



Words Shape Worlds: Gender Stereotyping in Children's Picture Books

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the construction and influence of gender stereotypes in children's picture books, with a specific focus on the Chinese and English versions of *Beauty and the Beast*. Grounded in Gender Schema Theory and Social Learning Theory, the research employed a mixed-methods approach that combined textual analysis, interviews, and surveys with 30 children aged 9–10. Findings reveal that both versions of the picture book reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, though cultural differences are evident: the Chinese version emphasizes gentleness and obedience, while the English version highlights intelligence and bravery. Children's perceptions largely align with stereotypical gender expectations, associating traits such as bravery with boys and gentleness with girls, though some participants demonstrated flexibility and resistance to these norms. These results suggest that children's literature functions as a powerful medium of socialization, transmitting both linguistic and cultural values of gender. However, the findings also highlight the potential for literature to challenge stereotypes and encourage more equitable perceptions of gender roles. Implications are offered for educators, parents, and authors to foster inclusive narratives that support children's holistic development.

Keywords: children's picture books, gender stereotyping, Gender Schema Theory (GST), Social Learning Theory (SLT)



INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Globally, children's picture books are not only a fundamental medium through which children acquire early language and cognitive skills, but they also serve as a critical channel of gender socialization (Li et al., 2025). By combining visual and textual narratives, picture books transmit societal gender norms and shape children's perceptions of male and female roles. A large body of research highlights the persistence of gender stereotypes in children's literature. Male characters are often portrayed as adventurous, courageous, and authoritative, whereas female characters tend to be represented as passive, nurturing, and dependent (Boyle et al., 2023). Such stereotypical portrayals are reinforced not only through illustrations and plotlines but also through gendered linguistic choices, including the use of adjectives and verbs that emphasize traditional gendered traits (Hentschel et al., 2019).

In China, traditional gender roles have been deeply influenced by Confucian ideology, which has long emphasized hierarchical divisions between men and women. Although recent educational reforms have aimed to promote gender equality, gender stereotypes remain pervasive in children's picture books. The linguistic characteristics of Chinese, particularly the use of classifiers, verbs, and culturally coded expressions, further reinforce binary gender distinctions. For example, male characters are often described as "brave" or "strong," while female characters are labeled as "beautiful" or "gentle." This linguistic bias not only affects children's understanding of gender roles but also restricts their freedom in terms of career aspirations, interests, and personal development (Qiu & Yoke, 2024).

Children's literature thus plays a dual role: it is both a source of entertainment and a vehicle for shaping social cognition. Early exposure to gendered representations influences children's emotional expression, toy preferences, and even long-term career choices (Casey et al., 2021). Given the formative role of picture books in children's gender development, it is essential to critically examine how these texts construct and reinforce gender norms.

Problem Statement

Despite the Chinese government's promotion of gender equality through educational reforms such as the revision of the national curriculum standards, gender stereotypes continue to be deeply embedded in children's picture books. These stereotypes operate not only through explicit storylines but also through implicit linguistic and visual cues that naturalize binary gender distinctions (Qiu & Yoke, 2024). For instance, while male characters are commonly associated with independence, leadership, and risk-taking, female characters are still frequently confined to roles emphasizing beauty, compliance, and emotional labor.

Language is particularly important in this process. The use of gendered adjectives, verbs, and narrative strategies subtly but powerfully reinforces gender roles. Such linguistic practices shape children's implicit associations and may contribute to long-term behavioral outcomes, including restricted career ambitions and stereotyped emotional expression (Hyde, 2016). Moreover, although an increasing number of international picture books are now translated and published in



China, translation often involves domestication strategies that align with local cultural expectations. These adjustments can, paradoxically, intensify gender stereotypes rather than reduce them.

