

## Constructing perfect women: the portrayal of female officials in Hong Kong newspapers

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On 28 February 2000, the Hong Kong government announced its newest round of reshuffling and promotion of top-level officials. The next day, *Apple Daily*, one of the most popular Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong, headlined their full front-page coverage: 'Eight Beauties Obtain Power in Newest Top Official Reshuffling: One-third Females in Leadership, Rarely Seen Internationally'.<sup>1</sup> On 17 April, the *Daily* cited a report by regional magazine *Asiaweek* which claimed that 'Hong Kong's number of female top officials [is the] highest in the world'. The article states that: 'Though Hong Kong does not have policies privileging women, opportunities for women are not worse than those for men.' Using the prominence of female officials as evidence for gender equality is common in public discourse in Hong Kong. To give another instance, Sophie Leung, Chair of the government's Commission for Women's Affairs, said in an interview that women in Hong Kong have space for development, and she was quoted: 'You see, Hong Kong female officials are so powerful!' (*Ming Pao*, 5 February 2001).

This article attempts to examine news discourses about female officials in Hong Kong. Undoubtedly, the discourses are complicated and not completely coherent. Just from the examples mentioned, one could see that the media embrace the relatively high ratio of female officials as a sign of social progress. But one may also question the validity of treating the ratio of female officials as representative of the situation of gender (in)equality in the society.

In this article I do not attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of all discourses about female officials in Hong Kong and reduce them to a single framework. Rather, I will extract some prominent themes that often

go together in newspaper coverage and demonstrate how they are articulated into a portrayal of the female officials as perfect women – who excel in everything they do, are competent in every realm they participate in and serve as models for other women in the society.

Given this goal, the present analysis is different from most past studies about media coverage of female politicians around the world in that it focuses on positive coverage of them. However, focusing on the positive portrayal of women politicians is not to suggest that Hong Kong is a uniquely non-discriminating society. The present analysis remains, in aspiration, a critical discourse analysis, which aims at unravelling how meanings are constructed to serve the purpose of domination (Fairclough, 1995). In this study, the critique of a seemingly positive media treatment of female officials is based upon the recognition that women politicians are not representative of ‘women’ in general. In the past decade, feminist theorists (e.g. Butler, 1999) have put into question the notion of women as a unified group with a fixed identity on which a shared interest and politics can be established. Instead, they called for the recognition of the differences and conflicts among women themselves. What is good for one particular group of women may be bad for others. Therefore, in the case of media coverage of women politicians, it is important to ask: if the media’s positive treatment of women politicians helps the politicians’ own careers, what does it do to other women in the society and gender relations in general?

To tackle this question, textual analysis of newspaper discourse will be followed by a discussion of the officials’ public performance. News is always the co-creation of reporters and their sources. Therefore, the image of perfect women needs to be understood by taking into account how the officials ‘cooperate’ with the media by performing in particular ways. These performances include both more or less consciously staged performance and the pre-reflexive behaviours generated by habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, 1991). Finally, I will put the analysis’s results into the context of gender issues in Hong Kong society and discuss how the image of perfect women fails to pay attention to the actual problems faced by many females in Hong Kong.

### **Women politicians in news around the world**

In modern societies, political leaders are predominantly males. This is, of course, the result of a set of factors involving socialization, the way politics is conceived of and conducted, and how the political system is structured in contemporary societies. In the Western philosophical tradition, the private and the public realms are separated, with the latter being considered as where rationality reigns (Elshtain, 1993; Okin, 1998). The construction of

women as emotional beings thus excludes them from politics. The idea of a competent politician – decisive, rational, strong and charismatic – is hardly a gender-neutral idea.

The case is similar in the Chinese tradition. Confucianism defines women's social position in terms of a submissive relationship with their male family members. The principle of 'Thrice Following', 'one of the twin pillars of Confucian gender ethics' (Ko, 1994: 6), says that a woman should follow her father when young, her husband when married and her son when old. Women are also confined largely to the inner domestic realm, though recently scholars have emphasized that women in ancient China did exercise some freedom within the cultural and social constraints (Ko, 1994; Mann and Cheng, 2001). Regarding women's role in politics, To (1995) points out that at various periods in Chinese history the ruling power was actually in the hands of a woman. These periods, when put together, cover a quarter of all Chinese history. However, To (1995) points out that these women emperors were merely taking the place of their deceased husbands and immature sons. Their role was to protect and maintain the ruling power of the patrilineal family.

