

# Representations of Women in Illustrations from Chinese Literacy Textbooks (1949–1978)

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**Abstract:** The illustrations of literacy textbooks from 1949 to 1978 created a rich and full image of strong women with intuitive visual language. On the one hand, the female role has evolved from the dual identity of both productive labor and cultural learning, to the image of “Iron Girl,” and then to the role expansion of the communicator of revolutionary ideas; on the other hand, the illustrations of each period have always continued the traditional gender model. This dual writing is the result of the joint efforts of national construction needs, social division of labor inertia, and traditional culture. It not only highlights the progress of women’s liberation in New China, but also reflects its historical limitations and provides a historical mirror for contemporary textbook compilation and gender equality education.

**Keywords:** Literacy textbooks; Illustrations; Representations of women

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## 1. Introduction

The academic community has made some achievements in the research on the literacy movement and women’s liberation. However, these achievements focus more on the text interpretation or social historical facts of literacy textbooks, and there is a lack of research on the writing of female images in the illustrations of literacy textbooks. In view of this, on the basis of relevant research, this paper tries to discuss this issue in order to provide a micro perspective for deepening the understanding of the complexity of the women’s liberation movement in new China.

## 2. Changing representations of women in literacy-textbook illustrations

Between 1949 and 1978, women were successively represented as participants in production, “Iron Girls” engaged in collective construction, and communicators of revolutionary narratives. These visual types closely tracked shifting priorities in national construction. They bear the imprint of their times and provide a small-scale perspective on the distinctive trajectory of women’s emancipation in China.

### **2.1. 1949–1957: Participation in production and cultural awakening**

In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the existence of a large number of illiterate people seriously restricted the national production recovery and social progress. In this context, the literacy campaign takes “serving production and serving national construction” as the core goal, and deeply binds literacy education with production practice. Under such policy guidance and the needs of the times, the female image in the illustrations of literacy textbooks shows distinct characteristics. In the illustrations of literacy textbooks from 1949 to 1957, women achieved a breakthrough from the family to public space. The high frequency of these scenes and actions in the illustrations, such as an illustration of a woman stepping on a spinning wheel while holding a book to read. The sharp visual contrast between spinning wheels and books breaks the traditional cognition that family work is separated from cultural learning, and shapes the female image of the dual identity of production workers and cultural learners. After 1958, with the change in the focus of national construction, the image of women in literacy textbooks will also usher in a new shape, entering a new stage of liberation with collective workers as the core.

### **2.2. 1958–1965: The “Iron Girl” in collective construction**

In 1958, national priorities toward collectivization and industrialization, collectivism, and the maximization of labor power became defining imperatives. To meet the acute labor demands of large-scale collective production, the state reinforced its policies of gender equality and encouraged women to undertake physically demanding work in water conservancy, iron and steel production, and land reclamation. The “Iron Girl,” a signature figure of the period, became a template for the representation of women in literacy-textbook illustrations.

This political and economic imperative was directly translated into visual form, producing more pronounced de-domesticated and gender-neutral depictions of women. Among the 60 illustrations examined for this period, 39 depict highly demanding production settings, including collective farming, water-conservancy sites, and combined industrial-agricultural work, whereas only seven depict literacy learning, most of them in conjunction with production. Thirty-six illustrations show women carrying heavy loads, pushing carts, or swinging hammers or hoes. The relatively restrained female image of the preceding period thus gave way to the “Iron Girl,” whose work was visually indistinguishable from men's. These depictions challenged the conventional stereotype of female frailty and widened the range of women's social roles. Yet the emancipation they articulated remained circumscribed: women's value was tied almost exclusively to productive labor, leaving little room for physiological difference or the plurality of female roles.

### **2.3. 1966–1978: Collective participation and revolutionary propaganda**

After 1966, China's social development entered a stage with political mobilization as the core, and the function of literacy education also expanded, becoming an important carrier for spreading revolutionary ideas and shaping the revolutionary image of the masses. Under the call of the era of “grasping revolution and promoting production,” productive labor and cultural learning have been given clear political significance, and the social role of women has also changed, becoming an important practitioner of revolutionary propaganda. The characteristics of this identity transformation are clearly presented in the illustrations of literacy textbooks. In the illustrations, the movement of holding the red book to learn frequently appears. It can be seen that the study of this period is no longer a simple cultural enlightenment, but a revolutionary

propaganda method with obvious political color. Compared with the first two stages, the illustrations in this historical stage have two obvious characteristics: first, the political elements are fully integrated into the daily life of women, whether it is productive labor or cultural learning, and are combined with revolutionary practice; second, women occupy a more important position in the picture, and may be in a key position in collective revolutionary activities and public political propaganda, changing the previous subordinate state.