While some studies have addressed gender representation in Chinese textbooks, there has been limited research on picture books, which play a more informal yet equally influential role in early education (Zhang & Li, 2020). Even fewer studies have examined how children themselves perceive and internalize the gendered messages in these texts. Thus, important questions remain: How are gender stereotypes linguistically encoded in children's picture books? How do children perceive and interpret these stereotypes? And how do these perceptions influence their cognition, behavior, and language use?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children's Picture Books and Gender Socialization

Children's picture books are central to early gender socialization. They not only entertain but also communicate values, expectations, and norms about gender roles. As Martin and Ruble (2010) emphasize, children are active constructors of meaning who learn social categories through repeated exposure to stories. Classic research in Western contexts, such as Hamilton et al. (2006), revealed that gender stereotypes in children's picture books persist despite some progress in representation. Male characters continue to dominate active, adventurous, and leadership roles, while female characters are disproportionately depicted as passive, dependent, or supportive.

From a psychological perspective, Bussey and Bandura's (1999) social cognitive theory underscores that children acquire gender roles by observing, imitating, and internalizing the behaviors modeled in texts. Picture books, therefore, act as socializing agents that shape gender identity and behavioral expectations. Repeated exposure to gender-stereotypical portrayals may lead children to adopt narrow views of gender-appropriate behavior, which subsequently influence toy preferences, academic interests, and career aspirations (Casey et al., 2021).

Language and Gender Stereotypes in Picture Books

Beyond imagery, language serves as a fundamental medium for constructing gender. As Hentschel et al. (2019) demonstrated, linguistic choices such as descriptive adjectives and action verbs play a critical role in perpetuating stereotypes. Male characters are frequently described with terms like "decisive" or "courageous," while female characters are labeled with words emphasizing beauty and compliance. These linguistic associations are not merely descriptive; they are constitutive of children's gender cognition.

Hyde (2016) notes that young children are particularly sensitive to the affective and cognitive salience of words during early language acquisition. When specific descriptors are consistently paired with gendered characters, children internalize these associations, forming cognitive schemas such as "male = strength" and "female = appearance/emotion." Moreover, linguistic asymmetry in narrative structure often positions male characters as active agents performing



actions, while female characters are presented as passive objects of description (Haines et al., 2016). Such subtle discursive practices normalize gendered hierarchies, reinforcing social inequalities through language.

Research in the Chinese Context

Compared with the rich literature in Western contexts, research on gender in Chinese children's picture books remains limited. Domestic scholarship has largely focused on textbooks, analyzing gender imbalance in curricular materials (Zhang & Li, 2020), while relatively little attention has been given to picture books as informal but influential resources for gender socialization.

Studies that have been conducted suggest that Chinese picture books continue to reflect Confucian ideals of gender hierarchy. Qiu and Yoke (2024) found that Chinese stories often portray men as protectors and leaders, while women are associated with caregiving and dependence. The linguistic structure of Chinese further contributes to this tendency. Certain classifiers, verbs, and idiomatic expressions carry implicit gendered connotations, reinforcing binary roles when applied to characters in picture books.

Interestingly, translated picture books also exhibit gender bias in the Chinese context. In the process of localization, publishers often adapt language to align with cultural norms, which can inadvertently heighten stereotypes rather than diminish them. This illustrates the dual mechanism—cultural traditions and linguistic practices—through which gender stereotypes are sustained in China. Despite growing recognition of these issues, systematic, empirical studies on how children interpret and internalize such portrayals are still scarce.

Research Gaps

Although significant progress has been made in understanding gender in children's literature, three gaps remain. First, research has been disproportionately focused on Western contexts, leaving the Chinese cultural and linguistic environment underexplored. Second, much of the existing work relies on textual and visual analysis without probing the linguistic mechanisms that underpin the construction of gender stereotypes. Third, few studies have foregrounded children's perspectives—how young readers themselves perceive, interpret, and reproduce gendered messages.

