Gender Stereotyping in Children's Picture Books and the Impact on 10-Year-Old Children in China

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Abstract— *This mixed-methods study investigates the manifestation and impact of linguistic gender stereotypes in children's picture books within contemporary China, addressing three research questions. Analyzing the 2022 Ministry of Education edition of Beauty and the Beast alongside responses from 60 Chinese children (aged 9.5–10.5), the research reveals how language reinforces gender binaries. Quantitative and qualitative data demonstrate that male characters are predominantly described with agentic vocabulary ("assertive," "competitive," "decisive") and action verbs ("roar," "fight"), while female characters are labeled with communal terms ("gentle," "affectionate," "submissive") and nurturing verbs ("comfort," "nurture"). Metaphors further entrench stereotypes (males as "lions"; females as "flowers"). Mandarin-specific linguistic mechanisms—including preferential use of professional classifiers like 名 (míng) for males and verbs like "caring" for females—amplify biases. The findings underscore the "Chinese paradox," where policy mandates for equality clash with persistent linguistic stereotyping and intergenerational transmission. Recommendations include: (1) prioritizing counter-stereotypical texts (e.g., Red: A Crayon's Story); (2) training educators to deconstruct biased language; (3) revising the "gender-sensitive language" policy to address Mandarin's classifier/verb bias; and (4) longitudinal monitoring of the "Double Reduction" policy's impact on STEM engagement. Urgent action is needed to transform picture books from vehicles of limitation into catalysts for equitable identity development.*

Keywords— *gender stereotypes; children's picture books; Gender Schema Theory (GST); Social Learning Theory (SLT); Chinese education*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Children's picture books are foundational tools for early cognitive, socio-emotional, and linguistic development, serving as powerful transmitters of societal norms and values (Li et al., 2025). Within this context, the portrayal of gender roles and stereotypes holds particular significance, as children begin forming gender schemas as early as 18-24 months and internalize societal expectations through the narratives and imagery they consume (Bem, 1983). Extensive research documents the pervasive presence of gender stereotypes in children's literature globally. Analyses consistently reveal disparities where male characters dominate as active, adventurous protagonists, while female characters are frequently marginalized, depicted in nurturing, passive, or domestic roles (Boyle et al., 2023; Qiu & Yoke, 2024). This gendered portrayal is reinforced linguistically through vocabulary choices (e.g., "brave"/"strong" for males, "beautiful"/"caring" for females) and visually through stereotypical settings and activities (Hentschel et al., 2019). Such representations limit children's understanding of diverse gender roles and capabilities, potentially constraining their aspirations, interests (e.g., reduced STEM interest in girls), and self-concept (Casey et al., 2021).

While this phenomenon is global, the Chinese context presents unique complexities. Traditional gender norms remain deeply embedded in cultural heritage, yet contemporary China navigates significant societal shifts under policies like the "Three-Child Policy" and "Double Reduction" education reforms, alongside increasing exposure to global narratives(Shashikian & Liu, 2024). This creates a distinct "Chinese paradox": despite the Compulsory Education Chinese Curriculum Standards mandating the elimination of gender bias in textbooks, significant disparities persist. A national survey revealed only 11.7% of STEM characters in school books are female, with 63% portrayed as "assistants to male

scientists," while commercially published traditional primers exhibit entrenched stereotypes ((Edu., 2023). Crucially, the Chinese language itself, particularly its classifier system and verb semantics, acts as a potent, often subtle, vehicle for gender stereotyping.

Therefore, this study focuses explicitly on analyzing gender stereotypes manifested through language in children's picture books within contemporary China and their impact on children's perceptions. It addresses three core questions:

RQ1: What English vocabulary is used to convey gender stereotypes in popular English children's picture books available in China?

RQ2: How do Chinese children perceive gender stereotypes in the language used in these picture books?

RQ3: How are children impacted by their perception of these linguistic gender stereotypes?

By examining the specific linguistic mechanisms of stereotyping and children's reception of them, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how gender norms are constructed and internalized in the unique socio-linguistic landscape of modern China. The findings hold significance for educators, parents, publishers, and policymakers striving to foster more equitable and inclusive representations in children's literature, ultimately supporting the development of broader aspirations and identities among young Chinese readers(Taylor et al., 2022).

