

Original Paper

Gendered Worlds in a Chinese University English Textbook

Series: Balance in Numbers, Stereotypes in Substance

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Abstract

Textbooks are rarely neutral artefacts. The choices their compilers make about who appears, who speaks first and which work is worth doing carry values that reach learners alongside the language being taught. Research on gender in EFL materials has concentrated heavily on primary and secondary schooling, leaving the textbooks used by English majors – students who will largely become the next generation of teachers and materials writers – comparatively unexamined. This article reports an analysis of a four-volume series published in China between 2020 and 2021, Core Curriculum: Comprehensive English, combining frequency counts subjected to chi-square testing with qualitative coding of activities, evaluative adjectives and occupations. Three findings stand out. First, balance has been reached on several measures: pictures are close to parity (76 female, 74 male), the gender of source-text authors does not differ significantly, and men are named before women no more often than the reverse in the reading passages. Second, older habits survive elsewhere: male figures outnumber female ones by 316 to 203, men hold 109 of the 131 occupations recorded, and 219 instances of “he” or “man” are used generically. Third, the qualitative picture is not uniform, since the series contains women who are bold, ambitious and heroic and men who are emotional. We read such contradictions as a symptom of a society in which women’s public presence has grown faster than the domestic arrangements and status perceptions that surround them.

Keywords

gender ideology, textbook analysis, English majors, China, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

1.1 *Why the Wording of a Textbook Matters*

What a language textbook says about men and women does not stay inside the classroom. Curriculum documents in China require teaching materials to cultivate values as well as skills, which means that the people, jobs and relationships depicted in a coursebook are read by students as examples of how the world is or ought to be organised. Compilers work from such documents and from their own professional judgement, so a series inevitably carries their assumptions (Tomlinson, 2012). Because the result appears in print under the imprint of a major publisher, teachers and students tend to treat it as reliable and rarely question its content (Lee & Collins, 2008).

The consequences of repeating the same picture are cumulative. A single sentence describing a nurse as a woman or a boss as a man is trivial; a hundred such sentences establish an expectation that shapes how readers see themselves and others (Gouvias & Alexopoulos, 2018). For young adults whose professional identities are still forming, exposure to a narrow range of gendered possibilities can narrow the range of futures they imagine for themselves, an effect that runs through gender socialisation rather than through any single lesson (Stockard, 2006). Since such effects are carried by wording and not only by content, the study reported here treats vocabulary, order of mention and job assignment as the relevant evidence, in the tradition of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Paltridge, 2022).

1.2 *The Chinese Case and the Research Questions*

China offers an unusually clear test of whether policy commitments reach the printed page. Legal equality has been on the statute book since the 1950 Marriage Law, and successive enactments have secured women's access to schooling, to inheritance and to public employment (Lee, 2012); later, the national programme for women's development set targets across education and work. Whether these commitments have filtered down into the sentences that 400 million English learners read (Wei & Su, 2012) is an empirical question.

University materials deserve particular attention. Studies of gender in Chinese textbooks have clustered at primary and secondary level, and the few that examine higher education seldom look at English-major series (Nagatomo, 2010). Yet English majors occupy a strategic position: most of them will teach, translate or write materials, so whatever view of gender a coursebook conveys is likely to be reproduced by them in turn, and a series that mixes images of professional women with images of women at the kitchen sink offers its readers a contradictory inheritance. The four-volume *Core Curriculum: Comprehensive English* (hereafter CCCE) was therefore examined to answer three questions:

1. How often do female and male figures appear in CCCE, and in what proportions?
2. How are the two genders represented, in terms of verbal description and social placement?
3. What conception of gender do these patterns imply?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Stereotypes, Bias and the Grammar of Default Masculinity*

Stereotypes about women and men work in two registers. Descriptively, they record what people are assumed to be like, with men expected to display agency – initiative, autonomy, rationality – and women expected to display communality, meaning attentiveness to others and emotional responsiveness (Heilman, 2012). Prescriptively, they specify what each sex ought to be, and these expectations are absorbed early and defended tenaciously (Ellemers, 2018). A person who departs from them attracts disapproval not because of any act but because of a perceived mismatch between conduct and category (Koenig, 2018); this asymmetry, in which one gender enjoys a systematically easier passage through institutions, is what is meant by gender bias.

