

Research articles

Human rights issues in the English language curriculum in China

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Abstract

As China increasingly engages in global human rights mechanisms, it has demonstrated a commitment to reforming its national curriculum. Through examining textbooks published during Xi Jinping's tenure, this study investigates how China embeds human rights issues in the English language curriculum. The findings indicate that the human rights issues addressed in the English textbooks have surpassed China's official revisionist narrative. This can be attributed more to the inherent features of the discipline of English than to a deliberate state strategy. Human rights issues are sorted into three categories: strictly taboo, decontextualised, and actively promoted. The meticulously constructed narratives highlight China's leadership in addressing global issues while avoiding critical examination of its domestic human rights situation. As a result, genuine social issues in human rights education (HRE) are overshadowed by propaganda. This study concludes that China's commitment to HRE largely remains an empty promise.

Keywords

China, human rights education (HRE), English language curriculum, textbook, People's Education Press (PEP)

Introduction

Since Xi Jinping's election as President in 2012, human rights have become increasingly contradictory and contentious in China. Domestic human rights activities are harshly repressed under the pretext of national security and counterterrorism (Chen & Hsu, 2021). Ongoing protests in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, along with tightened speech censorship, indicate a limited implementation of human rights, and this is exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. China's strict governance approach to achieving Zero-Covid has been criticised for increasing control and centralising power, and these actions have been characterised as 'violations of human rights and dignity' (Jiang, 2022, p. 491).

Conversely, China's engagement with global human rights mechanisms has expanded in both scope and depth (Zhang & Buzan, 2020). As a recurring member of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (2013-2016, 2016-2019, 2021-2023), China has initiated national five-year plans for human rights action (published in 2012, 2016, and 2021). These plans advocate for enhanced human rights education (HRE) in primary and secondary schools, specifically 'covering human rights knowledge in the content of national education' (The State Council Information Office (SCIO), 2016) and 'incorporating human rights issues into the courses' (SCIO, 2021). However, little is known about how these commitments are manifested in educational materials, such as textbooks. Thus, against this paradoxical social and political backdrop, this study critically examines English textbooks, which were revised, reviewed, and released after Xi's reign, in a bid to investigate how China's English language curriculum deals with human rights issues. The following two questions will be discussed in this paper:

1. Which human rights issues have been embedded in English textbooks in China?
2. What strategies are adopted by English textbooks to address these human rights issues?

Textbooks hold an exceedingly important position in China's educational framework. They are not merely pedagogical tools but reflective mediums of the state's endorsed narratives and ideologies. Rooted in the Confucian emphasis on written texts as instruments of moral instruction, contemporary textbooks are meticulously curated by the state to inculcate values and perspectives deemed essential for societal harmony and political orthodoxy (Xiong & Qian, 2012). Notably, in 2017, China established the National Textbook Committee under the State Council, with the Deputy Prime Minister assuming its leadership (The State Council, 2017). This move underscores the pivotal role of textbooks in the national educational agenda. Within the broader socio-political landscape of China, textbooks are instrumental in shaping collective consciousness. By presenting a unified version of history, culture, and societal norms, they enhance social cohesion, ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds and regions share a coherent understanding of their nation and its global position (Liu et al., 2022). Particularly in an era when China faces international scrutiny, textbooks adeptly address

external criticisms, offering students a state-endorsed perspective on contentious issues (Xu, 2021).

When it comes to English textbooks, their societal and pedagogical functions resonate with the general significance of textbooks. In the Xi Jinping era, the curriculum standards stipulate that the main goal of the English course is to ‘fully implement the Party’s educational policy and cultivate and practice socialist core values’ (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2020, p. 5). This goes beyond mere linguistic instruction; English textbooks are viewed as essential tools to nurture individuals with a profound understanding of Chinese values, whilst also equipping them with a global perspective and the capability for cross-cultural communication. The aim is to foster ‘socialist builders and successors’ (ibid.). The strategic emphasis on English language education underscores China’s acute awareness of the significance of ‘English as a global lingua franca’ (ibid., p. 1). English textbooks provide students with a platform to understand subtle global issues, encompassing topics like human rights, all from a state-endorsed perspective.

This paper begins with a review of existing HRE studies in school curricula and textbooks. Although numerous attempts have been made to assess the value of critically examining state-dominated textbooks, most focus on history and citizenship courses. Language education, particularly foreign language education, remains an under-explored field. Subsequently, HRE literature within the Chinese context is discussed. Existing literature highlights the advances made by Chinese HRE in the last 20 years and justifies the shortcomings by citing Confucianism. This study challenges such an approach, which protects Chinese officialdom and orthodoxy, and demonstrates why a critical perspective is necessary. After detailing the data collection and analysis methods, this study proceeds to present the contribution of English language education to HRE, and the strategies employed by English textbooks in embedding human rights issues.