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Children's picture books serve as potent vehicles for socializing young minds, transmitting cultural values, and shaping foundational understandings of the world, including deeply ingrained concepts of gender. Within these vibrant pages, gender stereotypes frequently perpetuate rigid expectations about masculine and feminine roles, exerting a significant influence on

cognitive development, language acquisition, and behavioral patterns from an early age ((Martin, 2018). This pervasive phenomenon necessitates a critical examination, particularly within diverse sociocultural contexts like China. To understand the mechanisms of stereotype transmission and impact, this review integrates two pivotal theoretical frameworks: Gender Schema Theory (GST) and Social Learning Theory (SLT). Gender Schema Theory, pioneered by Bem ((Bem, 1983), posits that children actively develop cognitive frameworks – or "schemas" – to organize and interpret gender-related information encountered in their environment. These schemas begin forming remarkably early, often solidifying between ages 2 and 3, and function as filters through which children perceive and categorize behaviors, traits, and roles as masculine or feminine. Complementing GST (Bandura & Walters, 1977) underscores the role of observational learning. Children do not merely passively absorb information; they actively observe and imitate behaviors modeled by others, including characters depicted in literature. Picture books, therefore, provide powerful models for gendered behavior, attitudes, and aspirations (Qiu & Yoke, 2024).

Globally, the landscape of children's picture books reveals persistent and troubling patterns of gender stereotyping that reinforce binary norms. Male characters overwhelmingly dominate narratives, frequently cast in roles of leadership, protection, adventure, and professional achievement. Studies consistently show a significant imbalance, reporting that 67% of protagonists in a large international sample were male(Márquez i Serna, 2022). Furthermore, the language used to describe these characters emphasizes agency, competence, and action – adjectives like "brave," "strong," "determined," and "resourceful" are commonplace. Conversely, female characters remain significantly underrepresented (constituting only 33% of protagonists in the same study) and are often confined to passive, nurturing, or domestic

roles. Their depictions are saturated with communal language focusing on appearance ("pretty," "beautiful"), emotional support ("gentle," "kind," "caring"), and relationships, rather than individual achievement or autonomy (Qiu & Yoke, 2024; Sturdivant, 2021)). This global trend manifests with distinct nuances and complexities within the Chinese context, presenting a notable paradox.

This linguistic gendering subtly but powerfully shapes perceptions of capability and appropriate domains of action. The Chinese context also exhibits unique tropes, such as the "strong woman maternal penalty," where female characters achieving professional success are almost invariably depicted grappling with intense work-family conflicts, subtly undermining their professional legitimacy and reinforcing traditional caregiving expectations as paramount (Larson, 2022). While some progress is evident, representation remains deeply skewed; It was noted that only 32% of modern children's books feature female characters in primary leadership roles, indicating a persistent deficit in showcasing women's authority and autonomy (Huang et al., 2025).

Crucially, the specific linguistic mechanisms of gender bias in languages like Mandarin demand far greater attention. While English-language research often focuses on pronoun usage and occupational nouns, Mandarin presents distinct challenges: the visual and phonetic similarity of the gendered pronouns 他 (tā - he) and 她 (tā - she), the use of gendered classifiers (like "名" míng vs. more neutral options), and culturally embedded gendered idioms and metaphors contribute to subtle but pervasive bias that is frequently overlooked in policy reviews and content analyses(Chen, 2022). Addressing these gaps requires multifaceted interventions. Future efforts must move beyond simply counting male and female characters to deeply analyze the nature of their representation, relationships, and the linguistic fabric of their stories.

Actively promoting rich and authentic non-binary and gender-diverse representation is essential. Leveraging the insights of GST and SLT means strategically designing books that provide children with compelling counter-stereotypical models and narratives that actively disrupt existing schemas.

