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## Visualizing minority: Images of ethnic minority groups in Chinese elementary social studies textbooks

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the visual representation of ethnic minority groups in Chinese elementary social studies textbooks. The author conducts a content analysis to examine the extent to which ethnic minority groups are visually represented and to explore the ways in which they are portrayed in some of the most popular social studies textbooks in China. A total of 6075 visuals drawn from 36 books were electronically coded and analyzed using SPSS. The findings reveal the dearth of ethnic minority-related visuals and show that ethnic minority individuals are visually represented in significantly different ways in many important aspects than non-minority people in these textbooks. The author concludes that the visual representations of ethnic minority groups in these textbooks contributes to a binary understanding of minority and majority by limiting the images of ethnic minority groups to selected cultural markers.

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### Introduction

Textbooks play a central role in the knowledge construction and transmission process as the major tools for lesson planning and classroom instruction (FitzGerald, 1979; Gay, 2010; Pratt, 1994). Students in lower grades, in particular, are often bound to learn from and accept information presented in their textbooks, which are shaped by textbook producers' positions and expectations about the target audience (Anyon, 1979; Apple, 2004). Textbooks also consist of hidden curriculum (Martin, 1976) that is not openly taught but learned by students through the transmission of cultural norms and dominant power structures embedded in the texts (Eisner, 2002). This is particularly true for textbooks that can be used in mobilizing citizens and shaping identities (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), such as social studies. In China, in spite of the increasing emphasis on student- and activity-centered learning, textbooks are still the most important instructional materials and teachers devote the majority of class time in teaching textbooks (To, Yang, & Helwig, 2014). As a result, textbooks are important sources of information in Chinese students' schooling experiences in terms of what is taught in the classroom.

Much research has been conducted to examine content about marginalized and minority groups in social studies textbooks because of the significant impact textbooks have on curriculum development and student learning. This scholarship indicates that minority groups are vulnerable to biases and stereotypes in this important educational domain that often privileges the standpoint of the dominant groups and mainstream ideologies (Abdou, 2016; Alridge, 2006; Hilburn & Fitchett, 2012; Su, 2007; Suh, An, & Forest, 2015). This article reports an analysis of visual images of ethnic minority groups contained in elementary social studies textbooks in China. It shows that ethnic minority groups are not only

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underrepresented in both the mainstream and local textbooks but also misrepresented in limited and essentializing ways. This article provides evidence that these popular textbooks all fail to provide the accurate images that are necessary to help students understand ethnic diversity in China. It also offers suggestions for teachers to expand their curricular resources beyond assigned textbooks and recommendations for future studies.

### Chinese elementary social studies curriculum

Education has long been regarded as one of the most important ways to cultivate students' identification with the socialist ideologies and policies of China (Law, 2014). No one designated subject of social studies exists in Chinese education system. Instead, the roles of social studies were fulfilled by several separate subjects in elementary schools before the curriculum reform in 2001,<sup>1</sup> primarily Ideology and Moral Education, as well as two other subjects: Nature and Society. In 2001, the subject of Ideology and Moral Education was combined with Nature for 1st and 2nd grades as Moral Education and Life (MEL) and with Society for grades 3 to 6 as Moral Education and Society (MES). The nature of the subject is best suggested by its title, which is moral/ character education and civic socialization. Similar to the social studies in other countries, the curriculum of MEL/ MES is comprehensive and students learn basic social, economic, legal, historical, and cultural knowledge of the country and the world (Ministry of Education, 2011a, 2011b).

Until very recently, the curricula in China were controlled in a top-down fashion by the Ministry of Education (MoE) (Law, 2014), which oversaw curricular development for all subjects at all school levels. Before the 2001 curriculum reform, the People's Education Press (PEP) was China's only textbook publisher and was exclusively authorized by the MoE to develop curriculum standards, produce textbooks, and publish other curricular and instructional materials. The sanctioned textbooks would then be printed and distributed to each school by the state-owned Xinhua Bookstore. After the 2001 curriculum reform, there has been a minor effort to decentralize China's curricula development mechanism: some state-owned and private publishers have joined the PEP to produce and publish textbooks (Huang, 2004). However, the MoE still holds the ultimate power of creating curricular guidelines and standards that are mandated to be followed by all textbook publishers. MoE now stipulates that each prefecture-level administrative area can choose their own textbooks from 4–5 ones that are pre-approved by the MoE and schools are also allowed to use some self-developed, local curricular materials (Xu & Wong, 2011). Nevertheless, the PEP version is still widely used due to its established history and perceived authority as the state-endorsed textbooks. In 2014, the PEP version accounted for more than half (56.6%) of the textbook market in China (China Press and Publication Research Institute, 2015).

Two notable examples of local textbooks included the ones published by the Beijing Normal University Press (BNUP) and the Jiangsu Education Publishing House (JEPH), both of which were analyzed in this study. They were originally developed as local curricula for the City of Beijing and Jiangsu Province respectively. These two versions were selected to compare with the mainstream PEP version because of the high academic performance of students from these two districts in national college entrance examination. Lessons in all three versions of textbooks are grouped into units with a theme or topic. Visual images are heavily used in all three versions of MEL/S textbooks, especially for lower grades where they consist almost entirely of photographs and illustrations, accompanied with short, functional and transitional texts.

### Textbook representation of minority groups

In the field of curriculum studies, textbook content analysis has been commonly used to examine the frequency and ways in which a variety of social groups are portrayed (Wade, 1993; Woyshner & Schocker, 2015). Curriculum scholars have found that information presented in textbooks often excludes or oversimplifies the experiences of marginalized social groups and contributes to perpetuating and reproducing the stereotypes and prejudices held by the dominant groups in the society (Avery & Simmons, 2000; Banks, 1969; Brown & Brown, 2010; Clark & Nunes, 2008; Field, Bauml, Wilhelm, & Jenkins, 2012; Journell, 2008; Suh et al., 2015; Woyshner & Schocker, 2015). For example, in his seminal study of the treatment of African Americans in 36 American history textbooks, Banks (1969) found that although textbooks did incorporate social problems related to African Americans, such as racism and discrimination, they failed to help students develop in-depth understandings of these issues. Field et al. (2012) also found that superficial and stereotypical information, such as dress, festivals, and food, prevailed in textbook content about Mexico and Mexican cultures.

Studies on the depiction of marginalized groups in social studies textbooks indicated that knowledge about these groups was often constructed and selected from the mainstream perspectives and dominant ideologies (Alridge, 2006; Anyon, 1979; Romanowski, 2009; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). Anyon (1979) analyzed how labor history was addressed in 17 history textbooks and found that ideologically oriented descriptions were often presented as objective or neutral "facts" in order to serve the interests of certain groups while silencing those of others. Romanowski (2009) examined how the September 11

<sup>1</sup> Curriculum reform and improving and strengthening moral education were two of the goals outlined in the *Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education* issued by the State Council of the PRC in May 2001. *Basic Education Curriculum Reform Outline (Draft)* (Ministry of Education, 2001) was issued by the Ministry of Education a month later in the same year. This was the latest curriculum policy of China and has been implemented nation-wide since then. For a more detailed discussion of this reform, see Law (2014).

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