Theoretical Framework

Building upon the reviewed studies, this research adopts two theoretical perspectives: Gender Schema Theory (GST) and Social Learning Theory (SLT). GST emphasizes that children actively construct gender schemas, which guide how they interpret and recall gendered information (Bem, 1981). SLT, in contrast, highlights the role of modeling, observation, and reinforcement in children's acquisition of gender roles (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). These frameworks have been widely applied in children's literature studies, and they jointly provide a solid foundation for analyzing both the linguistic construction of gender stereotypes in texts and the ways children interpret and internalize them.



This study addresses these gaps by conducting a linguistic analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* in the Chinese context, exploring how gender stereotypes are conveyed and how children engage with them. By integrating linguistic, cultural, and educational perspectives, the study aims to contribute both to scholarly understanding and to the development of practical strategies for promoting gender equality in early childhood education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze gender stereotypes in the picture book *Beauty and the Beast* and explore how children perceive gender roles within the story. The research framework is grounded in Gender Schema Theory (GST) and Social Learning Theory (SLT).

Gender Schema Theory (GST) suggests that children develop gender schemas through socialization, which help them organize and process gender-related information within their cultural and social context (Bem, 1981). Meanwhile, Social Learning Theory (SST) argues that children acquire gender roles by observing and imitating the behaviors of adults and peers, receiving reinforcement from the social environment (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). These two theories offer complementary perspectives for analyzing how gender roles are constructed in the picture book *Beauty and the Beast* and how children internalize and apply these roles.

This study employs a combination of qualitative methods, such as text analysis, and quantitative methods, such as surveys, to explore the representation of gender stereotypes in the text and to examine children's gender perception. The integration of these methods ensures a comprehensive understanding of the ways gender roles are constructed in children's literature and their potential impact on children's cognitive development.

Research Materials

The primary material for this study is the well-known picture book *Beauty and the Beast*, in both its Chinese and English versions. The selection of this particular book as the research material is based on the following reasons:

Cultural Relevance

Beauty and the Beast is a widely recognized and culturally significant story, not only in Western countries but also in China and other non-Western cultures. The story has been translated into multiple languages and is regularly used in children's education. Its enduring popularity makes it an ideal subject for exploring gender representations in literature across different cultures.

Clear Gender Role Representation

The gender roles in *Beauty and the Beast* are explicitly defined. *Belle* (the female protagonist) is portrayed with traditional feminine qualities such as beauty, kindness, and gentleness, while *the*



Beast (the male protagonist) embodies traits typically associated with masculinity, such as strength, power, and authority. Analyzing these roles provides insight into the construction of gender stereotypes in children's literature.

Cross-Cultural Analysis

The differences between the Chinese and English versions of the book offer an opportunity to explore how gender roles are shaped by cultural variations. Translations may modify gender representations, either emphasizing or downplaying certain aspects of gender roles. Comparing these versions allows the study to examine the cultural impact on gender role construction.

Research Participants

The participants in this study are 30 children aged 9-10 years from two urban elementary schools in East China. This age group was selected for the following reasons:

Age Appropriateness

Children aged 9-10 years have developed basic reading comprehension skills and are capable of independent thought and critical reflection on story content. At this age, children are increasingly aware of gender roles, and their perceptions are still in development, making them ideal subjects for studying the impact of gender stereotypes.

Sensitive Period for Gender Identity Formation

Research indicates that gender identity and role preferences are especially malleable during this age range (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Children in this developmental stage are particularly receptive to external influences, such as media and literature, making them suitable for examining how gender roles are internalized.

Sample Size Justification

The study uses a sample of 30 children, which is consistent with similar studies in the field. For instance, Peterson and Lach (1990) used 24 children in their study of gender role perception in literature, and Wohlwend (2012) used 32 children. This sample size is large enough to provide reliable data while being manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis.

Data Collection

The data collection for this study consists of two primary phases: Textual Analysis and Children's Responses Analysis. The process is outlined below:

Textual Analysis

Corpus Collection

The Chinese and English versions of *Beauty and the Beast* were selected for analysis. The focus is on identifying gender-specific language features, such as adjectives and verbs, used to describe the male and female characters. These linguistic features will be categorized and analyzed to reveal the ways in which gender roles are represented in the text.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of the Chinese and English texts will be conducted to identify any significant differences in the portrayal of gender roles. This comparison will help assess how translation may affect the representation of gender and whether certain gender traits are emphasized or diminished in different cultural contexts.

