

Radical Equity: A Case Study of the Use of Chinese Third-Person Pronouns in Taiwan's Third Grade Social Studies Textbooks

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Abstract: Increased awareness throughout the world of inherent and persistent gender inequality has resulted in concerted efforts to devise non-discriminatory gender-inclusive and gender-neutral third-person pronouns that transcend gender specificity and thus universally include all male, female, transgendered, transsexual, intersexual, queer-gendered, and otherwise gendered identified individuals. In Taiwan, the *Taiwan Gender Equity Education Act* was promulgated in 2004 to specifically promote substantive gender equity and eliminate gender discrimination. The intent of this study is to examine the history, use, and implications of using the “woman”-radical form of the third-person pronoun 她 as opposed to the human-radical 他 vis-à-vis the stated goal of promoting substantive gender equality in third grade Social Studies textbooks. Based upon a textual analysis of these textbooks' use of third-person pronouns, this study proposes that future textbooks should abandon the use of the “woman”-radical third-person pronoun 她 completely and in its stead use/teach the human-radical third-person pronoun 他 universally as the optimal gender-inclusive and gender-neutral third-person pronoun.

Keywords: Gender equality, gender equity, gender neutral, gender inclusive, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, transgender, transsexual, intersexual, queer-gender, non-gender, third-person pronouns, textbooks, identity

1. Introduction

Societies across the globe continue to grapple with how best to eradicate seemingly intractable issues of social and educational inequality based on gender difference and have become increasingly conscious of how such gender-based inequality is often inscribed in the very language societies use to communicate on a daily basis. Concomitantly, in many societies over the past decade, there has been a growing awareness that many individuals do not necessarily fit within a rigid binary gender construction of male/female. Some of those societies have started advocating for these traditionally marginalized or overlooked communities and have gained a greater sensitivity towards the problem of how the use of third-person pronouns in referring to them can inadvertently re-inscribe oppressive binary gender categories. Some countries, such as Germany, Australia, New Zealand, France, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, have officially recognized third genders (Cauterucci, 2015). Additionally, due to a growing awareness of transgender, intersexual, transsexual, non-gender, and gender-queer identities, many linguistic communities have been debating the adaptation and/or reinvention of third-person pronouns in order to promote gender equality, gender neutrality, and gender

inclusiveness. For example, in Sweden there has been an official adaptation of a gender-neutral third-person pronoun of *hen* in addition to the pre-existing male third-person pronoun *han* and female third-person pronoun *hon* (Tagliabue, 2012). In the United States, there is an ongoing effort to adapt the third-person plural “they” as a singular third-person pronoun (which has historical precedence in the English language with the plural “you” replacing the singular second-person pronoun “thee”); however, some consider this proposed adaptation too “unnatural” and too ambiguous (Hesse, 2014; McWhorter, 2014; Petrow, 2014; Shlasko, 2015).

It is in this historical context that Taiwan passed a *Gender Equity Education Act* in June, 2004, that, in part, addresses how curriculum, teaching materials, and instruction would “... encourage students to develop their potential and...not discriminate students on the basis of their gender” (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2005, Article 14). The evolving understanding of gender issues is evidenced by contrasting the later title of the Act, 性別平等教育法 [*Gender Equity Education Act*], with the original title of the committee established by Taiwan’s Ministry of Education in 1997 to develop the Act, 兩性平等教育委員會 [“Committee for Education Equality Between Two Genders”]. This name change implies that their concerns on gender issues have widened to include gender identities beyond a male/female binary paradigm. This study undertakes a review of third grade Social Studies curriculum material published since the passing of the above-mentioned *Gender Equity Education Act* in order to analyze how the use of third-person pronouns in third grade Social Studies curriculum material is addressing the growing awareness of how language can either perpetuate or challenge gender politics in the greater society. This textual analysis of curriculum material specifically seeks to analyze the use of the Chinese woman-radical third-person pronoun 她 vs. the use of a human-radical third-person pronoun 他 and draws cogent conclusions based upon the historical and cultural contexts for third-person pronoun usage in the Taiwanese curriculum. All this is done with an eye towards how the use of third-person pronouns is either meeting or falling short of the goals outlined in the *Gender Equity Education Act* and to reach an informed proposal regarding third-person pronoun usage that can best promote gender inclusiveness, gender neutrality, and/or gender equity.

