

# Teachers' Perceptions of Gender Representation in English Textbooks in China

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## Abstract

Textbooks play a significant role in shaping young learners' values, especially in contexts like China, where traditional gender structure is deeply rooted in the culture and textbooks are centrally compiled and widely used. Given their influence on students' perceptions of social roles, gender representation in these materials is particularly important. This study investigates Chinese English teachers' perceptions of gender representation in their textbooks and examines whether these perceptions align with actual content. A sequential mixed-methods approach was employed, beginning with semi-structured interviews conducted with English teachers from different educational levels and provinces in China. Subsequently, a corpus-based textual and visual analysis was conducted on one widely used English textbook (PEP 7A). The findings of interviews revealed that most teachers were unaware of gender bias in the textbooks and generally perceived them as gender-neutral, often citing their government approval as evidence of fairness. However, the textbook analysis uncovered subtle gender imbalances, such as the underrepresentation of males in domestic roles and limited diversity in female occupational and recreational depictions. These findings suggest a gap between teachers' perceptions and the implicit messages conveyed through textbook content. The study highlights the need for greater discussion on gender issues in the classroom and recommends that middle school is an optimal period for introducing gender topics to students. Enhancing teacher awareness is also essential to fostering a more gender-equitable learning environment.

**Keywords:** gender, representation, English textbooks, teachers' perceptions

## 1. Introduction

Gender is the social and cultural construction of women and men (Sunderland, 2004). It refers to a wide spectrum of identities shaped by cultural and societal distinctions between females and males. Gender equality in education is of great importance as a part of creating a gender-egalitarian society and as an initiative to empower women. Extensive research has been conducted to promote gender equality in the educational process. Many researchers have provided information on gender representation in textbooks from various countries, disciplines and educational levels. Evidence from previous studies indicates that gender bias and stereotypes still exist in school textbooks, both in developed and developing countries (Gouvias & Alexopoulos, 2018; Guichot-Reina & De la Torre-Sierra, 2023; Syed & Agha, 2019). However, studies on teachers' perceptions of gender representation in textbooks are relatively scarce. In China, like many other places in the world, textbooks are the main materials used in the English teaching and learning process. Consequently, gender representation in those textbooks can affect students' views and their gender identity (Du et al., 2021; Good et al., 2010). Therefore, this study seeks to address this research gap by focusing on the Chinese context. Positioned as a necessary first step and a preliminary inquiry, this research is designed with a dual focus: first, to closely examine how teachers in China perceive gender in the English textbooks they are using, and second, to conduct an initial textual and visual analysis of one representative textbook (PEP 7A) to evaluate potential alignment or mismatch. This study aims to lay the foundation for a larger research agenda; future research will expand the scope to include multiple textbook series and involve a larger number of teachers, thereby enabling a more robust and comprehensive understanding of gender representation in Chinese English materials as well as teachers' perceptions.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Gender Representation in Textbooks

While equal access to education is paramount, unbiased textbooks and curricula are also important. Nevertheless, gender bias

in textbooks is an imperceptible barrier preventing gender parity in education and should be highlighted (Blumberg, 2008). It is considered a hidden curriculum given to younger generations (Lee, 2014; Wang, 2014). Gender depiction in textbooks showing how females and males behave, either in texts or in pictures, can be imitated and internalized by students (Lee, 2018). Such portrayals can have detrimental effects on students, especially females, by hindering them from exploring their full potential. For instance, research shows female students exposed to counter-stereotypical images performed better on the comprehension evaluation and reported less anxiety than those exposed to stereotypical pictures (Good et al., 2010). Thus, gender representation in textbooks may shape, reinforce or weaken young people's view of gender.

Due to the importance of gender representation in textbooks, many scholars have sought to raise awareness and make improvements by analyzing gender bias and stereotypes in textbooks. Some studies have witnessed improvement in gender representation in textbooks. Norberg & Nordlund (2022) discovered equal gender representation in the numerical analysis of proper names, as well as in the collocated verbs and adjectives. However, gender depiction remains a concern, as the study also revealed an overrepresentation of male animals involved in a variety of funny activities compared with equivalent females, suggesting that bias persists in more subtle forms. Moreover, gender bias varies among countries. A comparative study of textbooks from Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh found different ratios of female to male characters (text and illustrations combined) in these four countries, with 44.4%, 44.1%, 24.4% and 37.3% respectively (Islam & Asadullah, 2018). An insignificant fraction of female names (5.3%) appeared in high school English textbooks compared to male names (94.7%) (Orfan, 2023b). Apart from underrepresentation in overall frequency, another salient bias is that females are confined to limited traditional roles and activities. For instance, although professional Dutch women participate in the workforce at rates similar to men in real life, professional men are more visible in textbooks (Koster, 2020). Similarly, male characters are typically depicted in tough physical occupations and tasks, whereas female characters are more generally represented in domestic settings (Zhang et al., 2022a). Males not only dominated the conversations but also held powerful and prestigious occupations. Fathers were almost absent from domestic roles. Furthermore, the portrayal of girls' and boys' interests and hobbies often noticeably reflected stereotypes (Vu & Pham, 2023).

