's future by announcing an expansion of enrollment at vocational school nationwide. In response to this announcement, Mingyuan Gu, one of China's most influential and prolific education scholars, advocated China's vigorous development of vocational education to overcome the shortage of skilled labor which had become a major challenge for China's development and in its drive to become a world manufacturing powerhouse (Cao, 2019).

Driven by a neoliberal agenda emphasizing economic productivity for the good of the nation, the state has made considerable efforts to vocationalize post-compulsory education. For instance, aiming to divert half of all junior high school graduates nationwide into the vocational track, the state provided 1,500 yuan (215 USD) subsidies on a per-year basis to support students from rural junior high school and poor urban students—part of the State Council's program The Decision on Vigorously Developing Vocational Education, 2005. This subsidy is significant but hardly adequate to offset the cost of paid-tuition TVET programs, which have costs comparable to those of traditional academic education. The actual cost varies by region, municipality, and subject area (arts are often the most expensive, followed by science and engineering, and then by the humanities), but some examples help to illustrate the general situation. In Chongqing Municipality, general TVET costs 4,000-5,000 RMB per year, while an academic science degree is 2,600-3,700 (Chongqing Municipal Education

Commission, 2023). In Sichuan, general TVET averages 5,300 while academic science is 5,200 (Sichuan Provincial Department of Education, 2023); in Henan Province, those numbers are 4,250 and 5,000, respectively (Henan Provincial Department of Education, 2023). In Shaanxi the comparison is 4,000 (TVET) to 4,800 (general science) (Shaanxi Provincial Department of Education, 2023), and in the IMAR, 4,250 to 4,600 (Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Development and Reform Commission, 2022). In other words, the stipend is a significant incentive but covers only about one third of tuition costs.

The recently released Outline of the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020) includes plans for providing access to vocational education completely totally free of charge, although tuition-paid secondary TVET remains the norm at present. The stated goal of that change would be for youth with rural backgrounds, who were originally excluded from urban post-compulsory education, to become a source of new vocational school students in cities.

The current vocational education system covers a range of school types. Following compulsory primary education, students enter junior secondary schools. In principle, this is where the two-track system splits, with some students entering junior secondary vocational schools, but there are only 8 such schools in the country—as compared to 34,304 regular junior secondary schools and 7,201 senior secondary vocational schools (NBSC, 2023). Those in vocational then optionally progress into one of three kinds of senior secondary institutions: a secondary professional school or zhongzhuan (中专), an occupational high school or zhiye gaozhong (职业高中), or technical school or jishu xuexiao (技术学校) Some students then progress to tertiary vocational training in certain specializations ranging from traditional clothing manufacture to information processing technology (Guo, 2022; Jing, Chung, & Gregory, 2022).

The Perceived Cultural Value of TVET

In traditional Confucian social settings, reading and writing are high-prestige skills and the development of vocational education has therefore been challenging: the public has perceived it as a pathway to manual labor instead of white-collar occupations (Schulte, 2003). Test scores have frequently been understood as the only expression of students' value, causing vocational schools with their lower entrance score requirements to be seen as second-best choices (Hansen & Woronov, 2013). Vocational education in China has also been stigmatized for its perceived poor quality, with vocational students reportedly investing comparatively little effort into their schoolwork as a result of loose schedules and the poor quality of vocational teaching (Ling, 2015). A robust and body of literature collecting qualitative and quantitative data on student experiences, educational outcomes, enrollment, and perceptions, identifies at least four major problems with vocational schools (see e.g., Guo, 2022; Liu et al., 2009; Yi et al., 2015; Li, Naya, Seeberg, 2019):

- Lack of standardized or effective management due to disparate regional and local regulation and administration.

- Lack of standardized, robust curriculum (this is an especially acute problem given variation across regions).

- Lack of unified standard for student enrolment, recruitment, and retention.

- Insufficient numbers of qualified teachers, due to issues with training, administration, compensation, and more.

These difficulties lead to higher rates of dropout, lower enrollment, reduced student enthusiasm, and a broad perception that vocational degrees are not as useful or valuable as standard ones (Ke et al., 2018; Seeberg, 2011). The training students received in vocational schools has been reported to be inapplicable to desirable work opportunities and often of low quality.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a recent study of Chinese vocational students' attitudes toward both their educational programs and the way their credentials are perceived emphasized that, despite significant governmental focus on TVET courses over the last decade, vocational education is still perceived as substantially inferior to traditional academic education at the senior secondary and tertiary levels (Wang, 2020). Wang's 200 survey respondents and 54 interviewees who were current students at two small TVET colleges in Tianjin, described many failure points in the way their programs prepared them for skilled labor. Many students aspired to complete "upgrade" or transition programs that would leave them with an academic tertiary degree at the cost of multiple years of additional study (Wang, 2020, p. 146). The study's conclusion was that investment in vocational training is not the only change required to produce successful, productive TVET graduates. The culture must change as well—there must be a social model within which TVET holds a real cachet, inspires confidence in prospective employers, and instill pride in alumni.

These findings echo with broader patterns in the study of vocational education. In many nations, tracking (separation of vocational and academic institutions) results in unequal distributions of educational resources, and this lack of equality leads to both differentiated outcomes and attendant stigmas and negative attitudes. There is even debate as to the ultimate value of TVET programs, with some scholars arguing that vocational education improves students' economic prospects (Dieckhoff, 2008; Shavit & Müller, 2000), while others contend that separating vocational and academic tracks functions to reproduce social inequality across generations (Kupfer, 2009). In addition to this practical question of outcomes, there is the general finding that students in vocational tracks do manifest more negative attitudes toward themselves than those in academic equivalents (Houtte, Demanet & Stevens, 2012).

These attitudes have a complex, bidirectional relationship to historical marginalization. In many nations—China among them—historically disadvantaged ethnic, racial, religious,

and gender-defined groups are more likely to pursue vocational schooling than their majority-group peers (Ling, 2015; Verhoeven & Zang, 2016). At the same time, scholars have expressed concern that tracking disadvantaged students into vocational pathways could reinforce existing inequalities—in effect, creating an alternative form of schooling for marginalized students (Yang & Wu, 2009). In China, the influx of rural migrants to cities has drawn researchers' attention to migrant experiences in city vocational schools, given that (a) migrant youth were more likely to attend vocational school than their urban counterparts (Hansen & Woronov, 2013; Ling, 2015) and (b) their schooling experiences may have profound influences on China's rapidly changing society (Ling, 2015). One line of the research involved how the increase in migrant youth attending vocational school may have perpetuated social inequalities in China.

Using an ethnographic approach, Zhou (2011) studied the experiences and perspectives of Chinese migrant students in a migrant school of Beijing. The author contrasted their observations about China with the classic work by Willis (1977), who observed young men resisting the rules and values of the mainstream school culture and creating a counterculture of their own in an industrial town in the West Midlands of England. For Willis' subjects, however, resistance became a constraint confining them to working-class jobs—to strive for white collar work would have required abandoning their cultural environment. Notably, Zhou (2011) finds that although the migrant students he interviewed often skipped classes and refused to study, they admired students who performed well in school and successfully conformed to mainstream ideals of educational success. There are some similarities to Willis' "lads": Zhou's migrant students devalued schooling in general and sought to build their self-esteem through activities such as smoking, playing cards, and teasing teachers during class sessions. However, these students did not perceive their academic failures as conscious rejection of mainstream norms, instead perceiving them as genuine personal failings (Zhou,

2011).

Building on Zhou's work, Ling (2015) compared Willis' (1977) Lads' counterculture to the social environment among a population of migrant students in Shanghai who had been channeled into vocational schools beginning in 2008. Ling (2015, p. 112) argued that "the lack of an articulated class culture or solidarity among migrant families makes it impractical to presume a causal relation between a class-based culture and class reproduction as suggested by Willis." Rather, Ling (2015) suggested that Chinese migrant students' resistance to or noncompliance with academic norms—"passing time" to get by with minimum input in class and schoolwork—was motivated by a shared sense of deprivation caused by the omnipresent hukou barriers and the perceived inferior quality of vocational schooling. Another sharp contrast lay in students' aspirations: rather than aspiring to the same blue-collar jobs held by their parents, Zhou's and Ling's subjects expressed the desire for indoor office work or for entrepreneurial undertakings, goals they shared with their urban, non-migrant peers.

Chinese TVET is not unique in producing these problems. Many nations that make use of tracking, separating vocational education from general education, share a similar set of challenges: the unequal distribution of educational resources, social reproduction of class barriers, limited upward mobility for TVET graduates, a sense of deprivation and lowered self-esteem among TVET students (Batruch et al., 2019). What makes China's system unique is that the new Chinese working class is not fully formed, as it is in many Western countries (Pun, 2016), meaning that tracking and class distinctions often conflict. As a result, China's vocational graduates typically aspired to achieve more and fared better economically than their parents' generation, many of whom were subsistence farmers or worker-peasants.

Internal Migration in International Context

If cultural values are one major force shaping China's TVET programs, the hukou

system and the broader organization of China's internal migration is the other. Globally, it is estimated that 740 million people, or one in eight, are internal migrants—a population substantially surpassing the numbers for international migration (Altinyelken, 2009; Bell & Muhidin, 2009). In most countries, internal migrants face fewer legal and administrative barriers to movement than do international migrants, meaning that one's legal status has relatively little impact on where and when one is able to migrate (Deshingkar & Natali, 2008). However, China is an exception. The hukou system limits Chinese internal migrants' ability to claim urban citizenship, creating a situation where—at least for rural-to-urban movement—internal migration within the country resembles international migration elsewhere (Lu & Zhou, 2013). The authors argue that the situation for a rural resident seeking entry to one of China's cities resembles that of undocumented international migrants in most Western countries: marginalized and forced to treat major state systems as obstacles rather than channels.

This comparison makes it possible to draw on the substantial literature on TVET and migration in international contexts. In particular, because the present study is concerned with young women, international comparisons are a useful way to ask about how vocational school might affect women moving from rural environments and navigating the cultural, social, familial, and economic complexities of migration. This is a context where TVET has been reported to have genuinely transformative effects. In one major study by Ling (2015) , second-generation migrant youth in rural China were found to develop entrepreneurial aspirations, actively pursue entertainment and consumption, and seek out part-time jobs once they enrolled in TVET programs. Together, these activities enabled them to "seek their own future paths by cultivating a savvy knowledge of city life and the crossing to various extents of local–outsider, urban–rural boundaries" (Ling, 2015, p. 130).

Broadly speaking, the extant literature supports the idea that vocational schooling

contributes to the agency and aspirations of migrant youth in cities. Interviews with migrant young people attest that despite a lack of awareness of restrictions and negative social status, many set their minds toward finding their own paths to the future and seeking new forms of dignity in the face of cultural marginalization or disempowerment (Woronov, 2011). Notably, all of Woronov's (2011) interviewees were optimistic about their futures, leading the author to suggest that these migrant youth were more prepared for the flexible uncertainties of emerging post-Fordist economies. Unlike graduates from traditional universities, many of whom were clustered in major cities pursuing a limited pool of white-collar jobs, many TVET graduates believed smaller cities provided more opportunities and less competition and were seeking more diverse labor markets. By attending vocational school in cities, these second-generation migrants fared better than their parents. They also formed (or joined) a new youth subculture that influenced their lives positively, despite limited social mobility (cf. Ling, 2015; Zhou, 2011).Furthermore, Lu, Koo and Pun (2019) conducted an expansive study on vocational students in China and proposed that TVET students were effectively working against neoliberal capitalist logic; rather than seeking success by seeking peers engaged in self-optimization such as self-marketing, these young people were demonstrating social values such as care and cooperation, creating a uniquely Chinese working-class culture through vocational schooling and achieving an alternative form of economic agency.

These findings are typical of the empowerment approach, which lends itself not to a verdict on whether or not TVET empowers migrant youth, but rather an exploration of how, from the perspective of participants, it changes their lives and expectations (Seeberg, Luo, Na, Clark, 2018). Nonetheless, most scholars have found that—in a broad range of ways— most migrants who participate in TVET in their new homes find their lives improved both economically and socially (Zhou, 2011). That patterns appears to obtain internationally, with the German TVET context—among the best-established in the world—vocational training

can play an important role in closing intergenerational gaps in educational achievement

(Gang & Zimmermann, 2000).

This finding is vital, given that international migrant children face many challenges in

educational achievement compared to their native-born counterparts (Barlett, 2015). These

challenges can be divided into system-level and school-level factors. According to Barlett

(2015), system-level factors include migration and education policies, (access to education is

often not guaranteed for migrants). In the United States, for instance, a large population of

undocumented immigrant youth is growing up with legal access to public education through

high school but encountering legal and economic barriers to colleges—a situation that affects

their experiences during secondary school as well, lowering motivation and high school

graduation rates as they look ahead to futures closed off to them (Abrego, 2006).

A second group of system-level factors has to do with funding. To borrow again from

the American context, even the most accessible institutions of higher education, community

colleges, remain financially out of reach for most undocumented students—a problem

exacerbated by widespread policies of deportation at many schools (Bartlett, 2015).

School-level institutional factors affecting the education of immigrants include support

for early childhood education, permissible age of school entry, ability grouping, school

quality, diversity and responsiveness of curricula and pedagogies, and openness to cultural

and religious diversity (Barlett, 2015). Notably, age of selection into different tracks can

explain most of the disparities between schools in OECD countries; for instance, delays in

tracking in Sweden and Finland lower the impact of home background on academic

performance and thereby improve equity (Harttgen & Klasen, 2009). Without these measures,

the authors suggest migrant children and youth face social exclusion at school because of lack

of family support and societal discrimination. In Europe, these challenges are recognized as

barriers both to economic progress and to societal well-being, and national governments in

cooperation with the European Commission are prioritizing the educational integration of young people with a migrant background, including newly arrived migrants and refugees. These efforts have included launching programs to promote fairness and inclusion (European Commission, 2017).

Such school-level strategies to improve opportunities for migrant children vary widely from country to country. Gomolla (2006) compared such strategies across Britain, Germany, and Switzerland, and noted that in areas where standardized testing is prioritized—such as Britain—the most vulnerable children were marginalized even further. This group of students comprises those with migrant backgrounds who currently live in seriously under-funded or under-resourced areas. For such students, performance-oriented educational reforms can contribute to exclusion and to the ways that institutional discrimination in the micro-level can limit their educational opportunity (Gomolla, 2006). The authors suggest that "the recognition of ethnic diversity and equity as integral part of mainstream reforms opens at least opportunities for these issues to become an evaluative criterion in the quality of other elements of reforms."

Unfortunately, this kind of educational exclusion is widespread. Using published international data and U.S. Census and Current Population Survey data on 32 immigrant groups, Feliciano (2005) examined immigrant/native differences in home environment affected educational outcomes, finding that non-economic forms of social and human capital transfer across borders, even when immigrant parents were originally educated in significantly different systems. Migrants of high-status backgrounds in their home countries confer advantages on their children, in other words.

Ethnicity, Gender, and Education in Rural China

Having established key concepts of empowerment, agency, and well-being; having reviewed the substantial literature linking TVET to the realization of all three, having

reviewed the specific value of TVET for the empowerment of women and of marginalized groups, including migrants; and having introduced the general context of Chinese TVET, this final section of the chapter turns to the specific context of the present student.

Gender and Education in Rural China

First, it is important to recognize that young women in TVET programs in Inner Mongolia and in other rural regions of China face many of the same barriers of exclusion and discrimination encountered by young women elsewhere in the world, as discussed earlier in the chapter. There are, however, important differences attributable to the specific details of rural China's economic and demographic composition as well as its TVET implementation. Wang and Yu (2020), for instance, discuss the problems posed by "homogenized" skills-training channels, i.e., TVET programs that did not differentiate offerings by gender and provided classes primarily for male-dominated industries. This can become a barrier for some women in developing communities, who need access to new skills—service industry skills in particular—to escape dependence on pastoral living as local economies shift toward increasing urbanization and industrialization. There were problems with available avenues toward acquiring those skills, however, chief among them was gender-blindness in program offerings. This is true of TVET programs as well as government-sponsored or on the job training and other available educational pathways.

These problems become worse as women age; although economic reforms of the region have succeeded in making newer, more modern jobs available in many cities, they have not provided support for aging women—most of the 45 million aging women in rural China rely on their children for support in old age, meaning that those without families, with estranged families, or with children who are themselves struggling financially can end up in difficult situations (Liu et al., 2013; Luo & Zhan, 2012; Mao & Chi, 2011; Yang, 2021). Several government programs are available to provide income and healthcare to the elderly, most

prominently the New Rural Pension Program (NRPP) that has spread rapidly since it was piloted in 2008—and still pays for only a portion of basic retirement costs (Chen et al., 2023). As rural adults age and become less able to handle basic farming tasks, and as rates of internal migration of younger adults increase, more aging adults are renting out farmland and relying on payments sent by their children living in cities (Shi, 2002; Wang, Zhou, Yang, Sun, & Chen, 2019).

Then there is the question of marriage. In the context of rural China, at the end of compulsory schooling, girls are faced with the choice of either pursuing self-financed senior secondary school or work as an unskilled laborer in the city because the minimum working age is 16. Here, the importance of secondary schooling lies in its potential to delay marriage, which may be forced, and protect girls from hard labor (Seeberg, 2014). Avoiding or delaying early marriage brings with it a tremendous range of benefits for girls and young women: greater freedom, improved social relations, broader experiences, and the health gains that result from delaying pregnancy into adulthood (Wang & Qiao, 2020). Child marriage is estimated to affect close to 3 million Chinese girls every year (Fan et al., 2022). In the absence of pressure to marry young, rural Chinese girls can exhibit agency by reassessing their lives and redefining their goals, taking into account both traditional and newly encountered social norms, values, morals, and identities, many of which they encounter through migration (Gaetano, 2004). This process ultimately enhances their ability to take intentional actions and make deliberate choices, contributing to their agency development.

The possibility of empowerment can sometimes be constrained by filial piety, however. As discussed above, filial piety is a system of expectations and obligations—both practical and emotional—that children have toward their parents within traditional Confucian society. The exact nature of these expectations varies widely by gender, however, placing young women under patriarchal limitations: the filial duties expected of women include more direct

caregiving as well as housekeeping and childcare, whereas men have more flexible duties such as financial support (Lam et al., 2022; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). Patriarchal attitudes such as son preference, patrilineal inheritance, and gendered restrictions on what work is considered suitable are closely linked to filial piety, especially in the historical context of the one-child policy, which shifted standard views of filial piety away from an expectation of having many children to ensure lineal continuation over to a narrower preference for having a single son (Yeh, Yi, Tsao & Wan, 2013). The link between patriarchal values and filial piety is not indissoluble, however, and some studies suggest that they have increasingly separated over time, especially in families whose children have access to higher education (Hu & Scott, 2016).