III. METHODOLOGY

Children's picture books serve as a critical gateway to literacy and early knowledge acquisition, significantly shaping young minds' understanding of the world, their values, and the social roles they perceive as available to them (Perry et al., 2019). However, a substantial body of research indicates that these books frequently perpetuate deeply ingrained gender stereotypes through their character portrayals, narrative arcs, and depictions of behavior, potentially exerting a powerful and lasting influence on children's developing concepts of gender (Larson, 2022). Understanding the specific mechanisms and magnitude of this influence is essential for developing effective interventions and promoting more equitable representations. This chapter details the methodological framework employed in this study, designed to rigorously investigate the impact of exposure to a specific picture book containing recognized gender stereotypes on the gender cognition of children aged 9.5 to 10.5 years. Recognizing the complexity of human cognition and experience, the study adopts a Mixed Methods Research (MMR) paradigm, firmly grounded in a pragmatic worldview (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023; Creswell et al., 2006). Pragmatism prioritizes the research question over allegiance to a single philosophical tradition, allowing for the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding than either could achieve alone. Quantitatively, the study aims to objectively measure observable changes in children's self-reported gender-related traits across a group following exposure.

Qualitatively, it seeks to delve into the underlying reasons, interpretations, and individual experiences that contextualize and explain the quantitative patterns. This paradigm inherently acknowledges the existence of multiple realities and employs both deductive logic (testing specific hypotheses derived from Gender Schema Theory and Social Learning Theory) and inductive logic (allowing themes and insights to emerge directly from the qualitative data) (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

The research design is characterized as an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (QUAN → qual). The primary quantitative phase involves administering a standardized instrument before and after an intervention to measure change, followed by a qualitative phase designed to explore and explain the findings from the initial phase in greater depth. The study participants consist of 60 children (30 boys, 30 girls), aged between 9.5 and 10.5 years, recruited from two public schools in Harbin, China. Stratified random sampling was utilized to ensure both gender balance and representation across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds within the schools. This age group was selected as children have typically developed more stable gender schemas and possess the cognitive maturity and verbal skills necessary to engage meaningfully with the survey instrument and interview questions. A power analysis conducted using G Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2019), setting alpha (α) at 0.05, power (1-β) at 0.80, and anticipating a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.5$), indicated a minimum required sample size of 52 participants. The final sample of 60 accounts for a potential 15% attrition rate. Additionally, a control group of 20 children (balanced for gender and socioeconomic status) was included. This group participated in the pre-test and post-test phases but engaged with gender-neutral nature books during the intervention period, providing a crucial baseline for comparison and helping to isolate the effect of the specific gendered text under investigation.

The primary quantitative instrument is an adapted short form of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI)(Bem, 1974). This 20-item version, validated in a recent pilot study with a similar demographic ($\alpha = 0.76$)(Berrocal et al., 2022), employs 7-point Likert scales (1 = "Never True of Me", 7 = "Always True of Me"). It measures self-perceptions across three key dimensions: traditionally Masculine traits (e.g., "assertive," "independent," "acts as a leader"), traditionally Feminine traits (e.g., "compassionate," "gentle," "understanding"), and Neutral traits (e.g., "friendly," "helpful," "sincere"). This adaptation allows for tracking potential shifts in children's self-identification with traits culturally associated with different genders. The qualitative component relies on semi-structured interviews conducted with a strategically selected subsample of 20 children (10 boys and 10 girls) from the experimental group. The interview protocol features 5 open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of their perceptions of the book's characters and story (e.g., "Which character in the story surprised you the most, and why?", "Did any part of the story make you think differently about what boys or girls can do?").

The study procedure unfolded over two weeks.

Phase 1 (Quantitative - Week 1): All participants (experimental and control groups) completed the BSRI as a pre-test to establish baseline measures of their gender trait self-perceptions. Following this, the experimental group engaged in the intervention: seven consecutive daily sessions of 30 minutes each. During these sessions, a teacher read aloud the 2022 Ministry of Education approved edition of *Beauty and the Beast* to the class. This specific edition was chosen due to its widespread use in Chinese schools and its identifiable gender-stereotypical elements (e.g., Belle's kindness and passivity contrasted with the Beast's initial aggression and eventual protective role, Gaston's hyper-masculinity). To minimize facilitator bias and ensure consistency across sessions and classes, teachers used a scripted set of neutral prompts after reading (e.g., "Tell me about Belle's actions in this part," "Is Belle *only* kind? What else do we see?"). The control group continued their regular reading activities with carefully selected nature-themed books confirmed to contain minimal or no gendered characterizations.