## *2.2 Teachers' Perceptions of Gender in Textbooks*

Many studies have added shreds of evidence on gender bias and improvements in textbooks. Meanwhile, how teachers perceive and react to the gender portrayal in textbooks has also attracted scholars' attention. Teachers' critical understanding of their own beliefs and values is important in developing ethos in schools and communities (Donnelly, 2004). As such, teachers might take a more active role in promoting gender equality for future generations. By using gender-neutral language themselves, supplementing with teaching materials, raising students' awareness of gender issues, and empowering them to challenge language, power, and discrimination, teachers could address the bias in textbooks (Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahruei, 2020).

A key question, however, is whether teachers can recognize and pay enough attention to gender bias and stereotypes in the textbooks. Dasrul et al. (2022) found that very few teachers interact with students differently based on their gender. According to the results, gender stereotypes are not particularly depicted in Indonesian textbooks, and stereotypes have little impact on students. However, many other studies revealed that gender bias still exists in textbooks even in countries that have high rankings in gender equality, like Sweden and The Philippines (Flores & Arandique, 2022; Norberg & Nordlund, 2022). Agha & Shaikh (2023) found that the majority of teachers followed the concept of traditional roles of men and women. Although these teachers acknowledged the influence of textbooks on students and thought it necessary to revise textbooks, their own adherence to traditional views presents a contradiction. Teachers' unawareness of gender bias in textbooks was also found through a quantitative and qualitative study (Mahmood & Kausar, 2019). The results aligned with the study of Kizilaslan (2010) that teachers disregarded gendered assumptions in the textbooks. Classroom sessions were mainly about linguistic knowledge, with little space for discussion of gender issues and teachers' own biases, and little attention to gender was noticed in the teaching process (Vu & Pham, 2022). Previous studies on teachers' perceptions revealed that most teachers overlooked gender bias in textbooks or its influence on students.

As a traditional patriarchal country, China has long been rooted in a culture favoring males over females. However, there hasn't been much research conducted on how teachers view gender bias in textbooks in China. This study explores the opinions of English teachers in China on how men and women are portrayed in textbooks and whether they think these books may be improved. It also examines how they consider that textbooks may or may not affect students. Furthermore, the study also analyzes gender representation in one English textbook to see if it aligns with teachers' perceptions.

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1 Research Design*

A sequential mixed research design was adopted for this study. The main purpose of this study was to understand teachers' opinions and perceptions of gender representation in English textbooks, for which semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate for gathering data (Cohen et al., 2018). The second phase of the study involved an analysis of

how gender is represented in one English textbook textually and visually through corpus analysis and visual analysis.

### 3.2 Research Methods

In the first phase, the semi-structured interview method was adopted. Interviews, especially in-depth interviews, are very useful for collecting data on people's attitudes, beliefs, feelings and knowledge on a certain topic (Cohen et al., 2018). This study adopted the five-step interview schedule design developed by Kallio et al. (2016). The process includes determining the requirements for conducting semi-structured interviews, identifying and employing existing literature, creating a draft semi-structured interview guide, conducting a pilot test of the guide, and delivering the final semi-structured interview guide. Interviews included open-ended questions addressing teachers' views on gender equality, textbook content, and students' responses to gender portrayals. Each interview lasted 10–20 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Transcriptions were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2023) thematic analysis method to identify recurring themes and insights.

In the second phase, a corpus and visual content analysis was conducted on the People's Education Press English textbook for the first semester of grade 7 (PEP 7A), widely used in Chinese middle schools. Textual data from selected units were compiled into a corpus to quantify the frequency and distribution of gendered terms, names, pronouns, and occupational roles. Additionally, images were analyzed using Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2020) framework for visual grammar, focusing on gendered representation through participant roles, activities, and spatial contexts. The combined approach allowed for a comprehensive comparison between teachers' perceptions and the actual textbook content.

### 3.3 Sampling

Purposive sampling is very useful in qualitative research for meeting the researchers' specific needs (Cohen et al., 2018). It was employed in this qualitative research to ensure the participants were willing to be involved in this study and could provide in-depth responses. Four English teachers participated in this study. One of them was a primary school teacher, one middle school teacher, one high school teacher, and one teacher teaching students from both middle school and high school. Pseudonyms are used to refer to them and represent their identities. For example, T3M3Y26 refers to Teacher number 1 who had been working in a middle school for 3 years. She is 26 years old. T4MH6 refers to Teacher number 4. She taught both middle school and high school students. She had 6 years of teaching experience in total. She is 35 years old. Teachers from primary, middle and high schools were chosen to gather teachers' perspectives on textbooks from different academic stages. All of them were females because there were no male volunteers. The researcher deemed that gender balance in the sample would not be a significant issue as all four participants mentioned that male English teachers were a very small minority. T3P3Y26 had no male colleagues teaching English. T3M3Y26 had 30 colleagues teaching English, yet only 1 of them was male. T4MH6Y35 had 46 colleagues teaching English, yet only 3 of them were males. All of them had a Bachelor's Degree in English. T4MH6 also had a Master's degree in English. All of them are below 36 and have 3–6 years of teaching experience. They worked in different provinces in China, one in Guizhou, two in Guangdong, and one in Jiangsu. They all used textbooks authorized by the government.