It should be noted that despite the passing of the *Gender Equity Education Act*, critics maintain that there has been a lackluster effort to actually implement and enforce the newly promulgated law even after nearly a decade since its passing. Critics have specifically blamed conservative Christian groups for creating an unnecessary drag on local education administrators from fully implementing the Act’s intended provisions, since these Christian groups oppose the law’s implied preparedness to accommodate differently-gendered students (Loa, 2014). While the Act does not specifically take a position vis-à-vis gender outside of a male/female binary, the framework clearly creates a dynamic for addressing concerns of communities and individuals outside of the male/female binary construction. This is evidenced by opposition forces’ attempt to curtail the full implementation of the Act and critics’ push for a more concerted effort to enforce the Act in both content creation and pedagogical innovation.

It should also be noted that issues surrounding gender equity and gender inclusiveness are commonly conflated with another distinct social identity surrounding sexuality/sexual orientation (specifically, concerns about creating a curriculum that does not stigmatize lesbian, gay, or bi-sexual individuals). While the issues surrounding sexuality/sexual orientation should

not be summarily conflated with issues around gender-inclusiveness or gender-neutrality, gender and sexuality issues certainly intersect and share a common concern that the curriculum should not reify normative social patterns which marginalize or occlude these minority communities and silence their identity concerns. It is unsurprising, then, that some of the most outspoken critics of how the curriculum is not keeping pace with changing social mores about gender equity and gender inclusiveness have come from LGBT activists (Loa, 2014).

The author presumes academic readers of this study will generally agree with the *Gender Equity Education Act's* wholly laudatory goals to create safe learning environments and develop effective strategies that will "...promote substantive gender equality, eliminate gender discrimination, uphold human dignity, and improve and establish education resources and environment of gender equality" (Taiwan Ministry of Education, 2005, Article 1). Thus, this study does not undertake a systematic study of the social conditions and philosophical rationale for why the Act was passed in the first place. Instead, this study focuses on the subsequent development of curriculum material designed to comply with the Act and critically interrogates whether the uses of third-person pronouns within that curriculum material either impede or promote the Act's stated goals to promote gender equality in the ever more inclusive definition of gender in the 21st century.

2. Linguistic and Etymological Background

A cursory but concise overview of the Chinese writing system and the various third-person pronouns within that system is in order before delving immediately into a qualitative study of Taiwanese school curriculum material. As practically any primer on Chinese linguistics will attest, less than 10% of Chinese characters fall within pictographic, indicative, or ideographic categories: a Chinese pictograph is a character that imitates the form of the referent, for example “木” *mu*, refers to “tree/s;” a Chinese indicative character expresses abstract concepts in iconic forms, for example “本” *ben*, refers to the idea of “root/s, origin/s;” and a Chinese compound ideograph combines two or more pictographs and/or indicative characters to suggest the meaning of the referent being represented, so for example “林” *lin*, [“grove”] with two trees or “森” *sen*, [“forest”] with three trees (DeFrancis, 1984). The overwhelming majority of Chinese characters are phono-semantic compound words comprised of two parts: a graphic semantic indicator called a “radical” which loosely indicates the general nature or meaning of the character, and a phonetic component that indicates the approximate sound of the character (so, for example, the character “杆” *gan* with a tree radical of “木” and a phonetic component of “干” *gan* means a “pole” or “post”).

