

# ***The Role of Textbook Idols on the Formation of Feminine Identity in Mainland China***

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**Abstract:** In the progress to understand the formation of feminine identity in education, a consequential yet often neglected aspect is the role of idols. Educational idols are abundant in textbooks and are given high esteem both in and outside of the educational environment, despite the primary role of textbooks as being a record of objective knowledge while idols are subjective and relatively personal. This article will consider the various ways idols influence the formation of feminine identity and analyze the delicate interplay between social horizons and the historical nature of textbooks. The method of literature is applied in this paper to explore the extent and mechanism by which textbook idols influence the formation of feminine identity. Sources of materials include published articles, papers, and statistics produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The five aspects of identity as proposed by Rorty and Wong will be analyzed along with the dualist theory of gender formation based on social horizons and personal interaction or experience. Moreover, the digitalization of textbooks, which occurs on a large scale in our information age, will play a pivotal role in our analysis, as the nature of textbooks undergoes fundamental changes in reactivity, fluidity, and personalization due to this advancement in communication technology. This increase in connection and reactivity ultimately leads to idols having an impact more comprehensive in coverage yet positive on the formation of feminine identity. Consequently, idols play a substantial role in the formation of feminine identity and, when seen in the light of digitalization, influence the majority of students in a constructive and positive way.

**Keywords:** Feminine identity, idol, digitalization

## **1. Introduction**

Despite the complex causes and processes involved, the formation of feminine identities is inseparable from the process of socialization in the oedipal and adolescent stages, since the age of adolescence plays a salient role in one's life, socially and culturally, being the transition between social dependency and adulthood, where the meaning of gender transforms [1]. Hence, conducting research with the goal of understanding gender identities in education can shed light on a cardinal sub-process under the general scheme of identity formation. Furthermore, the interpretation of feminine identity in educational institutions plays an important role in the future development of any individual as it forms arguably what psychologists called the first impression, leaving a profound effect throughout the individual's life by instigating the formation of basic social categories [2-3].

The manifestation of gender stereotyping within educational institutions is no surprise as it is derived from gender impressions in the larger society that the institution serves, and educational systems must be in accordance with the encompassing social structure [4]. However, educational institutions differ from the broader social structures due to their institutionalized nature of delivering uniform knowledge in a “mind-making process” [5]. Provided this general social and psychological context, there are a variety of processes that direct the formation of feminine identity. Firstly, the objectification and capitalization of girls played an important role in forming their understanding of gender-bias preferences, which in turn influenced their own identity under the greater scheme [6]. Moreover, this separation between gender types, however natural and common it may be, is not supported in a term of luck egalitarianism. As Ronald Dworkin proposes, society should not assign individuals with different resources based on brute luck, i.e., unpredictable and unavoidable luck [7]. Therefore, since a person’s gender is solely determined by brute luck, i.e., his or her biological orientation, differentiating between gender in terms of resources implies inequality, and thereby injustice, under Dworkin’s theory of the equality of resources.

Textbooks are representative of the role and function of education as the passing down of accepted and objective knowledge, while simultaneously being relatively permanent and historical, two factors that negatively impact gender identity formation. Therefore, in order to resolve gender stereotyping within educational institutions, one needs to first deal with the problem of textbooks and understand the role of textbooks, and more importantly, the role of idols contained within these textbooks, on identity formation.

There are three current debates on this issue, which are parallel when viewed individually while linking to each other in a multitude of ways. The first debate is on whether institutionalized education reinforces or destruct the formation of feminine identity, which is central to the issue this article set out to settle. This debate can be mainly concluded by analyzing the textbooks themselves, as almost all educational projects, especially in the Chinese context, are centered around textbooks. The second debate is on whether social or educational factors play a greater role in the formation of gender identity. This debate may be settled by analyzing the difference between what is so-called individual identity and social identity, with the latter taking various forms in a single individual. The last debate is on whether greater freedom and autonomy of the student in interpreting the material leads to an increase or a decrease in feminine identity reinforcement. This will be analyzed by taking into consideration the importance of personal experience and interactions in identity formation.

Textbook idols play a twofold role in role formation. On the one hand, they reflect the societal horizons provided by the greater sociocultural environment. On the other hand, through digitalization, they are interactable and affect the interaction facet of identity. This section will analyze the two sides of textbook idols and evaluate the issue in the encompassing picture that is the Chinese context. The main research objective of this paper is to evaluate the impact of textbook educational idols on the formation of feminine identities. In order to articulate the issue, the current theories on gender identity will be framed and contextualized, then different aspects of identity formation would be discussed, and lastly, different theories of identity formation would be employed to assess the impact of textbook idols on feminine identity formation. Furthermore, in this paper, we define ‘educational idols’ as major figures that appear in textbooks or other educational materials that may serve as role models for students.

