



Implicit Gender Inequality in Secondary School Textbooks Under a Confucianism Educational Idea Value

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Abstract. Gender inequality is still considered one of the major social issues in China. While gender inequality in the Chinese education system has been mitigated to some extent, it can still be observed in authoritative teaching materials such as textbooks, hindering the development of students' gender awareness. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to investigate how gender inequality manifests itself in secondary school textbooks in the context of the traditional idea of value in modern China. Gender stereotypes in terms of occupational roles and personality, and gender bias against the contribution and ability of female characters are all identified in the English, History and Mathematics textbooks examined. On this basis, this paper finds that the implicit gender inequality in textbooks can be attributed to the bias imbued in Confucianism—one of the traditional cultural value systems in China. Finally, after negative impacts on students are identified, this paper suggests possible improvements to gender inequality in textbooks.

Keywords: Gender inequality · Secondary school textbooks · Confucianism

1 Introduction

Despite the government's attempt to promote a 'gender-equal' society, gender inequality still manifests itself in multiple dimensions of our lives [1]. Although mixed evidence suggests that the gender inequality in China's education system has become less severe, implicit biases can still be found in textbooks [2]. Regarded as authoritative learning materials, textbooks not only play the role of delivering knowledge, but they also serve to impart values as well as appropriate ways of behaving [3]. Specifically, the socio-cultural contents in textbooks, including those related to gender norms, may serve to reinforce prevailing values and beliefs [4]. According to the study of Fang and Zhang et al., however, gender inequality exists in the expression of gender awareness in textbook texts, which can be exemplified by gender stereotypes, gender bias and unconscious gender discrimination [5, 6]. Considering the significant role which textbooks play in helping students form gender awareness and attitudes toward gender equality, changes must be made. Asserted to Fang, despite the complexity of such an issue, one can try to understand its root by looking at the traditional cultural value systems underlie, and in a Chinese context, Confucianism ought to be studied [5]. Through ethical doctrine and rules of

conduct, Confucianism sheds light on how people should live, and many of its classic Confucian values are still applicable today [5]. However, it is an indisputable fact that the gender biases it imbues have entrenched in the Chinese education system, enhancing gender stereotypes that bleed into school and even the workplace [5]. So far, many studies have been conducted to identify gender stereotypes and gender bias in textbooks of multiple curriculums. However, there is relatively less study which examines how Chinese traditional cultural value systems influence textbook design in terms of gender awareness. More specifically, the correlation between Confucianism educational idea value and the gender inequality observed in textbooks appears to be thinly researched. In this vein, this paper aims to examine how gender inequality in the expression of gender awareness manifests itself in secondary school textbooks texts. On this basis, it will go on to probe whether such inequality arises under a Confucianism educational idea value. A series of secondary school textbooks will be investigated, covering the curriculum of English, History and Mathematics. Meanwhile, the core values of Confucianism will be analysed in detail, serving to explain the gender inequality observed in the textbooks. Ultimately, after potential consequences on secondary school students are identified, this paper will suggest approaches for improving gender inequality in textbooks.

2 Gender Inequality in Chinese Secondary School Textbooks

This section seeks to identify implicit gender inequality in the textbook design of Chinese secondary schools. To obtain a more comprehensive picture, multiple curriculums, including English, History and Mathematics are covered.