The vocabulary a material chooses is not incidental. Categories embedded in a language shape how its speakers construe the world (Boroditsky, 2011), and evaluation is carried chiefly by lexical choices, among which adjectives are the most transparent marker of the writer's stance (Thompson & Hunston, 2000). Bias therefore leaves traces in language. The most conspicuous is the generic masculine, the use of "he" or "man" for people of either sex, which installs the male as the unmarked human and the female as a departure from it (Kiesling, 2019). Less visible but equally telling are counting practices: a group that is mentioned half as often as another is quietly assigned half the importance, and a convention of naming men first in paired phrases establishes a hierarchy of salience that readers register without noticing (Lee, 2014).

2.2 *Previous Studies on Genre Ideologies in Textbooks*

Systematic work on gender in teaching materials dates to the middle of the twentieth century, when Child, Potter and Levine (1946) argued that the stories children read shape their conduct. The field acquired its standard instrument when Porreca (1984) examined fifteen ESL coursebooks for omission, order of mention, occupation, gendered nouns and adjectives, and generic usage, finding bias in every category and the widest gap in employment; most later studies, including this one, adapt her scheme.

Results since then have been uneven. Some studies document stark imbalance: Singaporean primary materials in which roughly seven characters in ten were male even though women formed half the population, with a matching occupational gap (Gupta & Yin, 1990); Australian coursebooks that avoided generic masculine forms yet still presented more male characters, always in first position (Lee & Collins, 2009); Ugandan secondary texts in which female figures accounted for barely a third of the total (Barton & Sakwa, 2012); and Turkish materials in which men monopolised prestigious jobs while women received fewer descriptive adjectives, many of them unflattering (Söğüt, 2018). Yet the reverse also occurs. Demir and Yavuz (2017) found no evidence of inequality in Turkish ELT coursebooks, a result that sits awkwardly beside Söğüt's in a comparable setting, and in one Japanese university text female characters outnumbered male ones by 49 to 33 (Nagatomo, 2010). Since materials respond to the societies that produce them, uneven findings are to be expected, and each national context needs its own evidence.

Chinese evidence remains thin. Guangzhou primary materials were found to give men 60.93% of illustrated figures and 61.64% of textual ones, with 36 male jobs against 15 female (Xiong, He & Li, 2017); a corpus study of college English books counted female pronouns less than half as often as male ones, 1187 against 2581 (Wang, 2016). The most encouraging sign comes from Hong Kong, where a comparison of older and newer secondary series showed a shift towards inclusive wording and a broader range of female activity (Lee & Collins, 2008).

2.3 Research Gap

Two omissions persist. Non-Western materials are underrepresented in the literature relative to their classroom reach, and within that literature the university years are neglected: an English major may spend four years with a coursebook series whose gender content has never been assessed. Since Chinese education policy has made equality a stated goal, the materials designed for those students are an appropriate place to check whether the goal has travelled from document to page.

3. Method

3.1 Materials

Four volumes of CCCE, issued by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press between 2020 and 2021, formed the corpus (Table 1). The series was chosen because *Comprehensive English* is a required course for English majors in Chinese universities, because the publisher is among the most established in the field, and because the series was the most recent authoritative set available in complete form when the study began. Each volume contains ten units, and each unit pairs a Text A with a Text B on a shared theme, which provided a consistent unit of analysis across all four books.

Table 1. Description of the Four Volumes

Volume	Intended cohort	Issued	Units	Pages
CCCE I	Year 1, term 1	May 2020	10	226
CCCE II	Year 1, term 2	Dec 2020	10	241
CCCE III	Year 2, term 1	Jun 2021	10	250
CCCE IV	Year 2, term 2	Aug 2021	10	249

3.2 Coding Scheme

Because the reading passages in CCCE are reprinted from published sources rather than written in-house, the analysis begins one step earlier than Porreca's model: the sex of each author was recorded, on the reasoning that editorial choices about whose writing to anthologise are themselves a form of representation. Co-authored pieces were credited author by author, and anonymous or institutional texts were grouped separately. Three further counts were then made. Human figures were tallied from the

passages and from the illustrations, with a named character counted once however often it recurred and illustrations admitted only where the figure could be identified as male or female. Generic nouns such as “boys” or “mothers”, which refer to a category rather than a person, were also recorded.

Two further measures target usage rather than population. Order of mention was coded whenever both sexes appeared in one phrase, normally joined by “and” or “or”, since the habit of naming men first signals precedence. Generic masculine usage was coded wherever “he”, “his”, “him”, “man” or “men” referred to people in general, the construction that treats one sex as representative of both (Porreca, 1984; Kiesling, 2019).