HRE in curricula and textbooks

The importance of assessing HRE in national curricula and educational content is globally acknowledged. As a pivotal United Nations initiative, The World Programme for Human Rights Education (WPHRE) exemplifies this recognition through its strategic focus on integrating HRE into educational systems. The Programme’s first phase (2005-2009) initiated the review and revision of existing textbooks (UNESCO, 2016) because textbooks serve as a concrete operationalisation of a state’s HRE intentions and provide an effective venue for critically investigating the discursive power embedded in HRE. With the Programme’s promotion, countries worldwide are paying increased attention to human rights issues. Longitudinal statistics from cross-national sources reveal that the percentage of human rights concepts and

issues mentioned in social science textbooks has been rising globally, effectively contributing to HRE (see Bromley & Lerch, 2018).

Even so, the purpose and efficacy of HRE's localisation practices are debatable since countries have variously appropriated the human rights discourse, depending on their political goals and cultural contexts. Thus, country-specific case studies are necessary. Human rights are being used to advance the national agenda in Slovakia. Holocaust narratives have been adapted in history textbooks to assist students to develop a dual national and EU identity (Michaels, 2013). According to evidence from South Africa, history and social sciences textbooks prioritise local and national stories over global human rights issues (Russell, Sirota & Ahmed, 2019). Conversely, guided by an escapist paradigm, Turkish citizenship and social studies textbooks limit students' rights to debate real-world human rights issues (Sen, 2021). Turkish students are encouraged to support rather than criticise the state's authoritative rhetoric. Less light has been shed on the East Asia front, although research has revealed that Korean ethics and social studies textbooks reinterpret human rights through national narratives and that human rights are a fundamental right as well as a duty and obligation to the local community and the state (Moon, 2023). These studies have shown the need for and value of critically reviewing state-based textbooks. Yet this data is derived exclusively from history and citizenship textbooks. One explanation could be that these two subjects appear to have a natural potential link to HRE, as many HRE core values, such as equality, justice, dignity, and 'resistance to oppression' (Osler, 2016, p. 119), are frequently evoked in citizenship and history education.

Compared to humanities and social sciences subjects, language education, especially foreign language education, has not received the attention it deserves in promoting HRE. Foreign language learning, to a large part, serves the goal of intercultural communication (Osler & Starkey, 2005). It can be viewed as a space for dialogue where students reflect on the human rights situation in their home countries after receiving examples from around the world. Foreign language education is thus invaluable to HRE. Nonetheless, as in humanities and social science textbooks, bias, stereotypes and even discrimination can exist in foreign language educational content when historical contexts, political viewpoints, and international relations are considered (Su, 2016; Ke, 2021; Akbana & Yavuz, 2022). A critical human rights-based review of nationally recognised foreign language content is therefore essential, even though there is insufficient research of this field.

English is the most popular foreign language in China. Despite criticism of English as a linguistic hegemony and colonial instrument that exacerbates global North-South inequality (see Collyer, 2018), it remains an essential pathway for transnational communication and consultation on universal values. Proficiency in English is hence one of the global skills (Bourn,

2021). English language education cultivates students' transnational knowledge, ability to work and live in the age of globalisation, and global citizenship consciousness (Ke, 2021; Starkey, 2022). More importantly, freedom of expression and opinion is a fundamental human right enshrined in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Article 19). Using English, the global language, individuals are empowered to express their wishes, thoughts, and opinions on a global scale (Osler & Starkey, 2005; Su, 2016). These acts ultimately contribute to understanding and embracing multiculturalism, negotiating consensus, and addressing global issues collaboratively. English has proven useful for human rights-related concerns, such as global citizenship (Bourn, 2021; Starkey, 2022), peace (Akbanan & Yavuz, 2022), and environmental education (Cristovão, Sanches & Smart, 2022), but it is rarely used to discuss human rights in and of themselves.

HRE in the Chinese context

Despite gradual progress, the HRE debate in China remains very limited compared to that observed in democratic contexts. This can be attributed to human rights and HRE being perceived as 'politically sensitive topics' (Liang, 2020, p. 539) within China. Political interference and control continue to dominate HRE discussions. Scholars (e.g., Shi, 2010; Sun, 2022) have largely supported rather than criticised the official and orthodox position, in order to maintain 'political bottom lines' (without undermining the legitimacy of the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)). At least two strategies are used: highlighting what China has already accomplished in HRE; and using traditional culture to excuse its shortcomings.