### 3.4 Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview is a useful tool for collecting data as it allows the researcher and the interviewees to express their ideas from their own perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018). Eight preset open-ended questions were prepared prior to the interviews. The interviews, which lasted 10 to 20 minutes, began with informing the participants about the purpose of the study and obtaining consent. They were also explained that the interview would be audio-recorded, and they could stop at any time. During the interview, the participants were asked to give personal information on their teaching experience, educational background, workplace and textbooks used. Then questions were asked regarding how they perceived gender equality, gender portrayal in textbooks, students' responses to gender depiction in textbooks, possible influences, etc. They were also asked about what period they thought that topics on gender equality would be the most influential to students. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed for further analysis.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for understanding participants' experiences, opinions, perceptions and actions. The analysis process involved six steps: familiarizing the data, coding, generating rough themes, developing themes, refining themes, labelling themes, and report writing (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Thematic analysis involves locating similar messages to generate themes and reporting these patterns (Bradford et al., 2020). Transcribed interviews were read multiple times to ensure immersion, and key phrases were systematically coded to identify patterns reflecting teachers' perceptions of gender representation, awareness of bias, and their pedagogical approaches. Themes were developed inductively and cross-validated to ensure reliability and depth of interpretation. For the textbook analysis, both corpus-based and visual methods were applied. A small corpus

was constructed from key textual sections of the PEP English textbook 7A. Gendered terms—including names, pronouns, titles, family and occupational roles—were quantified to assess balance, visibility, and stereotyping between male and female characters. Visual data were examined using Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2020) visual grammar framework, particularly focusing on representational meaning through the analysis of participants (who), processes (what), and circumstances (where). The UAM ImageTool 2.0 was used to code images by gender, age group, activity type, and spatial setting. Patterns of inclusion, role distribution, and stereotypical portrayals were identified to evaluate implicit gender messaging. This dual-layered analysis enabled triangulation of qualitative insights from teachers with empirical evidence from textbook content, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the alignment or mismatch between perception and reality.

### 3.6 Ethical Concerns

Throughout the study, ethical considerations were prioritized. Firstly, the voluntariness of the involvement was guaranteed. A consent form explaining the study, their involvement in it, and how the data will be used was provided to the participants. They were also assured of anonymity so they could participate without concern. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in this study.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Teachers' Perceptions

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts yielded five main themes:

#### 4.1.1 Gender Equality in Society

All interviewees expressed that they still felt gender inequality and male dominance in society. However, their feelings were different in terms of the extent of inequality. It seems like the feeling of inequality becomes stronger when the teacher is more experienced and older. However, they tended to mention gender equality in the workplace, a more visible arena. None of them mentioned gender inequality in the domestic sphere, for example, the responsibilities of taking care of family members.

Although our society is still predominantly male-dominated, the trend is shifting towards advocating for equality. Previously, when it came to phenomena like the recruitment of teachers, there was a separation between male and female candidates. It was observed that male teachers needed only around 30 points or 3 points in the written test to qualify, while female teachers needed a higher score. However, as this gender disparity was recognised, subsequent teacher recruitments have consistently emphasised equality and no longer differentiate between male and female candidates in the recruiting process. There was also a previous news article discussing the advantages that men have in various exams and interviews. These instances often highlight male dominance in different assessment processes. T1M3Y26

I feel there is still a phenomenon of gender discrimination. Hmm. Actually, most of the time, boys still have an advantage. Girls, more often than not, still face discrimination. For example, in choices like when students are selecting majors, there are actually some majors that are not suitable for girls but are suitable for boys. Also, when it comes to finding a job, there are many situations where they prefer males over females in many places. T4MH6Y35

Because our work now involves limited social interaction, mainly oriented towards students, I haven't personally observed much gender inequality in my surroundings. In any case, there are more female teachers. Certainly, there's not complete gender equality, with males being in the majority[dominating]. However, I believe that women are becoming more aware nowadays, especially in our generation. I think women have the capability to stand on their own, just like my parents, my mother, my aunt, and my friends around me—all of them can handle their own affairs independently. T3P3Y26

It seems that the interviewees held a comparatively positive view toward gender equality in our society. They believe that our society is on the right track in terms of gender equality. The gender problem they noticed and mentioned is only a limited aspect, primarily related to workforce entry. They appeared unaware of the current setbacks that feminism is facing in China and around the world. For instance, since the first report was released in 2006, the gender equality situation has only improved by 4.1 percentage points, and the overall progress is slowing down significantly, even worsening in some parts of the world, especially in areas like political empowerment and economic participation (World Economic Forum, 2023).