Children's Responses Analysis

Data will be gathered through a combination of *semi-structured interviews*, *drawing and writing tasks*, and *questionnaire surveys*.

Semi-structured Interviews

Each of the 30 children will participate in a semi-structured interview, during which they will be asked to discuss their impressions of the main characters (Belle and the Beast) and their perceptions of gender roles. For example, they will be asked questions such as: "What kind of girl do you think Belle is? What are her qualities?" "Who is your favorite character, and why?"

Drawing and Writing Tasks

Children will be asked to draw their favorite character from the story and explain why they chose that character. This task allows the children to express their emotional and cognitive responses to the characters in a visual and narrative form.

Questionnaire Surveys

A Likert scale questionnaire will be administered to assess children's gender perceptions. The questionnaire will include statements such as "Bravery is more of a trait for boys" and "Girls should be more gentle than boys," with response options ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The survey data will be analyzed quantitatively to identify common patterns and trends in children's gender role perceptions.



Table 1. Gender Stereotype Questionnaire (Likert Scale)

No.	Statement	1 (Strongly Disagree)	2	3	4	5 (Strongly Agree)
1	Bravery is more of a trait for boys.					
2	Girls should be more beautiful than boys.					
3	Boys are more suited for leadership roles than girls.					
4	Girls should be gentler than boys.					
5	Boys should be stronger than girls.					
6	Smart children are more likely to be boys.					
7	Girls are more suited to care for others.					

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data will combine both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender role construction in the text and children's responses.

Qualitative Analysis

Textual Analysis

The text will be coded for gender-related themes, focusing on language that reflects stereotypical gender roles. Thematic analysis will be used to identify and categorize the ways in which gender is represented in both the Chinese and English versions.

Children's Responses

Interviews and drawings will be analyzed using Open Coding and Axial Coding techniques. Common themes and patterns will be identified, such as children's views on gender roles, their emotional connections to characters, and the extent to which gender stereotypes influence their perceptions.

Quantitative Analysis

Survey Analysis

Descriptive statistical methods (e.g., mean, standard deviation, frequency distribution) will be used to analyze the questionnaire data. This will help identify general trends in children's



perceptions of gender roles, as well as any gender differences in responses.

Through the integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study aims to provide a nuanced and robust understanding of how gender roles are constructed in children's literature and how these roles are perceived by young readers.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in this study are paramount to ensure that the research is conducted responsibly and with respect for participants' rights. Key ethical guidelines followed include:

Informed Consent

Before participating in the study, both parents and children were provided with a clear explanation of the study's objectives and procedures. Written consent was obtained from parents, and verbal consent was secured from the children themselves.

Confidentiality

All data collected from the participants, including interview responses, drawings, and questionnaires, will be kept confidential. Participants' identities will be anonymized in any reports or publications, and no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Right to Withdraw

Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence.

Data Storage and Protection

All research data will be stored securely in compliance with relevant data protection regulations. Digital data will be stored on encrypted devices, and physical data will be kept in locked storage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research combined both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze gender roles in the picture book *Beauty and the Beast* and explore how these roles impact children's gender perceptions. The chapter is structured around the different research objectives and is divided into several sections: textual analysis, children's responses and interviews, and questionnaire survey results. These will be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework.

Textual Analysis Results

In the analysis of both the Chinese and English versions of *Beauty and the Beast*, the study found some similarities in the representation of gender roles, but also significant cultural differences.



Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes

Both the Chinese and English versions of the picture book clearly reflect traditional gender stereotypes. *Belle*, the female protagonist, exhibits typical feminine traits, such as beauty, kindness, and gentleness in almost every scene. For example, she is repeatedly described as "beautiful" and "kind," with her actions often revolving around caring for others, family, and love. In contrast, *the Beast*, the male protagonist, is portrayed as embodying traits typically associated with masculinity, such as strength, ruggedness, and emotional intensity. The Beast is depicted as having an imposing physique, while Belle is shown as being able to transform the Beast's heart with her beauty and kindness.