Given the conventional set of binary oppositions, with male/public/outer/reason on one side, and female/private/inner/emotion on the other, the entrance of women into politics constitutes a problem, both for the women politicians themselves and for society at large. Some researchers thus pay attention to the media, the key site for the struggle of meanings in modern societies, to see how women politicians are represented. These studies adopt a wide range of research methods and theoretical perspectives, but they share the same concern on whether and how women politicians are treated unfairly by the press.

First, there is the concern of (in)visibility. Content analysis by Norris (1997) on media coverage of national leaders as well as by Kahn (1996) on US local election candidates both demonstrate that the media give less coverage to female than to male politicians. Gender stereotypes constitute another area of concern. Carroll and Schreiber (1997) show that US media coverage of female Members of Congress was not biased towards a focus on appearance and family lives. Similarly, Norris (1997) also did not find a stereotypical bias. However, Ross and Sreberny's (2000) interviews with female Members of Parliament in Britain showed that they did complain about the media's tendency to focus on their appearance. Some women MPs thus reacted by dressing in a way that would make them appear more serious. Kahn's (1996) content analysis also finds that, in the advertising campaigns of female election candidates, 84 percent of the personality traits mentioned are 'male traits' (independence, knowledgeable, objective, strong, etc.). In male candidates' advertisements, the figure is only 63 percent. These studies thus showed that women politicians do experience

the problem of stereotypical treatment, and they often react by masculinizing their performance.

Though evidence from content analyses is relatively mixed, case studies looking at the process of social construction of meaning provide ample examples of how media coverage of women politicians is based upon the idea that 'women' and 'politicians' should not go together. In the USA, the case of Hillary Rodham Clinton is widely analysed. Gardetto (1997) points out that Hillary's image as an independent career woman presents a challenge to the American ideal family. Brown and Gardetto (2000) argue that the US media impose an either/or choice between family and work on her, while Edwards and Chen (2000) reveal how political cartoons treated her intrusion into political affairs as threatening. On the whole, the media do not welcome a strong and active First Lady (Winfield, 1997). In Australia, Deutchman and Ellison show that media treatment of Pauline Hanson is driven by gender assumptions, so that Hanson was 'either denied political agency or accused of intellectual inadequacy by both the media as well as some of her former advisers' (1999: 46). Focused particularly on the tension between family and work, van Zoonen's (2000) analysis of gossip magazines in Netherlands shows that, while the families of male politicians are portrayed as sacrificing, families of female politicians are portrayed as suffering. In sum, these studies have demonstrated how the media treat women politicians in ways that are based on, and thus reinforce, existing gender assumptions.

### **Analysing the construction of perfect women in Hong Kong newspapers**

Though studies on how media representations undermine women politicians are valuable, focusing solely on negative representations leaves some other questions unresolved. Most notably, if the media tend to fetter women politicians with conventional assumptions and demeaning stereotypes, why are there not more open criticisms from women politicians? How do some female politicians succeed in their career despite the bad press?

In fact, a closer look at some of the studies' findings would show that the relationship between a politician's gender, the media coverage that she receives and her career success is more complicated than the media simply mistreating women politicians. For instance, while Deutchman and Ellison show that media coverage of Pauline Hanson is negative, Hanson nonetheless succeeded in 'capitalizing on her media celebrity to mobilize a cadre of followers from around the country' (1999: 47). Because Hanson embodies the contradictions of a female politician, a 'white male battler' and a 'military mother' (Deutchman and Ellison, 1999: 47), the media gave

her sustained attention, which in turn brought her popularity. In other words, Hanson's political success was paradoxically rooted in her being a norm-defying woman.

In other cases, women also have the advantage of being regarded as morally superior, a result of the link drawn between women and the domestic realm (Elshtain, 1993). When the level of corruption in the public realm is high, the public may opt for women politicians as 'political outsiders' (D'Amico, 1995). The media may correspondingly portray female politicians as agents of change (Carroll and Schreiber, 1997).

Therefore, a better understanding of media representation of women politicians should take into account when and how media treat them positively. This is especially important in the case of Hong Kong, where a significant number of successful women officials and politicians exist. They occupy top official positions or seats in the legislature, and some of them are highly popular among the public. Ex-Chief Secretary Anson Chan, for instance, has been hugely popular since she became the head of the whole civil service in 1993. She was even dubbed 'the conscience of Hong Kong', a label first used by *Newsweek* (9 June 1997) and then diffused into local usage. At the same time, opinion polls constantly showed that the proportion of female legislators included in the citizens' list of top ten legislators is higher than the proportion of females in the legislature as a whole. Of course, Hong Kong does have unpopular female politicians too, but if they are not the exceptions, they at least are not the rule.