#### 4.1.2 Gender in Textbooks

Notably, none of the interviewees reported noticing gender inequality in the textbooks they used. Yet, this view contradicts previous studies showing persistent gender bias (Song & Xiong, 2022; Wu et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2022a).

I haven't paid much attention, and it seems like I haven't noticed any issues related to gender discrimination. I feel there are basically no problems. I haven't observed or been aware of any gender discrimination issues. In the high school textbooks I used before, there were sections specifically dedicated to discussing successful female roles. Well, it was the People's Education Press version we used before last year. Last year, we started to use a different one. And now we've switched to a new edition, so I haven't reached the later content. I don't know if there will be any, but currently, there haven't been any significant impressions. T4MH6Y35

Males have short hair, and females have long hair. Our People's Education Press version is relatively good; it doesn't have a lot of fancy patterns or illustrations like some other versions. In the People's Education Press version, the representation of males and females is equal. T3P3Y26

I did not notice any gender inequality. Those textbooks are compiled by experts and scrutinised by censors. Thus, there won't be any gender inequality. There is no discussion on gender in the texts. Females and males appear only as characters or names. Plus, in our textbooks, because they have been reviewed by the state, there should not be any obvious indications of gender inequality. In reality, in social recruitment processes such as civil service exams, teacher recruitment, or various government and public sector recruitments, there are clear regulations that prohibit differentiation based on gender. Society has actively worked towards avoiding gender-related issues, both explicitly and implicitly, and has been making efforts to create an atmosphere that fosters gender equality. T1M3Y26

In our textbooks, there is a female scientist in the content. When students learn the content about Tu Youyou, the famous female scientist, female students all feel very proud. I think that these examples can help female students break the rules and have other choices. T2H3Y26

Such statements reflect trust in authority, where governmental approval is taken as proof of impartiality. The failure to recognize gender inequality by women themselves in society and textbooks is not a good sign for the process of gender equality. This unconsciousness of gender inequality in textbooks is another hindrance toward gender parity for young generations, as Fairclough argues: "Consciousness is the first step towards emancipation" (Fairclough, 2013, p.1).

#### 4.1.3 Gender Differences

One of my interviewees [T4MH6Y35] mentioned that she did not notice significant differences in academic achievements during middle school between the two genders. However, she observed a difference in high school. She suggested that it was because females and males are good at different things when it comes to studying.

When dealing with students, teachers are supposed to hold an unbiased position. One interviewee T1M3Y26 mentioned that different feedbacks towards students are possible.

Basically, there aren't many differences. For example, in their studies, there isn't a distinct disparity. It feels like both boys and girls who excel in their studies are quite similar; there's not much of a noticeable difference. Teachers treat them equally without any preferential treatment. However, teachers also discuss among themselves, and in middle school, there might be slightly more girls with good grades, mainly because it's still focused on memorisation. But when it comes to high school, boys might excel more in the end because their creativity tends to be stronger. Their thought processes, the way boys and girls think, are still different. Perhaps, in this aspect, boys are more skilled, and girls might be a bit weaker. When it comes to choosing majors, certain fields like civil engineering or engineering, in general, might not be as suitable for girls because of their physiological characteristics. After all, there are societal factors and limitations related to issues like marriage and childbirth that come into play. T4MH6Y35

Teachers might be more pleased to see boys' improvement and will give instant positive feedback. Girls are considered to be quiet and well-behaved, so their academic achievements are natural, normal and taken for granted. T1M3Y26

#### 4.1.4 The Most Influential Period

Most interviewees agreed that content and discussion on gender can be especially influential and useful for middle school students. During this period, they have the eagerness, curiosity, and willingness to understand and discuss these issues. Participant T3P3Y26 suggested that high school would be a better choice for discussion on gender.

I think that gender discussion in high school is the most influential. In elementary school, students focus on physical differences [of different genders]. In middle school, they may be in an age of confusion, as I used to teach middle school students, and we might think about the psychological differences between boys and

girls. Then high school, as we become mature, we become more aware and understanding of these things. T3P3Y26

I feel that middle school students nowadays need to be informed about [gender]. They might think there's not much difference, and girls nowadays are quite open-minded. My own [female] students, for example, openly discuss topics like girls' menstrual cycles in the classroom. Also, they seem to hold a vague concept; sometimes, when textbooks introduce characters, they find it challenging to distinguish whether the person is male or female. It's like they are not very clear about the differentiation. They are more interested in and pay attention to the differences between boys and girls in these aspects. T4MH6Y35

There are some kind of invisible rules which demand what females are expected to do and behave. Middle school is the best period to have such content and discussion. Because middle school students are sensitive to gender topics. They are gradually forming an opinion that some activities only belong to males or females. But for high school students, it seems like they are more aware of many things. And they may hide their opinions. T2H3Y26

It is better to include content with independent females in textbooks. They can be models for female students. Middle school is the best period to have such content. T1M3Y26

The period of middle school, as suggested by most participants, is a crucial time for adolescent development. It is a time when they begin to take a second thought about what they are told and form their own views. And they are willing to argue for what they believe in.

