POLITICAL WOMEN IN SINGAPORE:
A SOCIO-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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Synopsis — This study sets out to discover how the political woman in Singapore is portrayed in Singapore through a study of her representation in the media. A focused study of the Singapore English newspapers in the political elections of 1984, 1988 and 1991 show the construction of the political woman in two ways: one is through the creation of the stereotype, packaging the political woman as a type of woman and like all women, operating within the framework of the family, such as, their role as wives, as the helped, as mothers and as “the weaker sex”; and the other is through the medium of language itself, for example, such as the use of address terms, overlexicalization, and the tabloid commentary style. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The political woman in Singapore is a rare species, and this has been so ever since Singapore achieved its independence from the British colonial masters in 1959. The 1959 election manifesto of the People’s Action Party (PAP), the only political party which has ruled Singapore since then, had pledged to improve the status of women by, among other things, encouraging them to take an active part in politics, helping them to organize a unified women’s movement to fight for women’s rights and the abolition of polygamy (Chew, 1999a). They won a resounding victory at the polls in 1959. Not surprisingly, many people concluded that the PAP came into power because of the women’s vote. There were five women who entered Parliament in 1959. This dropped to three in the 1963 election, and this went down further to a lone PAP woman in 1968. After this lone contender retired in 1970, the ruling party did not put up a single female candidate until 1984, when it fielded three. The three were all elected. Since then, the representation of women in Parliament has remained between 2 and 6%. Today there are four elected women MPs out of 89. They account for less than 5%, a percentage which is lower than the world average of 10% (Chew, 1998, 1999b, p. 59).

A similar picture arises at the grassroots level. Here, women make up one quarter of the 18,000 odd grassroots leaders (Chew, 1999b, p. 58). At first glance, this compares favorably with the proportion of women in Singapore politics (ST 7.11.1992). On closer examination, however, one notices that of this quarter, 75% are in the lower ranked broad based Resident’s committees (RCs) and very few are in the premier committees. The 109 PA run community centre management committees (CCMCs) which conduct activities in the community centers, have only 275 women members, which account for 7% of the women grassroots leaders. The proportion goes down to 3% or 144 women, in the 81 Citizen Consultative Committees (CCCs) which coordinate all constituency grassroots activities and which is the highest level of grassroots leadership (ST 7.11.1992, p. 3). Despite such dismal statistics, the Singapore woman is, on the average, educated and socially mobile. About 60% of the female workforce in Singapore has at least a secondary education, compared with 50% of the males (Labor Force Survey of Singapore, 1997). In addition, the enrolment of women in the National University of Singapore has been slightly higher than that of men (Lee, Campbell, & Chua, 1999).

The under-representation of half of the country’s human talent, intellect and life expe-
rience as well as political and decision making is a loss for society at large. Such a scenario is also the norm in most countries in the world. The more common reasons found to explain this under-representation are the generally low esteem of women vis-a-vis the men, the lack of a role model for political leadership, and the constraints faced by many women in balancing both family and work. There is, however, a more insidious contributory reason that is very little known, and which is the focus of this article. This is the social construction of the political woman through the use of language within the media.

In Singapore, it is well known that the media is tightly controlled and the depiction of news under the constraint of the social structure, which is guided by and reflects the interest of the ruling elite (Birch, 1993). Chua (1995), for instance, states that the PAP has governed Singapore for over four decades through the use of state and nonstate ideological institutions since it assumed state power. Newspaper writing therefore has immense influence on the minds of the masses, and has the ability to influence ideas and perceptions on a vast range of subjects.

In addition, newspaper writing in Singapore, as in other parts of the world, tends to be involved heavily in the construction of stereotypes, which I will define as a socially constructed mental pigeon-hole into which events and individuals can be sorted, thereby making such event and individuals comprehensible, for example, “mother,” “businesswomen,” “teacher,” “woman politicians,” etc. In the disciplines of cognitive psychology and in semantics, these have variously been called “frames,” “paradigms,” “stereotypes,” “schemata” and “general propositions.” Newspapers have a tendency to sort people into categories, placing discriminatory values on them. Editors do their best to fit the story with recognizable patterns, since the firmer the stereotype, the more likely are relevant events to become news (cf. Fowler, 1991). Group identification produces identificatory thinking and the media provides a playing field for the enculturation of stereotypical identification (cf. Hong, 1995).