I have already pointed out that there is no single coherent media discourse about women politicians in Hong Kong. Discriminatory and demeaning remarks about women politicians do occasionally appear, but they are immediately condemned by the general public. Besides, coverage focusing on female politicians' appearance certainly exists. The public sphere, after all, is a space where competing discourses circulate.

However, within the varieties of discourses a relatively clear positive image for women politicians emerges. This image is based upon an evaluation of the women politicians in terms of two binary oppositions: (1) rationality vs tenderness, and (2) work vs family. Past studies often showed that the media impose these as an either/or choice for female politicians. But the same does not apply to the Hong Kong media. Female politicians are portrayed as perfect women, with both rationality and passion, who excel both at work and in the family.

In reconstructing this image, I would largely confine myself to the coverage of female officials. The Hong Kong public has higher level of respect for officials than for legislators (Lau, 1998). As a result, the image of successful women is also more apparent in the case of officials. The texts I analysed were collected by reviewing *Ming Pao* and *Apple Daily* from 1998 to 2001.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to include every single news article that involves a female official in it. Therefore, I selected three types of

articles that appeared during the period: (1) feature, soft-news articles about female officials, in which the 'hardcore' political issues are often backgrounded, sometimes resulting in the foregrounding of gender, (2) full-page special coverage on women politicians, which sometimes provide a detailed portrayal of their private lives and personalities and (3) ordinary news articles that nevertheless emphasize the politicians' gender. On the whole, my analysis focuses on how newspapers deal with female politicians when their gender is foregrounded.

### **The two-sided women officials**

It is widely recognized that women face the problem of the double-bind when they enter male-dominated arenas: 'If [women] take men on in their own terms, they are denying their femininity, which may diminish their private status as women; if they assert their femininity they risk being labelled as inferior and inadequate workers' (Bradley, 1994: 159). Here the assumption is that society would not accept the possibility for women having both the masculine traits of rationality, decisiveness, strength, etc. and the feminine traits of caring, tenderness, considerateness, etc. The Hong Kong media, however, do not seem to work on this assumption. Top women officials are often portrayed as 'two-sided':

Yam Kwan Pui-ying said she does not have any children or warm family life. But she absolutely has the side of female tenderness. [The reporter] remembers that once she incidentally met her husband on the road. She went over to her husband and clung to his arm very naturally, with a bright smile on her face. (*Apple Daily*, 11 February 1999)

The strong Mrs Yam also has a mild side. On her face there is always a tender yet bright smile, and she once told the reporter during an interview: 'In fact I am very soft!' (*Ming Pao*, 30 November 2000)

Yam was then the Secretary for the Environment and Food. Before that she was the first female Commissioner of the Independent Commission Against Corruption. As the head of a disciplinary force, Yam acquired an image of being a tough and strong official, and the media dubbed her the 'Iron Butterfly'. The above passages take the image of 'Iron Butterfly' as background, the 'news' is that Yam also has 'the other side'.

Yam is far from the only two-sided female official in Hong Kong. When ex-Chief Secretary Anson Chan retired in 2001, the press, besides praising her contribution to the city, also wrote about her 'other side'. Lily Yam this time became an information source, as she described Chan as a caring and tender friend as well as a good and competent boss (*Apple Daily*, 28 April 2001).

In the eyes of the media, female officials do possess the characteristics that are required to succeed in the public realm, but they also possess the characteristics of women. What makes this possible is a spatial differentiation as to where the characteristics are to be expressed. Yam, for instance, is regarded as tough and strong in work, but tender in front of her husband. *Apple Daily* makes this a general case for all female officials: 'But Mrs Chan and other female officials are similar in that, while they are heads of government bureaux in their public service, they are good wives and mothers at home, taking care of both family and career' (17 April 2000).