Announcing that HRE has been effectively developed in China over the past two decades is the first strategy. In terms of policy, these scholars claim that the government reversed its previous rejection of human rights and began to embrace it in the 2000s (Bakke, MacLeod & Smith, 2015; Sun, 2022). An explicit political commitment was made in 2004, as the Constitution guarantees respect for and protection of human rights. HRE is primarily implemented in universities, where several prestigious institutions have established human rights research centres that offer law-related degree programmes (Bakke et al., 2015). These institutions also provide the public with human rights counselling and training (Shen, 2015). Moreover, with the launching of the Human Rights journal in February 2002, scholars now have a designated platform to discuss China's human rights issues. These advances have been met with commendation, even to the point where China has been hailed as the world's 'banner for the respect and protection of human rights' (Chen, 2015, p. 3).

The aforementioned studies (see Chen, 2015; Liang, 2020; Sun, 2022) highlight that China does not neglect addressing human rights issues in its education system, contrary to what was once anecdotally assumed. However, these practical advances stem primarily from university

autonomy rather than governmental progress. Evidence from primary and secondary schools remains limited. More significantly, these studies mainly focus on approaches to advancing HRE, rather than its content. One reason for neglecting the discussion on HRE content is to conceal the fact that the official Chinese definition of human rights deviates considerably from the universally accepted understanding. In a somewhat oversimplified manner, ‘the rights to subsistence and development are regarded as primary human rights’ in China (The State Council, 2022). As ‘poverty is the biggest obstacle to fulfilling human rights’, the right to subsistence encompasses escaping poverty (*ibid.*), whilst the essence of development rights lies in state economic growth, as ‘a country’s economic development’ is a prerequisite for enhancing people’s quality of life (*ibid.*). These revisionist interpretations subordinate human rights to the interests of the state, undermining the universality of human rights norms (Zhang & Buzan, 2020; Chen & Hsu, 2021).

While highlighting existing achievements, scholars also find excuses for the shortcomings of HRE in China. It is the Confucian traditions, rather than the political system, to which these shortcomings are primarily attributed. Several studies (Chen, 2015; Shen, 2015; Sun, 2022) underline the Western origins of the human rights concept. By locating its deep roots in Western liberalism and individualism, the applicability of the human rights paradigm to China is questioned. Confucian social ideals are portrayed as advocating collective interests and reciprocity (Liang, 2020). HRE in China is advocated to embody ‘characteristics’ reflective of its communitarian traditions (Shen, 2015, p. 343). Thus, human rights are often conceptualised as cultural values rather than rights. Criticisms of China’s human rights record have also been labelled as promoting ‘individualistic values’ (Shi, 2010, p. 430) and ‘colonialism and Western hegemony’ (Sun, 2022, p. 209).

Yet, the human rights issue is not a trade-off between the ‘individualistic West’ and the ‘communitarian China’. Human rights exist as a fundamental right for all humans from the beginning of their lives. Governments, thus, are required by the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders to safeguard their citizens’ human rights (A/RES/53/144). The cosmopolitan and universal essence of human rights should not be dismissed due to state interests (Starkey, 2022). De Bary (2000) adds, through a dialectical examination of traditional Confucian principles and dynasty practices, how the CCP inverted the Confucian narrative to legitimise its own one-party rule. There does not appear to be a distinct traditional Chinese value that precludes human rights, since several Confucian-influenced regions, such as Taiwan (Su, 2016; Ke, 2021) and South Korea (Moon, 2023), advocate contemporary human rights values to varying degrees. In contrast, research from Turkey (Sen, 2021) reveals that authorities may frequently use the disguise of traditional culture in order to prevent students participating in human rights debates. This suggests that the state’s political interests, rather than cultural norms, are the primary reason for students not negotiating human rights issues.

This study, in contrast to most previous HRE studies in the Chinese context, adopts a critical approach by examining whether the Chinese government's commitments to HRE are compromised by political considerations. It questions whether China is genuinely implementing a systematic overhaul of educational content or merely making 'on the surface' (Tibbitts & Katz, 2018, p. 65) changes to the school system. As a result, this study focuses more on how state entities operationalise human rights issues within the curriculum, especially educational content, rather than the quantity of documents signed or research institutes established. As primary and secondary schools have traditionally received less attention, this study addresses the issue by concentrating on English textbooks at these educational levels.

Methods

This study collected data from English textbooks published by the People's Education Press (PEP). PEP is a state-run educational publisher directly managed by the MoE (PEP, 2020). Since 1951, it has been compiling and publishing primary and secondary textbooks for use across the country. It is commonly regarded as China's undisputed textbook authority, representing the will of the state (Xiong & Qian, 2012; Xu, 2021). PEP declares its commitment to 'always adhere to the correct [socialist] political direction and publishing orientation' and was praised by Xi Jinping (PEP, 2020).