## 2. Literature Review

The elucidation of the concept of identity must precede further discussions. According to Doret de Ruyter and Jim Conroy, identity is whatever makes a person that person [8]. In other words, it is the aspects of a person that is unique to him or her, or that can be applied to a person to recognize who

he or she is. Furthermore, sociologists and philosophers like Mead, Parsons, Taylor, and Ricoeur have argued that social processes are cardinal in the formation and definition of any individual identity [8]. Ruyter and Conroy further advanced that there are two social aspects that played central roles in identity development. The first aspect is the constructed horizons of interpretation. 'Horizons' are interpretations realized by the historical and social society or community in which the individual is placed. According to Taylor and Sampson, they are idealized figures which a society provides to the individual as an aim that is valued on a communal level [9-10]. The second aspect of identity formation is interaction with others. Through the process of socialization, identities are formed due to the uniqueness of the life experiences of individuals. This formation has to be based on the foundation set forth by the horizon and is constructed in a way that best aligns with the horizon. However, it differs from the horizon in the uniqueness of experience and directs the formation of new horizons in return.

Moreover, Rorty and Wong provided five aspects of identity. The first two aspects revolve around a person's biological, psychological, and physiological aspects, making them hard to alter through nurturing or education. The third aspect of identity is regarding the social status of the person, while the fourth aspect is regarding the group identity in which the person strives. Both aspects could be manipulated, nurtured, constructed, or destroyed through different methods of education. While the group identity defines the more basic part of one's identity, the individual identity forms mainly based on one's interpretation of his or her group identity in conjunction with his or her unique experience outside of the group identity. The fifth identity was the ideal identity, which could be formed in education through the scientific or literary ideals presented in textbooks or other sources, the aspect that this article mainly focuses on.

Therefore, reviewing previous research in identity theory, one could conclude that the formation of identities is mainly based on a general ideal, or set of values, that are presented to the individual by society or by means of education, in conjunction with individuals on life experiences juxtaposed to those ideals. However, there exists a research gap in contemporary literature, both in education and in gender studies, analyzing the impact of textbook idols on feminine identity, an influence that is foundational for progressions toward a gender-equal society.

### 3. The Chinese Educational System

Under the Chinese context, memorization and reiteration of the text are emphasized as central to the process of learning. This process nevertheless reinforces the fifth element of the five aspects of identity, i.e., providing the student with a clear and distinct picture of the ideal identity or identities. This ideal identity will play an almost exclusive role in the formation of the individual's horizon, and it narrates an ideal society for students to compare their society with. However, one dominant feature of textbooks is that they emphasize the male figures, especially in scientific areas, which will strengthen the horizon that males are more capable of achieving highly in scientific fields. This is contrasted with the modern picture where, in most schools, girls on average achieve higher than boys in almost all subjects. This not only leads to a separation between the individual experience and social horizons but may also lead to gender identity confusion, i.e., girls finding it perplexing to be identified as intellectually inferior.

Furthermore, almost all educational facilities in China are all centered around the *Goa Kao*, requiring the student to answer in a rigorous manner and to address specific figures, which are mainly male, reinforcing the idea that the masculine identity is more likely to succeed in practical and intellectual pursuits. As a result, although most females achieve higher in early education, they are timid to participate in higher education because that is discouraged by the horizon they receive.

According to a study performed in 2020, female enrollment in tertiary education is 41% compared to 36% of male enrollment [11]. However, analyzing primary education enrollment reveals that

although females have a higher participation rate in later education, their participation rate in primary education is, in fact, lower than males [11]. The fact that females have a higher participation rate in postsecondary education yet a lower participation rate in primary education poses a statistical inconsistency. As a result, there is a pressing need to improve the position of women in education so that more females can pursue higher education and beyond with confidence.

Another important characteristic that defines Chinese education is a strong emphasis on practicality. This practicality strengthens the stereotypical male picture of being physically stronger than females and symbolically reiterates the males' power in manipulating the physical world. Therefore, the feminine identity is suppressed to a great extent in Chinese schools, which will lead to the process of socialization being incomplete for the female, and the development of a sense of superiority around the masculine identity. Hence, as intellectual pursuits were viewed as less important to society, it implies a denial or suppression of the value of mentality, a characteristic commonly attributed to females.

On the other hand, education in general scientifically shows the indifference between males and females and presents examples of females succeeding in the scientific and literary fields. This weakens the sense of feminine identity because it forms an opposite ideal to the stereotypical one presented in the majority of social contexts. This will provide an alternative horizon that encourages the abandonment of the gender stereotypes formed by the unscientific views of society. This is proven to be an underlining reason advocated by feminist theories that promote education as the main method of removing identity stereotypes. However, the great number of male figures in comparison to the female counter-figures does show the lacking of modern education to fill this role of stereotype abolishment. Furthermore, all the previous examples of forces and counter-forces that play a role in identity formation are reinforced by the fact that education is systematic and institutionalized as well as shielded with an illusion of epistemological absoluteness. Therefore, any small deviation could have a large effect over time, as education has a self-reinforcing nature. This nature could be seen in the formation of ideals, where the more encouraged the masculine identity is to pursue scientific achievements, the more they are going to obtain them, reinforcing the cycle towards a greater separation between the masculine and feminine identity ad infinitum.