#### 4.1.5 The Improvement in Textbooks

The need for improvement in textbooks was not mentioned. This may be attributed to the public-recognized authority of textbooks.

I haven't considered or paid attention to this question before. T4MH6Y35

Those textbooks are compiled by experts and scrutinised by censors. Thus, there won't be any gender inequality. T1M3Y26

In summary, the analysis of interview data revealed five major themes: teachers' perceptions of gender equality in society, awareness of gender representation in textbooks, views on gender differences among students, the optimal timing for introducing gender topics, and attitudes toward textbook improvement.

Most teachers acknowledged ongoing gender inequality in society, particularly in workplace contexts. However, their understanding was generally limited to visible or institutional aspects, such as job recruitment, with minimal recognition of domestic or cultural gender norms. More experienced teachers demonstrated greater sensitivity to inequality, yet none explicitly connected these issues to educational content or classroom practices.

However, all participants reported perceiving little to no gender bias in the textbooks they used. They expressed confidence in the neutrality of government-approved materials and cited examples of female role models (e.g., Tu Youyou) as evidence of balanced representation. This perception stands in contrast to prior research findings.

Most teachers agreed that middle school is the most suitable stage for discussing gender equality, as students begin forming independent views and are receptive to critical thinking. However, these discussions are rarely integrated into classroom discourse, highlighting a missed opportunity for fostering gender awareness during a crucial developmental period.

#### 4.2 Gender Representation in Textbooks

The interviews revealed that these participants did not pay much attention to gender portrayal in textbooks. They did not feel there was gender bias. In order to validate to what extent their perceptions revealed gender representation in textbooks, a textbook was analyzed both textually and visually to see if any gender bias existed. As all participants either used or are using the textbooks from People Education Press (PEP), a textbook (7A) from PEP was chosen to be analyzed. In addition to studying teachers' perceptions, gender representation was analyzed in the first book of the seventh grade, both textually and visually.

##### 4.2.1 Corpus Analysis of Textual Content

A small corpus was compiled for the textual analysis. In the selected textbook, there are 3 starter units and 9 formal units. Each of the 9 units consists of Section A, Grammar Focus, and Section B. The transcripts and reading parts in Section A 2D and Section B 2B were chosen to compile the textual corpus. The frequency of female and male characters was analyzed. Those nouns, pronouns, addressing titles and names which could be recognized as females or males were coded. The analyses are listed in the table below.

Table 1. Frequency of Characters

Type	Female	Frequency	%	Male	Frequency	%
Names	Cindy	205	47.9	Tom	223	52.1
	Helen			Bob		
	Alice			Eric		
	Sally			David		
	Linda			John		
	Jane			Bill		
	Mary			Dale		
	Anna			Alan		
	Jenny			Mike		
	Kate			Frank		
	Gina			Jack		
	Grace			Paul		
Nouns	Girl	47	46.5	Boy	54	53.5
	Girls			Boys		
	Woman	15	62.5	Man	9	37.5
Pronouns	She/Her/Hers	22	50	He/ His/Him	22	50
Addressing Titles	Mrs.	1	55	Mr.	9	45
	Ms.	10				
Family Roles	Mom	22	85.7	Dad	0	14.3
	Mother	2		Father	4	
	Sister/Sisters	5	41.7	Brother/Brothers	7	58.3
	Aunt	1	50	Uncle	1	50
	Grandmother	1	50	Grandfather	1	50
	Grandma	1	50	Grandpa	1	50
Total		332	50.08		331	49.92

The findings in PEP 7A showed the gender awareness of textbook authors. The frequencies of appearances are listed in Table 1. In total, female and male terms appeared 332 and 331 times. There is not any significant difference, even the number of female terms surpassed the number of males. The names of characters are recorded based on the name list appendix in this textbook. Altogether, there are 12 different female names and 12 male names. The pronouns of females and males are exactly the same. The types of family roles are the same. Except for mom/mother and dad/father, the frequency of female family roles is the same as that of males. Regarding the addressing titles, female terms appear 11 times, while male terms appear 9 times. The term Ms, which does not reveal female marriage status, appears 10 times, while Mrs, referring to a married female, appears once, and zero occurrence of Miss referring to an unmarried female. In the nouns, the number of girl and girls is smaller than that of boy and boys, while the term woman appears more than man. When added together, the numbers of females and males are almost the same, with 62 and 63, respectively.