In this article, I show how the political woman is portrayed in the newspapers and how the social order of Singapore society is indirectly maintained and reproduced through the construction of such discourse. Sexist discourse, as will be shown, does not say women are inferior, instead it portrays them as inferior. Due to constraints of space, I will only be analyzing the depiction of the political woman from the Singapore English newspapers during the political elections of 1984, 1988 and 1991 when they were reintroduced to the public after an absence of 14 years.

It should be noted that the “political woman,” a subset of women, is an important but much neglected group in the study of Singapore culture, politics and society. While there have been several studies on the Singapore women, for example, Chew and Tan (1993), Lee, Campbell, and Chua (1999), Purushotma (1992), Lazar (1999) Ong, Zhuo, and Jacobs (1997), Luke (1998), Wong and Leong (1993) and Heng (1998), there has not been any study as far as I am aware, sociolinguistic or otherwise, on the reasons behind the dearth of political women.

Singapore newspapers construct the political woman in two main ways: one is through the creation of the stereotype, packaging the political woman as a type of woman and like all women, operating within the framework of the family, such as, their role as wives, as the helped, as mothers and as “the weaker sex”; and the other is through the medium of language itself, for example, the use of address terms, overlexicalization, and the tabloid commentary style.

THE CREATION OF STEREOTYPES

In the period under study in Singapore, stereotypes are created in four essential ways: by presenting women as wives, as the helped, as mothers and as the weaker.

Women as wives

A sexist maneuver in the language is the way it obliges women to label themselves in relation to men (Bocklund & Ivy, 1994). When the PAP fielded three women in the political elections, Dr. Dixie Tan, Dr. Aline Wong and Mrs. Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, in 1984, to help carry the additional demands of the national women’s constituency, the press faithfully summarized their career achievements but seemed more interested in the spouses’ responses to their candidacies rather than in the women per se. This was not the case with new male candidates (ST
31.5. 1984). The domestic sphere is one of the most powerful arenas in which the dominance of women is more readily accomplished, and it is the place where the supposed “natural” role of women is located. Introductory reports of Dr. Tan were replete with accounts on her children, her girlhood, her courtship and her marriage (cf. Sun T 13.5.1984). They often linked her to her family (particularly her husband), and were careful to highlight their support of her political venture.

Her husband was pleasantly surprised “and very supportive” of her entering the political arena. So, too, are their two daughters, one an undergraduate and the other about to enter the university. (BT 19.5.1984, ST 15.5.1984)

She did not anticipate any problem in home life. Her family was used to her spending time in community work. (19.5.1984)

She said she had the full support of her husband, Dr. N.C. Tan, a leading cardiologist here. Her two grown-up daughters were also for her becoming a politician. (ST 19.5.1984)

It didn’t take me too long, just a couple of days, to say “yes,” said Dr. Tan, a medical practitioner married to a heart surgeon, Dr. N.C. Tan. (BT 19.5.1984)

Another candidate, Dr. Wong, under the headline “A Voice for Her Sex,” was introduced as having successfully combined a career with family life (ST 2.9.1984), thereby underscoring the point that the economic productivity of the nation is not threatened by this particular woman in politics (assuming that it would normally be). One account included the following:

John (her husband) helps a lot. Really, he helps me manage the whole thing. I haven’t seen much of my children at all. I feel I’ve lost touch with them. Tonight, when I was preparing to come here, one of them asked me (in Mandarin): Are you leaving the house again? I feel so bad that I can’t spend time with them. (ST 9.12.1984).

After a successful term, Dr. Wong stood for election again in 1988, and was once more subjected to this schemata:

Sundays are family days at Dr. Aline Wong’s home. Since she became an MP in 1984 and constituency work took up much of their time, her husband two sons stopped accepting invitations on Sunday afternoons and nights. (ST 1.9.1988).