This would lead us to the work and family of the female officials. But before entering the next section, it should be noted that the feminine side of the female officials is not totally confined to the family. It also finds expression in work:

Among the newly promoted officials in the government, Yue Chung-yi, who controls the government's treasury, is probably the hottest. . . . And the reason behind this is that she perfectly expresses the nature of the strong woman – strong and decisive in public, and tender and mild when persuading people behind the door. (*Apple Daily*, 21 August 1998)

Secretary for Treasury Yue was rated here as the perfect example of the 'strong woman', a term for successful career women popularized by a local television drama series in the late 1970s. Here, the tender side of Yue finds expression not in family but in work. However, it does not mean that the spatial differentiation is eliminated. What replaces the family–work dichotomy is the distinction between the back and front stage (Goffman, 1974). The relevance of this distinction to politics is demonstrated by a current study on US presidents' different performances on the two stages (Sigelman, 2001). But here, what is more important is not whether Yue did in fact perform in such a way, but that the media portray Yue as being able to express her two sides in their proper places. Sometimes, male politicians are quoted to support the portrayal. For instance, a male legislator was quoted in another article: '[Yue is] tough when toughness is needed, and soft when softness is required' in handling matters. The legislator affirmed that Yue is an official with whom one can discuss issues rationally (*Apple Daily*, 6 June 1998).

This spatial differentiation does not mean that the feminine side never finds expression on the front stage. The differentiation is more prescriptive than descriptive. When female officials express their femininity on the front stage, even if the media do not treat it negatively, they do not treat such instances positively. But when female officials express their tender side within 'suitable' places, it is a demonstration of their competence.

### Good mothers, good wives, good daughters

In media discourse, female officials' career success does not prevent them from being good mothers, wives and daughters. The female officials themselves echo this view. Anson Chan emphasized that a woman can take care of her different roles by 'keeping the balance' and using time efficiently (*Ming Pao*, 26 January 2001). In another occasion, she said that:

The concept of the 'family' has been broadened. . . . Contemporary women have a role in both the debating hall and the living room. Besides shopping in the supermarket, [she] would also trade in the international commercial market. Besides taking care of [her] children's health, [she] also needs to concern [herself] with the needs of trading partners and customers. (*Ming Pao*, 15 December 1999)

However, the 'broadening of the concept of family' can hardly be found in news stories about the female officials' families. In fact, the female officials are not only good mothers and wives, they are good mothers and wives in a very traditional sense. For example, there seems to be nothing to alleviate the burden of household chores for these female officials:

On the one hand she is loyal to her duty. . . . On the other hand [she] insists on not employing domestic helpers, does everything herself, never relies on other people to do the household chores. (*Apple Daily*, 13 January 2000, on Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, Director of Social Welfare, then at Department of Treasury)

Friends who know Mrs Yam well know that she does not hire domestic helpers. [She] likes to do the big and little things at home by herself. (*Ming Pao*, 30 November 2000, on Lily Yam)

The careers of female officials do not call for a change in the division of labour within their families. Even the idea of hiring domestic helpers is implicitly regarded as undesirable. Good wives do the household chores, and women officials are not exempted.

Besides, role differentiation between mothers and fathers is similarly conventional:

The three males in the family – husband and the two sons – have already discovered 'the way to live'. Husband insists on the principle of 'mutual understanding and concession', the sons have also understood the 'different functions' of father and mother: ask father, who is a teacher, about homeworks, and find mother to have intimate talks. (*Apple Daily*, 28 January 2001, on Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor)

The headline of the full-page report was 'Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor Likes Shopping in Toyshops Best', because of her sons, of course. In the above quotation, the suggestion that her husband and sons have discovered 'the way to live' seems to be opening up a discussion of a different kind of



family. However, what follows is no different from a traditional family, and the 'different functions' of mother and father are surprisingly unsurprising, as father carries knowledge and authority, and mother is the source of intimacy.

As mothers, female officials are caring and loving, and as wives they are tender or even submissive. *Apple Daily* reported that people in political circles described Ex-Chief Secretary Anson Chan as 'Chair of the Fear Your Husband Association' (10 September 1998). This fear-husband theme was also applied to other officials and legislators.

The importance of the extended family in Chinese societies makes the relationship between wife and mother-in-law another important one. In the cultural imaginary, this relationship is particularly conflict-ridden. But female officials cannot fail to handle it. Director of Home Affairs Shelley Lee was described as particularly skilful at dealing with this relationship:

Regarding the relationship between mother and daughter-in-law, which is the most difficult one to deal with in the family, [Shelley Lee] has this viewpoint: 'Everything is difficult at the beginning. Give yourself three years, and be particularly tolerant. [She] accepts you as a new member of the family, then you have to understand and accept their family's original structure and habits.' (*Apple Daily*, 30 January 2000)

Lee's point of view is based on the assumption of a patrilineal family – it is the woman who enters a man's already existing family as a new member and thus she needs to adjust. The article goes on to describe Lee as appreciating her mother-in-law deep in her heart, and she accompanies her to lunch every Sunday however busy she is.

