

# **A Study on Gender Stereotypes in Illustrations of Senior High School English Textbooks: A Case Study of the 2019 FLTRP Edition**

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of globalization, English textbooks function as dual carriers of language and culture, and gender representation in their illustrations exerts a profound influence on students' social cognition and values. Taking human illustrations in the 2019 FLTRP senior high school English textbooks as the research subject, this paper adopts a mixed method of quantitative content analysis and qualitative interpretation to explore gender stereotypes from three dimensions: quantity proportion, occupational distribution and behavioral scenarios. The results show that male images outnumber female ones significantly. Males are involved in diverse high-status occupations and proactive authoritative scenarios, while females are mostly confined to traditional service jobs, family life and artistic creation. This embodies the stereotype of male dominance in the public sphere and female confinement to the private domain. It is suggested that textbook compilers strengthen gender equality awareness to optimize textbook compilation, and teachers enhance gender sensitivity to integrate equality education into classroom teaching, so as to promote gender equity in basic education.

**Keywords:** Senior High School English Textbooks; Illustrations; Gender Stereotypes; Gender Representation; Social Gender Theory

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Research Background**

In an era of deepening globalization, English education has become a core component of basic education systems worldwide. As dual carriers of linguistic knowledge and cultural values, textbooks not only cultivate learners' language

skills but also imperceptibly shape their social cognition and values. As a medium of intercultural communication, English textbooks containing rigid gender roles and biased occupational distribution will not only hinder language acquisition but also strengthen distorted gender perceptions and impede the cultivation of gender equality values.

From a social development perspective, gender equality has become a global consensus and a core goal of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. From an educational policy perspective, China's 2017 General High School English Curriculum Standards incorporates "cultivating students' sense of social responsibility and multicultural awareness" into core curriculum objectives, which implicitly requires the cultivation of gender equality values. The 2022 Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards further stresses that curriculum content should "reflect social progress and convey correct values", extending gender equality education from senior high schools to compulsory education and highlighting the importance of early gender equality enlightenment.

Illustrations and texts constitute the two major components of English textbooks, both of which profoundly affect students' ideological and moral development. As a key visual element, illustrations not only facilitate comprehension of linguistic content but also exert a subtle normative influence on students' values. Teachers should integrate illustrations with textual instruction to combine moral, intellectual, and aesthetic education and guide students to enhance their moral cultivation. At present, research on gender issues in English textbooks in China remains insufficient. Examining gender stereotypes in textbooks from a gender perspective represents an innovative research approach that helps teachers fully understand textbooks and optimize instructional design.

Therefore, gender-focused analysis of English textbooks carries important theoretical and practical significance.

## **1.2 Research Purpose**

This study selects the complete set of 2019 FLTRP senior high school English textbooks as the research object and systematically analyzes all illustrations with identifiable human gender. It aims to explore whether gender role bias exists in the illustrations by comparing numerical proportions, character frequencies, occupational role distribution, and behavioral differences between males and females. The study intends to raise educators' awareness of gender equality in textbooks, promote the integration of gender equality concepts into teaching practice, and provide a professional reference for building an inclusive educational ecosystem.

## **1.3 Research Significance**

### **1.3.1 Theoretical significance**

This study systematically deconstructs gender role concepts in FLTRP senior high school English textbook illustrations from the perspective of social gender theory. By constructing a visual semiotic analytical framework, it focuses on the visual construction logic of gender roles in illustrations and reveals how the textbook's visual system shapes specific gender cognition through socio-cultural norms and symbolic strategies. It thus provides empirical support for the application of social gender theory to the analysis of FLTRP textbook illustrations.

### **1.3.2 Practical significance**

Based on a CNKI retrieval, existing research on gender stereotypes in English textbooks mostly focuses on the PEP edition and textual content, while studies on illustrations of the new FLTRP edition remain scarce. Through in-depth comparative analysis, this study seeks to raise textbook compilers' gender equality awareness so that they can consciously apply gender equality principles in compilation and carefully select illustrations. The gender culture conveyed by English textbook illustrations plays a critical role in shaping high school students' gender perceptions, which is closely related to cultural selection and reconstruction and has become a key factor affecting students' development. Hence, research on this topic is highly necessary.

## **2. Relevant Concepts**

### **2.1 Gender Stereotypes**

Wen and Zuo [1] pointed that the term "stereotype" was first coined by journalist Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion*, referring to "pictures in our heads" that serve as a cognitive map of the world and an internal mental representation of social groups. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines gender stereotypes as "oversimplified and widely shared beliefs about the traits, abilities, or behaviors of members of a particular gender, usually derived from cultural traditions rather than empirical observation". In *Eliminating Gender Bias in Education*, UNESCO notes that gender stereotypes manifest as "the rigid binding of occupations, interests, and behavioral patterns to gender", such as the belief that "women should work in care and education while men dominate science, technology, and politics". Such presuppositions restrict individual development choices. Modern psychological and sociological research confirms that gender stereotypes are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Many countries have promoted gender equality by breaking such stereotypes through educational reform, legal policies, and media advocacy.