Ethnicity and Education in Rural China

China comprises 56 designated minzu, or ethnic groups, including the majority Han group and 55 ethnic minorities. Historically, Han Chinese have been concentrated in the nation's central plains and the Southeastern coastal regions, with minority populations mainly living primarily in border areas (Xing, Yumiyi & Liu, 2012). In general, Korean, Manchu, Mongol, and several other minority groups have resided in the North; while Zhuang, Dai, Dong, Miao, and others have lived in the South (Xing et al., 2012) most of whom retain their own languages In Inner Mongolia, the official languages are Han Chinese and Mongolian, the latter written in the traditional Mongolian script. Beside language, the ethnic minority groups in China also differ widely in terms of lifestyle, folk traditions, and customs (Heberer, 2017).

Mongols are an East-Central Asian ethnic group, settled primarily in Mongolia and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR) of China. Seventy percent of the total 5.8 million Mongols in China live in the IMAR, where they account for just 15% of the local population (Zhao, 2007) because their concentration was reduced by the agricultural settlement of Han people beginning with the collapse of Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368; Dong et

al., 2015). Since the economic and cultural opening of China that began in 1978, the

Mongolian ethnic group has tended toward assimilation into the Han majority (Iredale et al.,

2001), as evidenced by low enrollment rates of Mongolian youth in Mongolian Nationality

Schools, an observed preference for Han schools, the forced loss of the traditional Mongolian

religion (Bilik, 1998) and increasing intermarriage with Han Chinese.

Traditionally, Mongols have led pastoral lives, growing up on horseback. The large-scale

herding of sheep and horses served as the mainstay of this historical socioeconomic, but it has

been increasingly disrupted by climate change, the spread of mining in the IMAR, and new

industries such as goat-cashmere production (Chuluun et al., 2017). These factors contribute

to the reduction in ecosystem resilience, largely due to significant ecological degradation and

the influence of the predominant Han farming practices. These practices exacerbate the

challenges of pastoral living and intensify internal migration (Xu, Zhang, & Chen, 2021). and

the free-market economy, a rapid economic transition away from pastoralism has taken place.

The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China published The Grassland

Law of The People's Republic of China in 2002 to help prevent overgrazing and erosion of its

grasslands, and this added further difficulties for pastoral Mongolian communities:

restrictions on land ownership, fencing in of some land areas, limiting movement, and

reducing the length of land and livestock leases (Conte, 2015;Han, 2011; Li, Ali, & Zhang,

2007). More and more Mongolian people, particularly among younger generations, have

moved to the city over the twenty years since.

This urban migration sets the stage for the present study. In combination with the hukou

system, it places many young Mongolian women in the role of legally disadvantaged

migrants, facing institutional and administrative barriers as well as those of language, culture,

and custom. Against this background, TVET programs in Inner Mongolia's cities are one of

the primary avenues available to young women as they seek to establish urban lives for

themselves. Li and Seeberg (2022) found that TVET education was moderately accessible for rural migrant girls and provided them with skills, knowledge, and capabilities to at least marginally participate in the urbanizing economy. The TVET education experienced by the participants led to individual and collective changes, empowering the girls educationally and enhancing their capabilities. The research highlights the role of TVET in equipping rural migrant girls with basic skills to begin to navigate the rapidly changing socioeconomic landscape.

One final element of note concerns the way that ethnicity-linked inequality and the long-standing male-child preference have shaped patterns of marriage behavior. More Han men marry Mongolian women than the reverse; there are far more young men in China than there are young women, leading to a situation where many urban-dwelling Han men are looking for partners from more rural Mongolian communities (He & Eade, 2015).

Comparing Han and Minority Culture Values

Cultural contexts inform what individuals consider important, guiding their goals and shaping their visions of a good life. Appadurai (2004) highlights that aspirations emerge across multiple levels—immediate, intermediate, and general—reflecting both personal desires and broader cultural norms.

The nomadic history of Mongolian communities means that there are very few long-standing formal educational institutions across the rural areas of the IMAR. Because the Mongolian population primarily inhabited remote pastoral areas and lived in scattered households—making consistent school attendance near impossible—horseback schools were created by the Chinese government to provide some basic education for ethnic-minority children (Yang & Wu, 2009). Later, the central government sent indigenous children to boarding schools in remote areas. Starting in the late 1950s, ethnic regions, such as Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Guangxi, built boarding schools aligned with their own

region's specific needs and demands (Yang & Wu, 2009).

In Inner Mongolia, the educational system has offered instruction in two language tracks from early childhood through higher education—Chinese or Mongolian. Schools using Mongolian as the medium of instruction are known as Mongolian Nationality Schools, school settings where Han Chinese is a secondary language or is not used at all (Dong et al., 2015). The policies (e.g., "Recruitment of Excellent Minority Youth into Colleges and Universities," Jiaominting Document No. 13, or "Strengthening Minority Preparatory Classes in Ordinary Colleges and Universities," Jiaominting Document No. 17, both from 1992) are particularly relevant for those in the Mongolian track. Students in these Mongolian schools take college entrance exams in their own language and are admitted separately from students from the Chinese language schools. The acceptance rate to higher education in this Mongolian track is usually higher, which means Mongolian students have more opportunities to attend college by taking entrance exams in their own language. Because Mongolian students who attend Han track-schools and take college entrance exams in standard Han Chinese, they are accorded a slight advantage on test scores to account for what would otherwise be the linguistic disadvantage imposed by their ethnic background (V. Seeberg, Personal communication, 2018, speaking in reference to the Xilin Gol League Mongolian High School in Xilinhot).

Advantages of that kind fall under the banner of "preferential educational policy," a suite of rules, laws, provisions, and interventions intended to redress institutional inequities in the education of minority and majority Chinese (Yang & Wu, 2009). Because many minority groups have traditionally inhabited remote areas, where economic development typically lags behind the growth of coastal regions, the central government of China implemented a series of preferential policies in education that included preferential admissions, lowered school fees, and special boarding schools. These were paralleled by employment policies—extra

consideration in hiring and promotion—and business development in the form of special

loans and grants (Sautman, 1998). Article 71 of PRC's Law on Regional Autonomy for

Minority Nationalities (1984 stipulates that "all levels of the government and schools should

adopt a variety of measures to help minority students from socioeconomically disadvantaged

families to pursue their education." In the pastoral areas of Inner Mongolia, public ethnic

primary and secondary schools offer boarding and financial stipends for a majority of rural

students. field work, 2018)

As mentioned above, minority students have enjoyed some privileges on college

entrance exams as well. Article 37 of the Regulations on Enrollment of Regular Higher

Education Institutions published in 1987, stated explicitly that minority applicants living in

rural areas—mountainous, pastoral, or inhabited primarily by ethnic minority groups—should

be selected based on whether they were outstanding candidates relative to local peers, even if

their test scores were lower than those of Han nationality or urban applicants (Zhang &

Archer, 2024).

However, the effectiveness of these policies in closing the gap in upward social mobility

between ethnic minorities from rural origins and the majority group has been questioned

(Yang & Wu, 2009). Li and Zhao (2017) conducted a study examining the impact of

preferential policies on ethnic minority social mobility in China. Their findings indicated that

despite the implementation of these policies, the gap in social mobility between ethnic

minorities and the majority group remained significant. The researchers suggested that the

relative underdevelopment of the local economy in minority regions could be a contributing

factor to these ongoing disparities. That suggestion finds some support in a major review of

studies from 1980 to 2016 on ethnicity and educational inequality in China (Cherng & Davis,

2019), which found widespread economic underdevelopment at the regional level and

poverty at the household level. Alongside cultural attitudes of minority groups toward

schooling, the content of educational institutions, and labor market conditions were identified as major sources of minority disadvantage in education. Compared to other minority groups, such as Hui and Tibetans, Mongols have been relatively advantaged in terms of economic development (Hannum, 2002).

Those advantages may not apply equally to Mongolian girls and women relative to Mongolian men. Son preference has been a prevalent value in China for decades, especially in rural farming areas and among less educated parents. It is of note, however, that son preferences in rural minority areas—and how it manifests in young women's schooling experiences—remain underexplored. A survey of 19 largest ethnic groups in rural China conducted in 1992 shows that rural minority women and girls were the most disadvantaged group and had lower enrollment rates than Han or male counterparts (Hannum, 2002). The same study, however, found significant but unspecified evidence of Mongolian exceptionalism: Mongolian youth were the only ethnic group whose enrolment rates relative to Han children changed dramatically—for the worse—when the model controlled for a set of external variables (region, age, family size, parental education, and household income), which "suggests that the Mongols are advantaged with respect to one or more of the characteristics controlled in the model" (Hannum, 2002, p. 106), although Mongolian girls were still under-enrolled compared to Mongolian boys.

In addition, minority girls were more likely than any other group to report economic causes for dropping out of school; however, compared to the Han majority, the gender gap is actually narrower among minorities. This may be because, compared to the majority Han people, many ethnic groups have historically been less influenced by the patriarchal norms of Confucian ideology (Tilt, Li & Schmitt, 2019).

School Culture and Ethnic Cultures

Differences in adherence to Confucian cultural values affect more than son preference.

In fact, cultural differences between minority ethnic communities and Han communities create significant mismatches in expectations, behavior, and attitudes toward education, especially in a school environment that is so closely aligned with mainstream Han culture. Many scholars have criticized Chinese state education for often ignoring the diversity of minority languages, histories, and cultural differences that affect minority students' ability to form their cultural identity (see e.g., Gladney, 1999; Qian, 2007). Minority culture may also influence how ethnic minorities perceive education, and such perception can further impact their school enrollment and performance (Hansen, 1999).

In China in the 2020s, the dominant Han culture is associated with science and progress while ethnic minority cultural values are often seen as being backward or even primordial (Xu & Yang, 2010). Unsurprisingly, assimilation has been a widespread outcome of the national pressure exerted by China's modernization and nation-building efforts, even apart from the tremendous power of market competition and economic interests that make people conform (Han, 2011). The IMAR has experienced extremely rapid economic development over the last four decades; it has the highest GDP growth in China from 2022 to 2009 and the percentage of its population below the poverty line has dropped by more than two-thirds since 2010 even as its population has almost doubled (Shang et al., 2019). Two major drivers of these changes have been the booming agricultural sector and the rapid growth of mining in the region (Zhu et al., 2022). This growth has come at a cost, however, as the influx of Han Chinese, the decline of the pastoral socioeconomic model, and other aspects of development have made it harder for Mongolian Chinese to preserve their language and culture (Han, 2011). The usage of Mongolian in daily life and in educational contexts is fading quickly, especially among the younger generation, and this causes great anxiety among the Mongolians in IMAR (Bulag, 2003). However, despite the fear associated with language assimilation and the loss of the integrity of Mongolian identity, many Mongolians still send

their children to Han schools to have greater prospects—indeed, this may be the core engine of change, with families forced to choose security and baseline opportunity over cultural preservation and social reproduction (Bulag, 2003; Han, 2011).

Some of the relevant cultural differences cut very deep, affecting students' perceptions of foundational aspects of education. For instance, Han Chinese and Mongolians possess culturally distinct ways of conceptualizing their living environments (Williams, 2002). For Han Chinese, the land serves as a source of productivity—a way of making a living. For ethnic Mongolians, however, pastoral land is a foundation of their culture and the site of their history and cultural memory. Mongolians' nomadic lifestyle, although rapidly dying out, remains within living memory—and pastoralism is still practiced by many communities. These lifestyles result in very deep attachments to the IMAR's grasslands and produce a way of life much closer to nature and built on respecting nature, including natural laws (Zhang & Zhang, 2007). According to Han (2011), the grazing ban issued by the Chinese central government has placed the herders under growing economic and cultural pressures: the viability of pastoralism is threatened even while any move toward urban life would sever their connection to cultural identity. These losses directly affect educational values and even classroom behavior.

Culture affects how individuals perceive emotions (Deng et al., 2016, 2019; Miyamoto & Ma, 2011). Influenced by Confucianism, Han Chinese tend to adopt a dialectical attitude toward happiness or being pleasant (which is associated with hedonism). In practical terms, this means that there is a cultural expectation that, when experiencing pleasant emotions, misery will soon follow (Deng et al., 2016; Deng et al. 2019). This pattern of expectation can produce lower self-reported and self-assessed feeling of well-being as compared to Westerners living in comparable circumstances (Miyamoto & Ma, 2011; Miyamoto & Ryff, 2012).

As an important minority in China, Mongolian's cultural values and emotional characteristics are different from the Han's (Knight et al., 2020; Tilt, Li and Schmitt, 2019). Deng et al., (2016, 2019) find that Mongolians are less dialectical toward being happy than Han for two reasons. First, Mongolians are more unconstrained, extroverted, and outgoing due to their spacious living surroundings and vigorous traditional activities linked to pastoral living. Second, Mongolians have historically lived far from large cities, literally distancing them from Han cultural values. In an exploratory study on subjective well-being of minorities and Han people, many minorities (including Mongolians) were found to be conditionally happier than Han regardless of their lower average income (Knight et al., 2020).

A related set of phenomena—a parallel set of differences—link these cultural divides to economic ones. Above all, there is significant discrimination against ethnic minorities in China's labor market (Hasmath, 2011). Maurer-Fazio (2012) found that the job candidates who have Mongolian-sounding names were significantly less likely to receive calls back about open positions that were those with Han-sounding names—especially in big cities such as Kunming, Shenzhen, and Nanning. In cities within the IMAR, by contrast, candidates with Mongolian names faced much less discrimination or even received favorable treatment. This discrimination may contribute to patterns of migration. Members of ethnic minorities such as rural Uyghurs and Mongolians tend to be less mobile than their Han counterparts, due both to personal and cultural preferences. They may also anticipate the costs of migration to be higher than would Han households under similar circumstances, as a result of both lower information about the labor market in their destination and perceived/anticipated discrimination (Gustafsson & Yang, 2014).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter lays out the procedures used to conduct the present study, including theoretical and design considerations, ethical considerations, and the details of data collection, storage, analysis, and reporting, alongside descriptions of the participants and research settings. In addition, the chapter discusses the author's role as both researcher and cultural insider and discusses how my own cultural background and previous experiences helped in shaping the study's research design, interview questions, and interactions with participants. The chapter concludes by assessing potential issues of trustworthiness and documenting the study's IRB approval.

Study Design

The present study adopted an interpretive, qualitative method of research grounded in ECEF framework. This research design allows for an in-depth understanding of how Mongolian and Han girls perceive and experience capability development in TVET. By gathering qualitative data such as interviews and observations, and interpreting them using the ECEF framework, the study is able to answer the research questions 1) How the vocational education system enhances or limits these girls' capability, 2) What agency do Mongolian and Han girls achieve through TVET, and how does that agency contribute to their well-being, 3) How do cultural values influence the understanding and experience of well-being among Mongolian and Han girls.

The research was conducted by the author with the collaboration of two other researchers from The Chinese Rural Girls Education Project, a larger, longitudinal investigation that was the predecessor of the work reported here. The scope of that broader study, as described in (Seeberg, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2017), (Seeberg &

Luo2012, 2018), (Seeberg, Luo, & Na, 2018) and some of the other following

research was a multi-year, multi-site research project into the intersection of gender and education on economic prospects, empowerment, social circumstances, and well-being among rural girls' education in Shaanxi province. Specifically, the broader study spanned 24 years and followed over 140 girls from the Anjinggou village cluster in western Shaanxi province, utilizing similar tools, frameworks, and methods as those in the present study. The Shaanxi participants, data, and interviews in this study include some of the same participants reported in prior publications related to the Chinese Rural Girls Education Project.

The purpose of interpretive qualitative studies is "to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). This philosophy is common to much qualitative research, applying to any investigation where the primary goal is to explore social reality by documenting the meanings and interpretations of human behavior. Interpretivists often study phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of (i.e., "interpret") phenomena using the terms that participants apply to their own lives, actions, and experiences.

This study makes inductive use of its data, taking a bottom-up approach to the formation of generalizations about the two settings in which interviews were conducted and from which participants were recruited. The data analysis process began with specific, one-off observations and then attempted to draw general conclusions—an approach that is best described as exploratory rather than as an attempt to affirm any narrowly stated hypothesis.

Importantly, all steps of that process, from study design to data collection, analysis, and interpretation, were conducted according to the principles of the

Education for Capabilities and Empowerment Framework (ECEF) (Seeberg, 2014). The ECEF is a structured approach for understanding how educational experiences contribute to the empowerment of marginalized young women. It provides criteria, areas of focus, and guidelines that were used to craft interview questions for the present study, with the aim of exploring the ECEF's target capabilities and functionings. Similarly, interview transcripts were coded using categories derived from the ECEF framework. Major code "clumps" (roughly, themes) included key capabilities such as enjoyment, confidence, aspiration, economic facility, social opportunity, and protective security. Sub-codes were developed to capture the nuances of each capability area, leading to a more nuanced understanding of how educational experiences impacted participants' empowerment—exactly the purpose for which the ECEF was developed (Seeberg, 2014).

One further aspect of the general study design was the iterative nature of each key step: interview question preparation, data analysis, and the interpretive process of deriving conclusions from those data. This iterative aspect of interpretive research is results from a style of analysis that is integrated with and occurs throughout the research process, involving deliberation and critical thinking as assumptions are updated and the patterns identified (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).Such iteration may help to mitigate challenges in analysis and coding that result from the subjective nature of interpretive research. For the researcher to arrive at a holistic and accurate picture of the themes being studied, they must consistently examine and attempt to account for their own perspective. The perspectives of interviewees and informants must be compared, and points of divergence between their views and those of the researcher must be noted—a process referred to as "triangulation" in the literature on qualitative methods. For the present study, the researcher's observations were

recorded in research journal, creating a running catalogue of the researcher's experiences that should enable the concepts underlying interviewees' reports to be identified consistently and with confidence.

Comparative Case Study

The present study's efforts are comparative in nature, relying on cross-case analysis to compare, contrast, and synthesize the experiences of two groups with respect to the same (or at least overlapping) issues (following Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The issues in question are described in Chapters I and II, and include empowerment, agency, and well-being among female TVET students, as conceptualized within Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach and operationalized in Seeberg's (2014) Empowerment and Capabilities in Education Framework. The cross-case comparison applies to the study's two groups of participants—Mongolian and Han girls. Each group was recruited and studied in a distinct location (i.e., two cities or similar size and similar degrees of remoteness from larger urban centers in Central China), and the two settings were chosen for their relevant linguistic, economic, and cultural dissimilarities within a broader shared (national) culture and political/legal environment (see Chapters I and II).

This comparative approach allows researchers to escape some of the interpretive risks that come from a context-bounded study environment. Rather than treating the study setting as a fixed or static background to the lives of participants, comparative case studies rely on semi-systematic qualitative analysis to highlight interesting or valuable aspects of each location. Such an approach "seeks to trace across individuals, groups, sites and time" as well as "constantly compares what is happening in one locale with what has happened in other places and historical moments (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017)." The present work is informed by Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) concept

of the "horizontal axis," an approach that involves comparing how similar processes unfold across parallel case studies. The researcher thus sought to "not only contrast one case with another, but also trace social actors, documents, or other influences across these cases" (p. 14).