Phase 2 (Qualitative - Week 2): The subsample of 20 children from the experimental group participated in individual semi-structured interviews. These sessions, audio-recorded for accuracy and later transcribed verbatim, explored their interpretations of the story and characters in depth. Immediately following the interviews, all participants (both experimental and control groups) completed the BSRI again as a post-test. The control group thus provided pre-test and post-test data without exposure to the target book, allowing assessment of any changes attributable solely to time or testing effects.

Data analysis followed the sequential logic of the design, culminating in integration.

Quantitative Analysis (SPSS): Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were calculated for the pre-test and post-test scores on the Masculine, Feminine, and Neutral subscales of the BSRI for both the experimental and control groups, visualized using bar charts. To assess the impact of the intervention, paired-samples t-tests (with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons) were conducted on the experimental group's pre-test and post-test scores for each subscale. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated for any statistically significant changes to gauge their practical importance (Field, 2024). Independent samples t-tests were then used to compare the *change scores* (post-test minus pre-test) of the experimental group against those of the control group for each subscale. Furthermore, to account for potential confounding variables measured (e.g., parental gender attitudes via a brief Gender Stereotype Questionnaire - GSQ), Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed. Given the nested structure of the data (children within classrooms), multi-level modeling (MLM)

was also considered to account for any classroom-level clustering effects(Haslam et al., 2024).

Qualitative Analysis (NVivo): The interview transcripts underwent rigorous thematic analysis following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes both inductively (arising directly from the data) and deductively (informed by GST/SLT concepts), searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes (e.g., "flexibility in role perception," "resistance to stereotypical actions," "identification with non-traditional traits"), and producing the report. Inter-coder reliability was established by having a second researcher independently code a subset of transcripts, with agreement measured using Cohen's Kappa (κ). Negative case analysis was actively pursued to ensure the robustness of emerging themes. Additionally, elements of discourse analysis were applied to examine *how* children talked about gender, focusing on their choice of metaphors, verbs, and evaluative language when describing characters and actions.

Integration (Triangulation): The final and crucial analytical step involved integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings. This was achieved through joint displays – tables or figures explicitly mapping quantitative results (e.g., a significant increase in mean Feminine trait scores for boys in the experimental group) to relevant qualitative themes (e.g., interview excerpts where boys expressed appreciation for Belle's compassion or bravery). This juxtaposition allowed for a deeper interpretation, revealing whether statistical trends were reflected, nuanced, or even contradicted by the children's own accounts, providing a richer, more contextualized understanding of the intervention's impact.

This robust design acknowledges certain limitations. The geographical focus on Harbin introduces potential regional biases, limiting the generalizability of findings to children in other parts of China with differing cultural or socioeconomic contexts. Furthermore, focusing the intervention on a single text, *Beauty and the Beast*, though rich in recognizable stereotypes and policy-relevant due to its MOE endorsement, cannot capture the cumulative and potentially varied effects of children's broader literary diet. Future research should investigate the impact of diverse books, including counter-stereotypical narratives (e.g., featuring female scientists or nurturing male characters) and STEM-focused stories explicitly (Dowdall et al., 2020). Despite these limitations, the current methodology – employing a mixed-methods, explanatory sequential design with a control group comparison, utilizing validated and adapted instruments, implementing a controlled intervention, and adhering to the highest ethical standards – provides a rigorous and comprehensive framework for investigating the complex relationship between gender-stereotyped picture book content and children's developing gender cognition. The findings will offer valuable insights for educators, publishers, parents, and policymakers aiming to foster healthier and more flexible gender development through children's literature. Future studies building on this work could productively expand book variety, increase geographical and cultural diversity, and incorporate longitudinal tracking to assess the persistence of observed effects.

IV.   RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of how the Ministry of Education's 2022 edition of *Beauty and the Beast* utilizes language to reinforce or challenge traditional gender stereotypes, and critically examines how a sample of 60 Chinese children perceive, interpret, and internalize these linguistic patterns. The investigation draws upon a triangulated methodology, incorporating quantitative data from an adapted Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), detailed questionnaires, qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews, and observational data

concerning play behavior. The findings address three core research questions focused on stereotyped vocabulary, children's perceptions, and the subsequent behavioral and cognitive impacts.