A total of twenty English textbooks have been produced by PEP, all of which were examined in the present study. These books, eight for primary, five for junior secondary, and seven for senior secondary education, have all been written in English. As China's national curriculum textbooks must be reviewed by the MoE before their release, all twenty English textbooks passed the MoE's scrutiny. They were all compiled after Xi Jinping assumed power. Primary and junior secondary textbooks were released in 2013, with the senior secondary textbooks following in 2019. Table 1 summarises additional textbook details.

Table 1

Textbook information sheet.

Code	Textbook Original Name	Education Stage	Year of Publication
PEP 1	English Compulsory 1	Senior Secondary	2019
PEP 2	English Compulsory 2		2019
PEP 3	English Compulsory 3		2019
PEP 4	English Optional Compulsory 1		2020
PEP 5	English Optional Compulsory 2		2020

Code	Textbook Original Name	Education Stage	Year of Publication
PEP 6	English Optional Compulsory 3		2020
PEP 7	English Optional Compulsory 4		2021
PEP 8	English Year 7 Vol. 1	Junior Secondary	2016
PEP 9	English Year 7 Vol. 2		2018
PEP 10	English Year 8 Vol. 1		2018
PEP 11	English Year 8 Vol. 2		2018
PEP 12	English Year 9		2015
PEP 13	English Year 3 Vol. 1	Primary	2019
PEP 14	English Year 3 Vol. 2		2019
PEP 15	English Year 4 Vol. 1		2019
PEP 16	English Year 4 Vol. 2		2019
PEP 17	English Year 5 Vol. 1		2019
PEP 18	English Year 5 Vol. 2		2019
PEP 19	English Year 6 Vol. 1		2019
PEP 20	English Year 6 Vol. 2		2019

The way in which English textbooks' human rights issues are filtered is based on the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) framework (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/topics>). This framework includes 5 categories and 36 sub-categories. The OHCHR clarifies the meaning of each, making it easier to implement. The five categories are (brief description in brackets): Civic Space & Democracy (democracy, election, freedom of assembly and expression); Development & Living in Dignity (environmental protection, right to health, ending poverty); Equality & Non-discrimination (rights of marginalised and vulnerable groups); Justice & The Rule of Law (administration of justice, law enforcement); Peace & Security (humanitarian aid, peacekeeping).

Adopting this framework does not imply fundamentalist support. Instead, several studies (Collyer, 2018; Tibbitts & Katz, 2018) have highlighted the risk of Eurocentrism, imperialism, and colonialism in the UN's human rights action. Contextualising the UN's declarations and conventions is important, but so is rejecting 'uncritical cultural relativism' (Starkey, 2022, p. 73). These criticisms of the UN human rights machinery demonstrate, in turn, that the UN is a negotiating and challenging international public space for human rights. The more important

reason is that China has endorsed and accepted the OHCHR framework, at least in broad terms, because China is a drafter and signatory to the UDHR. It is also a member of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Therefore, the OHCHR framework is a valid and legitimate criterion for China.

Operationally, the authors and two additional scholars with experience in HRE research screened each of the 20 textbooks independently for human rights-related content, using the OHCHR framework. Following this, panel discussions on the differentiated elements were held in order to finalise a consensus data package for analysis. Summative Content Analysis (SCA) was used in the data analysis process. It is a prevalent normative qualitative paradigm in human rights policy and textbook studies (e.g., Russell et al., 2019; Sen, 2021). In particular, this study counted the frequency of each category occurring in the OHCHR framework to determine which issues receive more attention versus those that do not. The focus of this study, however, is to provide an integrative view of China's negotiation of human rights and HRE by critically examining English textbook content. Thus, after the frequency analyses, an in-depth analysis phase follows (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Grounded in the political and cultural context of China, the authors assess the underlying narrative intentions of each category's content to reveal the underlying conceptual assumptions and power dynamics.

Findings

The English textbooks contain a substantial amount of human rights-related content (n=200). However, none of them explicitly used the term Human Rights, although terms such as 'people's rights' are evoked. Valuing people's rights is the political claim of Sun Yat-sen, 'the founder and forerunner of modern China' (PEP 4, p. 10). In Sun's perspective, people's rights referred to establishing a democratic system of governance and empowering citizens with political rights, such as the right to vote, the right to participate in government, and freedom of speech (Sun, 1933). Textbooks simplify the meaning of this term to 'all people have great value and should also have the same rights' (PEP 4, p. 10). By omitting the political rights that the concept originally entailed, the government can shape public understanding and perception of their rights in a way that aligns with the state's objectives. One of the advantages of this is that the narrative of political rights and freedoms is controlled, thus limiting the possibility of dissent and criticism of the state.