Studying participants' experiences of TVET in two similar but identifiably distinct contexts not only legitimize comparisons drawn between the two groups of young women, but also enables the identification of future-oriented implications for further analysis that is needed—for instance, analysis dealing with social change that may be taking place, or exploration of policy implications for mid-Western China.

Pilot Study

Prior to the fieldwork conducted in the fall of 2018, a pilot study was carried out in May 2017 in Xilinhot, Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia. Xilinhot, located about 200 miles south of Eu-Qi, the current research site, shares similar cultural and social characteristics, making it valuable as the pilot research setting.

This pilot study laid essential groundwork for the current research by focusing on the educational experiences of Mongolian girls attending the local TVET school, Xilingol League Vocational School. A few key informants were interviewed, including principals of TVET school, high school teachers, and herders. The informant's knowledge and personal experience is crucial to understand the subject being researched, for example, during the pilot study in the summer of 2017, the research team conducted an interview at the hotel with an English teacher that we know through a local contact. The English teacher, who is a Mongolian herself, from the local Mongolian high school. She provided insights into the structure of Mongolian school settings, the demographics of students and cultural norms of local Mongolian community, which helps to me to analyze broader themes and ground my

research questions in the specific social/cultural context.

During the pilot study, the research team interviewed a group of vocational students from Xilingol League Vocational School, all in their second or third year of study across various disciplines. These students were introduced by Teacher Zhang, a key local informant. The interviews took place in a restaurant owned by the vocational school in Xilinhot, with each conversation lasting approximately 20 to 30 minutes. The students openly discussed their aspirations, challenges, and reflections on how vocational education plays a role in shaping their future careers.

Consequently, the pilot study was useful in shaping the research questions and refining the methodology for the current study.Through the pilot study, I achieved broader knowledge about the local education system, the research site, and the participant group, enabling me to contextualize my research questions and methods.

Research Settings

The present study took place in Western China, in locations outside the globalized and manufacturing-dependent regions on the country's Eastern coast. The study was carried out in two mid-sizes cities: Eu-Qi in East League, Inner Mongolia, and X-Sh city in Shaanxi (see Figure 1). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a midsize city is defined as a city with a population of less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000 (n.d.). These cities were selected due to ethnic demographics, culture, economy, and remote location; in particular, they were surrounded by extensive rural and semi-rural areas.

Figure 1

Research Sites
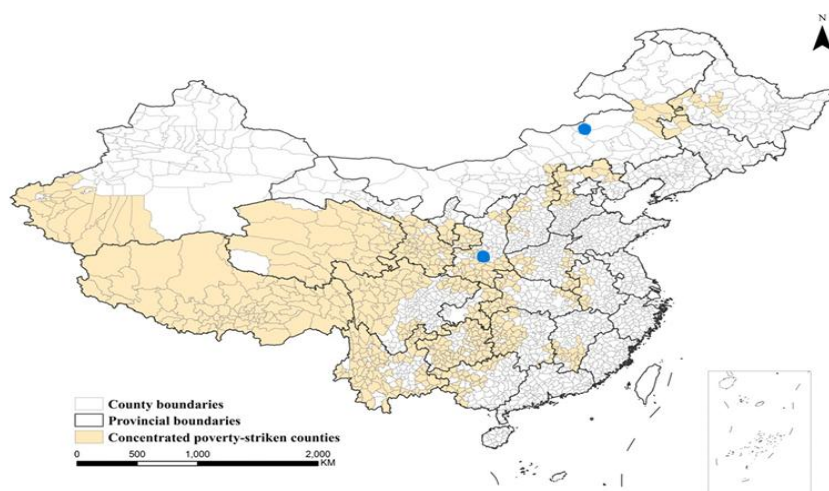
Eu-Qi in East League, Inner Mongolia

Inner Mongolia is a plateau that stretches across northern China. Eu-Qi is a mid-size city; its population totals just 100,610 according to the China's 2020 national census. The city is located in the Xilingol League (or Xilinguole Prefecture), in the central part of Inner Mongolia and immediately south of the nation of Mongolia, with which it shares a 527.5 km border. Eu-Qi is surrounded by the pasture lands that once sustained the region—and all local households—through the traditional herding of sheep and horses. Recently, however, these practices have waned in favor of the mining of Inner Mongolia's large deposits of coal and rare-earth minerals. The official languages in Inner Mongolia are Han Chinese and Mongolian, the latter of which is written in traditional Mongolian script.

X-Sh City, Shaanxi

The province of Shaanxi lies to the south of Inner Mongolia and has served as the eastern terminus of the Silk Road for thousands of years. It is administered by the

Prefecture along with six other counties, all of them designated as "poverty counties" at the national level up until 2020. Geographically, it is set in the rugged terrain of the Qinling mountains and surrounded by isolated rural communities, towns and villages where peasants grow subsistence crops on scarcely arable land. In recent years, the income of the average rural family in the region has improved with the aid of the central government's poverty alleviation project—resulting in the removal of their status as poverty counties in 2020.

TVET Schools in Eu-Qi and X-Sh City

The TVET schools in both Eu-Qi and X-Sh City have attracted large numbers of rural migrants from the villages on each city's periphery. These villages, or "gacha" (嘎查，"village" in Mongolian), are semi-rural communities with close ties to the pastoral lifestyles historically organized as clan-families in these parts of Inner Mongolia. They are also the primary source of population and workforce in each city. In turn, the cities function as centers of healthcare and education for nearby villagers and, thanks to their comparable levels of administrative and economic development, function as social hubs and interfaces with outside world. For many in the surrounding areas, Eu-Qi and X-Shi are the most accessible points of access to industrial jobs and to the amenities of urban living. Moreover, these two cities are regarded as "safe" or familiar to nearby villagers, thanks to their close proximity and cultural similarity. In particular, the linguistic environments of the two cities are easy for villagers to navigate, allowing access to economic and educational opportunities. In Eu-Qi, ethnic minority Mongolians encounter few language barriers when coming to the city from pastoral lands, as both Mongolian and Chinese are in common use. In X-Sh City, villagers and urban residents speak similar dialects.

Differences Between the Two Settings

There are several chief differences between the two cities selected as research sites for the present study. As part of the IMAR, Eu-Qi's economy relies primarily on mining coal and rare earth minerals. The mining industry in the region is characterized by significant coal resources, with identified reserves of 40.4 billion tons and prospective reserves of 60 billion tons, primarily distributed across eight major coal-bearing basins.

X-Sh City is both more diverse and less specifically reliant on natural resources. While both regions have significant coal reserves and energy production sectors, Shaanxi has made strides in developing other industries such as high-end manufacturing, chemicals, and emerging technologies as well as service industry. According to a 2023 government report presented at the second session of the 14th Shaanxi Provincial People's Congress, the added value of Shaanxi's manufacturing sector, strategic emerging industries, and service industry increased by 8.1%, 10.9%, and 5%, respectively, on a year-to-year basis (Gov.cn).

Second, the two cities are culturally divergent, with one predominantly Mongolian and the other a Han majority city. Third, China's central government allocates more financial aid to Eu-Qi in Xilingol League than it does to X-Sh, in an effort both to reduce potential tensions with ethnic-minority groups in the IMAR and to promote development of the borderland. As a result, Mongolian students living in the pastoral lands around Eu-Qi receive greater subsidies than their counterparts in X-Sh and additionally have the option of attending better-funded boarding schools starting at a young age. As an indicator of the difference, consider that total government expenditure on students in the Xilingol League was 8,857 RMB for primary school students and 9,700 RMB for junior high school students in 2022. By

contrast, in Shaanxi, government expenditure aimed only to meet the national baselines of 800 and 1,000 RMB for primary and junior high school students, respectively. This discrepancy was also noted during a field trip by an informant, who emphasized that the EU-Qi region in the Xilingol League benefits from better funding compared to other regions.

These differences are especially significant in light of the ways that enrollment in education affects the expectations young women face, and the opportunities available to them. Secondary school begins at a critical period in girls' lives, approximately coinciding with puberty and its attendant cultural and social obligations. In cultures where early marriage is common, puberty is the point at which young women become subject to the religious and cultural expectations attached to adulthood, and many are expected to get married shortly after. It is thus a critical age, one when girls' and young women's prospects of continuing higher education or pursuing other life and career options both come into view and, in some cases, disappear just as quickly (Muller, 2006, p. 355).

In the context of rural China, when compulsory schooling ends after grade 9, girls must make the choice to either pursue further education at an expensive senior secondary school, which can make them a burden on their families, or to accept work as an unskilled laborer in a nearby city—something most are able to do immediately, because the minimum working age is 16. Secondary school is thus doubly protective, serving both to potentially delay marriage, which may be forced, and to shield girls from hard labor and other forms of economic exploitation (Seeberg, 2014).

Participants

Participant Overview

The recruitment of participants for the present study was geographically restricted to the area around and in the two chosen cities. The number of participants

was determined following standard guidelines in qualitative research and accounting for several factors, including the nature of the research questions, the type of data being gathered, ongoing analysis efforts, and the resources available to support the study (Merriam, 2009, p. 80). The key concept in this determination process is "saturation," a state where continuing the sampling process and collecting data from additional participants is judged unlikely to further illuminate the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The authors describe this process as purposeful sampling, a recruitment system where, "the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus, redundancy is the primary criterion" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). Given my knowledge of the two sites, and the connections the Chinese Rural Girls Education Project team had with contacts in the two cities, I aimed for 10 participants in each location with the intention of achieving saturation.

In China, TVET schooling is available first as a parallel track to standard secondary education. These programs are labeled "TVET II" or 中专, and they provide high school-level curriculum with an strong emphasis on technical training. TVET III programs, or 大专, are continuations of this educational track offering higher education with a vocational focus at the post-secondary or college level, leading to a vocational diploma or an associate degree. All participants in the present study were either currently enrolled in or recent graduates from TVET II or TVET III programs. No distinction between these two levels of educational attainment was applied during the recruitment process.

Sampling Procedure

The foundation of purposeful sampling is that the researcher must first identify

what participant attributes are crucial to the study's investigative goals and then find people or sites meeting those criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The present study set sampling criteria that included age (participants needed to be young), gender (they must be women), and educational status: all participants were in their final two years of secondary TVET, were enrolled in tertiary TVET, or were recent graduates of either secondary or tertiary TVET programs. Together, these criteria selected for a candidate pool for whom education served a vital protective role against the possible foreclosure of opportunities represented by early marriage or labor exploitation, as described above. Additionally, women at these later stages of their TVET education would be old enough that some may have formulated career goals and embarked on the next stages of adult and professional life.

In Eu-Qi in East League, local women meeting the age and educational restrictions shared other features as well: they were young Mongolian women from herding families living in a remote pastoral, ethnic minority region of the IMAR. By contrast, participants recruited in X-Sh City, Shaanxi, were young ethnic majority Han women from a remote mountain village whose families were small farmers.

In both locations, suitable local residents were identified through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques. In X-Sh City, I began by selecting a group of young rural women who had been involved in the longitudinal study mentioned at the start of this chapter. I remained in contact with that study's local field agent, Mr. Pang, and with some of the former participants from the Chinese Rural Girls Education Project in the area. He knew the families of the former participants well and had remained in close contact with them. He was thus able to serve as a point of connection between the researcher and local women currently or recently enrolled in TVET programs. Ultimately the researcher was able to identify 10

local women who met the selection criteria and who expressed interest in participating in the study (Table 2).

For the research conducted in Eu-Qi in East League, IMAR, no such single point of contact was available, and snowball sampling was utilized instead. One of my family members had worked in construction in Eu-Qi for many years, and by contacting their acquaintances in the area, an initial set of several potential participants was identified. These then suggested other individuals who met the study criteria and were judged to be potentially interested in participation, and they in turn referred additional friends and colleagues, until a total of 10 local participants were recruited and interviewed (Table 3).

Critical demographic details of the two groups of participants are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively, including time of interview, occupation at time of interview, level of TVET schooling completed, and city of residence. Notably, 11 of the 20 participants had graduated from TVET III programs, another seven had graduated from TVET II programs, one from a TVET I program, and one was currently enrolled in TVET III.

Table 2

Demographic details of Mongolian participants recruited from Eu-Qi

Pseudonyms	Occupation/Major	City	Date Interviewed	Degree
Na	**Dental assistant/English**	**Eu-Qi, East League**	**2018**	**TVET III alumna**
Lianyun	**Housewife/Mongolian literature**	**Eu-Qi, East League**	**2018**	**TVET II alumna**
Wuli	**Owner of clothing store/English**	**Eu-Qi, East League**	**2018**	**TVET III alumna**
Suna	**Office clerk/business administration**	**Eu-Qi, East League**	**2018**	**TVET III alumna**
Wuna	**Office clerk/Mongolian literature**	**Eu-Qi, East League**	**2018**	**TVET III alumna**
Wuyun	**Owner of clothing store/English**	**Eu-Qi, East League**	**2018**	**TVET III alumna**
Lanhua	**Waitress/dancing**	**Eu-Qi, East League**	**2018**	**TVET III alumna**
Nabu	**Waitress/accounting**	**Eu-Qi, East League**	**2018**	**TVET III alumna**
Suri	**Civil servant/business administration**	**Eu-Qi, East League**	**2018**	**TVET III alumna**
Lige	**Owner of tailor store/dancing**	**Eu-Qi, East League**	**2018**	**TVET II alumna**

Table 3

Demographic details of Han participants recruited from X-Sh City

Pseudonyms	Occupation/Major	City	Date Interviewed	Degree
Pang Pengpeng	Kindergarten teacher/Pre-k Education	X-Sh City	2018	TVET II alumna
Pang Yanxing	Kindergarten teacher/Pre-k Education	X-Sh City	2018	TVET alumna

Pseudonyms	Occupation/Major	City	Date Interviewed	Degree
Pang Jiaojiao	Office clerk/computer	X-Sh City	2018	TVET III alumna
Qing Qian	Sales/Business and trade	X-Sh City	2018	TVET III alumna
Pang Xuxu	Unemployed/pre-k education	X-Sh City	2018	TVET II alumna
Yang Yuhu	Kindergarten teacher/Pre-k Education	X-Sh City	2018	TVET II alumna
Pang Li	Kindergarten teacher/Pre-k Education	X-Sh City	2018	TVET II alumna
Pang Yanmin	Student/computer	X-Sh City	2018	TVET II alumna
Dang Yang	Student/Nursing	X-Sh City	2018	TVET III
Wang Yunyun	Unemployment/Business and trade	X-Sh City	2018	TVET III alumna

Data Collection Procedure

Semi-structured interviews and in-person observations were the major methods that I used to collect data from the sample of participants. Further meta-data was gathered from informants on the same sites. The interviews with key informants about the school setting and educational environment provided essential knowledge to contextualize the interview questions.

Regarding the case study in X-Sh city, Shaanxi, my previous fieldwork observing Shaanxi participants provided critical background and contextual information that were invaluable during the interview process.

For the case study in IMAR, I made repeated visits from 2005 to 2019, observing the changes over the years. My father's longstanding business in the area gave me a unique perspective, as I was integrated into both the economic and social environments of the city and its surroundings. During these visits, I developed

relationships with local residents, several of whom became key informants, enhancing my understanding of the context.

Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted over the course of the study, each followed by additional contact with each participant to ask follow-up questions as needed for the purposes of clarification or elaboration. Interviews were held face-to-face and lasted 60–90 minutes per participant. This format allowed me to respond to the situation at hand, tailoring questions and adding further queries matched "to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). Each interview was recorded and later translated and transcribed prior to coding and analysis, with the translation and transcription shared by the primary researcher and several collaborators who had participated in the earlier study. The goal in analyzing each interview was to determine as closely as possible how each participant understood key aspects of the phenomena at issue (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Observations and Field Notes

Before, during, and after the interviews themselves, I also carried out detailed and persistent observations of participants and the schools they attended. These observations were documented in real time through field notes and photographs recorded in my Research Journal (cf. Hatch, 2002). (See the section below on Researcher Roles.) Throughout my data collection process in Eu-Qi, I adopted a deeply engaged and immersed role, which I believed to be essential for capturing the intricacies of participants' lives and the cultural nuances of their communities. The resulting records captured raw and unfiltered moments in various settings like homes, schools, and local businesses, were crucial in developing a comprehensive

understanding of the socio-economic and educational dynamics of the city and its surrounding villages and pasture areas. Whether it was observing the pastoral practices of families, the social dynamics of classrooms and offices, or the entrepreneurial spirit present in bustling local businesses, each observation contributed significantly to constructing a multidimensional portrayal of the participants' lives in the region.

This immersive and observant approach, as recommended by Hatch (2002), ensured that my records were not just superficial accounts but rich, in-depth narratives that reflected the real-life experiences and conditions of the community members with whom I spoke and interacted. By integrating these detailed observations from diverse environments, I was able to capture not only the cultural and educational aspects of my participants' lives but also the economic vitality and socioeconomic challenges present in the smaller and more rural communities surrounding each city.

As this data collection and observation process led me to the homes of the participants, and alongside them to their schools and workplaces, I saw firsthand how their lives were deeply intertwined with the rhythms of pastoral herding, especially evident in their summer activities in the mountains. In school settings, my exploration extended not only to classrooms but also to dormitories, libraries, and administrative offices, providing the opportunity for interactions that were vital in piecing together a comprehensive picture of the educational system and its intersection with local cultural practices.

Data Processing and Analysis

Data processing, annotation, and organization began even during the interview period, as I collated data that ranged from interview recordings, to photographs of the area and of academic and professional environments, field notes, and memos. This

process was systematic and slow, and involved "organizing and interrogating data in ways that allowed me to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories" (Hatch, 2002, p. 148). The analytical process was both recursive and iterative, with new interviews, insights, and observations frequently prompting me to revisit, reassess, and further annotate previously processed data. This experience matches the advice of Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), who suggest that qualitative data analysis should be integrated with and occur throughout the research process, involving deliberation and critical thinking (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Transcription and Translation

The second step in processing involved the raw interview recordings transcribing into text data so that they can be annotated and organized. I transcribed the recordings to Chinese transcripts and then translated to English. Transcription and translation were both fully manual, not employing any automated technologies. I handled all of the interview recordings from Eu-Qi and shared the transcription of X-Sh interviews with another researcher. Transcripts were stored in Microsoft Word and labeled by participant number.

Coding

The most systematic aspect of the data analysis procedure was the formal coding of the translated and transcribed semi-structured interviews. This process began with an open coding step, during which I went through the complete transcript for each interview cataloguing primary themes by attaching codes to text segments. The core codes predated the open coding step, having been defined by the ECEF framework in the research and interview questions prior to the analysis, while others were derived

from the text during the analysis process to better represent the information (Glaser &
Laudel, 2013).

