Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Discourse, Context & Media

The soft power of a First Lady—Constructing identities for First Ladies in the Chinese and American media

Lei Zhang *

College of English Studies, Tianjin Foreign Studies University, Tianjin, China

ABSTRACT

Soft power has replaced hard power to become a significant channel for countries to further their agendas in international affairs. As one instrument of enhancing soft power, media discourse bears material effects on the world through its choices in the identity construction of First Ladies. Combining corpus-based methods with micro-level manual analysis of English news from Chinese and American news sources, a comparative analysis of how the American and Chinese media construct the identities of Peng Liyuan and Michelle Obama is carried out within the approach of critical discourse analysis. The choices of key words, naming strategies, transitivity and metaphors in these two media reveal their differences in balancing multiple and mixed identities of these two First Ladies, in spite of their similarities in foregrounding the respective First Lady's celebrity identity. This demonstrates different understandings of soft power in Chinese and American culture and how identity construction of the First Lady contributes to the promotion of their soft power.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The information revolution and globalization has transformed the world in the 21st century greatly, forcing countries to shift from hard power to soft power, in order to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction. According to Nye (2011, p. 22), their soft power means their 'ability to affect others through the co-operative means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction for their desired outcomes in international affairs'. The former Chinese General Secretary and President Hu Jintao told the 17th Communist Party Congress in 2007 that China needed to increase its soft power and his successor Xi Jinping believes Chinese soft power is an inescapable instrument to make the Chinese dream[1] come true, modernizing China into a fully developed country. It is also claimed (Nye, 2004) that the United States

needs to enhance its soft power, which has suffered a dramatic drop due to its policy in Iraq. Since a country's soft power rests on its culture, political values and foreign policies (Nye, 2011, p. 84), any actors and institutions having access to these recourses could wield soft power. As a result, the manner through which soft power operates is multiple and diverse. The media discourse is one of soft power's instruments (Chouliaraki, 2005), which could bear material effects on the world through its choices in presentations of events and people. Among those reported, the First Ladies across the world are a group of high-profiled women who show activism in health, education and other public affairs. It is even believed that in countries with mature First Ladyship like the United States, First Ladies have become an institution in their political systems, wielding significant political and policy influence (Watson, 2000). We assume that they could contribute to some extent to promoting soft power of their countries. This paper aims to carry out a comparative study of the American and Chinese media's coverage of First Ladies to explore how the identity of these high-profile women is constructed and how such construction reveals different understandings of soft power in different cultures.

Media interest in the spouses of presidents is as old as the presidency itself in western cultures. As the presidential spouses, they are usually reported with frequency and in relation to a variety of private and public events by the popular media. This has formed a sharp contrast with few reports on the husbands of female presidents over the world. However, the role of First Ladies was and

* Address: 117 Machang Road, Hexi District, Tianjin 300204, China.
E-mail address: zhanglei@tjfsu.edu.cn

[1] Chinese Dream: This concept came up when Xi, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee visited "The Road toward Renewal" exhibition in Beijing along with other members of CPC on November 29, 2012. He said "realizing the great renewal of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history". Xi announced "The Chinese Dream" would become the hallmark of his administration, which is described as achieving the "Two 100s": the material goal of China becoming a "moderately well-off society" by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, and the modernization goal of China becoming a fully developed nation by about 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic.

continues to be particularly complex and largely undefined (Shoop, 2010). The coverage of them has been classified into different frames, highlighting different roles they play (Beasley, 2005, p. 245; Winfield, 1997a, 1997b). In the U.S.A, First Ladies are regarded as the 'symbol of American womanhood' (Wertheimer, 2004, p. 3) that are socially constructed phenomena. Such construction constantly varies as the public view on the women evolves. Therefore, how media represent the First Lady is a key concern for scholars seeking to determine gender roles (Beasley, 2005; Burns, 2008; Dubriwny, 2005; Gutin, 1989; Parry-Giles and Blair, 2002; Rifkind, 2000; Winfield and Friedman, 2003). Recent studies reveal that the representation of First Ladies is characterized as a struggle between tradition and modernity (Finneman and Thomas, 2014) in the U.S.A. In China, the study on First Ladies dates back to 1981 when Chinese scholars began to show interest in the American First Family (Zhang, 1981). After that, there were only sporadic studies, merely focusing on the First Ladies in foreign countries. They concern the role of First Ladies in the race for presidency and their changing role with the social development, but little address the media representation on these First Ladies. Things have changed after *Peng Liyuan*, the spouse of the current President Xi started to stand under the spotlight of the national and international world in the year of 2013.This prominence has initiated the public attention to the role of the First Lady in China, whose First Ladyship is far from mature compared with the United States. The number of papers with 'First Lady' as the key word has tripled in Chinese academic journals since 2013. Researchers have analyzed her complex identities from the perspectives of international relationship (Zhao, 2013), media studies (Fang and Cheng, 2014) and Chinese image building in diplomacy (Pu, 2016). Their focus lies on how her positive image could help enhance China's image and transmit Chinese traditional culture. This focus reflects the contribution of the First Lady to China's soft power. The term "First Lady soft diplomacy"was adopted by the Chinese media when they reported on *Peng Liyuan* and her counterpart *Michelle Obama*. However, these studies lack detailed discourse analysis of the First Lady's media representations. This research aims, hopefully, to address this lacuna by adopting a critical approach to a comparative study of identity construction of the First Lady in the American and Chinese media.