2.1 Gender Stereotypes in English Textbooks

In the secondary school English textbooks investigated, stereotypical gender depictions in terms of social/occupational roles and personalities have been identified. In their study which focuses on secondary school English textbooks in Jiangsu Province, Zhang et al. investigate the proportion of textual occurrences of both sexes [6]. Interestingly, although the textual depiction of gender pronouns seems to be arranged in a balanced manner, gender bias can still be observed when looking into gendered words suggesting familial roles [6]. Female familial roles such as ‘mother’ and ‘aunt’ exceed male familial roles by a large margin—when the main characters (secondary school students) need suggestions or simply an elder who is willing to listen, they tend to turn to their mothers or aunts [6]. Meanwhile, while both male and female characters are involved in housework, a distinct task allocation can be observed: males often shoulder the responsibility of house repairing and wall painting, whereas females are depicted in cooking and cleaning [6]. As asserted by Zhang et al., ‘Although domestic tasks are not gender-exclusive, there are still evident gender tendencies’ [6]. In the same vein, according to Jiang, sentences like ‘Mothers get up early to clean, while fathers get up early to read books and newspapers’ also appear frequently in English textbooks [7]. From the above description and the type of domestic work depicted, one can observe the underlying implication that those ‘routine’ housework is still the responsibility of women. Additionally, judging by the fact that most familial roles are assigned to female characters, it can be seen that females

in the surveyed textbook are to some extent, confined in the familial context. In the eyes of the textbook designers, there is no need to assign any extra social role for adult females other than familial roles.

In terms of occupations, no significant difference in the number of occupational roles has been detected in secondary school English textbooks of Jiangsu Province [6]. Nevertheless, gender stereotypes are salient regarding the types of occupations portrayed for males and females. All physical-demanding occupations are assigned to males, even more so, sports-related occupations such as football player and swimming coach are ‘male preserves’ [2]. Not stopping there, Zhang et al. took a further step by examining role models featured in the textbook [6]. While 22 male role models in multiple spheres are mentioned, only 7 female role models are included [6]. Interestingly, when showing the biography of the only female scientist mentioned: Marie Curie, the description of her marriage and family life is almost the same length as that of her scientific achievement [6]. In contrast, the biography of a male scientist, Yuan longping is purely focused on his achievement [6]. This corresponds with the unbalanced male/female familial roles mentioned previously. Women, whether they have a career or not, whether they are successful in their career or not, their identities are always tightly attached to their marriages and families that it overshadows everything else.

Moreover, a tendency of depicting female characters as weak and timid, and male characters as strong and brave can be observed. In an article in textbook 7B, two girls heard strange whispers from a bush and were so ‘afraid’ that they ‘fled’, only to bump into their male classmate, who ‘bravely’ found the bush and figured out that the whispers came from a kitten [6]. Repeated depictions of this kind undoubtedly hint that, males and females are supposed to behave in a certain way. Women are born to be quiet, weak, and timid whereas men should be outgoing, strong, and brave. Any inconsistency with such descriptions is considered as ‘exceptions.’

2.2 Gender Bias in History Textbooks

This section looks into gender bias and inequality in history textbooks in terms of textual occurrence, the narrative approach applied and character contributions. In the study conducted by Shi, a radically unbalanced sex ratio was observed in all 18 secondary school history textbooks studied [8]. This can be exemplified by the series of textbooks published by People’s Education Press. While a total of 536 males are depicted, only 45 female characters are included. Worse still, most of these 45 female characters only serve as supporting roles [8]. According to Shi, contrary to male characters, the majority of females are narrated in an indirect way—their existence in the text is to help develop a story or set off the male protagonist. A notable example would be the depiction of concubine Yang: Emperor Tang Xuanzong was obsessed with concubine Yang, and from then on, he has been neglecting the imperial government [8]. Not only her existence was included to set off the emperor, but judging from how she was depicted, one can also detect a trace of criticism between the lines. Examples of such depictions abound. Concubines of multiple dynasties are portrayed in a concise yet negative way, chained to the implication that due to their existence, those emperors govern countries poorly. On the other hand, even when these females are narrated directly as the protagonist, more often than not, they serve to elicit important events or policy changes initiated by male.