### 3. The persistence of traditional gender patterns

If attention shifts from whether women appear in the image to how they are represented, a latent visual grammar becomes apparent. Women's gestures, spatial positioning, and division of roles are all regulated by implicit conventions. Compositions that seem to embody equality often contain restrictions on female bodily movement, selective access to public settings, and conventional assumptions about the social division of labor.

#### 3.1. Subordination in bodily action

A comparison of male and female gestures shows that women are most often depicted bent forward or stooping over their work, whereas men more frequently appear standing upright, operating equipment, directing, or giving instructions (**Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Core actions of women and men in literacy-textbook illustrations, 1949–1978

| Period    | Action type              | Female frequency | Male frequency | Total illustrations |
|-----------|--------------------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| 1949–1957 | Stooped labor            | 19               | 10             | 40                  |
| 1949–1957 | Upright/directive action | 2                | 13             | 40                  |
| 1958–1965 | Stooped labor            | 28               | 17             | 60                  |
| 1958–1965 | Upright/directive action | 6                | 33             | 60                  |
| 1966–1978 | Stooped labor            | 11               | 9              | 22                  |
| 1966–1978 | Upright/directive action | 7                | 13             | 22                  |

In the 40 illustrations from 1949–1957, stooped labor accounts for 47.5 percent of female depictions, making it the dominant form of female activity; the comparable figure for men is 25 percent. By contrast, upright or directive actions account for 32.5 percent of male depictions but only 5 percent of female depictions. The illustrations themselves reproduce this disparity. Differences in bodily stance and role allocation thus directly register unequal gendered power.

During 1958–1965, collectivization and industrialization greatly expanded the scope and intensity of women's labor participation. Depictions of carrying heavy loads, pushing carts, and swinging hammers became markedly more common. Although such images appeared to challenge the stereotype of female weakness, the underlying hierarchy of bodily action remained largely intact. As **Table 1** shows, stooped labor still accounted for 46.7 percent of female actions and remained the dominant bodily signifier. Meanwhile, the proportion of men represented in upright or directive postures rose to 55 percent; the corresponding figure for women increased only slightly, to 10 percent. Thus, even as the physical intensity of women's labor

increased, the visual narrative continued to cast them as bent-over executors, while men retained the upright posture of supervision and command. Subordination in action became a persistent visual label attached to women.

From 1966 to 1978, the gender hierarchy of action changed in some settings but remained stable overall. The share of women shown in upright or directive postures rose to 31.8 percent, largely because new scenes of political meetings, public instruction, and mobilization allowed women to stand and lead. In production scenes, however, stooped labor still made up 50 percent of female actions, compared with 40.9 percent for men, while nearly 60 percent of male figures continued to occupy upright or directive positions. Women's greater bodily authority in political scenes did not dislodge their role as executors in the central sphere of production.

Overall, regardless of shifts in the specific actions assigned to women, their visual identity remained largely bounded by a subordinate position, while men repeatedly occupied roles of direction and command. This deeper gender order is the basis of the action hierarchy embedded in these illustrations.

### 3.2. Spatial marginalization

If subordinate bodily action indicates how women labor, spatial marginalization identifies where they labor and the relations of power encoded in those locations.

In illustrations of productive labor, male workers generally occupy the visual center, while women are positioned toward the edges and assigned less visual prominence. The composition itself therefore renders women spatially marginal (**Table 2**).

**Table 2.** Spatial positioning of women and men in literacy-textbook illustrations, 1949–1978

| Period    | Spatial position | Women |        |          | Men   |        |          | Sample size |
|-----------|------------------|-------|--------|----------|-------|--------|----------|-------------|
|           |                  | Total | Public | Domestic | Total | Public | Domestic |             |
| 1949–1957 | Center           | 12    | 7      | 6        | 18    | 14     | 3        | 27          |
| 1949–1957 | Periphery        | 15    | 12     | 2        | 9     | 5      | 5        | 27          |
| 1958–1965 | Center           | 24    | 17     | 7        | 34    | 31     | 3        | 52          |
| 1958–1965 | Periphery        | 28    | 27     | 1        | 18    | 13     | 5        | 52          |
| 1966–1978 | Center           | 11    | 10     | 1        | 15    | 10     | 0        | 19          |
| 1966–1978 | Periphery        | 8     | 8      | 0        | 4     | 8      | 1        | 19          |

The gendered spatial imbalance of public settings is borne out by the data across historical periods and reveals a dual spatial constraint: women are marginal in public scenes but central in domestic ones. Among the 27 illustrations from 1949–1957, women occupy the visual center in seven public scenes, compared with 14 for men; women appear at the edge in 12 public scenes, compared with only five for men. During 1958–1965, collectivization did not reverse this imbalance; rather, it became more pronounced.