### **2.2 Illustrations**

The word "illustration" derives from the Latin *illustratio*, meaning "to illuminate", originally referring to decorative images in religious texts. Cihai defines illustrations as images inserted in books and periodicals, divided into artistic and scientific illustrations, which supplement texts or provide aesthetic appreciation. This study focuses on textbook illustrations in the narrow sense. With technological advancement, illustrations have expanded to include charts, drawings, and photographs, becoming a core structural element of knowledge presentation. In China, research on English textbook illustrations remains limited: a CNKI search yields only six Chinese core journal papers, most introducing foreign textbooks or offering application suggestions, with little empirical research. Only one paper evaluates illustrations in PEP primary English textbooks, while 33 master's theses touch on this topic.

### **2.3 Theoretical Basis: Social Gender Theory**

Gender usually refers to biological sex, determined by chromosomal and anatomical

differences. American anthropologist Gayle Rubin formally proposed the concept of “social gender”. In brief, social gender theory argues that gender inequality stems not from biological sex but from socially constructed gender differences.

“Social gender” refers to social expectations, requirements, and evaluations of males and females and their relationships. Social gender theory holds that gender equality does not mean uniformity; it affirms both gender differences and commonalities, enabling males and females to maintain their unique characteristics while forming a harmonious and complementary relationship. This study adopts content analysis to investigate gender roles in FLTRP textbook illustrations. First, it analyzes illustration frequency and linguistic features based on social gender theory. Second, it explores gendered perceptions embedded in the textbooks from occupational and behavioral perspectives, supported by statistical data and qualitative interpretation.

### **3. Research Status**

#### **3.1 Foreign Research**

Academic attention to gender portrayal in textbooks dates back to the mid-20th century. Child [2] argued that gender images in textbooks influence students’ gendered behaviors. Levin [3] noted that illustrations concretize and visualize texts. Duchastel and Waller [4] identified four functions of illustrations: attention attraction, cognitive support, emotional effect, and textual supplementation.

Gender-focused analysis of ESL textbooks emerged in the 1970s amid rising feminist consciousness. Porreca [5] conducted a highly influential study of 15 ESL textbooks across dimensions including gender ratio, priority, occupational distribution, gendered language, and generic masculine structures, concluding that gender bias was pervasive, especially in occupational portrayal. Her framework has been widely adopted.

Compared with Western countries, Asian countries started later, and gender stereotypes in textbooks remain prominent. Java and Parcon [6] found that in Philippine textbooks, females were mostly confined to family roles while males dominated public and work spaces. Lee [7] reported strong male dominance in Japanese EFL textbooks. Tyarakanita et al. [8] found that

male social roles were significantly overrepresented in Indonesian junior high school English textbooks, especially in occupational identity and public participation.

#### **3.2 Domestic Research**

Zhang and He [9] pointed that Early Chinese gender research focused on Chinese language textbooks with growing global attention to education in developing countries, researchers began examining gender in other subjects, especially English. Domestic research on illustration effects mainly uses eye-tracking experiments. Shen and Tao [10] found that illustrations significantly improved reading speed and comprehension. Gao [11] confirmed that illustrations assisted comprehension, sustained attention, and reduced cognitive load. Tao [12] argued that gender stereotypes in textbook illustrations reflect widespread social gender bias and low public sensitivity to such bias. Wu et al. [13] pointed out that the illustrations in textbooks are of vital importance for both students' learning and teachers' teaching. Li [14] conducted an analysis of the meaning construction and explored the teaching application of the representative unit illustrations in the widely used high school English textbooks in China. Lu [15] pointed out that the moral education arrangement in senior high school English textbooks in China can be optimized from the perspective of textbook illustrations.

### **4. Research Design**

#### **4.1 Research Questions**

This study investigates the 2019 FLTRP senior high school English textbooks to address two core questions:

1. Are there significant numerical differences between male and female images in textbook illustrations?
2. What gender differences exist in occupational roles, and do they reflect gender stereotypes?

#### **4.2 Research Dimensions and Methods**

##### **4.2.1 Research dimensions**

Chen and Tao [16] constructed a four-dimensional model to analyze gender representation in textbook illustrations, covering image frequency, occupational distribution, and behavioral differentiation. This study adopts their theoretical framework and defines four analytical dimensions, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Analytical Dimensions of Gender Roles in Textbook Illustrations**

Analysis Dimensions	Specific Contents
Quantity of gendered illustrations	Number of male-only, female-only, and mixed-gender illustrations
Frequency of gendered characters	Appearance frequency of male and female characters
Gendered occupational roles	Types, distribution, and gender ratio of occupational roles
Gendered role behaviors	Behavioral content and scenario distribution of gendered roles

**4.2.2 Research methods**

This study adopts a mixed-method design integrating quantitative content analysis and qualitative comparative analysis. It systematically codes and analyzes gender role representation in human illustrations to identify potential gender bias.