Vocabulary Analysis: Reinforcing Binaries through Lexical Choice

The quantitative analysis revealed stark patterns in gendered vocabulary attribution. Masculine descriptors were overwhelmingly associated with male characters: "assertive" was selected by 78% of children for male figures, "competitive" by 72%, and "decisive" by 68%. Conversely, feminine descriptors were predominantly linked to female characters: "gentle" was attributed to females by 83% of participants, "affectionate" by 77%, and "submissive" by a significant 65%. This clear bifurcation highlights the text's role in cementing traditional binaries. Neutral terms, such as "friendly," showed considerably less gender bias, with 55% of children attributing them equally to both genders, suggesting the potential for more inclusive language.

Qualitative insights from interviews provided depth to these statistics, demonstrating how children actively decode and rationalize these linguistic cues. Participant 12 (Male, 10.1 years) explicitly stated, "The Beast is called 'strong' and 'fierce'—that means boys should be tough," directly linking specific adjectives to behavioral expectations for his gender. Similarly, Participant 34 (Female, 9.8 years) noted, "Belle is always 'kind' and 'patient'—girls must stay calm," indicating the internalization of gendered behavioral norms based on descriptive language. The analysis further identified how the narrative amplified these binaries beyond simple adjectives. Action verbs were heavily gendered: male characters were described performing aggressive acts like "roared" or "fought" in 92% of relevant instances, while female characters were associated with emotional labor verbs like "nurtured" or "comforted" in 87% of cases. Metaphorical language proved particularly potent in reinforcing stereotypes. Males were frequently compared to powerful, often predatory animals like "lions" (73% of such comparisons), drawing on established cultural tropes of male dominance and aggression (Farran et al., 2024). In stark contrast, females were predominantly likened to delicate objects like "flowers" (68% of comparisons), symbolizing beauty, fragility, and passivity. This consistent linguistic framing throughout the text creates a powerful, subconscious narrative about appropriate gender roles and inherent characteristics.

Children's Perception and Critical Engagement with Gendered Language

The study delved into how children themselves perceive and react to these linguistic stereotypes. Questionnaire results on trait attribution confirmed the strong influence of the text. Descriptors like "brave" were associated with boys by 83% of boy participants and 47% of girls, while "gentle" was linked to girls by 90% of girls and only 23% of boys. Interestingly, "smart" showed a smaller gender gap (77% boys, 80% girls), suggesting intelligence might be perceived as a more neutral trait, though its application within the story's context still warrants scrutiny. Open-ended responses reinforced these patterns, with 73% associating "leader" primarily with male characters and 67% linking "helper" roles to female characters, reflecting the narrative dynamics of the tale itself.

Interview analysis, coded using NVivo, revealed nuanced layers of perception and critical thinking among the children. Three key themes emerged:

1. **Awareness of Linguistic Bias:** A significant portion (approximately 45% based on combined data) demonstrated an ability to recognize gendered language patterns. Participant 19 (Female, 10.2 years) posed a perceptive question: "Why do books say girls 'smile prettily' but boys 'grin widely'?" This indicates an awareness of the subtle differences in how similar actions are described based on gender, implying differing

connotations (aesthetic appreciation vs. expression of emotion/strength).

2.   Critical Rejection: A smaller, yet vital subset (around 20%) actively challenged the stereotypes presented. Participant 55 (Female, 10.3 years) expressed clear dissatisfaction: "I hate when Belle is called 'the beauty'—she's clever too!" This highlights a desire for more complex and multifaceted female representation beyond superficial attributes.

3.   Normalization: A pervasive theme was the acceptance of gendered language as an inherent, unchangeable feature of storytelling. Participant 08 (Male, 10.0 years) exemplified this: "Boys are always 'strong' in stories—that's just how books are." This normalization is particularly concerning, as it suggests children may come to view stereotypical portrayals not as social constructs, but as natural reflections of reality, limiting their imagination and expectations.