Domestic scenes display the opposite pattern. From 1949 to 1957, women appear at the center in six domestic scenes and at the edge in only two, whereas men occupy the center in three such scenes and the periphery in five. The same tendency persists from 1958 to 1965: women are central in seven domestic scenes and peripheral in one, while men are central in three and peripheral in five. The contrast shows that women remained marginal in public domains such as collective production but became visually central when performing housework and other private responsibilities.

Between 1966 and 1978, the spatial arrangement appears to change, yet its underlying logic remains.

Some political-study scenes place women in positions of instructional leadership, but this shift does not extend to the broader public sphere. Nor does women's new prominence in public political settings dislodge their centrality in domestic scenes. The foundations of the traditional gender order therefore remain largely intact.

### 3.3. Auxiliary roles in the division of labor

The occupational roles in these illustrations register both women's entry into social life and the persistence of conventional gender segmentation. The allocation of technical labor, heavy physical labor, and domestic work changed over time, but substantial continuity remained (**Table 3**).

**Table 3.** Occupational roles of women and men in literacy-textbook illustrations, 1949–1978

| Period    | Type of labor        | Women (%) | Men (%) | Total illustrations |
|-----------|----------------------|-----------|---------|---------------------|
| 1949–1957 | Technical labor      | 15        | 52.5    | 40                  |
| 1949–1957 | Heavy physical labor | 45        | 60      | 40                  |
| 1949–1957 | Domestic labor       | 47.5      | 20      | 40                  |
| 1958–1965 | Technical labor      | 30        | 48.3    | 60                  |
| 1958–1965 | Heavy physical labor | 66.6      | 78.3    | 60                  |
| 1958–1965 | Domestic labor       | 25        | 13.3    | 60                  |
| 1966–1978 | Technical labor      | 23.6      | 76.4    | 22                  |
| 1966–1978 | Heavy physical labor | 54.5      | 63.6    | 22                  |
| 1966–1978 | Domestic labor       | 13.6      | 4.5     | 22                  |

As **Table 3** shows, technical labor is the most stable of the three categories in gender terms and remains male-dominated throughout. Between 1949 and 1957, for example, women participate in technical labor in 15 percent of the illustrations, compared with 52.5 percent for men. As Ma Yun observes, men in literacy textbooks were more often assigned skill-intensive and physically demanding tasks associated with public life, while women were confined to narrower categories of work <sup>[1]</sup>. Technical labor remained more closely linked to male figures throughout the visual narrative.

Heavy physical labor shows greater fluctuation, and those changes closely correspond to changing state priorities. Women's participation rises from 45 percent in 1949–1957 to 66.6 percent in 1958–1965. This variation should not be read as a simple reversal in women's labor participation. Rather, it reflects changes in the kinds of female figures demanded by different historical moments and demonstrates the direct effect of political-economic priorities on textbook imagery.

Domestic work declines steadily in the sample, but the decline must be interpreted within its historical context rather than treated simply as either progress or concealment. Domestic labor forms a significant component of female representation from 1949 to 1957, when women appear in such work in 47.5 percent of the illustrations. This falls to 25 percent between 1958 and 1965 and to 13.6 percent between 1966 and 1978, when domestic work nearly disappears from the visual record. Its disappearance does not mean that domestic labor had become equally shared in social life. It indicates, rather, that the visual focus had been redirected by the demands of the period.

Ma Yun argues that female roles in literacy textbooks were simultaneously refashioned by modernity and deeply constrained by the past <sup>[1]</sup>. This formulation captures the complexity of occupational representation.

Women's entry into heavy physical work and some technical fields broke with older gender roles, but male dominance in technical labor and the continuing association of domestic work with women preserved the core structure of the traditional division of labor.

## **4. Sources of the dual representation of women**

The illustrations present a complex coexistence of explicit emancipation and implicit continuity. This apparent contradiction was not accidental but emerged from multiple forces operating under specific historical conditions.

### **4.1. Demands of state development**

The literacy campaign from 1949 to 1978 was “not only a cultural and educational undertaking but also a process of constructing the values of a new society” [2]. This dual function helps explain why women in textbook illustrations were represented through both “emancipation” and “discipline.” National construction required the state to weaken traditional gender constraints and mobilize women as builders of the new society. At the same time, it sought women whose activities conformed to an established developmental program, and therefore regulated their roles in specific ways.