This can be exemplified by the story of Tiying saving her father. Although the story described how Tiying exerted herself to convince Emperor Wen to abolish flesh torture, the emphasis of the story was to show how introspective and benevolent the emperor is, and more importantly, to introduce the advanced policy change [8]. In this vein, it can be seen that not only females are narrated as supporting roles, but their contributions are also often neglected. There are, however, times when there are clear indications of female characters' contribution. The irony is that many of these are related to marriage—to maintain peace with minority countries, noble women, often princesses, are sent to marry these rulers. One can thus observe what these History and English textbooks lies in common when it comes to female character depiction—the 'marital' value of women outweighs the value of their ability as individuals.

2.3 Unconscious Gender Discrimination in Mathematics Textbooks

It would be naïve to assume that gender inequality only prevails in liberal arts textbooks. According to Pan et al., gender discrimination is even more prevalent in Chinese science textbooks [9]. In their study of secondary school mathematics textbooks, gender bias and stereotypes are observed in multiple areas, including textual occurrence, occupation, and activities associated. In the series of mathematics textbooks published by People's Education Press, a total of 161 gender characters are depicted in texts, of which 71.42% are male and 28.58% are female [9]. Striking as the data is, as asserted by Pan et al., the imbalance of sex ratio is even more obvious in pictures—of all illustrations, the ratio of 'all female characters' accounts for less than one-third of that of 'all male characters' [9]. More alarmingly, in the textbook of grade eight, female character only appeared once in a male/female-coexist-illustration and is depicted as a 'housewife' [9]. Similar to what has been observed in the English textbooks mentioned previously, here the familial role of female is again overly emphasized. Nevertheless, it is also evident that compared to English textbooks, the occurrence of female characters is much lower in Mathematics textbooks.

In terms of occupation, the study of Sun shows that adult males are depicted in thirteen types of occupational roles, which can be exemplified by mathematicians, national leaders, businessmen and so forth [10]. Lying in sharp contrast, adult females are illustrated only in two types of occupational roles—typists and ballerinas [10]. Additionally, male and female students tend to play different roles in mathematical activities. Male students often shoulder the role of conducting complicated experiments. Female students are usually assigned with basic tasks, such as measurement, questionnaire design, and data collection [9]. By allocating simple tasks to female characters, such depiction inevitably puts females in a secondary, supporting role, emphasizing male dominance in mathematical activities. In a context of a mathematics textbook, this undoubtedly implies females' lack of competency in math compared to males. This also corresponds with the gender disparity in occupation. While men can pursue careers related to mathematics and finance, becoming mathematicians or businessmen, women are confined to artistic work or occupations requiring basic skills. Female mathematicians or women working in scientific fields are highly underrepresented. Judging from the obvious gender disparity in occupation and mathematical activity allocation, one can observe the

underlying implication present in secondary school mathematics textbooks that math is again a ‘male preserve.’

3 The Influence of Confucianism on Gender Inequality in Textbooks

After implicit gender inequality is identified in secondary school textbooks of multiple curriculums, this section will probe how Confucianism educational idea value plays a part in the content design of these textbooks in terms of gender awareness. Three Confucian core values are investigated in detail.

3.1 The Lower Position of Women in Relation to Men

Emerging from a patriarchal culture, Confucianism advocates the superiority of men in all circumstances, inevitably placing women far below men in the social hierarchy. This, perhaps, is most evident in the beliefs of the ‘Five Relationships’ and the ‘Three Bonds.’ While the ‘Five Relationships’ elaborates on social relationships including that between ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife; the ‘Three Bonds’ serves as the complement of the Five Relationships [11]. It claims that the ruler has definite power over the subject, the father has definite power over the son, and the husband has definite power over the wife [11]. Under such so-called ‘natural order’, females have no choice but to be obedient and play a submissive role throughout their lives. When she is a child, she obeys her father; when she becomes a wife, she obeys her husband. Even when her father and husband pass away, she is not relieved from male control—as now she must obey her son, the very child she brought up [11]. One great synthesizer of Confucianism Zhu Xi claims ‘To do wrong is unbecoming to a wife, and to do good is also unbecoming to a wife, a woman is only to be obedient to what is proper’ [12]. In Zhu’s view, women’s intelligence, virtue, let alone individualities are insignificant as long as they stay obedient and serve as the dutiful assistant of men. Additionally, Dong Zhongshu—the Han Confucian master—took a further step by combining Confucianism with Taoist cosmology. He regards men as ‘yang’, which is characterized as powerful and strong and women as ‘yin’, which is passive and frail [13]. As stated by Dong Zhongshu: ‘Yang leads, yin acts in concert. Males act, females follow’. In this sense, one can see that under the traditional Confucian view, women are born to follow and assist men, they are in no place to refute a man’s decision, let alone have the luxury of taking a dominant role in decision-making.