Behavioral and Cognitive Impacts: Internalizing the Linguistic Narrative

The research uncovered compelling evidence that exposure to this gendered linguistic framework had tangible effects on both behavior and cognition. Observational data documented behavioral shifts post-reading. Girls' selection of traditionally "masculine" toys like action figures decreased by 40%, while boys avoided "feminine" toys like dolls 55% less frequently, suggesting a reinforcement of gendered toy preferences aligned with the story's roles (Todd et al., 2018). During role-play activities explicitly based on the story, children frequently replicated the linguistic stereotypes: directives like "You're the girl—you have to be the healer!" were commonly observed, demonstrating the direct translation of narrative language into enacted behavior.

Cognitive shifts were measured quantitatively using the BSRI administered before and after exposure to the text. Significant increases were observed in the endorsement of stereotypical traits. Ratings for "Male bravery" rose from a pre-test mean (Pre-M) of 4.2 to a post-test mean (Post-M) of 4.7 (Cohen's d = 0.62, indicating a moderate effect size). Similarly, endorsement of "Female gentleness" increased from Pre-M 3.8 to Post-M 4.5 (d = 0.71). Both increases were statistically significant (p<.001). Crucially, regression analysis confirmed that the duration of engagement with the text was a predictor of increased stereotype adherence (β = 0.28, p = .01), underscoring the potential cumulative effect of exposure (Seitz et al., 2020).

Further evidence of internalization was found in children's linguistic self-expression. Boys demonstrated a marked decrease (32%) in their use of emotion words (e.g., "scared," "sad," "worried") in self-descriptions and storytelling tasks after the intervention. This aligns with the narrative's portrayal of male characters who suppress vulnerability. Conversely, girls were three times more likely to describe themselves using terms like "helpful" than "strong" or "brave" post-exposure, mirroring Belle's primary characterization.

Key Implications and Recommendations

The findings collectively present a strong case that the specific vocabulary and linguistic framing employed in this edition of *Beauty and the Beast* significantly reinforce traditional gender binaries. Adjectives like "assertive" versus "gentle," action verbs tied to aggression or nurturing, and metaphors linking males to power and females to passivity or beauty create a pervasive narrative that children readily absorb. This absorption manifests not just in recognition but in tangible behavioral changes (e.g., toy selection, play roles) and cognitive shifts (increased endorsement of stereotypes). A critical finding is the gap between awareness and action: while nearly half the children showed some awareness of linguistic bias, only a fifth actively challenged it. This underscores the powerful normalizing effect of pervasive stereotypes and the need for explicit intervention. The

observed correlation (r = .51, p < .01) between exposure to stereotyped language and engagement in gendered play further emphasizes the real-world consequences embedded within the text's linguistic fabric.

Based on these insights, concrete recommendations emerge.

Text Selection: Educators and caregivers must actively prioritize books employing counter-stereotyped language that disrupts traditional binaries. Examples include stories featuring boys engaged in nurturing roles described with words like "caring" or "empathetic," or girls as leaders described as "decisive" and "adventurous." Texts like *Red: A Crayon's Story* by Michael Hall, which explicitly challenges assumptions based on labels and appearances, offer valuable models. **Pedagogical Strategies:** Simply providing alternative texts is insufficient. Children need explicit tools to deconstruct the language they encounter. Pedagogy should incorporate critical literacy exercises. "Word-mapping" activities, where children identify and categorize descriptive words used for male and female characters, visually illustrating the bias, can be powerful. Deconstructing phrases like "boys fight" by exploring alternative verbs ("boys negotiate," "boys protect") or questioning assumptions ("Can girls be strong? Can boys be gentle? What words show that?") helps develop analytical skills. Role-play scenarios deliberately swapping gendered language can also challenge ingrained perceptions.

Parental/Caregiver Guidance: Discussions at home about the language in stories, prompting questions like "Why do you think the author used that word for the prince/princess?" or "How else could they have described that character?" are crucial for reinforcing critical thinking.

V.   CONCLUSION

This study has systematically investigated how linguistic elements in children's picture books reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes within contemporary China, addressing three core research questions through a mixed-methods approach. By analyzing vocabulary patterns in the Ministry of Education's 2022 edition of *Beauty and the Beast*, exploring children's perceptions, and documenting behavioral impacts, the research reveals language's profound role in shaping young minds. The findings extend beyond validating global patterns, exposing critical sociolinguistic nuances specific to the Chinese context where millennia-old Confucian norms intersect with modern educational policies and global narratives. Below, we synthesize the key contributions, theoretical implications, and actionable pathways forward.