Theory was an important source for constructing codes. The most substantial and
immediate theoretical contribution was made by Seeberg's (2014) empowerment
capabilities in education framework (ECEF), from which I drew an initial list of
primary themes, focused mainly on the constitutive and instrumental capabilities that
a person can achieve through education. The ECEF provided a set of guidelines as to
the themes that were expected to play a role in shaping participants' lives. More
directly, the ECEF also provided a list of ways in which education can, in principle,
serve as a mechanism of empowerment, increased agency, and improved well-being,
i.e., the potential ways in which participants' experiences might supply answers to the
study's research questions. To offer a single example, the ECEF breaks "instrumental
freedoms" down into a number of categories that include "political freedom" and
"economic facility" (see Chapter 2), and these were thus natural inclusions for the
first round of coding.

However, when predetermined categories are used, it is important that data that
do not fit are also coded or categorized outside the framework, thus allowing for
unexpected findings (Bennett, Barrett & Helmich, 2019). I was alert to the need for
novel categories as I processed the transcripts, carefully noting where the
conversations strayed outside the bounds of my pre-defined categories and
meticulously coding these new topics and ideas. For instance, one participant
discussed the generational gap between themselves and their parents, a subject that
extended beyond the original scope of the categories I had established. This approach
allowed me to remain open to novel insights and perspectives that emerged during the

research, enriching the overall depth and breadth of my findings—and remaining consistent with the study's chosen exploratory approach.

<div align="center">**Trustworthiness and Ethics**</div>

Data Triangulation

All research is fundamentally concerned with generating valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner, a principle underscored by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). In this study, I utilized triangulation of data sources and immersive personal engagement in data collection as principal strategies to enhance both the validity and reliability of the research. Patton (2015, p. 674) notes that "Triangulation, in whatever form, increases credibility and quality by countering the concern (or accusation) that a study's findings are simply an artifact of a single method, a single source, or a single investigator's blinders." In this context, the term refers to "comparing and cross-checking data collected through observation at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 245).

In practice, data triangulation was achieved during the current study by collecting and utilizing multiple sources of data. These sources included conducting interviews and follow-up conversations with participants, making observations, consulting with informants, and capturing data through photos and field notes. A second form of informational breadth took the form of selecting informants with diverse roles and perspectives. For instance, I interviewed both the local field agent for the (prior) longitudinal study and the principals of TVET schools to gather data from varied viewpoints and to cross-check what I had been told in participant interviews. Employing multiple sources, despite having a relatively small number of participants and research sites, effectively countered the potential overreliance on a single method or the bias of a single researcher.

A final vital element of triangulation was the involvement of research collaborators. Two other researchers accompanied me on my fieldwork in X-Sh and Eu-Qi, and assisted in the data collection process (i.e., they were present for interviews). Both other researchers also provided their own notes and records of the trips, including observations, photographs, impressions of participants' words and behavior, and more. These additional records allowed for comparison, confirmation, and more rigorous analysis.

Informed Consent

The process of obtaining informed consent was integral to the ethical conduct of the present study. Informed consent forms were provided to participants prior to conducting interviews. These forms clearly outlined the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and how the data would be used, ensuring that participants were fully informed before agreeing to provide data. I also emphasized to the participants that they had the right to withdraw from the project at any time if they felt uncomfortable, or for any reason. In an effort to protect the identities of the participants, I used pseudonyms for all 20 women, adhering to ethical standards of confidentiality and respect for participant privacy.

This approach to data collection and participant engagement was guided by ethical considerations and aimed at enriching the study with robust and credible data, enhancing the overall quality and reliability of the research findings.

Researcher Roles and Bracketing

In this study, following standard practice for many forms of qualitative research, I served as the primary instrument for data collection as well as the principal data analyst. Recognizing the potential impact of my own biases and preconceptions on the research, I was acutely aware of how my personal perspective could function as an

interpretive lens influencing the study's conduct and conclusions, a notion supported by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Unlike most quantitative research methods, qualitative research openly acknowledges the influence of a researcher's values and expectations on the study's outcomes. Consequently, it was essential for me to introspectively examine relevant aspects of my own views and beliefs, including any biases, assumptions, expectations, and experiences that could have affected my ability to conduct unbiased research, as Greenbank (2003) suggests.

    With this goal in mind, throughout the data collection and analysis phases, I actively engaged in bracketing—a process of acknowledging and setting aside personal biases and assumptions to allow a researcher to understand the data more objectively. This practice of bracketing was recorded in memos in my research journal frequently and in detail. More importantly, it was aided substantially by the ability to compare impressions, notes, and observations with the other two researchers who accompanied me on fieldwork trips. The memos I wrote, guided by Glaser's (1998, as cited in Tufford and Newman, 2010) conception of the practice, were not merely a record-keeping exercise but a critical process that led to significant insights about my role as a researcher and as a participant in the process of knowledge creation. The reflections involved acknowledging and bringing to the forefront my preconceptions and presuppositions, rather than trying to suppress them in pursuit of objectivity. After data collection, I conducted a debriefing process, which included conversations and discussions with other researchers on my team. I took notes during the interviews to capture my thoughts and reflections in real time. The research team was divided into two groups to conduct the interviews, and after each day's work, we exchanged impressions and opinions. This exchange helped me reflect on my own biases and

allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the data. Through these reflections, I aimed to minimize personal bias.

A few key insights that emerged from the bracketing process are set down here, taking the form of a comparison between my own perspective and experiences and those of the participants I interviewed. First, I am a native speaker of Chinese, and a member of an ethnic minority born and reared in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China. However, my family does not speak Mongolian, and I have no experience studying at a vocational school. This background creates the potential for bias that may derive from my having studied with Mongolian classmates and my previous perceptions of Mongolians in our region.

Crucially, the school system in the IMAR is divided into a Mongolian track and a Han track. As a student in the latter environment, I often heard peers discussing perceived differences between Mongolian and Han residents of our community. During secondary school, I heard my Han classmates describing Mongolian students with certain pejorative terms related to their pastoral way of life, such as being barbaric, too direct and rude, or physically stronger than Han students. Outside the classroom, I often heard my parents' Han acquaintances describing Mongolian adults with reference to negative stereotypes, such as being bad at saving money or obsessed with drinking. The pervasiveness and unremitting negativity of these portrayals influenced me as a child and informed my assumptions about and initial predisposition toward the young women I studied. For instance, it was vital to strongly reject the easy assumption that Mongolian girls do not value city life and education as much as their Han counterparts might do.

This points toward a second major difference between myself and the study participants at both sites. I was raised in a middle-class urban environment and did not

experience the remoteness of rural life or its attendant poverty. My childhood was characterized by stable access to essential amenities such as libraries, retail locations, and healthcare facilities. Living in an urban setting enabled me to have more social contact and thus thereby to build a wider social network. It was easier for me to access technology and stay informed about current events. People in villages and on the pastural land have much reduced access to the conveniences of transportation, essential facilities (e.g., running water, electricity), and technology (e.g., TV, computers). People in remote environments are also often restricted in forming wider and more numerous social connections, with their daily contact limited to those who live nearby.

A third vital consideration with respect to bias and bracketing was my academic history, specifically regarding the case study in X-Sh City, Shaanxi. As mentioned above, I was previously involved in a long-term study of Shaanxi girls' education, a project that included fieldwork observing Shaanxi participants. I was thus acquainted with my Shaanxi participants' home village and its social arrangements, as well as many of their life stories, prior to the beginning of the present study. Thus, I may have formed assumptions and expectations about their experiences of education, their goals, their achievements, or other subjects relevant to this investigation. Reciprocally, participants from X-Sh were aware of my background as a researcher, and some knew me personally prior to the interviews.

A final consideration deriving from my past experiences relates to social pressures on participants' ability to express themselves freely. I assume that due to the prevailing Confucian views and social norms, girls in both sites—but especially Han girls in X-Sh, where traditional Confucian ideals are more prevalent—may not feel able to speak without inhibition about such topics as their families or lives at home.

We have previously observed in the field study that the impact of traditional views privileging males in their tight-knit kinship networks. My concern for the present study was that, as rural girls born and raised in a poor, remote village, the participants may carry internalized and oppressive ideas about "being a good woman."

I am conscious that my past experiences may keep me from being objective and nonjudgmental; however, I have studied the impact of biases and ways to confront them. While collecting and analyzing data I reflected on inherent and tacit biases and made a concerted effort to account for such assumptions as I iteratively reviewed annotations, notes, and codes.

IRB Approval Statement

The present study is part of Phase 7 of a longitudinal study of village girls' schooling and empowerment. IRB approval for the entire study was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Kent State University in 2019.

Summary

This chapter describes the way the present study sought to explore how TVET has affected the lives of girls and young women living in two Mid-size Chinese cities. The methods used were guided by the ECEF (Chapter 2), which helped to define the concepts to be explored and the types of life changes that were at issue. The participants were all current or recent TVET students, all of them having at least begun their secondary TVET studies, and they were recruited through a convenience sampling method. Data were collected in the form of photographs, field notes, and—most significantly—semi-structured interviews conducted by the primary researcher in the presence of two other scholars, with interview recordings transcribed and recorded by hand and subjected to a rigorous coding process grounded in ECEF concepts and principles. The analysis process was enriched and reinforced by rigorous

triangulation, not just between multiple time-points, types of data, and analytical

procedures, but also between the three researchers' divergent perspectives.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Given that the purpose of this study was to explore the empowering experiences of the participants in and through TVET schooling at two research sites, the findings highlight the voices of these young women. The two sites are located in culturally distinct areas of the most materially underdeveloped regions of Western China and serve as comparative cases. The project's intent was to expand the cross-cultural literature on capabilities and empowerment for marginalized girls. The findings are presented here organized to answer Research Questions1, 2, and 3. The 2014 ECEF analytical framework serves as the underlying structure of the themes derived from coding. Participants' interviews, observations, and informant interviews were incorporated into each theme.

The sections of this chapter address how TVET impacts the development of capabilities for both Mongolian and Han girls, examining the extent to which it either enhances or constrains their personal and educational growth (Research Question One).

Additionally, the chapter presents how these girls exercise agency through their TVET experiences and how this agency, in turn, influences their well-being (Research Question Two). Finally, the chapter presents the investigation of differing themes of well-being that hold varying significance for Mongolian minority girls and Han majority girls (Research Question Three). For clarity, I report findings for each ethnic group separately.

For Research Question One, I present the contributions followed by constraints of TVET on Mongolian and Han girls' capability development. And within those categories, I separate capabilities into their instrumental and constitutive

dimensions. Clearly, both capability dimensions interact to produce functionings and achievements; however, this further division provides a clear roadmap that guides the reader through the analyses.

Research Question One: Mongolian Girls' Capability Development

The Research Question One first asked about the Mongolian girls' capability development. (Research Question One consists of two parts: the first part examines capability development among Mongolian girls, while the second part investigates capability development among Han girls, which report later.)

TVET Contributions for Mongolian Girls

The following findings illustrate how TVET schooling substantially enhances the capabilities development of participants. Guided by ECEF, I found there are seven key capabilities.

Instrumental Capabilities

Economic Empowerment. In the ECEF framework, economic facility represents the ability to participate in economic activities such as starting businesses, securing jobs, and managing resources. The examples from the interviews, particularly those of Lige, Wuna, and Na, show how TVET education has empowered these girls to enter the urban economy.

Observation and informants made clear that the language transition is essential for these Mongolian girls to engage in the urban economy. Speaking Chinese is essential for Mongolian girls in the urban economy, where it is the primary language of commerce. Fluency helps them secure employment, communicate effectively with colleagues and clients, and navigate the diverse opportunities the urban job market offers. The curriculum in TVET schools was taught primarily in Chinese, providing an environment where students could immerse themselves in the language. Many

Mongolian participants mentioned that being able to speak Chinese fluently helped them find employment and enabled them to communicate effectively with their colleagues and clients after graduation.

Lige is one example. She runs a traditional Mongolian clothing and tailor store. Lige said, I started to learn Chinese in middle school. Speaking Chinese is very important for me to run this store because I need to talk to Han people when I purchase materials from factories in the southern part of China.

Wuna said, Speaking Chinese is very important so we can communicate with more people. We started learning Chinese in elementary school. The Hanzi [Chinese characters] we learned in school help me in business now and make my life easier. Understanding Chinese and Mongolian has been essential in navigating the job market, especially in communicating with clients and colleagues.

For Na, who was working as a dental assistant when I interviewed her, the English she learned in school has been useful in multiple ways. She continued "Although my work isn't related to my English studies, I've also done tutoring on the side. I taught for about three years as a kindergarten teacher before moving to this role."

This theme underscores how the development of economic facilities through TVET programs and language acquisition equips girls to access decent work and entrepreneurial opportunities, thus contributing to their economic independence. This capability is important in the ECEF because it contributes to instrumental freedom, enabling these girls to navigate diverse economic opportunities, achieve financial autonomy, and improve their overall well-being through meaningful economic participation.

Confidence In Learning Through the Ability to Reason and Acquire

Knowledge. TVET education fosters the development of confidence in learning, equipping girls with cognitive tools to reason through challenges and acquiring knowledge effectively. This capability is important in the ECEF because it contributes to constitutive freedom and instrumental freedom, directly improving girls' well-being.

Observations of participants' structured business practices illustrate the cognitive and psychological control fostered by TVET. While Lige did not explicitly attribute her entrepreneurial success to vocational education, her efforts to formalize her business and engage with suppliers from economically advanced southern regions suggest that her training provided crucial tools. These include communication skills, literacy for handling business documents and contracts, and the confidence to learn and adapt—factors contributing significantly to her entrepreneurial achievements.

Similarly, Wuyun and Wuna have successfully operated clothing stores, showcasing their ability to apply cognitive skills in real-world settings. Wuyun highlighted how the English she learned in school bolstered her confidence in international business dealings, she said, I learned English in TVET, which gives me confidence in doing business in Outer Mongolia. I go to Outer Mongolia to import clothing to IMAR, and the store I go to has signs in English. It's helpful to have the signs in English; otherwise, I wouldn't understand them. You know, we use different Mongolian scripts—ours is primarily used for cultural and educational purposes here in Inner Mongolia, while in Mongolia, they mostly use the Cyrillic alphabet for everyday matters. So, knowing English definitely helps and made me more confident in business.

Through TVET, I observed that the acquisition of practical skills—ranging from business planning to effective communication—reflects their enhanced cognitive

abilities. TVET helped them gain more knowledge and understanding than previous generations. Lige, for example, reflected on the impact of her education, stating, "We see things differently from our parents. Because of schooling, our horizons have been expanded, and we know more than the earlier generation."

TVET has significantly enhanced cognitive control among Mongolian girls by equipping them with practical skills in communication, business planning, and literacy. It has expanded their horizons, enabling them to navigate complex environments with greater confidence and adaptability, marking a shift from the limitations faced by previous generations.

Socializing And Building Relationships. TVET provides girls with social opportunities to build important social relationships with peers and educators. This capability contributes to both constitutive and instrumental freedom, enabling girls to build social capital, improve communication skills, find emotional support, and enhance their overall social well-being.

In EU-Qi, pastoral life is marked by a strong sense of isolation, with social contacts being quite limited, especially on a daily basis. Mongolian daily life, as I observed, tends to be relatively isolated; however, there are notable occasions when socialization occurs, particularly during annual and seasonal events that are both religious and sports related.

Compared to traditional socializing practices, TVET provides different social opportunities for these individuals, particularly as students from different regions come together, especially at the tertiary level. This setting introduces new forms of interaction that extend beyond the customary events tied to pastoral life.

Wuyun owned a traditional Mongolian clothing store and had attended TVET college in Hohhot (the capital city of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region). She

shared that, "When I was studying in Hohhot, I made friends in the school dormitory and we would go shopping together, which was quite enjoyable." Although she "didn't form deep connections," she said that she still "learned a lot about how to navigate social situations, which was a new experience for me." Teachers also provided important social connections, and "paid attention to our personal development and ensured we were doing well both in studies and socially."

Wuyun continued, I had a positive relationship with my teachers. They genuinely cared about us and were supportive. They wanted us to do well, not just academically, but also in life, and that made a big difference in how I approached my studies.

However, Lianhua and Suri's experiences of making friends and socializing at school revealed the challenges they faced in navigating the unfamiliar environment of a larger city.

Lianhua talked about the importance of friendship to her TVET experience, saying, "When I first entered the TVET school, I didn't know a lot of people. At first, I had a tough time getting around with other people I met, but after a while, I started to make friends." As one example, Lianhua's transition from a rural background to an urban educational setting initially posed social challenges, as reflected in her admission that she had few friends at first. However, her narrative revealed a journey of adaptation and social growth. Speaking of one friend, she said,

I made a friend from Ha'erbin, a nearby metropolitan city, who was very direct. She has a straightforward personality, but she's very kind to me. I really like her character—it's quite different from what I'm used to in the countryside. However, it's refreshing and helps me see things from a new perspective.

As a researcher, I observed that people from more urbanized areas tend to be more communicative and open compared to those from rural regions, reflecting the

differences in social interaction between urban and rural environments.

Therefore, TVET plays a crucial role in promoting the social opportunity capability by offering Mongolian girls significantly broader socialization opportunities than they would typically encounter in their traditional village settings.

Constitutive Capabilities

Enjoyment of Learning. Within the ECEF, Enjoyment of Learning and Playfulness is a constitutive freedom that is integral to capability development. By fostering a positive, engaging, and fulfilling educational experience, TVET enables them to achieve intrinsic motivation and engagement in learning, which enhances their personal well-being (Seeberg, 2014). In this study, many participants expressed that they enjoyed learning at school.

Lianhua loved dancing, which she majored at the tertiary-level vocational college. Reflecting on her time at the college, she emphasized the positive and engaging learning environment that made her feel motivated and supported. She said,

What I loved most about college life was dancing. I spent my weekends in the school dance studio because I struggled to master the moves at first. The time I spent there with my classmates was the best part of my life in school. I loved the atmosphere, where everyone was so passionate about dancing.

Many of the other girls I interviewed shared similar feelings. Suri "really enjoyed [her] time in college," while Wuyun "really enjoyed going to school, especially physical education. Na, meanwhile, said, "I love learning new things and expanding my understanding of the world. School has allowed me to gain knowledge and broaden my perspective."

Forthese Mongolian girls, the joy and satisfaction gained through their TVET education fostered a lasting commitment to learning and significantly enhanced their

personal well-being, highlighting the importance of intrinsic value of education in creating a meaningful and fulfilling educational experience.

Accessing Emotional or Institutional Support. Access to necessary resources is essential for girls to fully benefit from education and continue their schooling despite external challenges. This capability is important in the ECEF because it contributes to both constitutive and instrumental freedoms, improving well-being by enabling them to fully participate in educational opportunities

Many of these girls received support from their families, who understood the importance of education and were willing to invest in their children's schooling. In the narrative of Lianhua, a notable generational shift in the value placed on education is evident. Her parents, particularly her father who only completed middle school, exhibit a strong commitment to her educational pursuits. Lianhua said, "My parents are very supportive of my education; they see it as a chance I have, which they never got. My father's education ended in middle school, and they want more for me."