For the newspaper, the conflict between career and family for women politicians is mainly a conflict about time (limited time to spend with family) rather than a conflict about roles (how one can be a woman *and* a politician), and the time problem can be alleviated by efficient use of time. What is seldom mentioned is that this time conflict is faced mostly by female but not male officials. Even when this point is raised, it is not treated as a problem that needs structural remedies. For instance, when Sophie Leung talked about her experience in the 1970s, how her mother-in-law wanted her to quit her job after she gave birth to her second child, she recalled:

At that time I dared not say anything when I faced difficulties in my work. Besides that, [I] needed to take care of the children to my best ability, not giving any trouble to mother-in-law. Some Hong Kong women had long failed to develop themselves, probably because they faced the same problem as I did. (*Ming Pao*, 5 February 2001)

This paragraph highlighted the difficulty a female politician once faced, and also pointed out that the difficulty is faced by most women in society.

However, it does not lead to further discussion of this problem. Rather, Sophie Leung herself had endured the period by tolerance and personal persistence, and finally achieved her success.

Therefore, in Hong Kong newspapers, female officials' families are seen to be *not* really suffering a lot. They still have a good mother, a good wife and a good daughter-in-law. An image of a perfect woman thus emerges – a rational and decisive career woman who is also caring and loving and who performs the roles of mother and wife competently.

To further illustrate this image, we can look at the 'special case' of an unpopular female official. Analysing this case allows us to test the 'generalizability' of the perfect woman image, as well as to catch a glimpse of the dynamics of media representation of women officials over a period of time.

### **Regina Ip: from perfect woman to swab head**

In July 2001, a political satirical comic book called *Swab Head*, which refers to the hairstyle of Secretary for Security Regina Ip, came out in Hong Kong. Besides pointing to the perceived ugliness of the hairstyle, 'swab' is also traditionally a sign of ominousness, more usually used in the phrase 'swab star', which means a person who brings bad luck.

The book was not the first satirical comic directed at top officials in the city. Its publication followed the success of *Lo Mun-Tung* (Stupid Old Tung), focusing on Chief Executive Tung Chee-Hwa. The popularity of political satire is a result of the difficult economic, social and political conditions the city faced in the past few years (see Ku, 2001). *Apple Daily* reported that *Swab Head* sold 1400 copies on the first day of a book fair (19 July 2001).

Reacting to the satire, Regina Ip wrote an article to *Ming Pao*, accusing the book of perpetuating sex discrimination (7 August 2001). The response towards Ip's criticism was mostly a counter-criticism, however. Citing examples from Deng Xiao-ping to Bill Clinton, academics, politicians and cartoonists argued that politicians all over the world were treated similarly in political satire. A political cartoonist argued that Ip should take 'the perspective of Western politics and treat political satire as non-existent'; while another cartoonist argued that Ip should 'reflect' on why she was chosen as a subject for satire (*Apple Daily*, 8 August 2001).

The controversy reflects the difficulty of discussing the 'gender trouble' of women politicians, because such discussions would inevitably be conflated with discussions about the nature of politics, the ideal of good politicians, the political controversies of the time and the popularity of the officials involved. Here, I am not commenting on the rights and wrongs of

the *Swab Head* controversy. What is important is how Regina Ip's image differs from that of other female officials in the media.

Ip's promotion to top officialdom began in 1996 when she was appointed to head the Immigration Department, which made her the first female to head a disciplinary force in Hong Kong. This can be considered as a 'breakthrough' – a woman obtains leadership in the realm of 'wu' (martial) instead of the realm of 'wen' (literary) (see Hodge and Louie, 1998, for a discussion of the *wen-wu* distinction). In July 1998, she was further promoted to be the Secretary for Security. If 'female politician' is a contradiction in terms (Deutchmann and Ellison, 1999), then one might say that Ip's position carries an even larger contradiction.

