

Roaring Lion and Calm Girl: Analysing Gender and Representation in Chinese Olympic Reporting

Liwei Zhang; Ph.D student

Interdisciplinary Studies in the University of Saskatchewan

Abstract

This paper explores the gendered representations of male and female Chinese athletes in China's news media from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis. The artefacts analyzed in this paper are reportage in *China Sports Daily* on the two Chinese gold medalists in the swimming competition at the 30th London Olympic Games, specifically the male swimmer Sun Yang, a 20-year old gold medalist in Men's 400- and 1500m freestyle swimming, and female swimmer Ye Shiwen, a 16-year old gold medalist in Women's 200- and 400m individual medley. While news media praised both the male and the female athletes, the language used to celebrate their respective accomplishments is gendered to a perceptible degree, and when Ye was under suspicion of doping (a suspicion which proved unfounded) the gendered nature of the language used to describe her was even more in evidence. My analysis focuses on the gendered characteristics of the language used to portray these two athletes' achievements, and how the uncertainty surrounding Ye's doping allegations are reflected in an increase in the frequency of the gendered language. As an interdisciplinary approach, Critical Discourse Analysis facilitates the recognition of the dominant ideology in discourses as revealed through language use. My comparative analysis of the frequency and intensity of gendered language in this reportage will explore the extent to which gender ideology continues to influence China's news media in the realm of sports and athletics.

The coverage devotes comparable space to both athletes' appearance, body language, personality and psychological endurance. However, the descriptive vocabulary and metaphors used for the male and female athletes are at once gendered and hierarchical. Whereas Sun Yang's achievements are equated with maturity and masculinity (he is *composed*¹, *roaring*² and compared to *a lion*³), descriptive terms such as *petulant*⁴, *playful*⁵ and *small star*⁶ consistently place Ye Shiwen's accomplishments on a lower footing, associating her female characteristics with immaturity and fragility. The unsubstantiated doping charge against Ye is a significant factor in the analysis; when associated with the gendered language used to describe her, the nuances of undeserved reputation that accompany her status as a "*phenomenon*"⁷ (Chinese: "*xianxiang*") indicates a willingness, under conditions of uncertainty, to use feminine/feminized language to signal inauthenticity or a lack of integrity. The persistence of such attitudes represents a serious barrier to achieving real equality in how male and female athletes are represented in the Chinese media.

Bibliography:

1. The original Chinese version of reportage on the male Chinese swimmer athlete analyzed in this paper can be found at:

http://read.sportpaper.cn/zgtyb/html/2012-07/30/content_255869.htm,

http://read.sportpaper.cn/zgtyb/html/2012-07/30/content_255890.htm

2. The original Chinese version of reportage on the female Chinese swimmer athlete analyzed in this paper can be found at:

http://read.sportpaper.cn/zgtyb/html/2012-08/02/content_256220.htm,

http://read.sportpaper.cn/zgtyb/html/2012-07/30/content_255891.htm

3. Foss, Karen & Sonja Foss. "Incorporating the Feminist Perspective in Communication Scholarship." In *Doing Research on Women's Communication: Perspectives on Theory and Method*. Kathryn Carter and Carol Spitzack, ed. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, pp 65-94.

Note:

¹ Equivalent of the original Chinese, significant Chinese version will be provided in the subsequent paper.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*