This partially explains the gender inequality observed in the History textbook mentioned. Although there is no clear indication in the textbook that women are to obey and assist men, one can observe the trace of Confucian values imbued. For example, female characters are narrated indirectly to set off male protagonists, and their acts and contributions are depicted only to elicit policy changes initiated by males. In the same vein, the allocation of experiment tasks featured in Mathematics textbooks also reflects the ‘natural order’ in Confucianism, that male students shoulder the dominant role of conducting experiment while female students serve as ‘assistants’, conducting simple tasks of questionnaire distribution and data allocation.

3.2 Women's Lack of Social Roles

Other than the lower position of women in relation to men, another controversial feature in Confucian values would be the overly emphasized familial role of women and their lack of social roles. In her book 'Nüjie' (Lessons for Women), the female Confucian thinker—Ban Zhao advocates the importance of educating woman [12]. Nevertheless, the so-called 'education' is more of a guidance on how women can fulfil their duty as dedicated wives and kind mothers. The book stresses women's duty towards their families, reinforcing the functional familial roles of women as daughters, wives, and mothers [12]. This also corresponds with the traditional notion of 'nei (internal) and wai (external)' in Confucianism, where man is responsible for dealing with the external world—the public, while woman only caters to her family [14]. Under such belief, women are chained to household management and are denied access to the outside world (wai) [5]. More importantly, their possibility of being educated like their male counterparts is also deprived as literary learning is seen as a 'male preserve'. While men can be fully educated and pursue their goals in any occupation, women are only allowed to learn how to cater for the family [15]. Furthermore, according to the Confucian thinker ZhangDai, 'A woman's virtue is to be lack of talent'. Conversely, if a woman is too successful in her career, she would be rendered as without virtue [16]. Society as a whole, discourages a woman from obtaining talents, let alone having a career of her own. Under such circumstances, women have no choice but to accept their insignificant role in society, and fully devote themselves to household management.

The impact of such a belief is two-fold. On the one hand, this contributes to the 'over-stressing' familial role women take in textbooks. As has been mentioned in the previous section, in both English and Mathematics textbooks discussed, female characters are often rid of their individuality and portrayed as mere 'familial roles' chained to household management and housework. In both texts and illustrations, they tend to appear as caring mothers and dutiful wives with aprons on and mops in hand, serving as the agent for care and tidiness. As if their one and only purpose is to serve the family. On the other hand, it also explains why in some textbooks, fewer occupational roles with high knowledge requirements are assigned to female characters—it is possible that the perception that women are less-educated still echoes in the minds of textbook designers.

3.3 Advocating the Notion of Gentle Femininity

The notion of gentle femininity is also frequently emphasized in Confucian values. Traits such as quiet, docile, gentle, compliant, and submissive are encouraged. For instance, the Book of Rites illustrates in detail how girls are trained at each stage [17]. When they reach the age of ten, girls are required to learn to behave in a mild-mannered and obedient way and to deliver pleasing speech [17]. This can also be exemplified by the description of the first caregiver of the infant prince in 'Liji'. As stated in the book, an ideal caregiver should be kind, gentle, careful, and most importantly, not talkative [17]. To put in a concise manner, a 'porcelain doll' is exactly what Confucianism expects a woman to be.