However, it is still early to summarize that gender is equally represented in the textbook being analyzed. The frequency of names, which is the largest portion, is 205 for females in comparison with 223 for males. The male characters have a higher occurrence than female characters in textual representation. Most importantly, in the family roles, mom and mother appear 24 times while father appears only 4. There is a larger percentage of female representation (85.7%) compared to male representation (14.3%). This finding aligns with previous studies that females are more often depicted in domestic roles (Lee, 2018; Orfan, 2023a).

Table 2. Results of Occupation

Female Occupation	Males Occupations
Volleyball star, Cindy Smith	P.E. teacher, Mr. Hu
Chinese Teacher, Mrs. Wang	

In addition to family roles, occupational roles are also analyzed. Altogether, there are three occupational roles listed in Table 2: Volleyball star, Cindy Smith; P.E. teacher, Mr. Hu; Chinese Teacher, Mrs. Wang. Two of them are females: one teacher and one volleyball player. One of them is a male sports teacher.

Table 3. Results of Firstness

Female firstness	Male firstness
Linda and Bob	Boys and girls
	Grandpa and grandma
	Grandfather and grandmother
	Alan and Mary

The firstness means which one is presented first when females and males appear together. Previous studies have found that conventions that prioritize men demonstrate females' subordinate status. The firstness is also analyzed since the one being mentioned first is given more emphasis. The findings are shown in Table 3. There is female firstness once and male firstness 4 times.

The results of corpus analysis indicate that obvious female underrepresentation is not found. Textbook authors were conscious of gender equality in the textbook compiling process. However, there are still some covert aspects, as many scholars have discovered. They are less likely to be noticed since they are not prominent underrepresentation.

#### 4.2.2 Visual Analysis of Visual Content

Kress & Van Leeuwen (2020) proposed a systematic paradigm for Visual Grammar Analysis. This paradigm examines the three perspectives of visual grammar: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. The visual analysis in this study focuses on representational meaning, specifically narrative representation. This entails examining the participants(who), the processes (what is the activity the participant is involved in), and the circumstances (where) the participants are present in the images. Images are annotated and coded using UAM ImageTool 2.0 Version. UAM Image Tool is a free environment for annotation of image corpora developed by Mick O'Donnell.

Based on the purpose of this study, the focus of my analysis is on participants. Images containing characters (i.e. participants) in the selected textbook are coded and annotated in the following three aspects: who, what and where. Gender is characterized as a type of cultural classification and is indicated by conventional characteristics, including attire, hairstyle, facial traits, and so on (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Given that gender is a type of social identity, gender is one of the subcategories of social characteristics in cultural classification(Van Leeuwen, 2008). Gender is the main focus in this study, the participants are classified into female and male categories, further into adult, child and unspecified-age groups. Participants without prominent gender features are excluded from the annotation. In coding the processes (i.e. activities) and circumstances, I adapted and extended the categories developed by Yasin et al. (2012). The processes (i.e. activities) are labelled with institutional (course activities), political (e.g. giving a public speech), relational (family activities involving parents and children), social (e.g. having a conversation), recreational (e.g. dancing, playing sports), personal (e.g. eating, cleaning), professional (related to professions) and unspecified-activity (without specific features). The term "circumstance" relates to the participants' location and is labelled with indoor, outdoor and unspecified-circumstance.

Who are the participants?

Table 4. Participants' Composition

Age	Female	%	Male	%
Adult	36	60	24	40
Child	115	46.2	134	53.8
Unspecified-age	9	42.8	13	57.3
Total	160	48.3	171	51.7

The analysis of participants' composition (Table 4) shows that females in images appear less than males in the "child" and "unspecified-age" groups. The total number of females is also less than males.

Table 5. Occupational Composition

Occupational-type	Male(24)	100%	Female(36)	100%
Reporter	1	4.17%	0	0.00%
Basketball-player	1	4.17%	0	0.00%
Teacher	3	12.50%	11	30.56%
Unspecified-occupation	16	66.67%	21	58.33%
Salesperson	2	8.33%	3	8.33%
Volleyball-player	0	0.00%	1	2.78%
Chef	1	4.17%	0	0.00%

For the "adult" group, the occupational composition (Table 5) is analyzed. Males have a wider range of occupations, with 6 types in total, while females, who have 1.5 times the number of males only appear in 4 types of occupations. Besides, 11 females (30.56%) are teachers, while 3 males (12.5%) are teachers.

What are they doing?



Table 6. Activity Composition

Activity-type	Male(171)	100%	Female(160)	100%
Institutional	21	12.28%	16	10.00%
Political	1	0.58%	0	0.00%
Relational	27	15.79%	25	15.62%
Social	74	43.27%	67	41.88%
Unspecified-activity	7	4.09%	17	10.62%
Recreational	19	11.11%	4	2.50%
Personal	15	8.77%	17	10.62%
Professional	7	4.09%	14	8.75%

The processes (i.e. activities) that participants are involved in are listed in Table 6. There is not much difference in the range of activities presented in the images. Females are excluded in only the “political” activity in which a male is making a speech.