Many participants mentioned receiving government stipends help ease the financial burden of attending TVET school. For instance, Suri noted, "Rural students can get a stipend of 1,000 yuan per semester in TVET school, and that money helps." Similarly, Na shared that she received a stipend in college, which she used to buy essential items like clothes.

TVET fosters the capability development of these Mongolian girls by creating a venue where resources, such as family support and government stipends, are efficiently utilized.

Gender Identity Development. The functionings these Mongolian girls achieved through TVET encompass the development of a gender identity that actively challenges and reshapes traditional, restrictive gender roles—such as early marriage,

assuming domestic responsibilities, and a preference for sons over daughters. Within the ECEF framework, this is classified as constitutive freedom.

In fact, for most of the Mongolian women, that son preference was either absent or even reversed. When asked about whether she wanted to have a boy or a girl in her future family, Na said that it didn't matter to her, and that both boys and girls are similarly smart. Suri said,

I want three children in the future, and I like girls. I want them to have the freedom to do things they like to do. I want them to go to school … I hope my daughter can go to school and go to other cities.

Lige, who has a two-year old daughter, said she wants one more daughter in the future. She likes daughters, she said, and thinks girls are smarter than boys.

Other aspects of traditional gender roles are not challenged but are more essential to maintaining gender inequality in the community. For example, when asked about who has the right to inherit the land, nine out of 10 respondents said that boys have priority to inherit land and property. Na explained that, "Of course, my parents will let my brother inherit our ranch/land. My brother will be the one to support my parents when they get old. … Daughters marry out to other families." Suri said, "Of course, the sons will inherit the land because he needs to support parents." Lianhua finished the thought, stating that, "[Only] if there's no son, then girls inherit the land."

Participants were also asked about their views on marriage, and many of them implied that their TVET attendance delayed the age at which they got married (or would have gotten married). For instance, Na said, "Before, people used to get married at a younger age, but now it is becoming more common for women to marry at later ages, around 24, 25, or 26 years old." Wuyun's story was a perfect example of Na's point, she said,

I married when I was 23, which is a bit later compared to what some of my peers experienced. In my circle of friends, most people were getting married after they turned 25. Family expectations around marriage are not as pressing as they used to be, and we have more freedom in deciding when to settle down.

Another participant, Suna, got married at age 25, and specifically mentioned feeling free to make her own choices about marriage. She said,

While some of my friends were already married earlier, I didn't feel pressured to rush into it. My parents didn't force me into an arranged marriage, so I had the freedom to choose my own partner and the right time to marry.

As Nabu said, "The expectations around early marriage are still present in rural areas." For her, though, "Waiting allowed me to pursue my education and career a bit longer before settling down. In my hometown, it was common to see people get married at a young age, but I waited until I was 24."

Wuna also suggested that schooling might have an impact on delaying marriage, although it was not explicitly stated. She mentioned that, "many [educated women] get married in their thirties" and that "no one really rushes you to get married," which indicates a relaxed attitude towards the timing of marriage. Additionally, she notes, "Recently, it has been observed that people who attend college or higher-level schooling prefer to find jobs in the city." These points together suggest that pursuing education might be a factor in delaying marriage in her community.

Participants expressed more egalitarian views on gender, valuing daughters equally or more. TVET provided these Mongolian girls with greater autonomy, enabling them to pursue education and careers before settling down, though traditional inheritance practices remain unchanged.

Aspirations. Aspirations are integral to the ECEF framework's focus on

enhancing people's freedoms and capabilities—their actual and potential abilities to live lives they have reason to value (Seeberg, 2014). The Mongolian girls demonstrated their aspiration by expressing desire for continuous personal and professional development beyond the immediate skills provided by TVET.

Lianhua, who majored in dance during her college education, was deeply committed to further refining her skills. Her aspirations extended beyond opening a dance studio to providing high-quality instruction that reflected her continuous learning. To achieve this, she planned to undergo further training in Hohhot, a major urban center in Inner Mongolia. She said, "I will also get some training in dancing in Hohhot. I heard there are some very good programs and good dancing teachers there. I want to improve my dancing." Lianhua's experience in TVET set the groundwork for her to explore advanced learning in dance.

Although Lige was focused on her tailoring business in the short-term, she recognized that advanced learning is key to staying competitive and innovative. Her ambition to blend modern aesthetics with traditional Mongolian attire motivated her to seek further education in fashion design, which would allow her to elevate her craft. She expressed her future plans by saying: "In the future, I plan to study how to blend traditional Mongolian attire with modern aesthetics and trends."

Through TVET, these Mongolian girls were able to aspire to pursue higher learning as well as gain confidence, skills, and experiences needed to pursue more complex and specialized education.

Constraints

TVET constraints for Mongolian girls. Within the ECEF, the challenges faced by Mongolian girls can be understood through their impact on capabilities. My interviews with these girls revealed negative themes alongside the positive ones

discussed earlier. Three primary themes emerged: the social stigma associated with vocational education, structural barriers due to limited economic opportunities in Eu-Qi, and the lack of social connections in urban areas.

Within the ECEF, Social Stigma Toward TVET affects Constitutive Freedoms by undermining confidence and limiting aspirations, which are crucial for well-being and personal development.

Structural barriers impact instrumental freedoms by restricting economic participation and access to decent work, essential for doing and acting in the world.

Social connection barriers hinder both instrumental and constitutive freedoms, affecting social opportunities and psychological well-being. My interviews with Mongolian girls brought up negative themes alongside the positive ones discussed in the previous section. Three primary themes emerge: the social stigma associated with vocational education, structural barriers due to limited economic opportunities in Eu-Qi, and lack of social connections in cities.

These constraints are influenced by the unique social and economic conditions in Eu-Qi, East League, one of the most underdeveloped regions of Western China, as well as the difficulties in building social networks outside their pastoral communities.

Social stigma toward TVET. One constraint-related theme that arose in the interviews was the social stigma associated with TVET schools. Many Mongolian participants held the perception that vocational education is not as highly valued as university education. It appeared that would potentially restrict the opportunities available to Mongolian girls and discourage them from pursuing certain career paths. It may also cause them to feel insecure about their abilities and limit their aspirations for the future. Lianyun shared, "Nowadays, there aren't many people attending vocational schools, almost everyone is graduating from university."

The participants were vocal about their own views of the social stigma, which they see as a widespread trend. For instance, Wuyun said, "It feels like those who go to university have more options. I chose TVET because it was more practical for me, but sometimes it feels like people think I didn't do well enough to go to a real university." Similarly, Lige observed, "Vocational high school seems like a last resort, something you choose if you're not interested in continuing your education. People see it as a quicker path, but not necessarily a better one. Most students nowadays graduate from university."

As a result, the social stigma toward TVET may lead to the internalization of this negative perception, which can undermine students' confidence, limit their aspirations, and ultimately constrain their capabilities development. The social stigma toward TVET affects constitutive freedoms by undermining confidence and limiting aspirations.

Structural Barriers Faced by Mongolian Girls. Based on my observations during several visits to the research site from 2015 to 2018, Mongolian girls face significant structural barriers due to limited job opportunities in Eu-Qi. The local economy is only moderately developed and remains heavily reliant on herding, mining, and the processing of natural resources. There are few opportunities in business, manufacturing, and service sectors that actively hire people. Over the years, I have not witnessed any substantial economic growth that could absorb the skills of TVET graduates. This scarcity of opportunities constrains Mongolian girls who have completed TVET schooling.

Moreover, the TVET programs do not align with the existing limited job opportunities, which further constrains these girls' capabilities development. I did not observe any partnerships or agreements between TVET schools and local industries,

which shows a disconnect between education and employment. Suri described the overall situation: "Those who attended vocational high school tend to work here in the pastoral area or the county, without advancing further. They find fewer opportunities compared to those who studied in larger cities or attended academic high schools." For instance, Lianhua studied dancing at a TVET school and, despite her passion, was unable to find a desirable job in her field. Instead, she works as a waitress in her uncle's chain restaurant. Another example is Suri herself, who studied accounting in a Mongolian-language vocational school in Hohhot. She required an accounting certificate to secure a job but struggled to pass the state license exam because it was only offered in Chinese.

For participants like Suri and Lianhua, TVET helped them acquire valuable skills and knowledge, but they were not always able to put those skills from their majors into practice in an economically empowering way due to the lack of opportunities that match their specialization and qualifications. The limited economic opportunities available to graduates—typically confined to civil service, herding, or small businesses—restrict the prospects for Mongolian girls within narrow options. For Mongolian girls, TVET is disconnected from even the limited local employment opportunities and mirrors the literature's critique that vocational training often fails to align with desirable work opportunities, rendering it less effective (Hansen & Woronov, 2013). Structural barriers impact Instrumental Freedoms by restricting economic participation and access to decent work.

Social Connection. Lacking social connections in urban areas served as a significant barrier for Mongolian girls in TVET programs. For some Mongolian girls, the lack of social networks in urban areas like Hohhot hindered their ability to secure jobs and feel a sense of belonging. For instance, Wuyun struggled significantly due to

the absence of social connections in the city. She grew up in a remote pastoral land and found it difficult to study in a large city like Hohhot. "I didn't find a job there because I don't know anyone over there. But back here in Eu-Qi, my relative helped me get the job," she explained. After graduation, she missed the social connection of her home community, which shows how the lack of networks in urban settings can be a substantial barrier. Social connection barriers constrain both Instrumental and Constitutive Freedoms by affecting social opportunities and psychological well-being.

Research Question One Summary, TVET and Mongolian Girls

Many participants in TVET schools expressed their enjoyment of learning and an appreciation of the social opportunities the school provided. In their opinion, TVET offered valuable skills, knowledge, and experiences, facilitating their transition from pastoral living to urban life. Because the curriculum was primarily taught in Chinese, TVET programs provided an immersive language environment that was critical for future employment and communication in more diverse surroundings. Even limited English language proficiency was beneficial, as it helped them navigate business and trade beyond China. Such experiences, enhanced by meaningful social interactions with peers and teachers, helped many participants develop self-confidence, communication skills, and social capabilities, leaving them substantially more able to realize their personal and professional goals.

Mongolian girls generally felt supported emotionally and financially by their family members and benefited from special government stipends for ethnic minority students. They knew they were expanding their horizons and encountering opportunities beyond what was available to their parents' generation. One important shift involved changing perspectives on gender roles, as many study participants expressed less emphasis on prioritizing sons when discussing their plans for future

families. Additionally, some participants had developed aspirations to become small business owners, further highlighting their desire to pursue paths that differ from traditional roles expected of them.

With respect to constraints and barriers, the study identified participants' concerns about the social stigma associated with TVET—especially compared to traditional university-level education. Many had internalized this stigma, which manifested in feelings of inadequacy, with participants expressing lower confidence in their own educational futures. Most participants believed that academic tertiary level graduates had access to more opportunities than those graduating from TVET schools. This internalized stigma can limit their career aspirations and job prospects, reinforcing cycle where vocational credentials are seen as inferior and less capable of leading to stable and prestigious employment—a pattern that aligns with Ling (2013)'s findings.

Mongolian girls attending TVET programs faced significant structural barriers, largely due to the limited local job opportunities in sectors such as business, manufacturing, and services. The local economy in Eu-Qi remains underdeveloped and is primarily reliant on herding, mining, and natural resource processing, restricting graduates' career paths. The disconnect between TVET education and the local employment environment is a critical issue, as there are no formal partnerships between schools and local industries. As a result, even though participants acquire valuable skills, they struggle to find jobs that align with their qualifications, limiting the economic empowerment that TVET is intended to provide. This mismatch between education and employment opportunities constrains the potential benefits of TVET for these girls.

The lack of social connections in urban areas constraints Mongolian girls'

capabilities. Without established social networks in cities like Hohhot, girls like Wuyun faced challenges in finding employment.

<center>**Han Girls' Capability Development**</center>

This section on Research Question One shifts the focus to Han girls in X-Sh, presenting a similarly structured analysis on themes relating to TVET as experienced by ethnic majority Han girls. The initial question list for interviews was the same for both groups of participants, and the focus remained on empowerment and capability development.

TVET Contributions for Han Girls

This section illustrates how TVET schooling substantially enhances the development of capabilities of participants. Guided by ECEF, I found there are seven key capabilities.

Instrumental Capabilities

Economic Empowerment. The ECEF uses the term Economic Facility to describe a capability which will be rephrased as Economic Empowerment in this dissertation. It emerged as a key theme in the interviews, as participants described how TVET programs provided them with the skills necessary to enter the workforce and achieve financial independence.

Pang Pengpeng emphasized the value of acquiring these skills, stating, "It was much better for me to have learned white-collar skills than if I had had to work as a non-skilled laborer." She further highlighted the opportunities for continued education offered through TVET, adding,

Our school offers the opportunity to enroll in college... The teacher says that if our age allows, we should enroll in vocational college because we will have one more certificate. When we look for a job in the future, we will have more chances... you

know, having more qualifications is always better for future employment, and having another degree is never a bad thing. I'm preparing to enroll.

These insights reflect the role of TVET in enhancing participants' economic capabilities by providing them with both practical skills and pathways to further qualifications. This aligns with the economic facility capability in the ECEF, which emphasizes the importance of education in empowering individuals to engage in meaningful economic activities and achieve financial autonomy.

Confidence In Learning Through the Ability To Reason And Acquire Knowledge. Within the ECEF framework, this functioning enhances both constitutive freedoms, and instrumental freedom, by building confidence and enabling them to actively pursue personal goals and translate their skills into tangible life improvements.

Pang Jiaojiao reflected on how her education shaped her cognitive abilities at work, stating, "At work, I feel I understand and learn fast; I normally don't need other people to repeat things twice, and I feel like that has to do with my schooling." She also emphasized the importance of maintaining a growth mindset, sharing, "I don't think people from rural areas have less opportunities than those from the city. If I work hard and keep learning, I can seize the opportunity." Qing Qian said that she feels confident in her ability to make her own decisions on jobs and marriage, and she is willing to speak up for herself if her parents do not agree with her.

Through their engagement in classroom activities, learning how to read and write, using technology and computers, and collaborating with others in TVET, these girls demonstrated the development of cognitive and psychological control and confidence that contribute to their informed decision making.

Socializing And Building Relationships. One significant theme that emerged

among the Han participants was the development of socialization and peer relationships. This capability is critical within the ECEF framework as it enhances instrumental freedom by equipping Han girls with essential communication skills. As they develop confidence and social awareness, they learn how to express themselves more effectively.

Compared to pastoral life for Mongolian participants, Han girls' village life in the mountains seems even more isolated. Due to steep terrain and poor road conditions, connections between villages are very limited, with daily life relying heavily on walking along mountain paths. Geographical isolation confines the villagers' social circles mostly to family and friends within the same village. Furthermore, the lack of convenient transportation means that outsiders rarely visit these mountainous areas. Living in isolated mountain villages makes it difficult for these Han girls to develop strong communication skills, as their interactions are largely limited to familiar faces within their small communities. Attending TVET in urban areas provides them with valuable opportunities to improve these skills. In a more diverse and socially dynamic environment, they are able to engage with peers from different backgrounds, participate in group activities, and learn to communicate more effectively.

For example, Pang Jiaojiao explained: "Before attending TVET, I always felt inferior to others and didn't like to talk to my peers. But in TVET, I started to become more open and made friends." Pang Li said that she learned useful things in TVET, including both how to communicate with people and important computer skills, which she specifically noted were essential for her current job.

Wang Yunyun reinforced this impression, explaining,

By observing and participating in classroom discussions and other social interactions, I learned how to communicate politely and effectively. I used to offend

people sometimes, but now I know how to express myself in a way that is respectful and considerate of others.

Through TVET, these Han girls gained valuable social opportunities by interacting with peers and teachers, contributing to the development of key capabilities such as confidence and essential social skills needed to navigate broader social settings.

Constitutive Capabilities

Enjoyment of Learning. As previously noted, within the ECEF framework, the enjoyment of learning and playfulness is a fundamental freedom essential to capability development. Similar to Mongolian participants, many Han girls in TVET programs emphasized how the positive, supportive, and engaging school atmosphere fostered by TVET contributes to social opportunities and enjoyment of learning.

Wang Yun said: "I think the atmosphere in my school is very positive and also my dormitory." Pang Jiaojiao also said that she enjoyed the atmosphere in school, which was very friendly, and that, "students helped each other, and teachers were nice to us." Qing Qian said that the time she spent at school was "so happy, and I didn't have lots of stuff to worry about." She also shared,

After my second year in college, I would sometimes take extra training courses or pick up part-time jobs. When I got tired, I'd take a break, and when I had free time, I hung out with my friends and roommates, which made life more enjoyable. Overall, it's been pretty good.

For these girls, TVETfosters intrinsic motivation and active engagement in learning, ultimately contributing to their personal well-being.

Accessing Emotional, or Institutional Support. Having access to necessary resources is crucial for Han girls to take full advantage of their education and persist

in their studies despite external difficulties. Within the ECEF framework, this capability plays a key role by supporting both their personal development and practical opportunities, ultimately enhancing their well-being and allowing them to fully engage in educational experiences.

Qing Qian shared "going to college comes with financial aid, and it's all transparent and fair. It's 2,500 yuan per year for college. Around 30-40% of students can receive it" Pang Yamin stated,

In TVET, each semester we pay 400 yuan. The tuition is waived, and the other fees aren't very expensive, about 200 yuan. We pay 400 yuan, but sometimes they even refund part of it after we've paid. Each semester, there's also 1,000 yuan given to us.

Yang Yuhu shared how her teacher provided emotional and financial support.

Sometimes my teacher would tell me to study hard so I could change my fate. Our class teacher was very supportive, saying there was nothing to be ashamed of. He'd remind me that as long as I studied hard, achieved good grades, and eventually got into college and found a good job, that would be the true accomplishment. He told me not to worry about others looking down on me now. He even said if I had financial difficulties, I could borrow some money from him, and if I couldn't pay it back, that was fine too. He also offered to help tutor me if I didn't understand something in class

Access to resources—whether financial aid or emotional support—TEVT plays a crucial role in empowering Han girls to continue their education. By receiving financial assistance and emotional support, these girls are better equipped to overcome challenges and fully engage in their educational experiences, leading to improved well-being.

Gender Identity Development. In ECEF, gender identity development enables

these Han girls to reshape traditional gender roles and expectations which can promote social change.

As Qing Qian states, "I think the girls around me are smarter than the boys," Qing Qian also emphasizes, "In the same work environment, women need to have the spirit of not giving up. Through their own efforts, they can achieve the positions and better salaries they aspire to." Yang Yuhu shared "in school, boys and girls are treated equally, there is no difference."

Wang Yun says: "I think girls are more likely to become excellent leaders. Nowadays, it should be girls. In my household, I make all the decisions for both me and my husband."

TVET empowers participants to challenge traditional gender roles and develop their gender identity by promoting equal treatment in schools and leadership potential in the workplace.