The qualitative strand follows the categories proposed by Zhang et al. (2022) for activity types, distinguishing sport, study, routine daily tasks, arts and leisure, family life, social life and verbal actions, with a residual class for everything else. Evaluation was approached through adjectives in predicative and attributive position, since adjectives carry an explicit evaluative charge and are easy to isolate; they were sorted into the eleven groups used by Barton and Sakwa (2012), of which seven occurred in the corpus – appearance, intellect and education, emotionality, physical condition, personality, age, and reputation. Occupations were coded separately because the jobs a coursebook allows each sex are among the most consequential signals it sends about adult life. Guo (2023) first explored this analytical framework in her master’s thesis, upon which the present study is built.

3.3 Procedure

The volumes were scanned, checked against the printed pages and imported into NVivo. Counts of the two sexes, of order of mention and of generic usage were compiled first, with chi-square tests used to establish whether the imbalances observed were larger than sampling variation would produce. Activities, adjectives and occupations were then coded and cross-tabulated by gender. Interpretation followed deductively: an even distribution was read as equality, a quantitative skew as bias, and a qualitative skew in what each sex is shown doing or being as stereotype. All coding was performed manually; a second coder independently checked a sample of the material, and disagreements were resolved by discussion.

4. Findings

4.1 Frequency of Appearances

Table 2. Frequency of Female and Male Presence

Indicator	Female	Male	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Authors of source texts	33 (38.75%)	48 (58.75%)	2.778	0.096
Figures in reading	203 (38.34%)	316 (59.73%)	24.603	0.000**

passages

Figures	in	76 (50.67%)	74 (49.33%)	0.027	0.870
illustrations					
Generic nouns	in	88 (59.86%)	59 (40.14%)	5.721	0.017*
passages					

Note. df = 1 throughout. * $p < 0.05$, \p $p < 0.01$.

The authorship figures point to deliberate editorial care. Forty-eight men and thirty-three women supplied the anthologised passages, a ratio of roughly three to two, and the chi-square test returns a value too small to support any claim of preference ($\chi^2 = 2.778$, $p = 0.096$); no single volume deviates either. Because compilers had no control over who wrote the essays they selected, this balance is evidence of attention at the selection stage rather than of authorial habit, and it is precisely the kind of evidence that frameworks written for in-house texts cannot capture.

Characters inside the passages tell a different story. Of 519 figures, 316 are male and 203 female, a gap that is statistically robust ($\chi^2 = 24.603$, $p < 0.001$) and that leaves women conspicuously in the minority. The imbalance is unevenly distributed: the four volumes run at 1:0.63, 1:0.83, 1:0.43 and 1:0.72 (male to female), with the sharpest disparities in the first and third ($\chi^2 = 5.828$, $p < 0.05$; $\chi^2 = 20.485$, $p < 0.001$). Volume II is the exception, and notably it is also the only volume in which the sexes are equally represented among the authors. That coincidence is suggestive rather than conclusive, but it supports a practical recommendation: when compilers balance the sources, balance in the resulting cast of characters tends to follow.

Illustrations, by contrast, have reached parity. Seventy-six female and seventy-four male figures appear, a difference far too small to be meaningful ($\chi^2 = 0.027$, $p = 0.870$), and the finding marks real movement from older series in which men dominated the pictures as well as the prose.

Generic nouns reverse the usual pattern. References to women – eleven lexemes including *mother*, *wife*, *daughter* and *heroine* – occur 88 times against 59 uses of eleven male equivalents such as *father*, *husband* and *son*, giving women a clear majority ($\chi^2 = 5.721$, $p = 0.017$). The explanation lies in topic selection rather than in any preference for women as individuals: two early units address difficulties specific to women, one on a mother's running critique of her daughter's looks and one on dress codes that require women to wear high heels at work, while no unit is built around a problem defined as male. Women are thus discussed more often at the level of category while appearing less often as characters, a distinction that matters because the first treats women as a topic of commentary and the second as participants in events.