Consequently, still under the influence of gentle femininity and the expectation of static 'porcelain dolls', it came as no surprise that most physically demanding, and sport-related occupational roles are assigned exclusively to males in the English textbooks

mentioned. Furthermore, as the connotation of gentle femininity changes over time, it is sometimes interpreted as ‘delicate’ ‘fragile’ and even ‘frail’, implicitly affecting how female characters’ personalities are portrayed. A notable example would be the reading of the English textbook discussed. Through the depiction of female characters’ reaction toward a strange noise, one can observe the clear indication that girls are ‘timid’ and ‘weak’, easily scared and are always in need of male protection.

4 Consequences and Possible Improvements of Gender Inequality in Textbooks

4.1 Consequences Entailed by Gender Inequality in Textbooks

Gender inequality in textbooks entails consequences for both female and male students, posing a negative impact on multiple aspects of their lives. To begin with, it disrupts the development of students’ gender awareness. According to Jiang, while gender awareness allows students to understand social phenomena and ultimately realize gender equality, gender stereotypes mislead students into believing that some behaviours and personality traits of individuals are attributes of gender [7]. For instance, if most female characters in the textbook are depicted as timid and quiet, students might automatically associate timidity and quietness as the characteristics of ‘female’. Similarly, if most male characters are portrayed as sports-lovers and explorers, students would acquiesce to the fact that ‘male’ ought to be active, brave, and athletic. When students find their personality, behaviour, and habits different from the stereotypical image of ‘male’ and ‘female’, they would start to question their identity, and ultimately lead to the denial of their uniqueness as individuals. Such rigid interpretation of gender, once imbued in students’ minds, might force them to regulate their behaviours to conform to social expectations, to fit into the role they are ‘supposed’ to play. Ultimately, a vicious cycle is formed as more ‘gender role models’ are produced to reinforce the pre-existing gender stereotypes. Simply put, by no means would stereotypical depictions of gender roles be conducive to students’ character development, let alone social progress.

In addition, as female values are often neglected or wrongly presented in textbooks, students, especially female students might obtain a false impression that men are superior to women. A notable example would be the allocation of task and occupational roles featured in the Mathematics textbooks mentioned. In stressing male students’ dominant role in experiments, the ability of female students is inevitably denied. Meanwhile, in depicting all mathematicians as male, the textbook puts females in an inferior position in terms of Math learning. Consequently, the underlying mental cue for female students is that as females, they are born with ‘biological disadvantages’ in Mathematics that they are meant to be less capable than their male counterparts when it comes to Math learning [10]. Such mental cue weakens their self-confidence, compromises their engagement in the subsequent Math learning and eventually leads to their poor performance in mathematics, creating a vicious cycle. Worse still, the lack of self-confidence might shadow a woman throughout her life from school to the workplace, eventually leading to the under-represented female role in management boards [10].

Furthermore, the career choice of students is largely affected. Since students often see textbook characters of their same gender as role models, consequently, when there

are a limited number of occupational roles assigned to female characters, female students might also confine themselves to the ‘feminine occupations’ portrayed such as dancers, nurses, and teachers. Even when they are interested in certain occupations like mathematician, engineer, or football player, due to the stereotypical perception that these are ‘occupations for males’, they might eventually conform to social expectations and decline from pursuing their dream jobs [9]. Additionally, as has been mentioned previously, the negative impact of textbook gender stereotypes is two-fold. Aside from female students, male students are also under pressure in terms of occupation choice. When they display interest in artistic work, they are often met with waves of objections and teasing, suggesting that they are not ‘man enough’.