Between 1949 and 1957, China confronted the simultaneous tasks of economic recovery and consolidation of the new political order. Social production needed a large labor force, making women a major target of state mobilization. Yet the boundaries of this emancipation were established from the outset. From 1958 to 1965, demand for labor reached a peak, and women in literacy-textbook illustrations entered forms of arduous work previously coded as male. Paradoxically, it was during this apparently most emancipatory phase that traditional gender patterns were reproduced most intensively. The state urgently required women's labor to sustain collective production but did not intend their participation to challenge the inherited structure of gendered authority; discipline arose from this tension.

After 1966, literacy education became deeply intertwined with revolutionary propaganda. The underlying logic remained continuous with the earlier periods. Women were required as visual symbols of revolution and as agents of political mobilization, yet they were not thereby granted equal rights to social advancement.

Across the three periods, emancipation and continuity were not opposing tendencies but products of the same developmental logic. When production required labor, conventional restraints were relaxed so that women could enter social production. When political mobilization required revolutionary symbols, women were assigned new identities and brought into public political settings. Each form of emancipation, however, was accompanied by its own limits and modes of regulation. The visual language of the textbooks thus rendered the internal logic of state development strategy.

### **4.2. Inertia of the social division of labor**

Ma Yun's phrase “discarding the old while preserving the old” captures the inertia of the social division of labor [1]. When women were mobilized to leave the household and enter public life, they entered a social space already organized by gender. Direction versus execution, technical versus physical work, and production versus domestic labor had long been assigned gendered meanings. This inherited organization was a major source of the coexistence of emancipation and continuity.

Technical labor remained male-dominated, women participated at much lower rates, and domestic work continued to fall primarily to women. As Yuan Bo notes, although the state mobilized women to enter social production, the conventional division of “men outside, women inside” persisted; participation in collective labor did not relieve women of their household responsibilities <sup>[3]</sup>.

The same inertia also operated in political life. Yuan’s study of rural women cadres shows that, despite state efforts to train female cadres, women were usually appointed to deputy positions, rarely held principal posts, and remained far fewer in number than male cadres. One woman cadre summarized the predicament bluntly: “They call on us when there are errands to run, leave us out when major matters are discussed, and overlook us when work points are allocated—an office in name, but no power in practice.” <sup>[3]</sup>. The resulting pattern—more men than women, and more women in deputy than principal posts—illustrates how emancipation and regulation coexisted in the political sphere. Women could enter public political space, but usually in auxiliary and marginal positions, with limited access to the core of authority.

The inertia of the social division of labor was therefore a central reason traditional gender patterns persisted within the process of women’s emancipation. State mobilization widened women’s roles, but inherited forms of labor and authority continued to impose practical constraints.

### **4.3. Influence of traditional culture**

State development needs supplied the macro-level impetus for the coexistence of emancipation and continuity, while the inertia of social division reproduced that duality in everyday life. At a deeper level, however, the persistent disciplining of women in literacy-textbook illustrations also drew on long-standing cultural conventions.

Traditional attitudes remained entrenched among grassroots officials and family members. Many local cadres continued to hold hierarchical and son-preferring views, remained cautious or resistant toward women’s emancipation, and even argued that literate women would become difficult to control and were therefore better left illiterate <sup>[4]</sup>. Within the family, rural women who wished to attend literacy classes often encountered interference from husbands and fathers as well as opposition from mothers and mothers-in-law <sup>[4]</sup>.

Traditional culture also became internalized by rural women themselves. Hou Yingjun notes that prolonged exposure to the norms of the “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” undermined women’s self-confidence and fostered feelings of inferiority and incapacity; some women even believed that they were naturally unintelligent and incapable of learning to read <sup>[4]</sup>. Bi Shumin similarly argues that patriarchal ideology remained active across rural society and that beliefs in male superiority could not be eliminated within a short period <sup>[5]</sup>. Such cultural assumptions continued, often unconsciously, to shape expectations of women’s roles regardless of the labor setting in which women appeared. As a result, regulation accompanied emancipation throughout the period.

In sum, representations of women in literacy-textbook illustrations from 1949 to 1978 reveal a historical configuration in which emancipation and continuity coexisted. Women were visibly incorporated into productive, educational, and political life, yet established hierarchies of bodily action, spatial position, and social division remained embedded in the visual field. This coexistence of explicit emancipation and implicit continuity arose from state developmental priorities, the inertia of the gendered division of labor, and the influence of traditional culture. It therefore captures both the transformative ambitions and the historical limits of women’s emancipation in the early decades of the PRC.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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