The picture becomes sharper when the exercises are counted separately, for they are the one part of a coursebook that the compilers write themselves rather than borrow. Here the female presence falls to 289 instances against 468 male ones (1:0.62; $\chi^2 = 42.326$, $p < 0.001$), and the gap is significant in every

single volume, from 61 against 112 in the first to 106 against 151 in the fourth. The contrast with the reading passages is instructive. In reprinted texts the imbalance can always be attributed to the wider culture from which the essays were drawn; in the exercises there is no such alibi, since every sentence was drafted in-house. That the deepest inequality in the series should appear precisely where the compilers had the most freedom suggests that the default in the writer's mind is still masculine, and that conscious attention was paid to selection but not to production.

Table 3. Female and Male Presence in the Exercises

Volume	Female	Male	Total	χ^2	p
CCCE I	61	112	173	15.035	0.000**
CCCE II	61	98	159	8.610	0.003**
CCCE III	61	106	167	12.126	0.000**
CCCE IV	106	151	258	8.202	0.004**
All volumes	289 (38.18%)	468 (61.69%)	757	42.326	0.000**

Note. df = 1 throughout. $p < 0.01$.

4.2 Order of Mention and the Generic Masculine

Order of mention is close to even. Women are named first in 17 paired phrases and men in 21, a difference that carries no statistical weight ($\chi^2 = 0.421$, $p = 0.516$). Given that earlier studies have repeatedly found a male-first convention (Porreca, 1984; Lee, 2014), its absence here is one of the clearest signs of change in the series.

Generic usage is where the older order persists. Two hundred and nineteen instances of “he” or “man” are used of people in general (Table 4), and their distribution is heavily concentrated: Volume IV alone accounts for 156, or 71.23% of the total, while the first three volumes contribute 28, 21 and 14.

Table 4. Generic Masculine Usage and Inclusive Alternatives

Form	Total	Distribution by volume
he / his / him / himself	150	IV 113; I 24; II 13; III 0
man / men	69	IV 43; III 14; II 8; I 4
Total generic masculine	219	IV 156; I 28; II 21; III 14
his/her, he/she	7	III 5; I 1; II 1; IV 0

The compilers were clearly aware of the problem. Seven inclusive forms appear, among them a

sentence in Volume I advising readers that humility entails “a confident yet modest sense of his/her own” limits alongside “an understanding of his/her limitations”. Seven against two hundred and nineteen is a gesture rather than a solution, and the concentration in Volume IV suggests that the issue simply went unnoticed during preparation of that book rather than that it was consciously resolved elsewhere.

4.3 Activities

Activity coding produced a significant overall difference ($\chi^2 = 5, p = 0.025$), with 105 male and 75 female activities recorded. The distribution by domain is set out in Table 4.

Table 5. Activity Domains by Sex in the Reading Passages

Domain	M : F ratio
Sport	1 : 0.63
Study	1 : 0.50
Arts and leisure	1 : 0.69
Daily routine	1 : 0.75
Social life	1 : 0.25
Verbal action	1 : 0.52
Family life	1 : 1.29
Others	1 : 1.11
All domains	105 : 75, 1 : 0.71 ($\chi^2 = 5, p = 0.025^*$)

Note. $^* p < 0.05$.

Men take part in more activities in every domain except family life and the residual category. Within family life women predominate, appearing as household cooks, cleaners and carers, whereas study, sport, cultural pursuits and, most sharply, social life are the preserve of men. The clearest reading of this pattern is a division of space: women are located in the home and men outside it, a division that echoes findings from Iran, Pakistan and Singapore (Hall, 2014; Qasim, 2018; Ahmad & Shah, 2019). Since the frequency with which a group is shown is itself a message about its importance (Stockdale, 2006), a reader is quietly told which sex belongs where before any judgement is made (Sunderland, 1992). The exercises soften the contrast without removing it: their totals are almost even, at 53 male and 57 female activities, and the only significant differences occur in family life, where women again predominate, and in the residual class, where men do. In family scenes women braid a daughter's hair while the men who appear buy baby clothes – domestic work for one sex and an errand for the other.

The residual class repeats the pattern noted above, placing men in fights and frauds.

The residual category carries its own message. Here men outnumber women, and the activities that place them there are violence and petty crime – striking a desk, brandishing a bat at an assailant, evading arrest, swindling money. The series thus holds men to two contradictory standards at once: initiative and mobility in the public world, and a propensity for aggression. Neither stereotype serves the learners who are expected to recognise themselves in these figures.

4.4 Evaluation

Adjectives divide almost evenly, 76 for men and 66 for women (1:0.87), and the overall test finds no significant difference. The distribution within categories is less even (Table 6): intellect and education, physical condition, reputation and personality all lean towards men, while age alone leans towards women.