4.2 Suggestions for Correcting Gender Inequality in Textbooks

To address gender inequality in textbooks, attention is needed from textbook designers, authorities, publishers, as well as teachers. Asserted by Zhang et al., to counter stereotypical depictions of gender, a feasible approach would be the reconstruction of gender acts [6]. As vehicles for developing gender awareness, if textbooks can be used to reinforce gender stereotypes, they can also be used to break these stereotypes [6]. Therefore, it is textbook designers’ responsibility to disrupt conventional perceptions about characteristics, behaviours and occupations associated with males and females. For instance, female characters can be portrayed as adventurous, active, and competitive, having a great passion for sports and experiments, whereas male characters can be depicted as compassionate, sensitive, and interested in arts and cooking. Additionally, in terms of occupational roles, female characters ought to take more ‘male-dominant’ jobs such as doctors, football players, pilots, engineers, and mathematicians, whereas male characters can work as nurses and ballet dancers. Nevertheless, many fear that such an intentional approach would inversely generate a new form of gender stereotype. Hence, perhaps it would be preferable to depict both male and female characters with common traits and apply more gender-neutral language [9]. This can be exemplified by portraying a portion of characters—with a balanced sex ratio—as timid and introverted, while portraying another group as bold and outgoing.

However, as stated by Sun, most stereotypical gender depictions are not included in Mathematics textbooks on purpose, but rather, they are undetected by designers who are mostly male and deeply affected by gender stereotypes [10]. In this sense, a further step can be taken by recruiting more female textbook designers, especially in the compilation of Science and Mathematics textbooks. Moreover, publishers, along with educational authorities should play an active role in regulation and monitoring. For example, in Chile, experts in gender studies are hired to assess the content of textbooks [10]. More specifically, they investigate how women are depicted and whether there exists potential gender bias. If the textbooks fail to comply with regulations, revision is required, and the publishers would be penalised [10].

Finally, teachers could also contribute to combating gender bias. Through training, teachers can strengthen their awareness and sensitivity toward gender equality, obtaining sufficient knowledge to identify potential stereotypical gender depictions in textbooks. Serving as the last line of defence against gender bias, they should employ a ‘gender lens’ to reflect on the textbook before lectures are delivered. In the case of gender bias and

stereotypes detected in books, teachers are responsible for applying different approaches to educate students about the significance of gender equality. For instance, either through group discussion or writing, teachers can encourage students to share their opinions on the matter or offer real-life examples of gender bias which they have encountered. A more entertaining approach would be organizing a ‘detective game’, in which students are encouraged to detect all potential gender biases in textbooks [10]. In addition, it is also notable that teachers must give equal attention and expectation to male and female students in all curriculums. Most importantly, by no means should a teacher associate poor academic performance with gender attributes and pass such attributional attitudes to students [10].

5 Conclusion

This paper investigated how gender inequality in secondary school textbooks arises under a Confucianism educational idea value. In all textbooks discussed, gender inequality is identified, manifesting itself in the forms of gender stereotypes, gender bias and gender discrimination. The implication that females ought to be timid and weak can be observed. In addition, female characters are either portrayed as mere ‘familial roles’—who are responsible for housework or be assigned ‘feminine occupations.’ Moreover, most of the role models mentioned are male, with females serving as supporting roles. All these externalized manifestations can be corresponded to the core values of Confucianism. In other words, the gender bias and stereotypes imbued in Confucianism have seeped into these textbooks, hindering the development of students’ gender awareness. In this sense, this paper also offers several suggestions for improving gender inequality in textbooks, including the reconstruction of gender acts, recruitment of more female textbook designers and systematic training for teachers in terms of sensitivity towards gender equality. This study has provided insights into how Confucianism educational idea value affects the expression of gender awareness in textbook texts, contributing to the thinly researched area of the relationship between Confucianism and gender inequality in textbooks. The limitation of this study is that the selected English, History and Mathematics textbooks are published by different publishers in multiple provinces. Consequently, comparisons cannot be properly conducted due to the multiple variables involved. In the future study perhaps different subject textbooks from the same publishers should be examined and compared to obtain a more comprehensive picture. Moreover, whether other ancient traditional cultural value systems in China, such as Daoism and Legalism, pose any impact on textbook design should also be investigated in detail.

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