Protective Security. In the ECEF framework, protective security is a key capability that ensures individuals are shielded from vulnerabilities that can impede their personal and professional development.

Pang Pengpeng reflected on this, stating, If I didn't go to vocational school, I would have gone to 'dagong' (work) at age 15. That would be too young for a girl to work a temporary or casual job, and it is difficult to find any position at all at that age.

She further emphasized, "It would have been too young for me to go 'dagong' at 15."

By attending TVET, she was protected from the vulnerability associated with entering the labor market too early, allowing her to focus on gaining valuable skills that improved her future employment prospects.

By offering a safe educational environment, TVET provides protective security

for young girls by delaying their premature entry into the workforce and shielding them from unsafe or unstable employment.

Aspirations. Han girls participating in TVET programs expressed their aspirations for professional advancement that extend beyond the immediate skills provided by TVET.

Yang Yuhu, with a focus on early childhood education, expressed her long-term commitment to her career and her desire for professional development,

I plan to continue working in the kindergarten and, if possible, I would like to take the exam for the preschool teacher qualification certificate. If I can get the certificate, I feel that I can always continue to learn and work as a preschool teacher. Being a preschool teacher is quite good, and I really like it.

Qing Qian expressed her aspirations for job stability and her strategic planning for the future: "Within five years, I hope that my income will increase and that my work situation will stabilize. I might change jobs to achieve this."

Pang Pei emphasized her personal development and commitment to academic excellence as part of her aspirations: "Especially this year, I've decided that I must study hard, improve my grades in all subjects, keep up with my homework, and become better."

TVET enables Han girls to aim for higher education while building the confidence, skills, and experience required to engage in more advanced and specialized learning.

Constraints

The following findings highlight how TVET schooling presents significant constraints on the capabilities development of Han girls from rural areas. These constraints are shaped by structural barriers such as the hukou system, societal

expectations of early marriage, and the social stigma surrounding vocational education. The Hukou system restricts rural residents' access to urban employment, education, and social benefits, restricts their ability to achieve decent work and participate in economic distribution.

Inadequate Educational Standards and Social Stigma of TVET. Constraints within the ECEF—such as limited opportunities, diminished confidence, restricted access to knowledge, and barriers to desirable work—can significantly impact the empowerment of girls and women. TVET provides fewer opportunities for these girls to achieve instrumental freedom by restricting their access to high-quality training, limiting their career advancement prospects, and reinforcing societal gender norms that hinder their economic and social autonomy.

The Han girls discussed the low quality and social stigma associated with TVET programs, concerns that were similarly expressed by the Mongolian participants. Wang Yun commented, "It seems like TVET doesn't promise a good future... Once students enter TVET, no one supervises or disciplines them anymore; many feel they can't learn anything useful, so they quit."

Pang Xuxu, who majored in pre-school education, struggled after graduation to compete with her colleagues due to the lack of practical training in her small vocational school. "My school's limited resources didn't give me the same level of hands-on training that my colleagues from Xi'an schools received." she said. Her low salary of ¥2,200 per month made it difficult to support a modest life in the city, and she often felt inferior to her better-prepared colleagues.

Another limitation Pang Xuxu highlighted was the restricted number of majors and schools available in rural areas. "The majors offered were very limited, such as forklift operation, computer skills, early childhood education, and car maintenance.

The number of options for female students was particularly small." she explained.

The Han girls discussed the low quality and social stigma of TVET, reflecting similar concerns raised by the Mongolian participants. The limited resources, narrow range of majors, and social stigma attached to vocational training leave many students feeling unprepared for the job market and inferior to their urban counterparts, and thus constrain their capability development.

Structural Barriers Faced by Han Girls. Han girls from rural areas faced significant structural barriers that hinder their capabilities development. Two primary barriers identified in the research are the hukou system and the expectation of early marriage.

Hukou status affects the eligibility of an individual to attend school, especially if the school is in a different region from where their hukou is registered. Within ECEF, the hukou system restricts rural residents' access to urban employment, education, and social benefits, restricts their ability to achieve decent work and participate in economic distribution.

For example, Yang Yuhu, one of the interviewees, explained that if a student wants to attend school in Xi'an but their hukou is registered in Shangluo, the enrollment process can become much more complicated. As a result, it often restricts students with rural hukou from accessing urban schools that are better resourced and offer more opportunities. Moreover, the location of a person's hukou serves as a structural barrier in the job market, limiting access to employment opportunities in urban areas. For instance, another interviewee, Qing Qian, remarked,

If someone has a rural hukou, they're at a real disadvantage when it comes to getting certain jobs. Someone with a local urban hukou has it much easier—they've already got the right residency status and usually have local connections, so getting

the job is much smoother for them. But for someone from a rural area trying to land a better job in the city, they're going to have to jump through more hoops, build new connections, and work a lot harder just to get their foot in the door.

The societal expectation of early marriage serves as another structural barrier for Han girls. Two interviewees, Wang Yun and Pang Xuxu, both married at 21 and soon had children, explicitly stated that they married at a younger age due to family pressures—a pattern that directly contrasts with the Mongolian girls who mentioned that parents had not pressured them to marry. Wang Yun said she married despite feeling it was too early. Her father played a decisive role in her choice, believing that marrying a reliable, hardworking man was the best path for her future. Reflecting on this, Wang Yun said, "My father wanted me to settle down, and his views strongly influenced my choice to get married." Similarly, Pang Xuxu also married at 21 after being introduced to her husband by a relative who believed he was a suitable match. Although she now feels she married too early, at the time, she followed her family's guidance, believing it was in her best interest. In the interview, Pang Xuxu mentioned that she left her job due to her responsibilities as a new mother and noted that marrying early limited her career opportunities.

Societal pressures for early marriage constrain girls' educational and career aspirations by pushing them toward restrictive gender roles. By marrying early, they were often prevented from pursuing opportunities that would allow them to achieve valuable functionings and realize their aspirations, ultimately constraining their freedom to choose the kind of life they have reason to value.

Research Question One Summary, TVET and Han Girls

The second part of this research question examined how TVET may support or hinder the capability development of Han girls in X-Sh. Some Han girls reported that

a supportive and positive environment in TVET enhanced their enjoyment of learning, helping them develop social skills and confidence. Furthermore, TVET provided protective security by delaying their entry into the workforce, allowing them to focus on skill development that could improve their future employment prospects. It also fostered cognitive and psychological confidence, and through TVET, many Han girls aspired to pursue higher education.

However, the capability development of Han girls in rural areas through TVET programs is hindered by structural barriers, inadequate educational standards, and social stigma. Key structural challenges include the hukou system, which restricts access to better-resourced urban schools and employment opportunities, and societal pressures for early marriage that can limit the girls' ability to pursue personal aspirations and opportunities. Inadequate educational quality is another critical constraint, as vocational schools sometimes lack practical training, resources, and a broad range of majors, potentially leaving students unprepared for the job market. Additionally, the social stigma attached to TVET may cause students to feel inferior to their urban peers. These Han girls may internalize the stigma, leading to decreased self-esteem and limiting their motivation to pursue further opportunities or excel in their chosen fields.

Research QuestionTwo: TVET as Contributor to Agency for Mongolian and Han Girls

Agency encompasses not only the capacity to achieve desired outcomes but also the control over the process and the ability to make choices aligned with one's personal values and aspirations (Sen, 1999; Keïta, 2014; Dahl, 2009, Robeyns , 2005, Alkire & Deneulin, 2009). According to Sen (1999), in the Capability Approach, agency is defined as involving both action and active decision-making, or more

broadly, the capacity to influence the state of the world. Capabilities are then understood as the potential achievements that a person may attain, representing the opportunities or freedoms available to them (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2005, Alkire & Deneulin, 2009; Nussbaum ,2007, 2011). This distinction shows the importance of considering agency as a separate and critical area of research within the ECEF framework.

In this section, I present the findings for Research Question Two, which examines the agency that Han and Mongolian girls developed through their experiences in TVET programs. The analysis explores how their vocational education enabled them to have the capacity to act on what they have reason to value (Seeberg, 2014). Additionally, agency is assessed in terms of cognitive self-expression and reflection, enjoyment and playfulness, confidence, and affective and cognitive control (ECEF, 2014).

The theme of making informed decisions emerged as a significant topic in the interviews with both groups. To ensure clarity, I present the findings for Mongolian and Han participants separately. Additionally, the theme of Demonstrating Agency Through Entrepreneurial Aspirations was most prominently expressed by the Mongolian group, highlighting their strong entrepreneurial goals as a key form of agency.

Making Informed Decisions

Making informed decisions is a direct expression of agency because it involves taking control of one's life, using knowledge and critical thinking to evaluate options, and making choices that align with personal goals and values, thus shaping one's own future. When individuals exercise informed decision-making, they draw on specific ECEF capabilities and functionings that empower them.

Mongolian Girls

The decision to attend TVET was the first major choice that represented an exercise of agency for many participants. This marked the beginning of their journey toward building essential skills and gaining the confidence needed to navigate challenges and make informed decisions about their futures.

Na's story provides a vivid example of this process. Reflecting on her experience, she explained,

I made the choice to attend school, and my parents supported me. Upon completing my education, I plan to work and strive towards self-sufficiency. I aim to work and support myself. After spending three years in Huhehaote, I made the decision to return to Eu-Qi in East League.

This decision highlights the essence of agency as described in the ECEF framework: the ability to make thoughtful, autonomous choices that are grounded in one's personal priorities and future aspirations."

Han Girls

In both Mongolian and Han groups, making informed decisions emerged as a clear expression of agency, as participants described how TVET equipped them with the knowledge and critical thinking skills needed to take control of their lives and futures. Pang Jiaojiao, for instance, expressed her decision to pursue higher education after completing TVET secondary schooling: "After completing TVET secondary schooling, I want to go study for a college degree; I think I can have more opportunities with a college degree." Her choice to continue her education reflects her ability to evaluate her options critically, aligning with her personal goals of expanding her career opportunities.

Similarly, Qing Qian demonstrated agency by challenging traditional gender

roles and making independent decisions about her life. She confidently asserted her right to make her own choices about education, work, and marriage, explaining, "I think I can make my own choices. If my parents have different opinions, I will try to persuade them, or even oppose them." By using the critical thinking skills developed through TVET, Qing Qian made informed decisions that aligned with her personal values, further underscoring how TVET helps participants take control of their lives and futures.

In both cases, the participants' informed decisions represent a direct expression of agency, as they used the knowledge and skills gained through TVET to assess their options, align with their personal goals, and take actions to shape their own paths forward.

Demonstrating Agency Through Entrepreneurial Actions

In the 2018 interview data on Han and Mongolian girls, only the Mongolian girls expressed entrepreneurial interests. However, previous research by Seeberg (2011, 2014) found evidence of Han girls showing interest in opening online stores or make-up shops. For this section, I focus only on the entrepreneurial actions of Mongolian girls.

Another common theme related to expressing agency was that many Mongolian participants had their own entrepreneurial plans. Several of the young women described wanting to use the skills and knowledge they acquired through TVET to start their own businesses. Lianhua, for example, wants to open her own dance studio and teach children to dance. She said,

I will keep working to save some money and open my own dance studio in the future. I want to teach kids to dance. I will never give up on dancing. I like my major, dancing has always been my dream. I will also get some training in dancing in

Hohhot. I heard there are some good programs and good dancing teachers there. I want to improve my dancing.

Likewise, Lige's decision and action to run a tailoring business focusing on traditional Mongolian clothing demonstrates her agency. By evaluating her long-term goals and available capabilities, she determined that she was more attracted to a future where she quit dancing and opened this shop. In her interview, she talked about running a shop in her current life aligned more closely with her aspirations and was better for her overall well-being. She was clear about her goals, too, saying, "I would like to study clothing design that mixes modern fashion with Mongolian traditions. I think this combination will make unique and attractive designs that represent our culture while keeping up with current fashion trends." This specific business goal is deeply personal—by choosing it for herself. Lige is not following a path set out for her by an outside source, but actively seeking out the career that best matches her needs. Also, the essentialskills and confidence TVET provided enabled Lige to make the decision and take action on her shift from dancing to opening a shop.

In sum, the entrepreneurial actions of these Mongolian girls demonstrate the agency they achieved through TVET, enabling them to take control of their economic futures. This exercise of agency directly contributes to their well-being by fostering independence, self-reliance, and the pursuit of fulfilling careers that align with their personal values and goals.

Research Question Two Summary

Research Question Two examines the agency that Han and Mongolian girls exercise and how it contributes to their well-being. Making informed decisions emerged as a key theme for both Mongolian and Han participants, reflecting how TVET equips them with the knowledge and critical thinking skills to take control of

their lives. For Mongolian girls, the decision to attend TVET was their first exercise of agency, initiating their development of essential skills and confidence. Another theme, exercising agency through entrepreneurial aspirations, was particularly prominent among the Mongolian girls, who expressed strong entrepreneurial goals and plans to start their own businesses using the skills they gained through TVET.

Research Question Three: Understanding Well-being through Comparing Cultural Value for Mongolian and Han Girls

In Research Question Three, I explore the comparison of the cultural values of Mongolian and Han girls to reveal how culture shapes individual capabilities and aspirations and agency. This examination is essential for understanding their well-being, as difficulties in adjusting to city life can significantly influence their goals and decisions about where to live and work. This exploration is essential for understanding well-being, as culture influences what people consider important and the goals, they set for themselves, leading to the exercise of different functionings (Sen, 1999; Sahlins, 1976; Appadurai, 2004; Deng, Cheng, Chow, & Ding, 2016).

Challenges in Cultural Adaptation

Cultural adaptation theory examines how individuals adjust to new cultures by adopting local norms, values, and social skills to foster belonging (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Cultural adaptation fits within ECEF in several ways. Such as, the process of cultural adaptation involves cognitive and psychological control (an important capability in ECEF) by requiring individuals to develop new cognitive abilities and coping strategies to navigate different cultural norms and practices. Additionally, cultural adaptation expands social opportunities by necessitating the formation of new social networks and improving cross-cultural communication skills, which corresponds with the ECEF's focus on social opportunity capabilities that enable

individuals to interact effectively within society and access support systems. Furthermore, cultural adaptation enhances economic facilities by opening up diverse economic opportunities and improving employability. By developing language proficiency and cultural competence, individuals become better equipped to participate in the economy, which is consistent with the ECEF's aspect of enhancing economic facilities through improved access to employment and economic activities. Consequently, cultural adaptation supports both constitutive freedom (personal well-being) and instrumental freedom (active participation in society), which are fundamental objectives of the ECEF.

Applying this theoretical framework to the experiences of Mongolian girls highlights the specific challenges they face when transitioning from their pastoral homelands to urban settings.

Mongolian girls 'emphasis on pastoral life.All the Mongolian girls were born and raised in pastoral lands, encountering urban life for the first time when they attended primary school. They faced challenges in adapting to urban culture. Their experiences highlight how difficulties in adjusting to city life can influence their aspirations and decisions about where to live and work.

For these girls, moving to urban areas for education exposed them to environments that are very different from their rural upbringing. Lianhua reflects on the emotional toll of city life: "People living in the city are under lots of pressure, and they constantly stay anxious. When I studied in the city, sometimes I felt I didn't know what to do, and wanted to cry." Similarly, Suri shares her struggle with forming new social connections in the city: "I didn't really connect with the urban students. Most of the time, I spent with old friends I knew from before, back in the pastoral areas. It was easier for me to maintain those existing relationships."

Faced with these challenges, many Mongolian girls express a strong desire to return to their pastoral roots, where they feel a greater sense of belonging and comfort. Lianhua articulates this preference:

When I see the pastoral land, I feel relieved... I grew up here, so probably that is the reason I love living here so much. I wanted to go to big cities when I was in middle school. But when I grew up, I changed my mind. I feel like this suits me better.

The pastoral land represents a refuge from the pressures of urban life, offering familiarity and a supportive community. Mongolians are often first-generation urban dwellers whose parents have always lived on pastoral land and wish to maintain their traditional lifestyle.Despite recognizing some practical challenges — such as government limitations on the number of sheep per household — Lianhua remains committed to building her future in her hometown by opening a dance studio. Other participants share similar sentiments, Wuli states: "We like pastoral life better. The air is fresher, and life is simpler than in big cities. We also want to stay with our families. Maybe the body is tired, but the mind is free."

It's important to note that not all Mongolian girls share this preference. Suri considers moving to a coastal city: "We were thinking about moving to Dalian, and maybe buying a house there. My brother lives and works there. I like the ocean... I don't want to go back to pastoral land, it's too lonely there. I like socializing with people." For Suri, the presence of family in the city and her personal interests make urban life more appealing. Similarly, Wuyun expresses conditional interest in city life: "If I were not going to get married, and have no children, I would choose the city. Life would be more colorful in a big city."

These perspectives illustrate how deeply Mongolian pastoral culture influences

the aspirations and sense of well-being of these girls. Their strong inclination toward returning to pastoral homelands reflects a profound connection to their traditional way of life. It is important to note that in the research site, these girls' homes on pastoral land are not far from the city, typically a 30-minute to an hour's drive. For these Mongolian girls, returning to pastoral land and working or having a business in the nearby city are not necessarily contradictory pursuits. Returning to the villages in the Han research site is much less accessible due to the difficult mountain terrain.

Han Girls' preference for Urban Life and Economic Stability

In contrast, Han girls in the study seemed less eager to return to life in their mountain village. Many had experienced significant hardship as children, with their families relying on subsistence farming and manual labor. Their parents often had to leave their villages to seek work in nearby towns and cities. This hardship — and the limited resources in their hometowns — contributed to their reluctance to return. Pang Xuxu said,

Our area is a poor mountainous region; it takes more than an hour to drive here (SX city), and the roads are all mountainous. The people in the village are very poor. Now there are fewer and fewer people in the village. Young people move out and work in the nearby towns and cities; subsistence farming in the village can only earn a few hundred Yuan [approximately $80] per year.

Instead, the Han girls were more likely to want to settle in a city, believing that urban environments would offer better job opportunities, education, and living conditions. Qing Qian stated: "For me, returning to the village is impossible. I have seen the life of my mother in the countryside, and I don't want to live that way of life."

For many rural Han girls, TVET and the urban context together offered achance

to escape the cycle of poverty.

Another significant difference between the two groups pertains to family relationships. While both Mongolian and Han girls value family obligations, Mongolian girls experience less pressure regarding marriage, which affords them greater autonomy and freedom.

Family Relationships and Obligations among Mongolian Girls

Mongolian girls place significant value on family obligations but experience less pressure regarding early marriage, affording them greater autonomy and freedom in their personal choices than the Han participants. Their cultural background emphasizes personal agency in decisions like marriage, and there is a general absence of strict societal or familial expectations to marry at a young age.

For instance, Wuyun feels a strong sense of duty as the eldest sibling: "Because I have two little sisters... Since I am the eldest, I had to take care of many things. I have family responsibilities. There are things for me to take care of." Despite these obligations, she notes that her community does not impose strict expectations about early marriage: "No one really rushes you to get married... It's quite free. You find someone you like yourself.