Table 7. Recreational-type Composition

Recreational-type	Male(19)	100%	Female(4)	100%
Playing-sports	13	68.42%	0	0.00%
Dancing	0	0.00%	3	75.00%
Watching-tv	2	10.53%	1	25.00%
Juggling	1	5.26%	0	0.00%
Enjoying-exhibition	1	5.26%	0	0.00%
Relaxing-on-the-beach	1	5.26%	0	0.00%
Using-laptop	1	5.26%	0	0.00%

Table 8. Personal-type Composition

Personal-type	Male(14)	100%	Female(16)	100%
Shopping	1	7.14%	5	31.25%
Eating	7	50.00%	9	56.25%
Listening-to-a-speech	1	7.14%	0	0.00%
Thinking	1	7.14%	0	0.00%
Doing-housework	0	0.00%	1	6.25%
Reading	1	7.14%	0	0.00%
Cleaning	1	7.14%	0	0.00%
Walking	1	7.14%	0	0.00%
Organizing	1	7.14%	0	0.00%
Talking-on-the-phone	0	0.00%	1	6.25%

Due to the variety of recreational and personal activities, I further analyzed the results in these two sub-categories (Table 7, Table 8). Males appear in 6 recreational and 8 personal activities, while females only 2 and 4. The majority of males with recreational activities are “playing sports” (13 out of 19, 68.42%). Three of the four females are dancing, and the other is watching TV.

Where are they?

Table 9. Circumstance-type Composition

Circumstance-type	Male(171)	100%	Female(160)	100%
Indoor	92	53.80%	94	58.75%
Outdoor	37	21.64%	27	16.88%
Unspecified-circumstance	42	24.56%	39	24.38%

Circumstances refer to where the participants appear. The results (Table 9) show that males (21.64%) appear more frequently outdoors than females (16.88%).

The textbook analysis, conducted both textually and visually on the PEP English textbook 7A, offers nuanced insights into gender representation. At first glance, the frequency of gendered terms appeared balanced: female and male references were nearly equal in number, with 332 and 331 instances, respectively. The distribution of names, pronouns, and addressing titles also suggested a deliberate effort by textbook authors to maintain numerical parity. This surface-level symmetry reflects a growing awareness of gender equality in textbook production, aligning with findings by Norberg & Nordlund (2022), who reported improved balance in linguistic indicators.

However, deeper analysis uncovered subtle yet meaningful imbalances. While female terms slightly outnumbered male ones in aggregate, male characters were more prominently featured in names and received slightly higher textual visibility (223 male names vs. 205 female names). Furthermore, family roles showed a marked skew: maternal roles

(e.g., “mother,” “mom”) were overrepresented compared to paternal roles, reinforcing the traditional association of women with domestic spaces. This mirrors previous studies (e.g., Lee, 2018; Orfan, 2023) that found women disproportionately depicted in caregiving roles.

Occupationally, female characters were more frequently identified as teachers or caregivers, while male characters held a wider variety of roles, including reporters, athletes, and professionals. The range of activities in which genders participated also reflected stereotypical patterns. In recreational and personal domains, males were associated with active, public-facing activities like sports and outdoor scenes, while females appeared more often in passive, indoor settings such as dancing, watching television, or shopping. Notably, only male characters were engaged in political or leadership-related actions, echoing the findings of (Zhang et al., 2022) on gendered task distribution.

Visual analysis further supported these patterns. Using Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2020) framework, it was observed that males appeared more frequently in outdoor and varied contexts, suggesting a wider sphere of agency and autonomy. Female participants, although numerically well-represented, were confined to fewer occupational categories and more limited activity types. For example, among adults depicted with clear occupational identities, males appeared across six different professions, while females, despite outnumbering males, were represented in only four, predominantly teaching roles.

In terms of narrative order (firstness), male characters were more frequently listed or portrayed first in gendered pairs, subtly reinforcing patriarchal norms of precedence. Although seemingly trivial, such positioning has been identified by scholars (e. g. Van Leeuwen, 2008) as a symbolic assertion of male dominance.

The textbook analysis revealed subtle yet persistent gender imbalances, which align with previous studies. While surface-level data suggested near-equal frequencies of male and female terms, deeper investigation uncovered covert biases: males were more frequently depicted in diverse recreational and professional roles, while females were more commonly represented in domestic settings or passive activities. Visual analysis also showed males appearing more often outdoors and in active, varied scenarios, while females were largely confined to limited roles and environments.