All third-person pronouns in Chinese are phono-semantic compound words, and all are pronounced as *ta* in standard Mandarin (plural forms add a standard character pronounced *men* “們”) to indicate more than one referent is being referred to, as does the first-person and second-person plural pronouns); the various third-person pronouns, both singular and plural, are provided in the table below:

Chinese Third Person Character	English Equivalent/Meaning	Chinese Plural Third Person	English Equivalent/Meaning
他 / 他的	“He/Him/His” Currently refers to a male-gendered person and/or an unknown/unspecified gendered person	他們 / 他們的	“They/Them/Their” Currently refers to a group of male-gendered and/or unknown/unspecified/mixed gendered individuals
她 / 她的	“She/Her/Her” Currently refers to a female-gendered person	她們 / 她們的	“They/Them/Their” Currently refers to a group of female-gendered individuals
它 / 它的	“It/It/Its” Refers to a non-animal concept, object, process, or event	它們 / 它們的	“They/Them/Their” Currently refers to a group of non-animal concepts, objects, processes, or events
牠 / 牠的	“It/It/Its” Refers to a non-human animal	牠們 / 牠們的	“They/Them/Their” Currently refers to a group of non-human animals
祂 / 祂的	“It/It/Its” Refers to a divine entity	祂們 / 祂們的	“They/Them/Their” Currently refers to a group of divine entities

It is significant to note that the radical for 他 is the “human” radical (人), while the radical for 她 is the “woman” radical (女). The radicals for the remaining three third-person pronouns listed on the chart above (i.e. 它, 牠, and 祂) are roof (宀), ox (牛), and deity/omen (示) respectively.

Because of the critical attention given to the woman-radical female third-person pronoun 她 in this study, it warrants going into the character’s historical etymology. The introduction of the female third-person pronoun 她 began in the 19th century when there was increased interaction between China and Western countries. As more Western literature and ideas were translated and published within China, there was a perceived need to come up with a female third-person pronoun in Chinese corresponding to Western language feminine third-person pronouns such as “she” in English or “elle” in French. During the May Fourth period (1919-1930s), a period marked by radical cultural critiques of the traditional Confucian tradition and a wholesale advocacy for Westernization, many notable figures such as Liu Bannong (劉半農) and Lu Xun (魯迅) started to advocate and use the newly created woman-radical female third-person pronoun introduced through translations of Western texts. It is worth noting that their

advocacy for using the neologism of a woman-radical character for female third-person pronoun was informed by a sincere feminist critique of a patriarchal tradition consistent with the spirit of the May Fourth Movement; it was by no means adopted to denigrate or subjugate women in any way, shape, or form. The integration of using the woman-radical female third-person pronoun in everyday written Chinese has since become so ubiquitous in Chinese-speaking societies that its historical etymology goes largely unknown by the majority of Chinese-literate people (Huang, 2009).

While the May Fourth neologism of a woman-radical female third-person pronoun has proven to be an incredibly powerful introduction into the Chinese lexicon with manifest socio-cultural significance, it was not the only attempt to change linguistic patterns in third-person pronoun usage. Ling Yuanzheng (1989) notes that the poet Liu Dabai (劉大白) also introduced and used a man-radical male third person pronoun “男也” to correspond to European language masculine third-person pronouns such as the English “he” or the French “il” [with the graphic semantic “男” *nan* (man) radical being combined with the phonetic component “也”]. The character “男也” here is produced by typing the aforementioned two separate characters next to each other (rather than typing a single character containing two separate components); the inability for the author to find typographic software that can type such a word attests to how this neologism never caught on. Ling (1989) further explains that there was supposedly no significantly urgent need for a neologism to denote a masculine third-person pronoun since the gender-neutral (human-radical) 他 was by default assumed to refer primarily to male-gendered referents; in contrast, the marginalized and obfuscated history and presence of females in traditional Chinese letters created an objective need for the woman-radical 她. This explanation compels Moser in his 1997 article to very trenchantly note how “it is mildly incredible that a contemporary scholar researching the very origins of this asymmetrical ‘solution’ to the Chinese pronoun problem would blindly perpetuate the very sexist assumptions that gave rise to the situation” (Moser, 1997, p. 11).