However, the press did not pay too much attention to her gender when they covered the promotion. When her gender was referred to, Ip was portrayed as 'full of confidence', and she 'humorously warned the male civil servants in the Security Bureau to have "psychological preparation" for her appointment' (*Ming Pao*, 28 July 1998). The article reported that Ip 'admitted' that she faced 'some pressure' when she became the first woman to head the Immigration Department, but there is no further explication of what the pressure was. When Ip started her work at her new position, *Apple Daily* reported that she thought there was no difference between a female and a male Secretary for Security (*Apple Daily*, 1 September 1998).

The coverage was mildly positive in tone at the time. In fact, for a time, media portrayals of Ip followed the perfect woman image exactly. *Apple Daily*, which later became highly critical of Ip during the *Swab Head* controversy, devoted a full-page feature to her on 7 November 1999, headed 'Regina Ip Drove Porsche to Ping-shek Estate to Buy Food'. The overall theme is that Ip is a nice, friendly, ordinary person:

Since she married into the Ip family more than 10 years ago, she became the long-standing neighbour of the Ping-shek Estate. During holidays she does not go to shop for clothes in Central Districts' brand-name shops, neither does she go to ballrooms. Instead she goes to the public estate's market, and listens to citizens' grievances.

Public housing estates such as Ping-shek are where most working-class Hong Kong people live. The coverage does not deny that Ip is rich, but it emphasizes her closeness to the common people despite her wealth, which also implies the virtue of prudence. Buying food for her family is another instance of a female official managing the household. Since Ip's husband died of cancer, she needs to take care of her daughter by herself, but she still wins her daughter's love and respect.

Most interestingly, her hairstyle, that is, the 'swab head', was dubbed 'Fatty head' in this story; Fatty is a popular female veteran TV star in Hong Kong. The story also informed readers that Ip had gone to the same

hairdresser for more than 10 years because of the memory of her late mother, thus highlighting her filial piety.

If female officials are perfect women, Regina Ip *was* one of them. But three years after becoming head of the Bureau of Security, Ip's public image had been tarnished by her role in a number of political controversies and in more recurrent debates such as those surrounding anti-government protests. In these debates, Ip's standpoint, often regarded as illiberal and undemocratic, did not bring her approval. A local academic once even called her a 'dog-official', a derogatory and somewhat vulgar term used for morally corrupt officials.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, Regina Ip's case demonstrates the dynamics of media coverage of a woman politician's private life in relation to her public image, and the change from Fatty head to swab head demonstrates the extent of the malleability of a politician's image. Actually, at the latter stage of the *Swab Head* controversy, Ip stressed that she complained about the comic because she thought the book would hurt her daughter. Ip thus used the role of a caring mother to explain her lack of open-mindedness. Also, when the controversy had subsided, discourses that were more sympathetic to Ip also re-emerged; even the 'ordinary Ping-shek Estate woman' theme reappeared in the media. The perfect women image, therefore, is a general one in the sense that it is an image for all women officials whose public images are not in question. But on the other hand, the perfect women image is not a static one applied to all female officials at all times; when, how and to whom it applies at a given time is a part of an ongoing dynamic of image politics on the media.

### **Media coverage and the officials' performance**

The image of successful women officials would not easily be constructed without the cooperation of the officials themselves. Coverage of the officials' private lives, for instance, is published with their consent. In fact, the coverage sometimes even takes on the characteristics of a staged performance. Regina Ip's food-buying trip is an example.

An even clearer example is Anson Chan's performance after her retirement. On the day after she announced her retirement, she went shopping, accompanied by her son and followed by an army of reporters. For Anson Chan and the media, to retire is to return to the private realm. Three months later, when she actually retired, she carried her grandson to meet reporters in front of her house, and *Apple Daily* headlined a main article: 'Anson Chan Meets Media with Grandson for the First Time: Without Official Position, She Turns into a Kind Grandmother' (29 April 2001). During that weekend, reporters continued to follow her shopping activities. *Apple Daily's* reporter noted the three books she bought in a

bookstore – one on bodily health, a novel and one on cookery, with the latter grabbing the headline (3 May 2001).