Moreover, human rights issues are unevenly distributed across educational levels. They appear in senior secondary textbooks (n=143) much more frequently than in junior secondary (n=42) and primary (n=15) textbooks. One reason could be that English teaching in primary schools emphasises vocabulary and grammar. The texts consist of everyday dialogues, and students' topic discussions are also limited by their vocabulary range.

Table 2

Category distribution of Human Rights issues.

	Senior Secondary	Junior Secondary	Primary
Civic Space & Democracy	5	0	0
Development & Living in Dignity	82	24	15
Equality & Non-discrimination	48	14	0
Justice & The Rule of Law	0	0	0
Peace & Security	8	4	0
Total	143	42	15

In addition, the distribution of human rights issues within the OHCHR framework categories is uneven, as shown in Table 2. These texts exhibit no commitment to the Justice & The Rule of Law category and contain minimal content (n=5) in the Civic Space & Democracy category. The texts do not touch on democracy, elections, or freedom of speech. Instead, they caution students about the presence of ‘misleading’ (PEP 3, p. 22) information on digital media and advocate for reduced use of social apps. Students are also warned to regulate their own speech and not to ‘spread unkind news’ (PEP 7, p. 4). Meanwhile, protest is only encouraged in the context of national independence. Rather than providing Chinese role models, texts offer examples of foreign figures. For instance, Gandhi is praised for utilising a ‘non-violent’ approach to achieve national liberation (PEP 6, p. 99).

A point of particular note is that, although the text does not address democratic participation and freedom of speech within the societal dimension, students are nonetheless encouraged to engage with these themes in a classroom setting. The English textbook promotes ‘critical thinking’ (PEP 7, p. 68) among students and democratic participation in classroom undertakings. Students are expected to ‘hear all’ [listen to everyone] (PEP 6, p. 35) and articulate their viewpoints uninhibitedly in both peer and group contexts. Despite criticisms labelling China’s legislature as a mere rubber stamp (Jiang, 2022), textbooks require students to ‘vote’ (PEP 3, p. 35; PEP 4, p. 23; PEP 7, p. 47, 59), and especially to ‘have everyone’s vote’ (PEP 6, 2019, p. 59) to select the best presenter. Such activities are designed to immerse students in public discourse and facilitate conflict resolution, potentially nurturing them into active citizens in their future lives (Tibbitts & Katz, 2018; Starkey, 2022).

The Peace & Security category contains little data about war and/or peace, which is arguably

counter-intuitive. English textbooks simply praise the remarkable contribution of the United Nations and its peacekeeping forces to world peace. Most of the content focuses on humanitarian assistance following natural disasters. These textbooks portray post-disaster aid and rebuilding as a global issue by introducing the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. They highlight China's exceptional track record in this area, demonstrating its attempts at establishing global leadership. Domestically, the state organised over 150,000 soldiers to search for and rescue victims of the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, and it strongly supported Tangshan's revival. The same thing happened during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. The government was actively involved in the rescue and reconstruction efforts as Chinese soldiers formed the China International Search and Rescue Team and participated in several international rescue missions. This team is praised for its professionalism in 'bringing help and hope' to those whose lives have been altered by natural disasters around the world (PEP 1, p. 94).

In contrast to the three preceding categories, there is considerable content in the Development & Living in Dignity (n=121) and Equality & Non-discrimination (n=62) categories. These contents prioritise three issues that are discussed below: environment, poverty, and vulnerable groups.

Environmental protection

For over a decade, China has led the world in total energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions (see Liu & Lin, 2019), a result of the country's rapid economic growth and urbanisation. Although air, water and soil pollution are commonplace in China, textbooks only implicitly or minimally address these local concerns. In profiling the Great Smog of 1952 in London, glacier melting in Norway, and animal habitat destruction in Kenya, climate change and environmental pollution are depicted as an ongoing global issue. By continuing to emit greenhouse gases and engaging in deforestation, human activity as a whole is presented as destroying the natural environment. Because of climate change and environmental degradation, biodiversity, particularly wildlife, is on the verge of extinction. Thus, 'everyone should play a part in saving the earth' (PEP 10, p. 50).

In response to environmental challenges, these English textbooks attempt to inspire students to be committed while simultaneously highlighting the Chinese government's performance. Students are expected to be active citizens. The textbook suggests they plant more trees, volunteer at animal shelters, and join environmental groups. Students are additionally obligated to change their lifestyle choices. Walking and cycling are two examples, as are conserving energy and reducing plastic use. The state's accomplishments include protecting endangered animals, governing water pollution, and instituting green energy. The Tibetan antelope, a Chinese endemic species, has been given a protected area and professional

nursing care. Because of these measures, it has been removed from the endangered species list. To tackle water pollution, Beijing has enacted the ‘Water Ten Plan’ (PEP 6, p. 33, 100), which is enforced across the country and centred on senior officials’ accountability. Additionally, in terms of clean energy, China is now the ‘world’s greatest producer of solar technology’ (PEP 6, p. 80). It also contains ‘the world’s biggest energy stations and geothermal fields’ (PEP 6, p. 81).