Similarly, Suri shared her experience: "I married at 23 and my parents did not arrange the marriage for me."

These narratives illustrate that while Mongolian girls are committed to their familial roles, they retain personal freedom in significant life decisions. The lesser emphasis on early marriage allows them more time to pursue personal goals and contributes to a sense of autonomy uncommon in more traditional settings. Notably, gender relations seemed more flexible among Mongolian girls; several participants noted that men might move to their wife's home for herding if she inherits extensive

land. Conversely, the practice of marrying out is more pronounced and traditionally expected among Han girls.

Family Relationships and Obligations among Han Girls

In contrast to the Mongolian participants, Han girls often prioritized family obligations and faced greater pressure regarding early marriage, which significantly influenced their sense of personal well-being. They tend to marry at younger ages than Mongolian girls, frequently due to parental pressure and cultural expectations rooted in Confucian traditions emphasizing filial piety (personal observation). Many Han respondents expressed desires that align closely with family expectations, such as getting married early, settling in the city, and supporting their parents. This often involved challenging traditional gender roles to fulfill familial duties. Additionally, as many Han girls were second-generation urban residents whose parents had left subsistence farming, there was a stronger push towards economic stability and support for the extended family. Wang Yun, for example, married at 21 and discussed her responsibilities: "We won't go back to live in the village. Because I work here and will have to support four elderly family members in the future, and my younger sister is still young, there will be additional expenses that we have to bear together." Her plans to support her elderly relatives and younger sister highlight a deep commitment to family obligations, often at the expense of personal aspirations. Similarly, Pang Xuxu married at 21 and reflected on her decision. Although she later believed that she married too early, her initial decision reflected the importance she placed on family opinions in determining what course of action would best serve her own well-being.

An illustrative case is Julie Pang from Seeberg's (2010) study. Julie excelled academically but faced familial and financial pressure. Julie had excelled in a competitive exam and was admitted to a prestigious senior high school in town.

However, her family's situation had critically worsened; her mother developed a brain tumor with high medical expenses, and her father's income was barely sufficient for basic needs. Consequently, Julie was instructed by her father to drop out of school and marry a town resident where she could find paying work to help pay for her mother's medical bills. Julie's story underscores the profound impact of cultural expectations and financial hardships on Han girls' life choices, highlighting how family obligations can dictate personal decisions such as education and marriage.

Research Question Three Summary

This part of the study explored the differing life choices made by rural Mongolian and Han girls under different cultural contexts and economic circumstances. Many Mongolian girls wished to return to or live close to pastoral lands to stay near their families and partially maintain their traditional pastoral lifestyle. They experienced less pressure regarding early arranged marriage, allowing them greater autonomy in personal choices and the freedom to prioritize personal aspirations. In contrast, Han girls were less inclined to return to rural areas due to hardships such as poverty and limited opportunities experienced in their mountainous villages. Seeking economic stability, they preferred urban life where they believed better job prospects and living conditions existed. Han girls often married at a younger age, sometimes due to parental pressure, and prioritized family obligations focused on supporting their families financially.

Chapter Summary

In summary, utilizing the ECEF framework, findings based on the ECEF framework reveal that TVET contributes to developing capabilities among Mongolian and Han girls in specific ways, both instrumentally and constitutively. Through attending TVET, these girls acquired essential communication skills, cognitive

reasoning abilities, and the confidence to lead lives they value. Some traditional, restrictive gender roles—such as early marriage and a preference for sons over daughters—were being challenged. Both Mongolian and Han girls somewhat internalized the social stigma associated with TVET. Han girls were less eager to return to their remote mountain villages due to hardships like subsistence farming and parental absence for work. In contrast, Mongolian girls emphasized a strong desire to return to their pastoral roots, where they felt a greater sense of belonging and comfort. Despite facing challenges, pastoral life held significant cultural and emotional value for them. Moreover, their homes on pastoral land were relatively close to the city, unlike the remote and less accessible Han villages, enabling a more integrated life for the Mongolian girls. This proximity allowed Mongolian girls to maintain their traditional lifestyle while also engaging in economic opportunities in nearby urban areas.

Beyond cultural values, factors such as misaligned or poor economic conditions, traditional family obligations and expectations, and the difficult geographical location and accessibility of their home regions played important roles in shaping their well-being and aspirations. These findings highlight the complex interplay between culture, economics, and geography in influencing the life choices of Mongolian and Han girls attending TVET.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the chapter, I will discuss how my findings are situated in the context of the literature following the order of the research questions. Then this study draws conclusions based on the discussion of findings. Implications and recommendations follow the conclusion. I also address the limitations of the study and give suggestions for future research.

The study set out to solve the problem of the absence of comprehensive, comparative data on the TVET experiences of various groups, in this case, rural Han majority and rural Mongolian minority ethnic girls –despite the recognized potential of TVET to foster human resource development and advance educational equity. This study brings attention to marginalized groups' voices and reveals the unseen aspects of the unequal treatment and conditions that exist and provides insights for policy makers to understand the role TVET can play in the lives of young rural migrant women as they undergo rapid urbanization in Western China.

To address this problem, this study investigated whether and how young Mongolian and Han women in two small, midsized cities in the materially underdeveloped regions of western China could empower themselves through TVET by adopting the three research questions.

The research questions were built to provide answers to the problem posed by building on each other, creating a cohesive and comprehensive analysis of how TVET affects the empowerment of Mongolian and Han girls in rural western China.

The study chose ECEF to understand the contributions and constraints of TVET on these women's capability development, the agency they achieve, and how this agency influences their well-being. The ECEF focuses on assessing functions that enhance individuals' substantive freedom and comprises two sets of capabilities: constitutive freedoms, related to well-being, and instrumental freedoms, associated with tangible or material achievements.My findings add mainstream language proficiency to the economic facility capability and familiarity with local language to the social opportunity capability within the ECEF framework.

The exploration of how TVET contributes to or constrains the expanding freedoms of rural migrant women, both constitutive and instrumental, was addressed in Research Question One. The findings revealed that TVET generally expanded rather than constrained their capabilities. This was followed by a detailed examination in Research Question Two of how these women exercise agency through their experiences in TVET. The findings indicated that through TVET, both Mongolian and Han participants were able to make informed decisions, taking greater control over their lives. The final component, Research Question Three, compared how cultural values of Han and Mongolian girls variously influence perceptions of well-being among these women, emphasizing the role of values and culture in shaping individual capabilities and aspirations.

The discussion follows in the order of the Research Questions, where Research Question One is more broadly conceived and Research Question Two and Research Question Three are more focused; hence, they are shorter but equally significant.

Discussion of Findings by Research Question

This section discusses the findings on the research questions in the context of the literature review presented in Chapter II. This discussion serves the research's broad

aim of investigating, by using the capability approach of the ECEF, how young Mongolian and Han girls empower themselves through TVET.By centering the experiences of these girls, this study empowers marginalized voices, and by grounding the analysis in a theoretical framework, it suggests broader applicability of these insights to other regions undergoing rapid socioeconomic transitions.

TVET Contributes to and Constrains Mongolian and Han girls' capability Development in Particular Ways

To answer Research Question One, this study found that TVET equips both Mongolian and Han girls with valuable skills that contribute to their economic empowerment. This finding supports the work of scholars such as Lu, Koo and Pun (2019), Seeberg and Luo (2012), Wang (2020), Postiglione and Tang (2019), Guo (2022), Liu et al. (2009), Yi et al. (2015), and Hansen and Woronov (2013) in the Chinese context, as well as Tripney et al. (2013), Chaghari et al. (2017), Meel and Gehlot (2020), Ebrahimi et al. (2022), and Diwakar and Ahamad (2015) internationally, who have demonstrated a positive relationship between TVET and key indicators of economic success, including improved job quality, higher earnings, and increased access to formal employment. This study addresses a further gap in the literature, as there is little research on Mongolian girls' TVET schooling experiences in China. Specifically, this study reveals that TVET broadens the range of life choices for Mongolian girls by facilitating the acquisition of Chinese-language skills, which are essential for employment and integration in urban areas dominated by Han culture.

This study documented that both Mongolian and Han girls receive government stipends and support from their families while attending TVET schools.

However, Mongolian girls receive preferential policies due to their ethnic

minority status, which are not available to Han girls. This confirms the findings by Sautman (1998), Yang and Wu (2009), and Zhang and Archer (2024) regarding the implementation of preferential educational policies for ethnic minorities in China. My findings extend the existing literature by adding evidence from the capabilities approach perspective that being able to have access to these resources and institutional support, these girls gained instrumental capabilities that lead to other capabilities.

This study found that for rural Han girls, TVET provides protective security by offering a safe educational environment that delays their premature entry into the workforce, thereby reducing their vulnerability to exploitation as well as protecting them from arrangements for early marriage. This finding confirms and extends the existing literature (Seeberg, 2011, 2014; Wang, 2016), which documents that access to secondary education is vital for girls and young women in rural areas has been shown to have a strong association with women's empowerment. It protects them from too early marriage, premature pregnancy, domestic chores, and financial dependency, and enables them to develop the skills and confidence needed for economic independence (Muller, 2006; Parveen & Leonhäuser, 2004; Roy & Niranjan, 2004; Seeberg, 2011, 2014; Wang, 2016)

Consequently, TVET facilitates improved labor market outcomes and higher income levels for women, which, according to Sustainable Development Goal 8, helps reduce extreme poverty and promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth. Additionally, by empowering women through education and skill development, TVET contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Constitutive Capabilities

As discussed earlier, this section will explore how economic empowerment contributes to constitutive well-being. The findings indicate that both Mongolian and Han girls aspire to entrepreneurial activities and stable employment, consistent with studies by Zhou (2011) and Ling (2015), which showed that Chinese rural migrant youth in TVET programs often sought indoor office jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities. In this context, TVET plays a crucial role in helping students formulate entrepreneurial and professional goals that might otherwise seem unattainable (Ling, 2015). The formation of these aspirations through TVET represents a constitutive capability, as the capacity to aspire — the ability to envision and pursue meaningful goals — has intrinsic value (Appadurai, 2004),which empowers students with a sense of control over their future—contributing directly to their well-being.

My study found that TVET provides important social opportunities for both Mongolian and Han girls, supporting the existing literature of the social impact of TVET (Shi & Bangpan, 2022; Ngcwangu, 2018, on South Africa).By bringing together students from diverse backgrounds, TVET facilitates the formation of new social networks and relationships and provides access to information and resources. For Han girls from relatively isolated villages, TVET broadens social horizons and enhances social skills, countering the social isolation often experienced in village life, supporting Seeberg (2014). Similarly, for Mongolian rural girls, TVET acts as a "unique social platform" where students engage in "new forms of interaction" (Ling, 2015) that differ from the customary social events of pastoral life. Unlike Ling's (2015) study of TVET students in a major metropolis, where TVET facilitated an environment that allowed both migrant (i.e., rural) and local urban students to interact on relatively equal terms, this study observed a different dynamic. Here, both Han and Mongolian rural girls did not form the same level of bonding with urban students as

seen in Ling's study. For Mongolian participants, the additional layer of ethnicity may explain why many of them spent most of their time with other Mongolian students at school. The current study thus highlights the importance of both context and ethnicity in shaping TVET experiences.

My study found that TVET contributes to gender identity development by enabling both Mongolian girls and Han girls to reshape traditional restrictive gender roles, such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and son preference. TVET allows them to pursue education and careers before settling down, although deeper social gender norms, such as traditional inheritance practices, remain unchanged. These findings support Hartl (2009), who noted that while TVET may not fully address gender issues, it can begin to undermine patriarchy by enhancing women's agency—motivation, commitment, willingness, and insight. Additionally, my findings support Rai and Joshi (2020), who argue that women who participate in TVET are better equipped to navigate power dynamics after graduation, developing the will to make career choices and thereby gaining access to the income needed for economic self-determination. Thus, my findings extend existing literature on the transformative potential of TVET by demonstrating how TVET empowers women through gender identity development and promotes equity and equal opportunities.

TVET significantly influenced the participants' aspirations and their capacity to aspire. The study found that TVET fostered both Mongolian and Han girls' aspirations for a better future, such as advanced learning, entrepreneurship, and stable employment. This finding is consistent with Aldinucci et al. (2021), who observed that women in Chile aspired to pursue tertiary education in traditional academic institutions after participating in vocational training and Seeberg and Luo (2012) who found that rural girls wish to improve skills or get advanced education.

Other constitutive capabilities the study found that are valued by the rural Mongolian and Han girls are associated with enjoyment of learning, confidence, cognitive control, and building relationships with friends and teachers. This confirms Chaghari et al. (2017), Mormina (2019), and Seeberg & Luo (2012), who report how TVET transforms students' perspectives, self-understanding, and skills rather than merely meeting specific benchmarks.

Constraints

In discussing the constraints imposed by TVET on Mongolian and Han rural girls, it becomes evident that these challenges affect both their instrumental and constitutive freedoms, although the constraints are relatively fewer than the contributions.

This study found that the constraints that TVET imposes on Mongolian and Han rural migrant girls' capability development are reported consistently across much of the literature on TVET schooling in China (Hansen & Woronov, 2013; Ling, 2015; Wang, 2016; Koo, 2016; Guo, 2022; Liu et al., 2009; Yi et al., 2015), Mongolian and Han girls encountered broadly similar challenges over the course of their TVET education, including limited post-graduation opportunities, the social stigma associated with TVET, and various structural barriers to social and economic advancement. This confirms previous research that has identified similar sets of constraints in TVET in China, such as stigmatization and discrimination, relatively lower standards of educational quality, inadequate availability of TVET and limited access to resources (Hansen & Woronov, 2013; Ling, 2015; Wang, 2016; Koo, 2016). The study also found that both Mongolian and Han girls perceived TVET as less valued than university education and internalized this social stigma. This finding is consistent with studies by Schulte (2003) Koo (2014)and Hansen & Woronov (2013),

who report similar results on vocational education is frequently seen as inferior to academic education, which reinforces the broader devaluation of TVET. Additionally, among Mongolian girls, internalizing this stigma manifested as reduced confidence and limited aspirations, undermining their confidence and enthusiasm, as similarly reported in the literature (Ling, 2015; Wang, 2020; Batruch et al., 2019; Koo, 2016). Moreover, the challenges Mongolian participants face with national licensing exams offered only in Chinese highlight broader systemic issues, such as inconsistent curriculum standards and insufficient support for minority students. These findings may contribute to the knowledge base of ethnic minority education research. Another significant constraint for Mongolian participants is their discomfort in predominantly Han settings, which exacerbates the challenge of TVET schooling pathways. The existing literature, such as Maurer-Fazio (2012), who demonstrated that job applications featuring Mongolian-sounding names are less likely to receive callbacks, which deters these individuals from pursuing urban opportunities. Furthermore, Gustafsson & Yang (2014) emphasize that perceived ethnic discrimination creates more barriers associated with migration for minorities, complicating their integration into urban environments. My research extends the literature by examining the obstacles faced by Mongolian girls both outside and within IMAR in Han-dominated cities.

Regarding Research Question One, the study concludes that TVET acted as a crucial gateway for the sample of Han and Mongolian girls, expanding the freedoms of rural migrant women—both constitutive and instrumental—and providing them with enhanced opportunities for personal and material development. However, they also encountered persistent challenges: vocational education carried a social stigma in comparison to traditional academic routes, and systemic barriers limited their career

advancement. Mongolian participants faced additional hurdles, particularly in Han-majority cities, where language barriers and cultural differences complicated their educational and professional integration.

Exercising Agency by Mongolian and Han Girls Through TVET and Its Contribution to Well-Being

Research Question Two re-examined my initial findings of Research Question One from a different perspective to gain deeper insights as it focuses specifically on how these girls enacted agency to achieve valuable outcomes.

Agency encompasses not only the capacity to achieve desired outcomes but also the control over the process and the ability to make choices aligned with one's personal values and aspirations (Sen, 1999; Keïta, 2014; Dahl, 2009, Robeyns , 2005, Alkire & Deneulin, 2009).Agency is central to the Capability Approach as outlined in the ECEF framework and is defined as involving both action and active decision-making, or more broadly, the capacity to influence the state of the world (Sen, 1999).

In the present study, both Mongolian and Han girls exercised agency by making and acting on informed decisions. Participants reported how TVET equipped them with the knowledge and critical skills necessary for making and acting on decisions about pursuing higher education and seeking employment as well as marriage. This facilitates transition from farm work to paid employment, thereby empowering women with financial resources for independence. This finding supports existing research in the context of China by Seeberg (2011, 2014), Maslak (2022), and Hansen and Woronov (2013), which documented the transformative impact of TVET on women's economic roles. In particular, Mongolian girls often express a desire to return to pastoral lands. Some of them have made decisions and taken steps to achieve this goal, such as saving money to run small businesses in their hometowns and hiring

women from herding families to make clothes for tailor shops, which they sell to tourists visiting the grasslands. This enables Mongolian girls to live close to the pastoral land while staying financially independent and expands both their individual and collective capabilities in meaningful ways.

This finding also supports international literature, including studies in rural Bangladesh (Parveen & Leonhäuser, 2004), Palestine (Hilal, 2017, 2019), Indonesia (Tohani et al., 2019), refugee camps in Jordan (Jabbar & Zaza, 2015), and rural Nepal (Garbuja & Pasa, 2016). All these studies demonstrate that women involved in secondary TVET programs not only exhibit the ability to make decisions but also actively act on these decisions to improve their well-being and pursue the life they have reasons to value.

This study found that, through TVET, Mongolian girls exercised agency by running their own small business, which confirms Ling's (2015) study who described TVET as a catalyst for rural migrant youth in China. However, this study extends Ling's research by adding evidence of how these entrepreneurial aspirations translated into concrete outcomes—such as increased financial independence.

Regarding Research Question Two, the study concludes that through TVET, both Mongolian and Han girls made informed choices and acted on them to enhance their skills, capabilities, and economic position within given conditions.

Well-Being Comparing Mongolian and Han Girls: Cultural Values, Understanding and Experience

Addressing Research Question Three, this study explored the comparison of how cultural values of Han and Mongolian girls influence their sense of well-being differently, discussing the role of culture in shaping individual capabilities and aspirations as well as agency. Besides cultural values, economic factors, family

relationships, and the geographical location and accessibility of their home regions also play important roles in shaping their well-being and aspirations and agency. Sen's (1985) conception of well-being encompasses both valuable states of being and meaningful activities, which encompass various capabilities such as being well-nourished, having adequate shelter, receiving education, securing stable employment, living in a safe environment, and experiencing intangible aspects like pleasure and fulfillment. In the context of this study, well-being within the ECEF also encompasses cognitive self-expression and reflection, enjoyment and playfulness, confidence, and affective and cognitive control. By demonstrating how cultural values intersect with economic factors, family relationships, and geographic accessibility to create distinct pathways for well-being among Mongolian and Han girls, it offers valuable insights into how specific cultural contexts shape the capabilities and aspirations of young women. Moreover, its implications may extend beyond the immediate setting, offering guidance for policymakers and educators in other regions undergoing similar socioeconomic transitions.