At the same election, another woman was fielded: Dr. Seet Ai Mee. The press framed her candidacy in the context of morning breakfast with her children:

She is up at 6.30 AM, has breakfast with her teenaged son and daughter and by 7.45 AM, she is dressed in People’s Action party whites and off for another day’s campaigning . . . (ST 1.9.1988)

A husband is usually in the background and the same report continues to situate her more firmly as a wife, in line with the Confucian moral order, which is advocated by the government:

Dr. Seet, 45, a clinical biochemist, said the September 3 polling date caught her off guard.

Husband Seet Lip Chai, 45, who works in a multinational company, wanted to help in her campaign. With earlier rumors of a September 10 election, he made sure he would be back from a business trip to China today. (ST 1.9.1988)

In all these extracts, the voice used is the voice of neutral authority, speaking factually from the institutional perspective. There appears to be no personal identity, no overt message. It is to supply new information with anonymity and authority. No one appears to be speaking, but it creates and defines reality, while denying it is doing so.

A little later, when news was released that Dr. Seet would be the first woman who would be offered a ministerial job (Minister of State for Education and Community Development), the papers reported her as saying:

Life will change “drastically,” she said. Her husband and two teenage children are elated about her appointment. (NP 12.9.1988)

For male candidates, their lives are assumed not to change dramatically and so their families’ responses to their candidature do not
Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew

make the news. It must be noted that hardly any reference was made to wives and children and other domestic chores when male colleagues were introduced. See the introduction of political male candidates such as Mr. Ng Pock Too (ST 8.5.1984), Mr. Yeo Cheow Tong, Dr. Arthur Beng, Mr. Yatiman Yusof and Mr. Abdullah Tarmugi in the 1984 elections (ST 8.12.1984).

Women as helped

While chivalrously giving women “a chance” in a powerful position, there is an implicit belief that they have to be helped, in true boy scout tradition, along the way. Where Dr. Seet is concerned, “Acting Health Minister Yeo Cheow Tong is helping her with about a third of the blocks and her campaign workers are covering the rest” (ST 1.9.1988). Mrs Yu-Foo is not spared from this as a headline on her campaign underscores a similar point: “Willing hands from the unions helps out” (Sun T, 9.12.1984).

In addition, women are often perceived to have less initiative than men. In Singapore, the PAP selects candidates to stand for the election. However, the fact that the women are invited is often highlighted (as if assuming that the men are not). In a leading question, Dr. Tan was led to confess that she had watched a parliamentary session once and “it was a rather dull session” (Sun T 19.5.1984). So it was not surprising that entering politics was not due to her initiative: “And it was Dr. Tay, who two months ago, sounded her out on standing for election as a candidate of the People’s Action Party” (ST 19.5.1984). In the case of Dr. Seet’s appointment to a ministerial position, prince charming appeared in the form of the first Deputy Prime Minister:

I got a phone call to see Mr. Goh Chok Tong . . . I thought he wanted to talk to me about my constituency, she said.

Asked how she felt about her appointment, she said: “I feel that if I pinch myself I’ll wake up and think I’ve been dreaming. This whole experience has been one long dream.” (NP 12.9.1988)

Men choose the women they want to work with. So Prime Minister Goh, during an election address, justifies his choice and reassures the electorate on Dr. Seet’s integrity:

Dr. Seet’s character was “all right” but her personality remind him of “Margaret Thatcher” She does tend to lecture a little . . . maybe over time, like me, she can learn not to lecture people . . . He told of “a silly mistake” Dr. Seet made when she was campaigning in the last selection—she washed her hands after shaking hands with a fishmonger. News of this spread through the constituency. He asked the electorate to “have faith in our judgment. We know her personality. She cannot change. She is in her 40’s. I don’t think she can change. Old wood, very difficult to bend. But habits can change.” (BT 30.8.1991; ST 30.8.1991)

Ironically, when men try to help women by praising their qualities and explaining away their faults, they sometimes destroy whatever political chances they may have in the process. Not surprisingly, Dr. Seet lost the election to an opposition male candidate, confirming the high risks involved in putting up “a woman candidate.”