While celebrating China’s achievements in environmental protection, the text pragmatically acknowledges the need to strike a balance between environmental and economic interests. It asserts, ‘These [Environmental protections] should be balanced with economic needs’ (PEP 7, p. 32). This statement appears to be an implicit justification for the environmental pollution resulting from China’s long-standing developmentalism, one that is rooted in relativistic principles. According to China’s human rights rationale, one of the fundamental human rights is the right to development, with accelerating economic growth at its core (see The State Council, 2022). The text points out, ‘As countries develop and their populations grow, the demand for the energy to support them increases’ (PEP 6, p. 80). While showcasing China’s dedication to environmental protection, the textbook seems to suggest that there are limits to the sacrifices the country is willing to make in terms of economic impact.

Ending poverty

Similar to the strategy employed for environmental protection issues, these textbooks avoid discussing domestic poverty groups and the widening wealth gap. Instead, the text portrays poverty as a global issue, asserting that ‘many countries still face food shortages’ (PEP 4, p. 58). The most immediate issue arising from poverty is the denial of children’s rights to attend school. English textbooks indicate that 9% of children worldwide drop out of school ‘because their families are too poor, and they have to work like adults’ (PEP 1, p. 20). African statistics, as well as the example of a 13-year-old girl in Bangladesh who ‘wishes I was a student, but I am not’ (PEP 1, p. 73), demonstrate that the right to education for poverty-stricken girls is even more precarious. Another problem associated with poverty is the difficulty in accessing the right to healthcare. The textbook underscores the urgency of improving Africa’s medical infrastructure by describing the Ebola outbreak in West Africa and the prevalence of AIDS in other African countries. These textbooks encourage students to adopt strategies to assist those suffering from poverty in order to ‘make the world better’ (PEP, p. 20). Suggested actions include raising money online, donating clothing and footwear, participating in international projects, and volunteering for African aid programmes.

These textbooks assert that China plays a key role in eliminating global poverty, particularly in Africa. They highlight various humanitarian assistance programmes organised by China, including road construction in the Congo and the distribution of household goods and medical

aid to Tanzania. Moreover, many Chinese citizens have volunteered in Africa, caring for the disabled and providing medical care. China's assistance to Africa goes beyond humanitarian efforts; the textbooks explicitly explain the political and strategic importance of such aid. Assistance to Africa is portrayed as an exemplification of Xi's diplomatic notion – a community with a shared future for mankind. Textbooks present this idea as 'everyone deserves a fair chance in life' across the globe (PEP 7, p. 45). However, this notion has been criticised for having an arrogant, chauvinistic undertone (Chen & Hsu, 2021). Critics argue that China's true objective is those countries' reliance on China and a China-centred political order. This aid is expected to increase not only China's international influence, but also volunteers' sense of national pride. 'When I think of all the things that we as Chinese citizens can be most proud of, helping others comes at the top of this list', one of the book's characters, Zhang Bingbing, states (PEP 7, p. 45).

Rights of marginalised and vulnerable groups

These English textbooks encompass a wide range of marginalised and vulnerable groups, although the extent of coverage varies significantly among them. The elderly and the disabled are arguably underrepresented, as they are only briefly discussed. The textbooks endeavour to encourage students to support and assist the elderly and disabled, while also advocating for institutional safeguards to ensure the right to quality education for individuals with disabilities. In contrast, issues relating to women, indigenous populations and migrants are covered more extensively.

In terms of gender issues, the textbooks aim to challenge stereotypes and present students with female role models. Attention is also paid to the issue of gendered language bias. These textbooks advocate for using gender-neutral phrases such as police officer instead of policeman and chairperson instead of chairman to reduce traditional gendered social roles. Citing the examples of Lin Qiaozhi, a noted modern Chinese doctor born in 1901, and Marie Curie, textbooks encourage female students to focus on their careers rather than solely dedicating themselves to their families, as is 'the traditional path' (PEP 3, p. 16). Students are also urged to fight for women's rights, drawing inspiration from Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai. Additional examples include Jane Goodall, a renowned English primatologist, Junko Tabei, the first woman to climb Mount Everest, and Wang Yaping, a well-known Chinese astronaut. However, it is relevant to note that the majority of these role models are from other countries or modern China, with only one example from present-day China. The exclusion of contemporary women in these textbooks could be a strategic move to avoid confronting the limitations and challenges that women in present-day China face. By focusing on international examples and historical figures, the textbooks can promote gender equality and inspire female students without directly addressing or critiquing the current societal norms and expectations within China itself.