While much has changed in the century since the May Fourth movement, a historical appreciation of the etymology of the female third-person pronoun 她 and the ongoing debate about related issues of gender politics are crucial for the current study. The passage of time begs the question whether equal offset use of both “woman”-radical 她 and “human”-radical 他 in curriculum material can adequately address the persistent “covert sexism” in the language or whether a new third-person pronoun pattern of usage might address the various issues this study critically examines. Can we assume that the “human”-radical 他 continues to exert a covert sexist association that privileges male identification? And, in contrast, does the “woman”-radical 她 sufficiently open up alternative ways of thinking about gender identification?

3. Literature Review

A guiding theoretical framework that informs this study is the ongoing and highly influential debate surrounding notions of linguistic determinism as presented in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (or, in a “softer” version more widely accepted, perhaps better known as “Principle of Linguistic Relativity”) (Hussein, 2012; Bîgu, 2012). In its most succinct formulation, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as articulated by Whorf (1956) is that “the way in which the speakers

of a language conceptualize the world is strongly influenced by the vocabulary and the grammatical structures utilized” (Whorf, 1956, p. 221). Theorists have since been debating the degree to which language determines one’s perception of the world and the implications of that determinism on all sorts of human interactions (perhaps most cogent for this study, cross-cultural communications and/or perceptions of gendered categories). As Hussein summarizes Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis’ “harder” version in his 2012 article, “the strongest claim of all is that the grammatical categories available in a particular language not only help the users of that language to perceive the world in a certain way but also at the same time limit such perception. You perceive only what your language allows you, or predispose [*sic*] you, to perceive. Your language controls your world-view” (Hussein, 2012, pp. 643-644). This hard version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis would seemingly imply that the introduction of neologisms or efforts to change third-person pronoun usage to effectively change notions of gendered individuals would have a very tough row to hoe indeed. In contrast, Bîgu (2012) explains, “according to the weak version, the features of the native language influence speakers’ world view and the way of perceiving, but this influence can be surpassed” (p. 42). This conceptualization of the principle of linguistic relativity accommodates a self-conscious effort to reformulate either linguistic patterns, vocabulary, or grammatical structures which would have the potential to change the way linguistic communities perceive reality (including social and cultural constructions such as gender relationships and identities).

Insightful studies on the evolution of third-person pronouns in Chinese (Huang, 2009; Huang & Luh, 2012; Moser, 1997) not only have provided invaluable historical and linguistic information cogent to the scope of this study, they have also engaged with the Sapir-Whorf’s principles of linguistic relativity. While none of these scholars have directly addressed how differently-identified gendered individuals outside of a male/female binary dynamic have either historically been or would now be able to be accommodated in written Chinese, their interest on the general construct of gendered identities and its relationship to language is manifest. For example, a critical feature of all their research is the degree to which the “human” radical (人) is referring to non-gender specific “human”/“person” rather than heavily carrying an implicit male identification by default (with significant implications for this present study). A shared concern in their studies is perhaps best summarized by Moser in his 1997 article, “Covert Sexism in Mandarin Chinese,” where he states that there is a persistent “asymmetric gender default” in the use of (人 ‘person’), so much so that “...the character *rén* 人 serves a double function, either denoting humanity in general, or males in particular. Females are left to a special linguistic category all their own, outside of the general category of human — they are ‘out of the club,’ so to speak” (p. 12).

Perhaps precisely because of these strong scholarly assumptions about the radical asymmetry of covert sexism associated with the human-radical 他, related studies on Taiwanese curriculum (Chuang, 2004; Huang & Luh, 2012) have overwhelmingly focused on measuring ways in which a binary male/female gender construction receives equitable/equal representation within curriculum material (through their examination of the use of 她 and 他), and either how such a curriculum is aligned with stated curriculum goals of gender equity education (Chuang, 2004) or how third-person pronoun usage is tied into student performance outcomes like reading comprehension (Huang & Luh, 2012). Huang and Luh’s study shares a similar

scope with the present study insofar as they qualitatively investigate the introduction of third-person pronouns in the elementary curriculum, with the important difference that they examine the curriculum in third grade Chinese Language Studies textbooks. Both Chuang and Huang and Luh's studies (even being done nearly a decade apart) reach similar conclusions (albeit to varying degrees) that even though sincere efforts are evident to increase and infuse issues around gender equity within the datasets they examine, actual parity and equity based upon a male/female binary paradigm has not yet been reached (although neither study frames it in that particular language). Both studies, moreover, advocate for redoubling efforts in curriculum design, professional development, and assessment to advance the goals of gender equity in the Taiwanese education system. What most pronouncedly distinguishes this current study from the previous studies on elementary Taiwanese curriculum is a broader focus on not just achieving gender equity within a male/female binary paradigm, but to interrogate the curriculum material to assess whether and how it might universally accommodate differently-gendered identities through third-person pronoun usage as well.