Table 6. Evaluative Adjectives by Category

Category	Direction of difference
Appearance	even
Intellect and education	men favoured, significant
Emotionality	men marginally ahead (contrary to expectation)
Physical condition	men favoured, significant
Personality	men favoured, significant, positive and negative
Age	women marginally ahead
Reputation	men favoured, significant
Total	76 : 66, 1 : 0.87 (not significant)

What men are praised for is revealing. The adjectives cluster around mental capacity (clever, brilliant, ingenious), bodily strength (able-bodied, strong, sturdy) and standing (great, stupendous, respectable), a combination that matches Lee's (2014) observation that male characters attract attributes of strength, success and wealth. Men are also given a fuller personality profile, running from virtue to vice, and a varied character is easier to remember and to identify with than a uniform one (Lee, 2016).

The exercises repeat the distribution with one exception: 63 adjectives attach to men and 52 to women overall, but appearance is the single category that leans significantly towards women ($\chi^2 = 4.571$, $p < 0.05$), and the word carrying most of that weight is *little*, used seven times out of eleven in appearance adjectives, mostly in the phrase “the little girl”. A diminutive applied to female children with such regularity does more than describe a size; it rehearses a position. Against this, the fourth volume

describes men as *shy* and *sensitive*, adjectives usually reserved for women, which suggests that the compilers were willing to redistribute traits even while leaving occupations and activities largely untouched.

Two results run against the literature. Women are usually found to be described mainly in terms of looks, age and feeling, yet here men attract more emotion adjectives than women do, contradicting the finding that Indonesian materials never show men in emotional states (Julianti, Ikhsanudin & Sutapa, 2019). Volume II also presents female characters who are bold, ambitious and heroic. These are genuine departures, though they sit alongside a continued reluctance to let women occupy public roles, and one should not mistake a handful of vivid portraits for a general reversal.

4.5 Occupation

Occupations produce the sharpest disparity in the study. Of 131 roles, women hold 22 and men 109 (1:0.2; $\chi^2 = 57.779$, $p < 0.001$), a pattern consistent with the international literature (Barton & Sakwa, 2012; Hall, 2014; Zhang, Zhang & Cao, 2022) and with earlier Chinese findings (Xiong & He, 2016). Because career aspirations are formed partly through exposure to models, a coursebook that gives women one job for every five given to men is not simply describing a workplace; it is helping to design one (Van der Vleuten et al., 2016).

Table 7. Occupational Roles by Volume

Unit	Female	Male	M : F	χ^2	p
All volumes	four 22	109	1 : 0.20	57.779	0.000**
Volume I	2	33	1 : 0.06	27.457	0.000**
Volume II	7	17	1 : 0.41	4.167	0.041*
Volume III	8	33	1 : 0.24	15.244	0.000**
Volume IV	5	26	1 : 0.19	14.226	0.000**

The kinds of work differ as much as the quantities. Women appear as servants, maids, housewives and homemakers; men appear as sailors, surveyors, explorers and sea captains, and they alone occupy the highest positions of authority – president, prime minister, party leader – a finding that mirrors the scarcity of female leaders in Chinese teaching materials generally (Li, 2016). Volumes I and III show the widest gaps, with two women to thirty-three men and eight to thirty-three respectively.

The exercises show the same segregation at a smaller scale. Of 59 roles there, women hold 12 and men 47 (1:0.26; $\chi^2 = 20.763$, $p < 0.001$), concentrated in the third and fourth volumes, while the first two show no significant difference; and the division of labour is familiar, with women as secretaries and

receptionists and men as general managers, supervisors and presidents.

Change is nonetheless visible at the margins. Women drive vehicles and work as guards, occupations long coded as male, and they appear as pop stars, actresses and celebrities, that is, as figures commanding public attention in their own right rather than as members of a household. Such examples are few, but they show that the older equation of female with domestic has begun to loosen.

4.6 The Gender Ideology these Patterns Reveal

Set side by side, the quantitative and qualitative results do not point in a single direction, and it is the combination that is informative. On the side of progress stand the parity of authorship, the parity of illustration, the even handedness of order of mention, the presence of inclusive pronouns and the occasional forceful female character. On the side of continuity stand the missing third of the characters, the concentration of women in the home, the appearance-based adjectives of earlier studies and, above all, the occupational ratio of one to five.