Most of the indigenous-related content is concentrated on the West. China's current 'ongoing crackdown, arbitrary detention, and enforced disappearance' of indigenous peoples in Xinjiang and Tibet (Zhang & Buzan, 2020, p. 178) is not acknowledged. Instead, textbooks provide a comprehensive assessment of the devastating impact of colonialism on indigenous peoples' rights to survival and cultural development, emphasising the West's historical shortcomings in human rights. In the case of Oceania, these English textbooks claim that the Aboriginal narrative of national history in Australia 'looks very different' from that of whites (PEP 7, p. 24). The textbook narratives for the Americas follow a similar pattern: 'In the 16th century, the native people suffered greatly after the arrival of the Europeans. Thousands of them were killed or forced into slavery' (PEP 3, p. 27). Certain texts deliberately intersperse praise for China's economic, redistribution-oriented indigenous policies with these negative Western narratives, noting that China's indigenous people are 'often entitled to special funds from the government to help protect their cultural heritage' (PEP 7, p. 16).

In addition, the textbook highlights the ethnic and cultural diversity of Western immigrant countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. Queens in New York and the Mission District in San Francisco are particularly emphasised. However, beneath this cultural diversity lie deep-rooted racial prejudice and economic inequality. The assassination of Martin Luther King and the poor living conditions faced by new Chinese immigrants in the United States illustrate this point. English textbooks lament the difficult circumstances encountered by Chinese immigrants, specifically when describing Angel Island, an immigration detention and inspection facility established under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. 'Their [Chinese immigrants] miserable stay felt like punishment rather than justice and freedom' (PEP 3, p. 75). These narratives suggest that Western countries, especially the United States, may not be as just or egalitarian as they profess, thereby challenging Western narratives of moral superiority when it comes to human rights.

Discussion

Globally, human rights narratives in textbooks are frequently censored, revised, and nationalised to align with specific national agendas. As this study demonstrates, China adopts a distinct approach to this issue. While some countries (see Sen, 2021) avoid reality by marginalising or theorising human rights issues, others (see Russell et al., 2019; Moon, 2023) emphasise the tension between global human rights narratives and the cultural traditions and historical backgrounds of the state. China, however, grounds its human rights narrative in global human rights governance, actively demonstrating to students the country's remarkable achievements in global affairs since its rise. It thus avoids domestic human rights negotiations.

One potential reason for this discrepancy is that the primary data in this study came from

English textbooks, whereas previous studies examined history and citizenship materials. English textbooks are more likely to address global issues than history and citizenship courses (Bourn, 2021; Akbana & Yavuz, 2022). More significantly, however, China's growing aspirations for global governance have also had an impact, as these English textbooks contain extensive discourses on 'China's rise' (PEP 7, p. 90). German students are 'truly fascinated by' Chinese culture (PEP 5, p. 17); and Xi's Belt and Road Initiative 'has strongly supported the economic development of many participating countries' (PEP 7, p. 69). These ambitious examples prominently showcase China's capabilities and influence in global and regional affairs. As stated by Chen and Hsu (2021), China is pursuing greater ownership of global governance to match its burgeoning economic prowess.

Furthermore, this study reveals that human rights issues in English textbooks extend beyond China's revisionist paradigm (the right to survival centred on poverty reduction and the right to development centred on economic growth) (The State Council, 2022). However, this transcendence is not a subjective choice of the state. More precisely, there is no substantial evidence to suggest that the Chinese government desires students to delve into a profound discussion on human rights. The conspicuous absence of the term human rights in the curriculum standards and textbooks substantiates this claim. This transcendence is more indicative of the intrinsic attributes of the English discipline itself. The emphasis on a 'global perspective and multicultural awareness' in the English language curriculum (MoE, 2020, p. 5) allows textbooks to incorporate cultural elements from around the world and discuss global issues. Within language learning, various thematic debates and discussions encourage students to express themselves freely and participate democratically in the classroom setting. Thus, transcending the revisionist paradigm is not a strategic pattern of China's HRE but rather underscores the unique value of English, as a global language, in advancing HRE.

Specifically, all human rights issues can be categorised into three types: strictly taboo (democracy, free expression, and the rule of law), decontextualised (gender, ethnic minorities/ indigenous peoples, and immigrants), and actively promoted (environmental protection and ending poverty). The key criterion for classifying these issues is whether they undermine the legitimacy of the CCP's rule. Given China's one-party system, topics that challenge the Party's leadership or the current system are often seen as sensitive. As a result, textbooks purposefully omit these contents to avoid controversy or misinterpretation. This is consistent with the role of textbooks in China, which primarily serve as tools to guide public opinion, ensuring they are in line with national goals (Xiong & Qian, 2012; Xu, 2021). Although the Chinese constitution claims to protect freedom of speech and democracy, centralisation of power has been notably intensified under Xi's leadership (Jiang, 2022). In such a political environment, any topic perceived as a threat to the Party's authority or to national stability is taboo, explaining the omission of democracy, freedom of speech, and the rule of law from

textbooks.