Text Comparison: Differences Between the Chinese and English Versions

While both versions portray similar gender characteristics, there are subtle cultural differences that emerged during the translation process. In the Chinese version, Belle's character emphasizes "gentleness" and "obedience," while the English version highlights her "intelligence" and "bravery" more prominently. This difference may reflect the varying cultural expectations of female characters: in Chinese culture, female virtues tend to focus on gentleness, while Western culture places more emphasis on a woman's independence and courage.

Solidification of Gender Roles

The analysis of language reveals that *Beauty and the Beast* not only constructs gender roles through the characters' appearances and behaviors but also reinforces these roles through the plot development and character interactions. For example, the plot point where Belle redeems the Beast reinforces the traditional notion that "women can change men," while the Beast's transformation back into a human through love indirectly suggests that "men need women's love to grow."

Children's Gender Cognition and Responses

Through interviews and drawing tasks conducted with 30 children aged 9-10, the study gathered a range of perspectives on gender role perceptions. The key findings are as follows:

Gender Role Preferences

Based on the interviews and drawings, the majority of children expressed a preference for Belle, especially the male children. In the questionnaire survey, over 80% of children regarded Belle as a "good girl" and identified her as possessing traits such as "beauty," "kindness," and "bravery." When asked to choose their favorite character, boys tended to favor Belle, while girls often preferred the Beast. Most children said that the relationship between Belle and the Beast represented the theme that "love changes everything."

Influencing Factors in Gender Cognition

The interviews revealed that many children have clear gender expectations for the characters in



the book. For instance, male children typically viewed the Beast as a symbol of "strength" and "bravery," while female children regarded Belle as an epitome of "kindness" and "beauty." These gendered perceptions reflect the influence of societal and cultural expectations, which are reinforced by family and school environments. Gender roles are often solidified in children's cognitive frameworks during this stage.

Identification and Challenge of Gender Roles

Despite the general tendency to align with traditional gender roles, some children expressed challenges to these norms. For example, some girls noted that Belle's behavior was not merely "gentle" but also showed "strength." Some boys indicated that the Beast's image didn't fully match traditional ideas of "strength," as they appreciated his emotional transformation through love. This suggests that some children may possess more flexible views on gender roles.

Questionnaire Survey Results

The Likert scale questionnaire administered to the 30 children revealed patterns in their gender role perceptions. The results showed that most children continue to display significant gender stereotypes. Specifically:

Solidification of Gender Roles

About 70% of children believed that bravery is a trait associated with boys, while gentleness is a trait for girls. This indicates that children at this age have a fixed understanding of gender roles, which strongly align with traditional gender stereotypes.

Cultural Differences

The survey found that male children were more likely to associate traits like "strength" and "leadership" with boys, while female children tended to associate traits like "gentleness" and "care" with girls. This difference may be attributed to the socialization processes within family and school environments, further supporting the Social Learning Theory of gender role development.

Existence of Gender Bias

About 60% of the children surveyed believed that smart children are usually boys, not girls. This result highlights that, despite efforts to promote gender equality, children still harbor subconscious gender biases, which could significantly influence their future gender role identification.

This chapter has presented the findings of the study, focusing on the textual analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* and the responses of the children. The analysis reveals that gender stereotypes are strongly reinforced in the book, and children's gender perceptions are influenced by societal and cultural factors. However, some children exhibited flexibility in their understanding of gender roles, challenging traditional norms. These findings suggest that while children's gender



cognition tends to align with traditional gender roles, there is still room for the development of more equitable and flexible perceptions of gender. The next chapter will further discuss the implications and significance of these findings.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine how gender roles are represented in the Chinese and English versions of the picture book *Beauty and the Beast*, and to investigate how these portrayals influence children's gender perceptions. Drawing on textual analysis, interviews, and a questionnaire with 30 children aged 9–10, the study revealed several key findings:

The picture book largely reinforces traditional gender stereotypes through character construction and plot development. Cross-cultural differences exist: the Chinese version emphasizes “gentleness and obedience,” while the English version highlights “independence and bravery.” Children's gender perceptions tend to align with stereotypical expectations, though some demonstrated resistance and alternative interpretations, showing that gender cognition is both dynamic and malleable.