4. Dataset and Methodology

The dataset for this case study consists of the most recently published versions available of third grade Social Studies, volume 1 textbooks (published in 2014). The reason why Social Studies is chosen for review is because this is the subject in which the concept of gender equality/equity is introduced and would be most evident and presumably aligned to the 2004 *Gender Education Equity Act*. The reason why third grade, volume 1 is selected is because this particular volume represents the first of eight volumes to be used from grades three to six and is where the concept of gender equality/equity is outlined to be introduced according to the *General Guidelines of Grade 1-9 Curriculum* (九年一貫課程綱要, originally implemented in 2001). The rationale for choosing these particular publications for the dataset was that the three published versions of textbooks and accompanying workbooks examined (by the publishers Kangxuan 康軒, Hanlin 翰林, and Nanyi 南一) are published by the most widely-recognized textbook publishers with the largest market share in the Taiwanese curriculum publishing industry.

The methodology used for this study is qualitative. Qualitative methods have traditionally been favored when the main research objective is to improve our understanding of a phenomenon, especially when this phenomenon is complex and deeply embedded in its context. According to Merriam (2009), the four key characteristics of qualitative research are: 1) it focuses on the meaning and understanding of a process; 2) the researcher is the primary instrument of its data collection and analysis; 3) it involves mainly inductive analysis; and 4) its product is richly descriptive. Since these characteristics of qualitative research well match the nature of this study, the author has chosen to employ qualitative research methods as the methodological foundation for the study of the use of third-person pronouns in the Taiwanese third-grade Social Studies curriculum.

Within the realm of qualitative research, a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system. According to Yin (2008), various research methods are distinguished with three important conditions: type of the research question posed; the extent of control the researcher has over actual behavioral events; and the degree of focus on contemporary as

opposed to historical events. Since this study poses “how” and “why” questions, requires no control of behavioral events, and focuses on contemporary events, it aptly matches Yin’s profile of a qualitative case study. Also, since the curriculum under review represents the dominant market share of published curriculum material used throughout Taiwan for third grade Social Studies, the dataset represents a “bounded system,” which Merriam identifies as “...the single most defining characteristic of case study research” (2009, p. 40).

5. Data Findings

Using the methodology and dataset outlined above, the following represents the data findings for each publisher’s Third Grade Social Studies, volume 1, as aligned to the teaching and learning expectations informed by the *Taiwan Gender Equity Education Act* of 2004 and with particular focus on the use of pronouns in these volumes.

The Kangxuan (康軒) volume:

- Of the three textbooks and workbooks examined, the Kangxuan version has the most explicit discussion on gender equality/equity; it not only mentions the phrase 性別 (“gender/sex”) 6 times, but also includes a stand-alone unit title *Male/Men and Female/Women* (男生和女生);
- 她 is used 15 times and it is used to refer to a gender-specific female person in all instances;
- 他 is used 17 times; it is used to refer to a gender-specific male person in 16 instances and in one instance it is used to refer to someone who should be a gender non-specific person (a “stranger” who approaches you and asks for directions), but in the accompanying illustration a seemingly male stranger is depicted approaching a student;
- 他們 is used 20 times and it is used to refer to a group of gender non-specific people in all instances;
- the use of both 他 (她) (with 她 in parentheses) is used twice in the material and it is used to refer to a gender non-specific person in both instances;
- 她們 is never used.