The decontextualisation model's key strategy is to avoid mentioning China-specific contexts when discussing topics such as gender and ethnic minorities. This approach portrays these issues as having a more universal or global relevance, rather than being confined to China. Hence, the textbooks can introduce these issues to students without directly confronting or challenging prevailing domestic policies and perspectives. This strategy also avoids sensitive discussions that could harm the CCP or the state's image, especially when dealing with potentially volatile subjects like ethnic minority issues, thereby preventing exacerbation. Moreover, through decontextualisation, China intentionally emphasises problems of the West, both historically and currently, such as colonialism and racial discrimination, challenging the West's perceived 'moral superiority' on matters like human rights and democracy. This also offers a form of justification for China's centralised developmental model. Worryingly, this strategy could lead students to mistakenly believe that the global issues they are familiar with, and the critiques of the West, are unrelated to China.

The third category of issues is intended to be actively promoted. These matters (e.g., environmental protection and poverty eradication), are categorised as global issues, like the decontextualised ones. However, there is a clear distinction between them: textbooks explicitly acknowledge that environmental pollution and poverty exist in China. Typically, these are areas in which China believes it has achieved significant progress, both domestically and internationally. By highlighting China's contributions in addressing these issues, textbooks aim to instil a deeper sense of pride and national identity in students. These success stories are utilised to demonstrate China's contributions to the world as 'a responsible great power', a term defined by Xi Jinping to describe China's international standing, and to validate its leadership and effectiveness in tackling global issues, thereby further solidifying the legitimacy of its regime. Students are encouraged to follow the state's lead, showcasing their commitment as active citizens.

The discourse strategy on human rights in China's English textbooks, to some extent, also reflects Confucianism and the communitarianism prevalent in East Asia. These textbooks emphasise the duties and dedication of students. Being an active citizen is seen as a mission and responsibility of students, not a right. This perspective is deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese belief that the welfare of the community supersedes the individual. Such beliefs have undermined the essence of human rights, as its universality has been compromised, limiting the scope of individual freedoms and rights. This strategy is very similar to that adopted in South Korea (Moon, 2023). However, there is a key distinction; while South Korean textbooks strive to convince students that human rights necessitate balancing rights and responsibilities, they acknowledge that human rights are fundamental rights that everyone should enjoy. In

contrast, Chinese students are primarily encouraged to reflect on their responsibilities concerning these issues, instead of assessing the rights they should be entitled to.

Conclusions

In contrast to most previous studies that have focused on history and citizenship subjects, this study elucidates the importance of English language education in promoting HRE and investigates how human rights issues are embedded in China's official curriculum through a critical review of textbooks. Although not explicitly referring to human rights, the English textbooks contain a significant amount of related content. In a similar way to Osler and Starkey's findings elsewhere (see Osler & Starkey, 2005; Starkey, 2022), the English language curriculum in China encourages students to freely express their opinions and participate democratically in classroom activities. Such an educational approach provides students with a preliminary understanding of and practical experience with human rights. Within an inclusive, open, and encouraging environment for expression, they come to understand the right to voice their opinions and the significance of being heard. Critical thinking and respecting others' views, as mentioned in textbooks, aid in fostering their independent thinking and, at the same time, they learn to respect the opinions of others, regardless of whether they align with their own. These principles and practices are aspects often limited and lacking in China's education and even in the broader society.

However, this study argues that the achievements of English textbooks in HRE are not the result of a proactive strategy by the state, but rather the outcome of the intrinsic attributes of the English discipline itself. Despite the prevalent global scepticism regarding China's HRE reality, English textbooks still present students with a carefully crafted narrative. Human rights issues can be broadly categorised into three types: strictly taboo, decontextualised, and actively promoted. These human rights contents are rooted in the global narrative. With the rapid economic development of China, those in power aim to present China's leadership in addressing global issues.

Students are encouraged to participate as active citizens in environmental protection, poverty reduction, and care for the elderly and disabled. However, students are denied access to democracy, elections, and freedom of speech – all of which are, ironically, aspects that China has shown to be severely lacking in its human rights practice. The refusal to address these issues can be interpreted as an attempt to mitigate threats to state and CCP legitimacy. Consequently, the actual social issues in HRE are removed and substituted with propaganda. Although China is increasingly integrated into global human rights mechanisms and has initiated human rights actions to promote HRE, this study concludes that China's commitment to HRE remains largely an empty promise.

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