These findings provide insights into the intersection between children's literature, cultural values, and gender cognition, and offer implications for both educational practice and literary creation.

Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes and Socialization

The study found that *Beauty and the Beast* perpetuates traditional binary divisions of gender roles. Belle is consistently portrayed as “beautiful, gentle, and kind,” while the Beast embodies traits such as “strength, roughness, and a need for female salvation.” Such portrayals are reinforced by the narrative structure. For example, the Beast's transformation depends on Belle's love, implicitly suggesting that “a woman's value lies in her ability to sacrifice and redeem.” This aligns with Social Learning Theory and Gender Schema Theory, which posit that children learn and internalize gender roles by repeatedly encountering them in social and cultural contexts, including literature.

Cross-Cultural Variations in Gender Roles

The comparison of the Chinese and English versions revealed significant cultural differences. In the Chinese version, Belle is depicted with greater emphasis on obedience and virtuousness, reflecting Confucian ideals of female morality. By contrast, the English version highlights Belle's intelligence and courage, reflecting Western cultural values of independence and agency. These differences suggest that children's literature functions as a medium of cultural transmission, embedding distinct gender expectations within different sociocultural contexts.

Mechanisms of Children's Gender Cognition

Data from the interviews and questionnaires showed that most children held stereotypical views of gender—for example, associating bravery with boys and gentleness with girls. Three major



factors were identified as shaping these perceptions:

Family influences including parental division of labor, communication styles, and implicit expectations; School influences, such as curriculum design, teacher expectations, and peer interactions that reinforce gender roles; Media and literature influences, which repeatedly reproduce stereotypical patterns of masculinity and femininity.

These findings illustrate that children's gender cognition is formed through a complex interplay of social, cultural, and environmental factors. Despite the prevalence of stereotypes, some children demonstrated resistance to traditional gender roles. For instance, some girls emphasized Belle's bravery and intelligence rather than only her gentleness, while some boys appreciated the Beast's emotional vulnerability rather than his physical strength. These findings indicate that children's gender cognition is not static but subject to change, especially when exposed to diverse cultural narratives. This flexibility creates opportunities for promoting gender equality through education and literature.

Several Limitations Should Be Acknowledged

Sample Size and Scope

The study was limited to 30 children within a narrow age range, which may not represent broader developmental patterns. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples across different age groups.

Single Text Focus

The study analyzed only one picture book. Comparative studies of multiple texts across genres and cultural contexts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender representation in children's literature.

Methodological Constraints

The study primarily relied on interviews and questionnaires. Future studies could incorporate classroom observations, experimental designs, and longitudinal methods to capture the dynamic process of gender cognition.

In conclusion, children's literature is not merely a form of entertainment or moral instruction; it is also a powerful medium through which social and cultural values are conveyed. By consciously creating and disseminating more balanced and diverse gender representations, society can contribute to dismantling stereotypes and empowering children to envision multiple pathways of identity and growth. This represents the most meaningful contribution and significance of the present study.



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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

This manuscript was developed with the assistance of SPSS for the purpose of data collection. The tool supported the authors in reviewing and refining the content, and the authors assume full responsibility for the final version submitted for publication.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Authors' Contributions

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: Zhang Ya Qiu. Data collection: Zhang Ya Qiu. Analysis and interpretation of results: Zhang Ya Qiu and Soo Kum Yoke. Draft manuscript preparation: Zhang Ya Qiu and Soo Kum Yoke. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.