The Hanlin (翰林) volume:

- While gender quality/equity is prominently mentioned in its preface, Hanlin discusses gender equality/equity in a more implicit manner; it mentions the phrase 性別 (gender/sex) 4 times without including a stand-alone unit discussing gender related issues;
- 她 is used 6 times and it is used to refer to a gender-specific female person in all instances;
- 他 is used 17 times; it is used to refer to a gender-specific male person in 7 instances and is used to refer to a gender non-specific person in 10 instances. In two particular/peculiar instances when 他 is supposedly used to refer to a gender non-specific person (for example, “if a classmate accidentally damages my book, as long as *he* sincerely apologizes, I will forgive *him*”), the accompanying illustration shows one ostensibly identifiable “female” student apologizing to another “female” student;

- 他們 is used 4 times; it is used to refer to a gender-specific group of boys in one instance and is used to refer to a group of gender non-specific people in 3 instances. In one particular instance when 他們 is supposedly used to refer to a group of gender non-specific people (“If my classmates don’t dress properly or run in the hallway, I will remind *them* to...”), the accompanying illustration shows only boys who are improperly dressed and/or running down the hallway;
- 她們 is never used.

The Nanyi (南一) volume:

- Of the three textbooks and workbooks surveyed, the Nanyi version has the most implicit discussion on gender equality/equity; it mentions the phrase 性別 2 times without including a stand-alone unit discussing gender-related issues;
- 她 is used 13 times and it is used to refer to a gender-specific female person in all instances;
- 他 is used 10 times; it is used to refer to a gender-specific male person in 2 instances and a gender non-specific person in 8 instances;
- 他們 is used 10 times; it is used to refer to a group of gender non-specific people in 9 instances and is used to refer to a gender-specific group of girls in 1 instance.
- 她們 is never used.

6. Discussion and Proposal for Future Third-Person Pronoun Usage in Curriculum

If there is an intentional use of the woman-radical third-person pronoun 她 as a means of promoting the objectives of the *Taiwan Gender Equity Education Act*, it is being done inconsistently across the dataset between different publications and with widely varying degrees of frequency even within a given textbook version of the Third Grade Social Studies volume. Critics, moreover, have very publicly charged that actual in-class discussion of cogent gender issues that inform the use of these pronouns is either routinely avoided or indefinitely postponed (Loa, 2014). While it is beyond the scope of this study’s methodology to assess the veracity of these allegations, the degree of inconsistency in which gender/sex is presented as a cogent issue in the field of Social Studies makes one doubt whether the issue is indeed uniformly addressed in all third-grade classrooms.

As previously discussed in the literature review section, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis argues that language shapes our perceptions and thoughts (albeit, to debatable and varying degrees). Therefore, in order to reshape or redress a complex issue like gender inequality/inequity in society at large and to simultaneously achieve a more gender-inclusive reality, textbooks, education, and social interactions need to develop the most optimally inclusive use of pronouns on a consistent and widespread basis. Given the historical etymology of “woman”-radical female third-person pronoun 她 and its propensity to unintentionally but unavoidably re-inscribe a binary male/female gender paradigm that relegates females to a special linguistic class, this study proposes and advocates abandoning the use of “woman”-radical female third-person pronoun 她 altogether in curriculum material and instead using “human”-radical 他 exclusively as the only third-person pronoun that consistently and universally promotes gender

equity, gender neutrality, and gender inclusiveness. In contrast to many other societies and linguistic communities grappling with how best to introduce gender equity, gender neutrality, and gender inclusiveness through the introduction of unfamiliar neologisms or new-fangled, “unnatural” grammatical usage, Taiwanese curriculum writers enjoy the benefit of being able to re-conceptualize a “human”-radical third-person pronoun 他 that already is intrinsically used by every Chinese speaker. Etymologically speaking, 他 should also have been a universal third-person pronoun for all genders since its radical denotes “humans” rather than “male/men” (granted, the human-radical third-person pronoun 他 may have been historically read by default as connoting male subjectivity, which was exacerbated with the introduction of the woman-radical third-person pronoun 她 in the May Fourth period). Critically, the exclusive use of human-radical third-person pronoun 他 in future textbooks would not pose a linguistically daunting, unfamiliar, new-fangled, or “unnatural” obstacle to address issues related to gender equity, gender neutrality, and gender inclusiveness. This would, however, almost certainly require stand-alone sections mandated in future textbooks across disciplines and across grades to introduce, contextualize, and reinforce how the human-radical third-person pronoun 他 encompasses all gender identities (female and differently-gendered along with male alike), in order to avoid perpetuating the issue of covert sexism underlying studies examined in the literature review section of this study.