Women candidates from the opposition party are not depicted well either. In 1980, to make political capital of the glaring absence of women members in the PAP, an opposition party, the United People’s Front (UPF), decided to field women. This “unusual move,” of course, made the headlines “Harbans to women: Stand as UPF candidates.” (ST 2.10.80). “UPF believes in Women” (2.10.1980); and “UPF is fielding about 25 women candidates” (BT 2.9. 1980, ST 2.8.1980). However, when the UPF women candidates were introduced, the paper emphasized that: “The women were “discovered” by men—Miss Ang’s boss and Madam Piaro’s husband—active in the party” (ST 4.12.1980). In another report it was highlighted that: “Secretaries Ang Bee Lian and Giam Lai Cheng are running on the United Front ticket along with their boss and party leader, lawyer Harbans Singh” (NN 14.12.1980). Granted that new candidates must inevitably be appointed by men who are in founding positions, yet this particular fact was highlighted only for the women candidates.

The “indecisiveness” of these women candidates were also diligently reported:

. . . Yesterday, all but two had fallen by the wayside.
While three—all mothers—informed the party they had no time for a political career. (SN 14.12.1980)

This theme of dependency is displayed when Mdm Pairo, an opposition candidate, was asked whether she would continue working and was reported as saying: “she hadn’t decided but that her party’s general-secretary would make the decision for her” (BT 13.11.1980, ST 12.11.1980).

In 1976, a rare woman opposition candidate was introduced and dismissed as a credible candidate almost immediately:

Opposition candidate Miss Lee Nai Choo, 22, who filled her nomination papers as an independent candidate at Whitley center—then rushed home to tell her mother what she had done. (ST 14.12.1976)

Women as mothers

Women candidates tend to be portrayed as nurturers of the next generation in line and this is not surprising bearing in mind the state’s emphasis on traditional Confucian values and the emphasis on the family. Nowhere is this seen as clearly as during the introduction of Dr. Tan’s candidacy. In the coverage of the election, this basic “femininity” was constantly staged:


On one visit, she met Mr. Foo Sze Tat, 36, a patient of her husband, a heart surgeon. Was he all right after his open heart surgery? Could he do the kind of work he was doing before? “We have a way of running into our patients,” she said with a smile. (Sun T. 9.12.1984)

In later elections, Dr. Seet Ai Mee also fell victim to this schematic pattern. Under the headline, “Petite candidate who is a veritable dynamo,” the report elaborated:

On her soon-to-be-done list are a study center, more senior citizens’ corners, another community center and an indoor stadium. That children, women and the elderly figure prominently in her programs is evident. They are also the ones who shower her the most affection on her door-to-door visits.

For the women and the elderly, it is as if Dr. Seet is operating a mobile counselling service. They take her into their confidence readily, telling her their problems with their children or husbands, or work and rising prices.

One housewife grabs both her hands as she tearfully confides how lonely she is, now that her only son is married and has moved out. Dr. Seet advises the woman in Hokkien to take it easy, and to remember she still has a family.

Another asks: “How many children you have ah, Dr. Seet? Your children live with you? . . . you know ah, my husband, he does not understand children . . .”

The candidate listens and shares her own experience about being a mother to two children. (ST 30.8.1991)

“Petite” also contributes to this feminine schema by drawing attention to physical features. Here it suggests a small, delicate object rather than a person who can take on the hustlings of politics. Such attempts to situate political women with “women’s affairs” became on one occasion oppressive for Dr. Tan who proclaimed:

“I’ll serve my constituents like any other MP—Forget about the fact that I would be a woman MP. I will serve my constituents like any other MP, male or female. I will not confine myself to articulating only women’s views.” (ST 19.5.1984)

This was also stressed by Dr. Seet in the 1988 elections when she was asked whether it was a good thing to have a woman as a Minister of State:

The work can be done by a woman or a man equally well. I like to see it in the context of the whole team. I was chosen as the one most suited for the job, she said (NP 2.9.1988).

Despite these attempts to break out of the parameters which the media has placed on them, they still tended to be perceived as being more inclined to the “mothering” aspects of nationhood. Mrs. Yu-Foo Yee Shoon was portrayed as:
A unionist and mother of three, she is brimming with ideas for Yuhua. She is planning another child-care center, a students’ care center for latch-key children and a tea corner for the old folks. (ST 1.9.1988).

When her candidacy was announced less than four months ago, she said she did not think there would be tremendous change in their life-style. After all, she has been a party member since 1973.

But she concedes now that her political candidacy has made a difference to her family life.