A standardized coding sheet was developed based on the four core dimensions to ensure reliable data collection. A pilot analysis was conducted on one unit to refine coding rules. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until inter-coder consistency was achieved.

**4.3 Research Object**

The study selects the complete seven-volume set of 2019 FLTRP Senior High School English Textbooks, which is widely used in Shandong Province and other regions.

**5. Research Data and Analysis**

**5.1 Gender Quantity and Frequency Distribution**

**5.1.1 Quantity of gendered illustrations**

Table 2 shows the quantitative distribution of male and female illustrations in FLTRP textbooks.

**4.4 Research Tools**

**Table 2. Gender Distribution of Illustrations in FLTRP Textbooks**

Edition	Type	Volume	Male-only	Female-only	Mixed	Total	M:F Ratio
FLTRP	Compulsory	1	31	20	25	76	1.6:1
		2	38	31	24	93	1.2:1
		3	46	17	20	83	2.7:1
	Elective	1	56	22	12	90	2.5:1
		2	32	12	22	66	2.7:1
		3	23	10	8	41	2.3:1
		4	28	12	8	48	2.3:1
	Total	—	254	124	119	497	2:1

The seven volumes contain 497 human illustrations. The ratio of male-only to female-only illustrations is 2:1. Male-only illustrations account for 51.1%, while female-only ones account for 24.9%. Six out of seven volumes show a male-female ratio above 1.6:1, indicating consistent male dominance.

Table 3 shows the frequency analysis of male and female figures in the textbooks. Male characters appear 552 times, females 383 times, with an overall ratio of 1.4:1. Only Compulsory Volume 2 shows slightly more female appearances, related to its thematic design. Overall, male representation remains dominant.

**5.1.2 Frequency of gendered characters**

**Table 3. Character Frequency in FLTRP Textbook Illustrations**

Edition	Type	Volume	Males	Females	M:F Ratio
FLTRP	Compulsory	1	97	74	1.3:1
		2	81	87	0.9:1
		3	107	63	1.7:1
	Elective	1	101	68	1.5:1
		2	73	47	1.6:1
		3	59	23	2.6:1
		4	34	21	1.6:1
	Total	—	552	383	1.4:1

**5.2 Gendered Occupational Roles and Behaviors**

To compare gender representation in FLTRP and

PEP textbooks, this study reconstructs occupational data into nine categories: art, commerce, science & technology, medical care, life service, public service, politics, education,

and sports.

5.2.1 Occupational role analysis

Table 4 presents the frequency statistics of male

and female occupational roles in FLTRP textbook illustrations.

**Table 4. Top 5 Occupations by Frequency**

Males		Females	
Athlete	23	Actress	11
Writer	19	Athlete	8
Soldier	12	Teacher	6
Scientist	10	Astronaut	5
Astronaut	9	Dancer	4

According to the data in Table 4, occupational roles in FLTRP textbook illustrations exhibit significant gender differentiation: males dominate sports competition, science and technology, public affairs, and cultural creation, demonstrating gender advantages in high-prestige and public domains. By contrast, females are concentrated in artistic performance and basic educational services, mostly in emotional and auxiliary roles, reinforcing the traditional division of labor that men work outside the home and women manage domestic affairs. Collectively, the data reveal a dualistic logic in occupational gender narratives, reflecting the unconscious reproduction of gender inequality in the construction of professional images within the textbooks.

5.2.2 Behavioral scenario analysis

Table 5 presents the frequency statistics of male and female role behaviors across different scenarios in FLTRP textbook illustrations.

**Table 5. Frequency Statistics of Male and Female Role Behaviors in Different Scenarios in FLTRP Textbook Illustrations**

Scenario		Family		School		Business		Art		Politics		Production		Sports		Science	
Edition	Volume	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Compulsory	1	25	30	31	24	0	2	3	1	2	0	0	2	18	6	1	0
	2	10	10	4	4	11	10	17	20	2	2	4	0	27	26	0	0
	3	0	0	19	12	3	1	11	6	3	2	2	1	2	0	4	4
Elective	1	0	0	10	8	1	0	12	5	1	0	2	1	12	9	1	2
	2	5	4	12	10	4	4	1	0	6	0	2	0	1	0	1	0
	3	0	0	1	1	0	0	16	4	9	0	0	1	0	0	8	2
	4	0	0	2	2	5	5	2	0	4	0	1	2	7	3	2	1
Total		40	44	79	61	24	22	62	36	27	4	11	7	67	44	17	9