Han girls exercised capabilities grounded in familial obligations and maintaining traditional values, rural connections without emphasizing land as central to their sense of self. This contrasts with Mongolian girls, who valued the capability to return to pastoral lands as integral to their cultural heritage.

My study found that some Mongolian girls' consideration for returning to pastoral lands supports existing literature by reporting the strong connection between Mongolian nomadic culture and the pastoral landscape. This connection constituted for these Mongolian girls a central component of their aspirations and subjective well-being. It highlights how ethnic Mongolians in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region regard the grasslands as both an economic resource and a fundamental aspect

of their personal and collective identities (Zhang & Zhang, 2007; Wu, 2006). This study supports the literature by demonstrating that Mongolians' cultural values include a desire to preserve their cultural identity, maintaining strong connections to their heritage and upholding a traditional way of life deeply ingrained in the Gacha (equals to Han girls' village) of their parents in Inner Mongolia (Gustafsson & Yang, 2015; Hua & Squires, 2015; William, 2002).

This study indicates that some Mongolian girls value the capability to return to pastoral lands as central to their well-being and aspirations, aligning with existing literature that links Mongolian nomadic culture to the pastoral landscape (Zhang & Zhang, 2007; Wu, 2006). It affirms that the grasslands serve as a cultural resource, shaping functionings, identities in the Gacha (Gustafsson & Yang, 2015; Hua & Squires, 2015; William, 2002).

For Mongolian girls, returning to herding was economically feasible because the income from herding is not necessarily less than that from working in the city. In contrast, returning to the subsistence farming practiced in rural Han areas is not a feasible option for Han girls. Supporting this point, a Mongolian informant, who participated in a 2017 fieldwork in Shaanxi, noted that she had not seen the extreme poverty observed in the Han village in the rural areas of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR). Consequently, the study suggests that migration was the only way for Han girls to escape extreme poverty and earn a living, which supports Luo & Seeberg (2022)'s study.

A novel finding is the difference that migration patterns make. Mongolian girls, as first-generation urban dwellers whose parents continue to reside on pastoral lands, retain the capability to return and live there permanently or temporarily. In contrast, Han girls, as second-generation urban residents whose parents have abandoned

subsistence farming for city-based employment, have diminished capabilities to re-engage with rural lands (Seeberg, 2024).

The geographical location of their home regions and accessibility also play crucial roles in shaping their well-being and aspirations. The Mongolian girls' homes on pastoral land are not far from the city—typically a 30-minute to an hour's drive. For these Mongolian girls, returning to pastoral land and working or owning a business in the nearby city are not necessarily conflicting pursuits. However, the mountainous villages where Han girls originate are not conducive for them to return home while working in the city, though some reported returning for harvesting work.

My findings suggest that Mongolian girls are not necessarily less mobile because of anticipated barriers or discrimination but are influenced by strong cultural and familial connections that encourage them to return home. This provides additional insights into previous studies, which have shown that Chinese ethnic minorities with rural hukou are often less mobile than their Han counterparts due to higher anticipated migration barriers, limited information about destination markets, and perceived discrimination (Gustafsson & Yang, 2014; Maurer-Fazio & Hasmath, 2015).

While both Mongolian and Han girls exhibit strong familial commitments, this study identifies a previously overlooked distinction in marriage expectations. Specifically, Mongolian girls face less pressure to marry early and enjoy greater autonomy in choosing partners. By contrast, Han girls often experience more parental influence—sometimes resulting in arranged or early marriages. This new insight sheds light on how cultural norms shape young women's choices, revealing the interplay between familial obligations and personal autonomy in ways not previously documented.

Previous studies (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004; Hwang, 1999) have established that

filial piety heavily influences the decisions of rural Chinese youth. This study confirms that influence among Han participants and, crucially, adds that parental instructions and desires remain integral to Han girls' personal value systems despite broader economic and social transformations.

The question arises whether this cultural influence empowers or disempowers Han girls. On one hand, it offers strong familial support and reduces personal stress, aligning with Lam et al. (2022), who observed its protective effect on mental health. On the other hand, prioritizing family obligations can limit opportunities for education or careers outside traditional roles. This echoes Seeberg (2011) and Seeberg and Luo (2018), where girls face a "tragic choice" between pursuing further education and easing their families' financial burdens.

Research Question Three concludes that both Mongolian and Han girls found a profound sense of purpose and motivation by valuing their cultural traditions—pastoral life and filial piety, respectively. This sense of purpose positively influenced their well-being by providing daily motivation and a clear role within their communities. From a hedonistic psychology perspective (Teschl & Comim, 2005), this alignment with cultural values can enhance subjective well-being through increased satisfaction and emotional support. However, evaluating their well-being solely based on their expressed preferences may overlook the potential influence of adaptive preferences and cultural constraints (Nusbaumm, 2007). For Mongolian girls, returning to pastoral lands might bring with it accepting traditional gender roles that limit their capabilities, such as participating in ownership and decision-making. For Han girls, the strong emphasis on filial piety might restrict their ability to pursue personal ambitions that deviate from family expectations

Drawing on the concept of adaptive preferences from the Capability Approach

developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, individuals often adjust their desires based on their circumstances, which can sometimes distort their true assessment of well-being (Teschl & Comim, 2005). Evaluating their well-being solely based on this preference may overlook the constraints imposed by gender roles and the lack of opportunities for personal development in pastoral settings. In these communities, I found men predominantly managed the pastoral businesses, with women and girls primarily assisting in herding. Women could only inherit pastoral lands in the absence of male heirs. The return to pastoral life might also reinforce traditional gender roles. Therefore, the girls' expressed preference to return may reflect aspirations shaped by their environment and experiences, possibly without recognizing other potentials for well-being.

Conclusion

This study compares the TVET schooling experiences of Mongolian and Han girls in western China. Within distinct cultural and economic contexts, TVET emerges as a meaningful pathway for empowerment, emphasizing gender and ethnicity as critical factors that bring the marginalized voices of these students into focus. This analysis of the two groups demonstrated the essence of Sen's framework, showing how educational opportunities can expand or constrain the freedoms that individuals value.

However, the potential of TVET to expand the capabilities of both Mongolian and Han girls remains constrained by social stigma and insufficient resources. In this context, TVET may seem like a mechanism of social reproduction, channeling rural students into alternative paths that hinder access to the most preferred jobs in the labor market. Additionally, this material deprivation and stigma have been internalized by many participants, resulting in lower confidence and reduced aspirations.

Nevertheless, when contrasted with the opportunities available to their parents—who lacked access to any form of schooling—the importance of TVET becomes evident. The girls interviewed faced radically different social and economic possibilities compared to those open to the previous generation. For many participants in this study, TVET was not only the best among available options but also the only one carrying transformative potential.

Drawing on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Seeberg's ECEF, the study illustrates how TVET expands the girls' capabilities, enhancing both their constitutive freedoms (the ability to lead the kind of life they value) and instrumental freedoms (the means to achieve desired ends). Although the development of capabilities for both Mongolian and Han girls is constrained by factors such as a poor local job market, restrictive gender roles, family obligations, and cultural expectations, TVET offers a meaningful opportunity for empowerment within their contemporary circumstances. Relative to the academic education pathways available in major cities, TVET offers practical skills and opportunities that are more accessible to these girls. In sum, TVET plays a role in promoting individual well-being and agency, supporting Sen's preeminent claim that broader human development extends beyond economic growth to include the expansion of human freedoms and capabilities.

In conclusion, the study employs the ECEF framework to analyze systematically how TVET contributes to or constrains the capability development of Mongolian and Han rural migrant girls, thereby emphasizing the significance of understanding gender and ethnicity as critical factors that shape educational opportunities. The findings invite policymakers and educators to consider how TVET can be aligned with broader goals of social equity and workforce development, while encouraging NGO's and governments to address persistent stigmas and resource limitations. In the long run,

the outcomes of this research may prove applicable to other regions where rapid economic development coexists with substantial rural populations, offering a template for understanding and improving the conditions under which marginalized youth—especially young women and girls—seek greater control over their futures. This ultimately supports a deeper understanding of how changing cultural and economic landscapes influence young migrant women, ensuring the voices of Mongolian and Han girls are not only heard but integrated into policies and practices that foster their capabilities and well-being.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings on TVET's contributions to personal growth and well-being has implications for the broader socio-economic development of their communities and the nation, as is stipulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As China is a participant in the SDGs, this study aligns with several of its key objectives. Specifically, it supports Sustainable Development Goal 10 (SDG 10) by advocating for the social and economic inclusion of individuals regardless of ethnicity and origin as well as gender. Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls and ensure equal participation in leadership and decision-making.

There are several other important implications drawn from this study. Firstly, by comparing Mongolian and Han girls across two research sites, it suggests that China's centralized approach to TVET may not adequately address the diverse needs of rural girls from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Policymakers might consider adopting a more decentralized or culturally responsive approach to TVET. By tailoring curricula and policies to reflect local contexts and the specific needs of ethnic minority students, TVET could become more relevant and effective.

Additionally, the study indicates that while stipends and affirmative action policies aim to increase educational access for Mongolian girls, their effectiveness may be limited if underlying barriers are not addressed. Financial support alone may not overcome the cultural, economic, and social obstacles hindering educational attainment. Both Mongolian and Han girls are eligible for certain stipends, but the sufficiency of these funds remains uncertain. Compared to Mongolian girls, Han girls may receive less financial support from both the government and their families, constraining their capabilities to secure stable, well-paying employment. It is recommended to increase financial aid and scholarship opportunities for both Mongolian and Han girls. Establishing microfinance programs and grants to assist both Mongolian and Han girls in starting and running small businesses would help address disparities in financial support. Notably, the expected majority-minority resource inequality commonly observed in international research does not fully apply here. Rather, in this context, the resource inequality appears to be reversed

The government's plans, as outlined in the Outline of the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020), aimed to provide vocational education free of charge. Many students have benefited from these free TVET programs, improving their access to education. The government should continue and expand policies that facilitate free secondary vocational education and offer additional subsidies for economically disadvantaged students, particularly girls from rural areas.

The national effort to redirect half of all students into vocational schools aims to enhance China's skilled workforce (State Council, 2005). Focused on economic productivity, the State Council has made considerable efforts to promote TVET, such as providing annual stipends of 1,500 yuan (approximately $215 USD) for rural and

economically disadvantaged urban students. Furthermore, according to the State Council (2019), China plans to allocate 100 billion yuan (approximately $13.94 billion USD) from the Unemployment Insurance Fund for large-scale vocational upskilling to bolster the national workforce. However, for Mongolian and Han girls in rural western China, significant cultural, economic, and social barriers make this goal challenging. Without addressing these underlying issues, the national objective of diverting half of all students into vocational schools may not be realistic for these populations. Policymakers must consider these limitations and implement strategies to make vocational education accessible and appealing to all students.

For example, internships, intended to provide relevant workplace experience, were not aligned with students' fields of study. For Mongolian girls, internships were virtually nonexistent, further diminishing the effectiveness of TVET. It is recommended that TVET policy to help schools align their programs with market needs and industry standards by actively encouraging partnerships with industries in their own and neighboring cities. This alignment would facilitate internships that provide valuable and relevant experience for students, enhancing their employability.

Overall, both central and local governments can help to enhance the capabilities of young rural women by fostering educational opportunities that are equitable, empowering, and culturally responsive, and by actively mitigating local external constraints.

Limitations

The following section outlines the key limitations of the study, which may affect the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. Acknowledging these limitations not only contextualizes the results but also guides future research directions. Firstly, as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, my

personal biases, preconceptions, and assumptions could have influenced the research outcomes, a central concern in qualitative research. Despite employing strategies such as bracketing, debriefing with others familiar with the research, and engaging in reflexivity to mitigate subjectivity, objectivity is challenging to maintain.

Secondly, the study involved a relatively small number of participants—20 women—and was conducted at only two research sites in western China, the experiences and perspectives captured in this study do not claim to be representative of those of young women in other regions or from different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds within China.

Similarly, the study took place during a time marked by rapid social, economic, and policy changes in China, not to mention external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, it is possible some minor limitations related to language barriers may have affected the accuracy of participants' responses. For Mongolian participants, interviews conducted in standard Mandarin may have impacted their ability to fully understand the questions and provide accurate and detailed responses.

Future Research

In addition to qualitative methods, future research should consider using other methodological approaches to enhance both the depth and breadth of understanding regarding the impact of TVET on young Mongolian and Han women. While the qualitative nature of this study provided rich, detailed insights into participants' experiences and perspectives, future studies could employ a mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative elements such as surveys. Future studies could include additional sites and different socioeconomic contexts and regions within western China. By engaging individuals from multiple parallel sites, researchers can identify

themes and patterns that may or may not hold across a broader range of populations.

In this study, the strength of adherence to traditional norms among Mongolian girls' such as returning to pastoral lands which raised the notion of adaptive response to challenging circumstances might be explored more fully in future studies in later time frames. A future study of participants' lifepaths can illuminate their aspirations, subjective experiences, and the objective opportunities available to them-particularly regarding how small business development among Mongolian youth may foster cultural preservation, as well as how Han youth navigate the processes and implications of urbanization.

Future research focusing on rural girls is needed to determine whether participation in TVET effectively fosters upward social mobility, including improvements in their social class standing over time. While recent work by Seeberg (2024) offers updates on this subject, further investigation into the experiences of ethnic minority girls and diverse populations is essential to better understand the long-term socio-economic impact of TVET on rural girls' life trajectories.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Appendix A

Interview Questions

I**. In what ways the local context, structural changes interacting with TVET impact…***

1. Where is your family home located? 'where you're your parents now When and Why did you move to the city?
2. What kind of work do your parents do? And what is the main source of your family income?
3. In your home community, was there much illness, hunger, illiteracy, variety of work or what did most adults do?
4. What kinds of jobs are available in job market? How does the perceived employment opportunities influence your choice? Does it influence what you are studying now?
5. Do you feel discrimination in urban environment against you?
6. Does TVET schooling help you adjust to city life better?
7. What is your hukou? Did hukou affect your choice of school?

II. In what ways gendered cultural norms interacting with TVET expands or limit ….

8. What work do men do and what work do women do in your family?
9. Who makes decisions on going school or work in your family? Did you help make decisions?
10. Do you have brothers? Are they in school? What year educational attainment?
11. What do they do now? Do your parents support their schooling more? .If your parents do or did 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?
12. Are boys or girls smarter in school? Will girls or boys make good leaders? Are boys and girls treat differently in school?
13. do you want to get married? Soon or later?
14. Do you have plans to raise your children? How many children do you want to have? what kind of life you hope for your future children?
15. Have or will your parents arranged marriage for you?
16. Will you support your parents in their old age?
17. Since in school, Are you braver or more able to tell others what you want? Are your parents more willing to listen to your opinions?

III. How did you experience school and what impact did it have…

18. do/did you enjoy your schooling? What do/did you like best or very much about life while in school?
19. Have/did you learned how to make & keep friends? How friendly and helpful is/was the social environment?
20. Do/did you sleep well at school or do you worry a lot? Are or were you lonely in school?

21. Are/were you ill a lot at school?
22. How was/is your relationship with teachers? Teacher role model? Do/did the teachers care about you as a person [guanxin ni]?
23. What did you learn in school that you value? Your Courses?
24. What is your major? What were the majors available for you to choose from?
25. Did you learn a lot about Mongolian/Han culture, history and society in school and are you satisfied with what you learned?
26. Which schoolyear did you start to study English and for how many years
27. Do you speak both Han and Mongolian? Did you choose to study in Han track or Mongolian track? Why did you make such decision?
28. Does your language fluency affect your academic performance?
29. Were you aware of any subsidy policy? Are the policy clear and open to all the people?
30. Did you receive subsidizes to attend this school? Does it help?
31. Do you feel safe living in school? Are you afraid of teachers? Any sexual harassment-verbal or physically?
32. Were there many drop-outs and troublemakers in your school?
33. Do you see any differences in opportunity and achievement in the future between those who have graduated from an academic versus a vocational-technical, (Mongolian language track or Han language track) TVE II/senior secondary school? Between rural and urban (Mongolian and Han) people?
34. Is/was there an internship in last year of school? What have you heard about it being/ was it useful, will/did you learn a lot about the kind of work you will/have been doing?
35. Do you think your vocational schooling provides you with good opportunities to build a good life in the future?
36. Do you think your life will be different from your parents' life? Do you experience fewer deprivations

- prevalence illness,
- needless hunger,
- premature mortality,
- unceasing illiteracy,
- social exclusion,
- economic insecurity,

IV. What do you imagine and want your future to be (aspiration)

38. What work have you been doing you do after TVE II/III
39. Where do you want to live in future, in 5 years? Will you return to the village/muqu/province?
40. What kind of life do you want to live in the far future?
41. Do you feel that you can go out and make a life

APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter

IRB Level I, category 1/2 approval for Protocol application #18-517 – please retain this email for your records

From: Research Compliance research

Sent: Monday, January 28, 2019 4:07 PM

To: Seeberg, Vilma vseeberg@kent.edu

Cc: Ya Na, yna2@kent.edu

Subject: IRB Level I, category 1/2 approval for Protocol application #18-517 –

please retain this email for your records

RE: Protocol #18-517 – entitled "Schooling of Girls from Marginalized

Backgrounds in China"

We have assigned your application the following IRB number: 18-517. Please

reference this number when corresponding with our office regarding your application.

The Kent State University Institutional Review Board has reviewed and

approved your Application for Approval to Use Human Research Participants as

Level I/Exempt from Annual Review research. This approval is good for 3 years from

the date of approval. Your research project involves minimal risk to human subjects

and meets the criteria for the following category of exemption under federal

regulations:

Exemption 1: Educational Settings

This application was approved on January 28, 2019.

Submission of annual review reports is not required for Level 1/Exempt projects. We

do NOT stamp Level I protocol consent documents.

For compliance with:

DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects (Title 45 part 46), subparts A, B, C, D & E

If any modifications are made in research design, methodology, or procedures that increase the risks to subjects or include activities that do not fall within the approved exemption category, those modifications must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please contact an IRB discipline-specific reviewer or the Office of Research Compliance to discuss any changes and whether a new application must be submitted. Visit our website for modification forms.

Kent State University has a Federal Wide Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP); FWA Number 00001853.

To search for funding opportunities, please sign up for a free Pivot account at http://pivot.cos.com/funding_main.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us at researchcompliance@kent.edu or by phone at 330-672-2704 or 330-672-8058.

Respectfully,

Kent State University Office of Research Compliance

224 Cartwright Hall | fax 330.672.2658

John McDaniel | IRB Chair | 330.672.0802 | jmcdani5@kent.edu

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