It may be especially rough on her since she is the only one of the PAP’s three women candidates with young children at home, including a son just a year old.

Fortunately, my home, which is near Toh Tuck, is not too far away from my constituency. After work, I rush home to be with my children before I go off again to Yu Hua.

I still try to go to the library to borrow books for my children—but now my husband has to take my place and read to them. (Sun T. 9.12.1984)

While the media prefer to view the political woman within the paradigm of the family in line with the state’s ideology, political men are displayed not so much as husbands or fathers but as leaders, managers, thinkers, strategists and scholars, very much the Confucian gentleman at the helm—the sage leader. See, for example, the introduction of Brig. Gen George Yeo as a political candidate (ST 13.8.1988). There are photographs of him in action and in army uniform. The introduction begins in the following way: “Recently promoted Brigadier-General George Yeo steps out of uniform and into the world of politics on Aug 17, but chose to remain silent yesterday on what lay ahead for him.” It goes on to lists his academic qualifications and achievements.

Women or the weaker sex?

The perception of women as relatively more vulnerable appears regularly in the media. When Dr. Dixie Tan was asked whether she was scared, a question not normally asked of male candidates, she was quoted as saying: “Well, I am not easily bullied (ST 19.5.1984). This recalls a similar occasion in 1976, when an opposition woman candidate, Hajjah Amnah, was introduced by the press as a “widowed mother of 14 children and grandmother of 20” and quoted as saying this of her male competitor: “I am not scared of Haji Rahmat or Haji Darus . . . .” (ST 14.12.1976). Another candidate, Miss Ang, was introduced as a fumbler:

Miss Ang rated her chances as “quite good,” confident that she would not suffer from stage fright as in 1976, when “confused,” she “couldn’t express herself.” (SN 14.12.1980)

While, on the one hand, such remarks reassure constituents of the tenacity of the female mettle, it simultaneously, on the other hand, takes away public confidence in them, and makes the presence of women in politics seem an aberration.

It is assumed that being an MP is hard work. Thus, women MPs tend to be viewed in terms of their “unusual grit and determination” in doing what is normally considered “man’s work.” In 1984, Mrs. Yee Foo is admired for her determination: “She treks determinedly through the new constituency of Yu-hua five evenings out of seven almost every week” (Sun T. 9.12.1984). Meanwhile, Dr. Tan is also asked how she is “coping”:

“The work has been interesting though I’ve lost a lot of my free time,” she said. It may mean having to cut down on her other community work. Dr. Tan is, among other things, founder-president of the Association for Educationally Subnormal Children. “I spend three out of seven evenings doing constituency work and the pressure is going to build up,” she said. (Sun T. 9.12.1984)

By implication, other work is not as difficult, especially in those domains where women predominate, such as teaching, nursing, factory and domestic chores. Therefore, political women must be admired for their courage and effort for venturing into a “male domain.” This double-edged admiration for women candidates is carried over to the next elections. This time the headlines are focused on the new woman candidate, Dr. Seet: “Tireless Dr. Seet takes the stairs” (ST 1.9.1988), showing her walking up multistory
apartments to visit voters. Here, copy-editing, as exemplified in the headlines, is designed to maximize news value—to make the lead “harder” and more striking, the source’s credential more authoritative, the writing more crisp, the appeal to the audience more compelling (Bell, 1991).

This theme of “true grit” is carried forward in the 1991 election: “Bystanders can be forgiven if they wonder how this rather fragile-looking 48-year-old former biochemist (Dr. Seet) can have enough grit to go through a grueling campaign (ST 30.8.1991). These images are enforced when corresponding articles on new male political candidates do not find it necessary to describe them as “brave” or “tireless.” While political women are often portrayed as “the other” and displayed in the context of men and families, other types of qualities are emphasized in male candidates. In the last election (1991), candidates Mohammed Maidin Packer Mohd and Matthias Yao Chih were presented in terms of their background, work record, education (BT 17.8.1991).