This mixture corresponds to a specific social formation. Chinese women have entered education and employment in large numbers – enrolment through junior secondary is now effectively universal, removing an older form of selection between boys and girls (Yang, Huang & Liu, 2014) – and the expansion of opportunity after 1978 and the demographic effects of the one-child policy both widened the pool of families investing in daughters (Evans, 2021; Lee, 2012; Xu, Zhou & Xu, 2022), although for decades before that schooling was costly enough, and its returns uneven enough between sons and daughters, to reproduce older preferences (Connelly & Zheng, 2003; Hannum, Kong & Zhang, 2009). Labour force participation now exceeds the world average (Cooke, 2010), and the returns to women's qualifications have risen accordingly (Chi & Li, 2014). Yet advancement stalls later. Domestic responsibility, still allocated mainly to women, absorbs the time that promotion requires (Horta & Tang, 2023; Evans, 2021), and the manual demands of some occupations constitute a second barrier, the two effects reinforcing one another (Ji et al., 2017). A coursebook written in this environment will register both movements at once: women visible in public life, and women still at home.

One further observation concerns the relationship between the two halves of the evidence. Where compilers exercised editorial choice – which authors to anthologise, which illustrations to commission – the sexes are close to level; where they wrote quickly and without deliberation – sentences in the exercises, generic pronouns in a long final text – the older pattern reasserts itself. This asymmetry is worth registering because it locates the problem in habit rather than in intention. Nobody involved in producing these books is likely to have set out to give men five jobs for every one given to a woman. The outcome arose from a thousand small decisions made at speed, each individually unremarkable, which is exactly why guidelines and checklists, rather than declarations of principle, are the instruments most likely to change it.

The lesson for compilers is that stereotypes rarely announce themselves. They survive as accumulated small choices – a pronoun left unrevised, a job assigned by habit, a family scene written without deliberation – and each is defensible in isolation. The argument is not that the two sexes should be

presented identically, since differences in temperament and interest are real and worth depicting. The argument is that such differences should not harden into a script that tells a reader in advance what she may become.

5. Conclusion

This study examined gender representation across four volumes of a Chinese university English series, using quantitative counts of presence and usage and qualitative coding of activity, evaluation and occupation. Balance has been achieved in some respects: the sexes are equally represented among anthologised authors and among illustrated figures, women are named first as often as men, and inclusive alternatives to the generic masculine appear, if sparingly. Imbalance persists in others: male characters outnumber female ones, men occupy five occupations for every one held by a woman, and generic masculine forms remain the norm in the reading passages, above all in the final volume. Qualitatively the series is genuinely mixed, giving readers both a mother who criticises her daughter's appearance and a woman who is bold, ambitious and heroic, both a violent criminal and a sensitive man.

The overall picture is of material caught between two moments in its society's history. It reflects a country in which women study and work on terms close to men's, and it also reflects arrangements in which women still carry the household and reach fewer positions of authority. Read as evidence about China rather than as a verdict on four books, the findings suggest that formal equality has been absorbed by educators more readily than the domestic division of labour that limits its effect.

For practice, three measures follow. Compilers can audit the balance of source authors as well as characters, since the two proved linked here; they can set a house rule replacing the generic masculine with paired forms; and they can review the occupations assigned to women, particularly in texts written in-house rather than reprinted, where the compilers have full discretion. Teachers can treat coursebooks as documents to be interrogated rather than trusted, drawing attention to the figures a unit omits as well as those it includes. Students, finally, are better served by an awareness that a representation is a choice than by an assumption that print equals truth.

A final point concerns how such findings should be read. A coursebook is not a policy statement, and it would be a mistake to treat the ratios reported here as a measure of the status of Chinese women, who have entered higher education in numbers comparable to men and whose labour participation remains high by international standards. What the ratios measure is the residue of older arrangements in the material that a particular group of editors, working under particular deadlines, was able to produce. Read that way, the mixed results are neither a scandal nor a vindication, but evidence that change in a society reaches its printed artefacts unevenly, and that the last places it arrives are those where nobody is looking.

The study has limits. Coding was manual and therefore exposed to judgement, notwithstanding the second coder; illustrations were examined only for the sex of the figures rather than for posture, gaze

and relative size; and nothing here establishes how these materials are actually used in classrooms. Future work could reduce the labour of coding through corpus tools, extend analysis to the visual grammar of the pictures, and compare series from different publishers or different countries, since only comparison can show which patterns are local and which are general.

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