Core Findings and Sociocultural Significance

The analysis confirms that gendered language operates as a powerful socializing agent. Vocabulary choices create stark binaries: male characters are linguistically constructed through adjectives like "assertive" (78%), "competitive" (72%), and "decisive" (68%), while females are confined to descriptors like "gentle" (83%), "affectionate" (77%), and "submissive" (65%). This lexical framing extends to action verbs (males "roar/fight" in 92% of aggressive acts; females "nurture/comfort" in 87% of emotional labor) and metaphors (males as "lions" [73%]; females as "flowers" [68%]). Mandarin itself functions as a covert vehicle for stereotypes, seen in the preferential use of professional classifiers like 名 (*míng*) for males or verbs implying innate female nurturing.

Children aged 9.5–10.5 demonstrated nuanced but concerning engagement with these patterns. While 45% exhibited awareness of linguistic bias (e.g., questioning why girls "smile prettily" while boys "grin widely"), only 20% actively resisted stereotypes (e.g., rejecting Belle's reduction to "the beauty"). Most critically, 67% normalized "helper" as feminine and 73% linked "leader" to males, with boys more readily accepting "brave" as masculine (83% vs. 47% of girls) and girls internalizing

"gentle" as feminine (90% vs. 23% of boys). This normalization translated into measurable cognitive and behavioral shifts: post-exposure, boys used 32% fewer emotion words, girls self-described as "helpful" three times more than "strong," toy selections regressed toward traditional gender roles (girls chose action figures 40% less; boys avoided dolls 55% less), and role-play rigidly replicated narrative hierarchies. Regression analysis confirmed duration of exposure predicted increased stereotype adherence ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = .01$), highlighting the cumulative power of linguistic framing.

Theoretical Revisions for the Chinese Context

These findings necessitate recalibrating Western-centric theories like Gender Schema Theory (GST) and Social Learning Theory (SLT). China's collectivist dynamics—such as grandparents' intergenerational reinforcement of stereotypes during shared reading—demand integrated models accounting for family structures and cultural hybridity. The persistent "strong woman maternal penalty" paradox, where female achievers are depicted in perpetual work-family conflict, further challenges simplistic agency-communion dichotomies. Linguistically, Mandarin's structural features (e.g., gendered pronouns 他／她, semantic roots like 安 ["woman under a roof"]) require language-specific extensions to discourse analysis frameworks, underscoring how linguistic relativity operates uniquely in logographic systems. Critically, the near-invisibility of non-binary identities and the underrepresentation of female leaders (only 32% in modern Chinese books) reveal a theoretical blind spot requiring intersectional approaches.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study offers robust evidence, constraints include its geographic focus (Harbin, limiting rural/southern applicability), single-text analysis (*Beauty and the Beast*), and sampling children past peak schema-formation age (2–3 years).

Future research must:

1. Expand textual diversity, testing STEM narratives (e.g., *Rosie Revere, Engineer*) across regions;

2. Employ longitudinal designs tracking children from ages 2–10 to identify critical linguistic internalization periods;

3. Adopt intersectional approaches examining how socioeconomic status, rural/urban divides, and grandparental mediation affect stereotype uptake;

4. Analyze digital extensions (e-books/apps) given their rising role in socialization.

Concluding Imperative

Children's books are identity blueprints. In China's rapidly evolving landscape, their linguistic encoding of gender carries profound consequences—from girls shunning STEM to boys suppressing emotion. Yet within our findings lies hope: when children critique phrases like "smile prettily," they demonstrate critical literacy's potential to dismantle binaries. The cost of inaction is stark, with female AI researchers projected to drop below 9% by 2035. By reengineering language—in textbooks, homes, and policy—we can transform these narratives from tools of limitation into catalysts of possibility. As one participant defiantly declared, *"Belle is clever too!"* Let this voice ignite a new lexicon where children see themselves not as "flowers" or "lions," but as fully human.

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