#### **4. The Immutability of Textbooks**

In spite of the various roles an idol plays in the formation of identity, its primary function is to paint an idealized image that one could strive towards. This is the primary function of idols and makes up the reason why they appear so frequently in textbooks. Moreover, since the idol one aspires to become is highly correlated with one's achievements in the future, positive idols can have a profoundly beneficial impact on society.

However, although educational idols are mostly positive in their nature, and many may encourage women to pursue academics, there exists a numeral gap between the number of male and female idols, reinforcing historical stereotypes. The main reason for the formation of this gap is the relative permanence of textbooks, i.e., whilst societal horizons may evolve over time, textbooks take substantially longer to change. Therefore, as an increasing number of women become great scientists and scholars in all fields, these textbooks do not reflect the current reality anymore, but instead, by this very fact, inhibit growth in gender equality by presenting us with horizons from the past.

The occupation of male and female figures in textbooks also has a negative implication on gender identity. For instance, according to a published study in 2018 on economics textbooks, 92% of economists and 93% of policymakers are male in textbooks [12]. This reinforces the gender stereotype that males and females should take on specific occupations.

## 5. The Process of Digitalization

However, this lag between social horizons and educational idols is becoming increasingly brief as the digitalization of educational materials prevails due to the COVID-19 pandemic, opening new possibilities for a more intimate connection between contemporary gender views and textbooks.

To begin, Digital textbooks embodied “polycentricity,” a concept proposed by Blommaert, elucidating the state of simultaneous working of multiple normative complexes [13]. This corresponds with the multicentric nature of identity, where operations at different levels interact with each other on an intimate level. With this in mind, idols in this context are profoundly interactive and connect with the student through multiple mediums, such as visual, audio, or even virtual reality. This means that the role of idols is not only a horizon towards which one could aspire but also a new category of interactive personal experience, one that is caused by the will of the receiver.

This change, brought forth by the advancements of modern technologies, leads idols to have an increasingly comprehensive impact on the student’s formation of identity. On the one hand, this resolves the problem of idols being overly historical and objectified beings and makes idols, albeit only appearing in academic contexts, very human figures. On the other hand, however, it leads to the delocalization of social and cultural horizons, which will ultimately to an increase in historical impact on contemporary views of gender.

This delocalization may ultimately lead to the “anachronism” of gender identities. The names of famous physicists, such as Newton and Galileo, and the gender implications they carry might experience a kind of rejuvenation in their digitalization, where students can interact with them on a personalized level. However, this will ultimately to a positive effect on the formation of gender identity as female students can feel personally connected to certain figures, rather than being influenced by the general disproportion in the gender of idols, a problem prevailing in traditional, physical textbooks.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, the importance of social identity will be considered for a review that not only includes the formation of individual identity but also of collective identity, which gender influences predominantly. To grasp the idea of collective identity in an educational context, the role of social identity, as opposed to individual identity, must be articulated. ‘Social identity’ is how one characterizes oneself in the form of meanings from another individual’s perspective, and it is the identifying factor one forms in relation to other individuals within a certain social sphere. Therefore, social identity could take on different forms depending on the social environment the individual is engaging in, as opposed to individual or corporate identity.

Taking this into consideration, a personalized, digital version of textbooks may prove to disrupt the previous overly generalized collective idea of gender. This will influence gender identity in a positive way regardless of the fact that it still reinforces the idea of gender, as females will not be discouraged by their gender but rather encouraged by their personal connection to textbook idols, be it only virtually. Hence, the collectivity of identity is destructed or, to say the least, weakened by the processes of digitalization. The contemporary trend in Chinese education, moving towards a moral and health-focused curriculum, also proves to be beneficial in gender equality, as there are more ways a female student can realize her potential and compete with males in more areas.

Thus, this article considered the various aspects and processes of feminine formation within Chinese educational institutions. Among the various influencers of formation, the role of idols stood out as being central to the formation of gender identity, and further research suggested that the role is closely connected to social horizons. However, more in-depth analyses have revealed a lag between the evolution of social horizons and the idols presented in textbooks. The digitalization process,



however, is reversing this gap, while at the same time humanizing and personalizing idols. Hence, despite the gap between social horizons and textbook idols, under the modern scheme of digitization, textbooks in the general sense reinforce feminine identity in a more or less positive way.

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