However, female officials' performances are not restricted to these more-or-less consciously constructed ones. Also pervasive in the coverage of female officials is the kind of performance that needs to be understood in the Bourdieusian framework of habitus, bodily hexis and field. For Bourdieu (1990), people's social actions are often driven not by reflexive rational calculation but by the dispositions of their habitus, which are the result of their experience of living through a particular position in a particular field in the society. Habitus is not just mental predispositions but also bodily predispositions (Bourdieu, 1991: 81–9). Masculinity and femininity, therefore, are acted out through bodily appearance and movements:

The reporter asked if [a new policy proposal] is related to her long-established strong and hard style? The new Secretary used her hand to half cover her mouth, smiled, and denied: 'It's you who said I am hard and strong, this image is given to me by the media.' (*Ming Pao*, 15 January 2000, on Lily Yam)

People say she is tender and loving at home, a completely different person than she is in the legislature; she brushes aside the hair beside her ear and says: 'This is a good thing. I hope this is true. . . .' (*Apple Daily*, 7 April 2001, on Emily Lau, legislator)

In the Bourdieusian framework, suitable performance results in gains in symbolic capital – a positive image in this particular case, which can be turned into other forms of capital in the field of politics (promotion within the government hierarchy, votes in elections, etc.). In contrast, if the performance goes wrong, politicians are sanctioned, sometimes conspicuously and immediately. For instance, after Sophie Leung said in a newspaper interview that women should keep their own savings and not put unlimited trust in marriage, various women's associations in Hong Kong immediately cancelled plans to invite her to their activities and criticized her views as destructive to family harmony (*Ming Pao*, 7 February 2001).

To be successful, female officials have to be competent performers in the field of gender and politics. This requires them not to challenge the existing rules but to play by them. It thus becomes 'reasonable' for female politicians to re-confirm traditional gender assumptions, since doing so enables them as much as it confines them. In an extreme case, Anson Chan turned to the Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's wife during her speech in a farewell dinner and stated:

Betty, I think I should share with you what a successful marriage is . . . to have a successful marriage, a wife has to think like a man, act like a lady, appear like a girl, and work like a slave. (*Apple Daily*, 29 April 2001)

If this sounds sexist, it is because Anson Chan is adept at the game she has to play. Her understanding of the game is conveyed by the following statements in an interview:

I like being a woman. . . . I like being treated differently because I'm a woman. I like having my doors opened, and people standing up when I come into the room, and having my chair pulled back. All that is part of being a woman.

But I hope that as a result of 35 years of civil service, that I'm accepted as a chief secretary not because I happen to be a woman but because I happen to be the best man for this job. And I use the word 'man' advisedly. (*Newsweek*, 9 June 1997: 15)

For Chan, there is no contradiction between being equal to and being different from men at the same time. She is willing to accept the social rules governing interactions between the two sexes because they are 'part of being a woman'. However, she also understands that to be a top official is to be a 'man'. She does not challenge the gendered conception of a competent politician as long as being a woman does not exclude her from being a manly politician.

### **The ideology of the perfect women**

In her study of gossip magazines' portrayal of women politicians, van Zoonen (2000) criticized the magazines for refraining from acknowledging that women politicians can have both career and family. Hong Kong media do grant this ability to women officials, but their coverage may lead to other problems.

If ideology is meaning in service of power that perpetuates domination (Thompson, 1995), the perfect women image is at least potentially ideological. This can be discerned when one puts the image back into the larger contexts of gender inequalities in Hong Kong. The perfect women image would not harm the women politicians, but it may nonetheless fetter other women by its failure to problematize, or even its attempt to trivialize, the work-family tension.

Since John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, the configuration of the institution of the family has been recognized as a fundamental problem in equality between the sexes. The division of labour within the family greatly constrains females' chance to develop their own career. Women not only have to do more in the house, they also take up the more straining kind of housework that conflict with the normal working schedule of a full-time employee (Delphy and Leonard, 1994). This sexual division of labour within the family certainly applies to Hong Kong (Yu and Chau, 1997). In some cases women simply have to sacrifice work. Ngo (1992), analysing census data, finds that the number of children and domestic help resources

affects women's chances of taking up paid jobs. And when women go to work, their need to devote much time to family becomes the basis for their relatively low pay and rank (Westwood et al., 1997). This conflict between work and family exists for both working-class women (Lee, 1998) and middle-class professionals (Ng, 1999; Tam, 1999). The tension is also subjectively experienced by women, as Aryee and Luk (1996) show, through a survey study: work identity and family identity are negatively correlated with each other for women, while the two correlate positively for men.