LEXICAL CATEGORIZATION

Another way of perception is through lexical categorization. Here, women are positioned as “the other” in the way in which they are addressed based on their connection to men. Marital status becomes important information. If the candidate has a gender-neutral title such as “Dr.,” the problem is solved but when they do not, then address labels are either “Mrs.” or “Madam,” which signify their status as a possession. “Ms” only began to be used in the Singapore press towards the mid-90s, which is after the period of the data in question. When the pioneer PAP woman candidate, Mdm. Chan Choy Siong, was concerned, the newspapers varied between calling her “Mrs. Ong” (ES 9.9.1966), in which case there appeared to be no perceived need to mention who she was married to, and “Madam Chan,” in which case, an additional appositive clause was often deemed appropriate: “Madam Chan, wife of Education Minister, Mr. Ong Pang Boon” (ST 22.2.1981, ST 30.12.1965, ES 9.9.1966, MM 1.4.1970, ST 26.6.1971, ST 15.12.1975).

Moreover, in a world riddled with conflicts, the simple act of speaking often aligns us for or against certain positions, depending on our choice of words. One of the most familiar psychoanalytic concepts is that of projection—a defense mechanism whereby unacceptable aspects of ourselves are seen as belonging to other groups of people. There is a tendency to split groups into “us” and “them,” “good” and “bad,” “white” and “black,” “rational” and “irrational,” “respectable” and “nonrespectable.” The dichotomy used is that of “woman” as opposed to “man” or “male” as opposed to “female.” Since the English language has patriarchal tendencies, the antecedents of he tended to be strong, active, brave, wise and clever while antecedents of she tended to be weak, passive and foolish. Similarly, oppositions associated with male in English are reason, action, knowledge, competence, action, culture; and that of female emotion, passive, expressive, ignorance, incompetence, speech, nature. Men are in control of their feelings compared with women who are often interpreted as irrational, illogical, unreasonable and emotional.

In the portrayal of the political women, the Singapore press has often used terms such as the following which has the function of polarizing caricatures of real people in order to justify the maintenance of unequal role relations between them:

**Assemblyman or assemblywoman**

MP vs. woman MP/female MP. The sole PAP woman MP for several years, Mdm Chan Choy Sum was often referred to as an Assemblywoman. (MM 13.10.1964, ST 2.11.1964, MM 19.6.1965, ST 10.5.1965, ST 23.10.1965, ST 31.8.1965, etc.)

On other occasions, it would refer to her as “female MP” or “woman MP.” (Sun T 24.12.1967, MM 19.2.1968, ST 31.12.1968, Sun T 5.4.1970, ST 13.2.1981, etc.)

**Doctor vs. woman doctor**

Dr. Tan vs. Dr. (Mrs.) Tan. In introducing Dr. Dixie Tan to the public, the press occasionally referred to her as “Dr. (Mrs.) Dixie Tan” (19.5.1984).

In other contexts, it was a “forty-eight year old woman doctor” (Sun T 13.5.1984).

**Wives vs. lawyers.** The rare women from the opposition parties often fared worse. In 1976,
Lawyer vs. women lawyer. The account of a “young woman lawyer” who might contest the political election appeared under the headlines in 1984: “Worker’s Party may field Woman Lawyer” (ST 10.12.1984). Generally, there is a tendency for newspapers to overlexicalize women relative to men, thus indicating that the culture regards women as having an abnormal status (Fowler, 1991). The small group of political women in Singapore are also not immune to this in my newspaper data. Dr. Tan is labeled as “a happy small-town girl in Pahang” (ST 19.5.1984). Women from the opposition tended to be labeled more derisively. In the 1988 elections, three women candidates were headlined as “Charlie’s Angels stand in Bedok” (ST 1.9.1988), after the popular television detective serial then showing in the republic. The candidate from the Singapore Democratic Party was introduced with the headline “lang loey (or “pretty girl” in Chinese) (ST 1.9.1988). Furthermore, while the modification of males generally varies with occupation and is therefore relatively personalized, the modification of women is often fixed and stereotypical. Women are more likely to be modified by items describing physical appearance. In Singapore, even the Singapore Armed Forces advertisements assume that “looking good” would draw female officers to the army. The advertisement was deemed newsworthy since it fitted a stereotype and was reported under the headline, complete with a pretty girl in a uniform: “SAF using looks to draw women officers” (ST 23.8.93).