Overall, the findings emphasize the need for professional development that helps teachers identify and address gender bias in instructional materials. Encouraging critical engagement with textbook content could bridge the perceptual gap and support a more inclusive and egalitarian educational environment.

These findings highlight the presence of covert gender bias—bias that is not overtly discriminatory but operates subtly through role assignment, activity portrayal, and visual positioning. While overt stereotypes are less prevalent, the persistence of traditional gender roles and imbalances in character agency signals the need for continued scrutiny.

In sum, although the textbook demonstrates some progress in gender representation, covert disparities persist in both textual and visual domains. These findings contrast sharply with the perceptions of the interviewed teachers, most of whom reported no observable bias. This misalignment underscores the importance of enhancing teachers’ critical literacy skills, particularly in recognizing and addressing implicit gender norms embedded in instructional materials.

## 5. Limitations and Recommendations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, only four teachers were interviewed in this study. As a result, the small sample restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the textual and visual analysis of gender representation was focused on only one widely used Chinese English textbook, which may not fully represent the diversity of gender representations across all educational materials. Consequently, this study should be considered exploratory rather than conclusive. Future research is encouraged to include a larger and more diverse sample of teachers from various regions and educational stages, as well as to analyze a broader range of textbooks. Additionally, incorporating students’ own perspectives on gender would be valuable to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gender messages are perceived and internalized.

## 6. Conclusions

Using a semi-structured interview method, this study sought to understand how English teachers in China perceive gender depiction in the textbooks they use. It also conducted a textual and visual analysis of gender representation in one popular textbook. Given the small sample size and the analysis of only one textbook, the generalisability of the results is limited. Therefore, the findings should be considered as exploratory. The results of this study suggest that teachers may not fully recognize gender inequality either in our society or in the content of the textbooks. This textbook analysis showed that the content has exhibited a tendency toward gender egalitarian principles, but subtle biases favoring males still persist in many aspects. Based on the findings, middle school teachers are encouraged to inspire students’ critical thinking on gender topics.

This study examined Chinese English teachers’ perceptions of gender representation in textbooks and evaluated the

actual portrayal of gender through a combined textual and visual analysis of a widely used English textbook (PEP 7A). The findings revealed a clear disconnect between teachers' perceptions and the subtle gendered patterns embedded in textbook content. Most participants believed the textbooks were neutral, citing their government approval as evidence of parity. However, the content analysis revealed underlying gender biases: females were more often portrayed in domestic or passive roles, while males appeared in more varied and active professional, recreational, and leadership contexts. These discrepancies between teachers' perceptions and textbook analysis suggest a critical gap between teachers' perceptions and the actual gender information embedded in textbook content. The teachers' lack of awareness may be due to the subtlety of contemporary gender bias, which often manifests in nuanced forms rather than overt exclusion. Moreover, the interviews suggested limited critical reflection on gender issues in educators' teaching practice, with most participants unaware of the potential influence of textbook content on students' identity formation and value systems.

These covert forms of bias are less likely to be noticed by educators. This unawareness among teachers presents a challenge to achieving genuine gender equity in education, as this hidden curriculum may continue to shape students' attitudes in unintended ways. Moreover, the absence of gender topics in textbook content and the limited integration of gender topics into classroom discussion suggest that opportunities to foster critical awareness among students, especially during formative middle school years, are being missed. To address this gap, teacher training should include gender-sensitive pedagogical approaches and critical textbook analysis. Future curriculum development must go beyond surface-level balance and ensure that gender-related topics are covered.

This study contributes to the theoretical discourse on gender representation in education by bridging the gap between multimodal critical discourse analysis (linguistic and visual) and teacher cognition research. It highlights how hidden curricula—embedded in ostensibly neutral textbooks—can be naturalized and legitimized through teacher trust in institutional authority. While prior studies have documented textbook bias, fewer have interrogated the disconnect between these biases and how teachers perceive or engage with them. By demonstrating that educators may unknowingly reproduce gendered narratives despite advocating for equality in principle, this research underscores the role of teacher perception as a mediating force in the reproduction or disruption of gender norms.

As a preliminary inquiry into the complex issue of gender representation in Chinese English textbooks and its perception by teachers, this study revealed a discernible gap between teacher perception and the subtle gendered patterns in textbooks. It provided the necessary groundwork and highlight the significance of more extensive research in this area. The limitations of this study, particularly its scale, naturally point to the direction of future work. To move from these initial findings to a comprehensive understanding, subsequent studies must incorporate a larger number of teachers and multiple textbook series across various grade levels and publishers. Such an expanded sample and corpus are essential to map the full spectrum of gender representation in Chinese English materials and to enhance the generalizability of the research findings.

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### **Authors contributions**

Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Yueqin Huang led the data collection and preliminary analysis, and took primary responsibility for drafting the initial manuscript. Dr. Manvender Kaur Sarjit Singh played a leading role in reviewing and revising the manuscript. Both authors approved the final version for submission.

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No additional data are available.

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