Of course, it would be an over-simplification to say that the family just constrains women's work opportunities. After all, many women in Hong Kong go to work not in spite of but because of the family's need. Since the 1960s, women's entrance into the workforce in Hong Kong has often been driven by family economics (Salaff, 1981). Besides, it is important to recognize that family does provide important emotional support for women (Choi, 1998). And, in the daily dynamics of work, a woman's need to take care of her family can be used strategically by women themselves to gain local advantage (Lee, 1998). But these are just an integral part of the game that working women have to play. While a single move within the game may help or hurt the woman making that move, the move is also an act reproducing the game itself. The consequence is that structural inequality persists, while women are allowed to grab the local benefits by playing the game adroitly.

While the media empower the female politicians by hailing their ability to balance work and family, the failure to problematize the tension between work and family tends to reproduce the existing family institution, which is, on the whole, more confining for women than for men. The women officials' achievements may be real, but the newspaper discourse ignores the difficulty of such achievements. Or, more precisely, it ignores the relative levels of difficulty women and men face when they attempt to build both a successful career and a good family. This ideological aspect of the discourse is most apparent when, as mentioned at the beginning of the article, the success of female politicians is used as evidence for relative gender equality in the city. It prevents people from raising more fundamental questions regarding the constitution of family and workplace, and the relationship between the two.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this article I have demonstrated how Hong Kong newspapers portrayed female officials in a highly positive manner. In one sense, when compared

with other studies of female politicians in other countries, the present case is a special one. Hong Kong's high percentage of female top officials might have been a temporary phenomenon<sup>4</sup>, the more significant point is that media discourse involves different assumptions about the relationship between their work and family, their masculinity and femininity, and their public and private lives. But a basic premise underlying the present study is that to understand the media portrayal of women politicians one should look at the positive portrayals as well as negative ones. Positive presentations of women politicians – such as presenting them as morally superior or as agents of change (Carroll and Schreiber, 1997) – also occur in other societies. Gender stereotypes and overemphasis on appearance are important concerns, but studying how and why the media show some women politicians in a positive light may also reveal how meanings are constructed to shield social and political institutions from criticisms.

Studies of positive portrayals of women politicians can also sensitize us to the relation between the gender problems specific to the field of politics and the gender problems pertaining to the larger society. I have argued that Hong Kong media coverage of the women politicians helps the politicians' careers, but it does not question existing inequalities in the family institution. The interests of women politicians and those of other groups of women in society do not perfectly coincide. Studies of women politicians have usually focused on the difference between male and female politicians, but the difference between women politicians and women workers, women middle-class professionals, etc. should also be examined.

Another reason to study the positive treatment of women politicians is that it can alert us to how the 'game' of gender in the political arena is structured. Positive media portrayal often results from the women politicians' ability to play by the rules of the game and to move adroitly within the constraints. It is thus illustrative of what the media and the society expect of women politicians. A society may generally expect women to stay away from politics, but it is also important to recognize what expectations and assumptions the media hold about how women should behave when they do in fact become politicians.

Of course, this does not mean that positive coverage must be ideological in Thompson's (1995) sense. There is no inherent logic tying the positive portrayal of perfect women to the downplaying of family-work tension. And there is no denying that positive coverage may make working women who want to have both career and family feel empowered. But, as Barthes (1972) points out, a myth is a myth not because of its truth-value but because of the way it is evoked. Therefore, what should be challenged is not the portrayal of success of women politicians but the way this success is talked about, so that the portrayal does not inadvertently become an obstacle to challenging persisting inequalities.



## Notes

1. All translations are by the present author.
2. Lee (2000) classifies Hong Kong newspapers into: (1) elite-oriented information papers, (2) mass-oriented story papers, and (3) leftist papers controlled by the Chinese government. *Ming Pao* and *Apple Daily* are representative of the first two kinds of newspapers respectively. Leftist papers are not studied since they are not part of the mainstream press.
3. After this article was written, Regina Ip continued to embroil herself in numerous political controversies in Hong Kong. In late 2002, she took up the task to 'promote' a national security legislation in Hong Kong. The proposed legislation led to heated debates and criticisms in the society, culminated in a historic anti-government protest march along Hong Kong on 1st July 2003. Ip resigned two weeks after the 1st July rally, thus ending her career (at least temporarily) as a government official.
4. Traditionally, heads of government bureaus and departments in Hong Kong were promoted within the civil service. 'Civil servants', a career that is relatively stable, attracted a lot of females in the past. This is probably part of the reason why Hong Kong had a high percentage of top level female officials when this article was written. However, in 2002, the Hong Kong government changed to a ministerial system in which heads of government bureaus could be recruited from outside the civil service. Since then, the percentage of top level female officials has dropped.

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