Appearance is an important criterion in the portrayal of women. When this technique is used on the political woman however, it trivializes their candidacy. The introduction of Dr. Seet as the first woman to be offered a ministerial post goes as follows:

Back at the branch, Dr. Seet whips out a brush to tidy up her hair as she makes a few hushed calls. Lunch is a few mouthfuls of rice, meat and mushrooms, after which she insists on washing her own bowl. Clasping a designer briefcase, she dashes off to her Thomson Road office to write a speech. An hour later, she is back, her face freshly powdered, her lips a rust orange. She chirps: “Okay, let’s go, let’s go.” (ST 30.8.1991)

There is also a penchant to describe the “femininity” of the political figure:

Clad in a white T-shirt tucked into slim white slacks and without her trademark heels and cheongsam, she cuts a petite figure . . .

Throughout the day, as she walks along the corridors, she occasionally skips and waves her hands like a Chinese ribbon dancer. She banteres with her grassroots workers, figures out some new Mandarin words and casts a stern eye on cleanliness. (ST 30. 8.1991)

The tabloid commentary style replete with colloquialism, incomplete sentences, questions mimicking the speaking voice, all suggesting informality as in the above, adds to the truth-value of the depiction. But there is an important ideological reason for the adoption of this informal and friendly conversational style. In order to understand the text, the reader must bring with him or her a mental model of the expected style, must recognize the style intuitively through prior learned knowledge, and be able to read into it the values it embodies. Conversation implies cooperation, agreement, symmetry of power and a commonly held view of the world, a shared subjective reality that is taken for granted and which does not have to be proved and which Berger and Luckman (1966) have referred to as the “reality-maintaining” function of conversation. Conversational discourse therefore naturalizes the terms in which reality is represented and the categories these terms represent.

In like manner, Dr. Seet’s colleague, Dr. Aline Wong is described in an election report:

She has a bubbly personality, a great sense of humour” said a colleague. Fresh-faced and pint-sized—she’s just 1.5 metres tall—Dr. Wong looks almost 10 years younger than her 43 years. (Sun T 2.9.1984)

It appears that while men are the masters of technology engaged in the serious active busi-
ness of life, women are described by incidentals such as age, colour, national origin and appearance. While it may be common to expect this in the Discourse on women dancers and actresses, it tends to tarnish the image of the candidate in a political election.

CONCLUSION

In the period under study, it is obvious that political women have been perceived and presented differently from male candidates in the mass media in Singapore. Through such measures, political women have been shown to be by definition already antipolitical. I have shown how media representation and language use cannot be regarded as neutral, value-free or exempt from at least some “angle of telling.” Rather it is shaped by a mosaic of cultural assumptions, political beliefs and institutional practices. Language takes the leading role in constructing the fabric of our sexual subculture.

In this article, the discourse surrounding the political woman in Singapore gives subtle expression to the meanings and values in which society regards the political woman. Such discourse discreetly encodes ideologies which are embodied in language, implanted there by existing social and discursive practices. There is a “taken-for-granted” routine of reality in the use of such discourse. Unconsciously, readers read in rather than read off ideology which shapes the newspaper representation of reality. Thus, values which already exist—about social hierarchy, money, family life, women, etc.—are reproduced in this discursive interaction between the newspaper text and the reader.

Although the idea of gender construction is not new, relatively few people are aware of the meaningful reality that underlines the reproduction of an ideology that keeps women suppressed and in this case, away from any form of leadership. I believe that it is important to address the issue of the domination of the males over females by understanding some of the sociolinguistic ways in which we construct the world. As an informed intelligent public participating in the effort toward the goal of a civilized society, we should be alert to the perpetuation of social stereotypes that hinder recognition of the full worth of every group of persons in our society. In order to change the processes that have brought about a world of inequality, instability and conflict, it is necessary to unlearn the myths that bind us. More than ever in the past, there is an urgent need for humanity to renew the effort in visioning and commitment as we enter the 21st century. It is a time for men and women to be equal partners, to explore new ideas, and to develop new vision and strategies.

Key to Singapore newspaper references: BT—Business Times; ES—Eastern Sun; MM—Malay Mail; NN—New Nation; SN—Sunday Nation; Sun T—Sunday Times; ST—Straits Times.

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