We chose to look into the coverage of American and Chinese media on the current Chinese First Lady *Peng Liyuan* and her first American counterpart *Michelle Obama*. *Ping Liyuan* is the first Chinese presidential spouse who has received much attention of the national and international media after the Beijing Olympic Games, which is regarded as the symbol of a rising Chin and its soft power (Callahan, 2012, p. 1–4). *Michelle Obama* distinguishes herself from her predecessors too. She is the first African-American First Lady in American history and the media often contrasts her with Hillary Clinton for their different ways in participating political issues. Our media discourse analysis attempts to explore what identities of the two First Ladies are constructed in these two media, especially which aspects of their identities are given prominence in respective media. The manner and strategies in which the news media cover these two women is a topic of both national and global significance, since many around the globe look to them for clues about the appropriate role played by First Ladies in the enhancement of soft power.

In the following, Section 2 elaborates on the role of media in identity construction from the critical perspective. Section 3 presents the methodology of this study, including the collected data and the analytical procedure. Section 4 is devoted to a detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of the selected news. Section 5 discusses about the data analysis and summarizes the major findings of the study.

2. Critical analysis of identity construction in media discourse

Identity is originally a philosophical concept that is introduced as a technical term to analyze social psychology. It is regarded as 'a particular form of social representation that mediates the relationship between the individual and the social world in that field' (Chryssochoou, 2003, p. 225). In linguistics, identity is regarded as a potential characteristic existing in individuals or groups, which is taken as an important standard to distinguish them from others. Following the view of social constructivism, identity is not a static and invariant feature of an individual or a group, but can be constructed by individuals or groups in the process (Halliday, 2000, p. 109–121) of interacting with others in certain social and cultural contexts. It is also multiple and mixed (Barletta et al., 2014, p. 88). For an individual, in different contexts his or her mixed identities will get salience at different degrees. In this paper, we aim to reveal how the multiple identities of the two First Ladies are balanced or contradicted in media from different cultures in certain social contexts.

It is pointed out that discourse is 'the mediating mechanism through which certain identities are produced, reproduced and transformed by culturally recognized, ideologically shaped representations of reality'(Ivanic, 1998:17). The news reports on specific people and events in media are ideological, related to the beliefs, evaluations and values of their social context in a variety of ways (Fowler, 1991). They are said to be affected by and simultaneously affect other parts of social practices. One of such social practices is to identify high-profile figures, including the First Ladies. Since the public lack interpersonal connection with these women, their perception of First Ladies is entirely filtered through mediated representation of journalists, editors and those who are quoted in the news, working as delegates of their readership (Bourdieu, 1991; Wertheimer, 2004). These people are given the power to bring the reality before the reader, including what these First Ladies do and say in their special position, how others respond to their actions and remarks and the characteristics that distinguish them from other women. On one hand, the way they represent such reality is affected by social, cultural, historical elements, reflecting the mental image of the society about the role of First Lady through the eyes of the media; on the other hand, the manner in which media depict First Ladies has some degree of influence on their readers. The identification of these high-profile women may impact on the preservation and collapse of domestic and international stereotype of the First Lady when countries have begun to attach importance to enhancing their soft power, in which First Ladies play certain role. However, the process of making choices in the identification of First Ladies is not transparent. The following discourse analysis aims to deconstruct the ideologies embedded in media's representation of First Ladies, focusing on the identify construction and its ideological implications, obtaining a deeper understanding how media in different cultures represent the First Lady and show their soft power.

Such analysis considers social, cognitive and linguistic dimensions in micro-, meso- and macro critical discursive analytical framework (Fairclough, 2010, p. 133; Koller, 2012). It starts with micro-level textual analysis, describing the linguistic features of the naming of the First Ladies, the processes (Halliday, 2000, p. 109–121) they take part in and metaphorical expressions used to represent them in the reports. These lexical and semantic findings could provide the evidence for the interpretation on the meso-level, in which the underlying belief, evaluation and conceptual metaphors of First Ladies will be inferred by taking into account the discourse practices concerned, including who produce the reports, who are their intended recipients and what are their communicative purposes. Both the textual features and discourse