The exclusive use of the human-radical third-person pronoun in written Taiwanese curriculum material would also be consistent with how the third-person pronoun functions orally in spoken Chinese, which makes no distinctions between differently gendered referents (the single spoken syllable *ta* covers all referents in Mandarin). Examples of the ambiguity of this all-inclusive nature of the spoken third-person pronoun are rife throughout Chinese media and would be immediately familiar to any native speaker or student of the language. For example, in the recent 2013 Mainland Chinese film, *A Touch of Sin* (天注定, directed by Jia Zhangke), there is a scene where two young co-workers (one male, one female) are taking a break and the young woman is reading news items appearing on her hand-held device. She curses and says that a government official was charged with corruption after a large cache of Louis Vuitton handbags were found in the government official’s home (and here she speaks the third-person pronoun *ta*). The young man, informed by covert sexist assumptions about men in power, instinctively and stereotypically assumes that the government official is male and so he asks, “why would *he* [*ta*] have so many Louis Vuitton bags?” To which the young female worker, also informed by her own sexist assumptions about women hoarding handbags, replies, “because the *she* [*ta*] is female [*nü de*].”

This admittedly comical example of the ambiguous and often indeterminate nature of third-person pronoun usage in spoken Chinese attests to the highly contextual nature of Chinese language and how it requires additional contextual information in order to deduce the gender identity of the third-person *ta* referent. Similarly, such a universal third person pronoun *ta* in spoken Chinese (e.g. Mandarin) can be replicated through the exclusive use of human-radical third-person pronoun 他 in written Chinese. In so doing, the human-radical third-person pronoun can attain the same universal gender-neutral, gender-inclusive potential without falling into a covert sexist dynamic, especially when it is used in a consistent, comprehensive, and conscious manner in all curriculum related materials. As noted in his 1997 article, Moser also expresses

how a self-conscious and analytical understanding of the historical propensity towards a covert sexism in the Chinese usage of third-person pronouns might provide an opportunity for changing that dynamic rather than just simply resigning oneself to perpetuating it: “surely real hope lies in the possibility of a *conscious* challenge to the generally accepted ways of speaking, thinking, and categorizing. Just as awareness of sexist conventions and social arrangements have led to a gradual elimination of their vestiges in the language, so explicit awareness of deeper levels of linguistic sexism can awaken speakers to previously hidden sexist patterns in the culture at large” (p. 20).

This expressed hope (which, incidentally, is a very forceful articulation of the “weak” version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis) also informs many of the ways in which Chinese-language communities are taking their own initiative and addressing the issues of gender equity/equality as well as the need for increased gender-neutrality and gender-inclusiveness in written third-person pronoun usage. Linguists have been noticing (Mair, 2013) how in online chat rooms and on social media many netizens or participants have started to forgo typing out either 他 or 她 and simply write in the *pinyin* Romanized “ta” in order to circumvent some of the pitfalls discussed in the course of this paper (e.g. gendered assumptions, unintentional covert sexism, etc.). While such a tactical use of *pinyin* on an online setting makes for a commendable gesture of solidarity for a more gender-inclusive virtual community, it does not really present a viable option for Taiwanese textbook writers to officially and formally adopt the *pinyin* Romanized “ta” into the Taiwanese curriculum.

For all the reasons stated above, this study strongly advocates that future textbooks in Taiwan should abandon the use of the “woman”-radical third person pronoun 她 and exclusively use the “human”-radical third person pronoun 他 that will be self-consciously re-conceptualized for its universal, inclusive nature — a third-person pronoun for one and for all, regardless of (or because of all) gender(s).

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