Horizontal segregation is manifested in males' monopolization of high-authority scenarios such as politics, business, and production, while females are concentrated in service-oriented or performance-oriented scenarios such as family and art. This forms a "glass ceiling" effect and reinforces the traditional division of labor that "males control public affairs and economic power, while females undertake emotional services and aesthetic display". Vertical

Based on the data in Table 5, the occupational presentation in the illustrations of FLTRP senior high school English textbooks exhibits gender segregation, including horizontal segregation and vertical segregation. Anker [17] was the first to distinguish between these two types. Horizontal segregation is reflected in the uneven distribution of occupations between males and females: males are highly concentrated in government services and business occupations with high social evaluation and superior economic status, while females are underrepresented in these fields. Vertical segregation refers to the unbalanced participation ratio between males and females within the same occupational fields (such as sports, science, health, and politics), where males usually occupy a dominant position, especially in competitive sports where their advantage is obvious, while female participation is limited.

segregation is reflected in the hierarchical differences of roles within the same field. For example, the absolute advantage of males over females in sports scenarios, the quantitative suppression of females by males in scientific scenarios, and the implicit "management-teaching" hierarchical gap in educational scenarios all consolidate the stereotype that "males dominate rational, technological, and competitive fields, while females are confined to

auxiliary roles".

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

### 6.1 Research Conclusions

Taking the illustrations in the 2019 edition of senior high school English textbooks published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) as the research object, this study systematically analyzes the presentation characteristics of gender stereotypes embedded in textbook illustrations and draws the following major conclusions.

#### 6.1.1 Imbalanced distribution of gender quantity and frequency

Among the illustrations across the seven volumes of FLTRP textbooks, male images significantly outnumber female ones, showing an overall male-dominated representation. This indicates a structural imbalance in the quantitative gender representation of textbook illustrations. The high frequency of male images may reinforce learners' perception of male dominance in social affairs.

#### 6.1.2 Gender differentiation in occupational role distribution

Males are portrayed in a total of 80 types of occupations, while females are limited to only 38 types, with an overall ratio of 2.1:1. Male occupations cover high-income and high-social-status fields such as science and technology, political decision-making, and competitive sports. By contrast, female roles are mostly confined to traditional gender-segregated sectors including life services and artistic performance. Although a small number of non-traditional female roles such as entrepreneurs and astronauts appear in the optional compulsory Volume 4, the overall representation still fails to break the stereotype of male dominance in the public sphere and female confinement to the service domain.

#### 6.1.3 Gender role differentiation in behavioral scenarios

In scenarios involving family, school, business, and scientific activities, males are more frequently depicted in proactive and authoritative contexts such as scientific exploration, sports competition, and political decision-making. In comparison, females are overrepresented in family life and artistic creation scenarios. Such differentiation in behavioral patterns implies that the textbooks implicitly construct the social norm of men

engaging in external public affairs and women undertaking internal domestic roles.

### 6.2 Research Implications

#### 6.2.1 Textbook compilation level

First, systematic training on gender equality theories should be provided for textbook compilers, and a gender review mechanism for illustrations should be established. It is necessary to balance the quantity of male and female images, diversify occupational roles for females by adding more female figures in science, technology and political fields, and avoid the stereotyped portrayal of males monopolizing high-power occupations while females are confined to auxiliary service roles.

Second, scenario design should be optimized to increase the presence of females in public affairs and scientific exploration. Illustrations such as female scientists leading experiments and female entrepreneurs participating in business negotiations can be adopted to break the visual norm of the traditional pattern that men manage external affairs and women take charge of domestic affairs.

#### 6.2.2 Teaching practice level

First, teachers should enhance gender sensitivity and make rational use of textbook illustrations in classroom teaching. Combined with empirical data such as the occupational distribution findings of this study, teachers can guide students to critically analyze gender representation in textbooks, and initiate discussions on topics such as why most scientist roles are male and why female figures dominate family scenarios.

Second, teachers can supplement diverse real-life cases by introducing outstanding female figures in science, technology and politics, such as Tu Youyou and astronaut Wang Yaping. By comparing textbook illustrations with real-world examples, teachers can help students establish the equal cognition that occupations have no gender boundaries.

#### 6.2.3 Social and policy level

First, educational administrative authorities should incorporate gender equality into textbook evaluation indicators and formulate unified national gender review standards for textbook illustrations. Publishing houses should be urged to revise textbook contents regularly to eliminate implicit gender bias in visual symbols.

Second, interdisciplinary academic research on gender representation in textbooks should be

encouraged to provide solid theoretical support and empirical evidence for textbook revision. This contributes to promoting the inclusive and gender-equal development of educational visual texts.

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