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Evil Interference in Political Affairs of Women? A Case Study of Candidates' Wives in the 2014 Taipei Mayoral Election in Taiwan

Pei-Ci Li

Abstract

Since the time of the ancient Chinese dynasties, it has been a taboo for women to interfere in political affairs. The demise of some dynasties was even attributed to *trouble water*, which means 'a beauty who ruins her country'. However, has this phobia of women's involvement in politics finally become outmoded? This study examines the critiques about two candidates' spouses – Pei-Chi Chen, Wen-Jo Ko's wife, a paediatrician; and Patty Tsai, Lien Sean's spouse, a housewife – during the 2014 Taipei Mayoral Election Campaign to investigate what the *should-be* images of women are when political affairs are concerned in present Taiwanese society. This study selects the media news during the three months before the election, the most competitive local election in Taiwan, as a corpus, using the names of these two candidates' spouses as the target words. The results show that although Chen is praised as a good career woman who takes care of the household, her personal opinions expressed on Facebook are taken as an interference in her husband's career. Furthermore, she is attacked by the rival camp, which claims that she might meddle in future municipal affairs. In contrast, Tsai, a glamorous housewife, who supports her husband by smiling and seldom expresses her opinions publicly, is regarded favourably as a candidate's wife. This case illustrates that in Taiwanese society, the spouse of a politician is still expected to be silent and stay behind the scenes. When a professional woman expresses her opinions, she is vulnerable to being associated with a negative image that is used to depreciate her husband in an election. In addition, this study shows that women are still regarded as an appendage of men, serving as a tool that gives their husbands plus or minus points.

Key Words: Women and politics, women in the news media, Taiwan election.

1. Introduction

Since the time of the ancient Chinese dynasties, it has been a taboo for a woman to interfere in political affairs. A recurrent warning *do not let women touch political affairs* can be found in numerous historical classics. For example, an old Chinese saying goes, *a hen crowing in the morning leads to the ruin of the family*. Here, woman is described as a hen that crows in the morning, a task that could only be managed by a cock, and a man who controls the power in his family is portrayed as the cock that is responsible for this task. As the division of labour

between men and women is clearly defined in the notion of Confucianism, the violation of each one's role is regarded as improper. When a woman does work that does not match her status, namely taking the power in the family or a country, people say that her family or her country will be ruined sooner or later.

In Chinese history, the collapse or the weakening of some dynasties was even attributed to *trouble water*, which means 'a beauty who ruins her country'. Those 'dangerous women' who are accused of interfering in politics in history could be the mother, the consort, or the concubines of the emperor,¹ despite the fact that the collapse of one dynasty must have many reasons: weakening economy, invaders, wrong policies, etc. By shifting the responsibility to women, men, as the main authors of historical classics, have rationalized the exclusion of women in the political field.

Even in the present, stories seeing women as the trouble water are still repeated in students' textbooks, as Zheng's study (1997) shows. It reinforces the concept that the field of politics is highly favourable to men and that women better keep away from it. However, has this phobia of women involved in politics become history, or is it still entrenched in the Taiwanese mind?

To explore this question, this study examines comments about two candidates' spouses: Pei-chi Chen, Wen-je Ko's wife, and Patty Tsai, Sean² Lien's spouse, during the Taipei Mayoral Election Campaign, the most competitive local election in Taiwan in 2014, to investigate what the 'should-be' images of women are when political affairs are concerned in present Taiwanese society.

2. Background Information

2.1 Election Culture in Taiwan

Taiwan has a peculiar election culture. During election time, a variety of tactics are employed to attract voters' attention. Each tactic is seen as a *card*, which is a metaphor from the conceptual domain of *game play*. Each card is regarded as a chance to get more points, as each tactic could increase the chance to win more voters' support. Some traditional tactics include putting giant billboards and flags with candidates' profiles on the streets, holding big parties with sensational speeches, describing one's miserable personal story to arouse people's sympathy (*miserable card*), seeking for other famous politicians or celebrities' support (*big shot card*), and so on.

Unfortunately, apart from those basic tactics, some dirty tricks are also used to defame other candidates by fabricating unreal events. Another peculiar tactic is to show the candidate's spouse, which is called *wife card*.³ For example, since family values are of great importance to Taiwanese people, holding his wife's hand or kissing his spouse in public helps improve the public image of the candidate. Moreover, when an election is approaching, we see candidates' wives working the crowds, visiting traditional markets to beg voters to support her husband.

2.2 The Importance of the Taipei Mayoral Election

During the 9-in-1 election in 2014,⁴ the Taipei Mayoral Election was the most competitive local election, which attracted the most focus. First, since Taipei is the capital of Taiwan, it is understood that the executive head of the capital also represents the nation. Furthermore, the candidate and party that win the Taipei Mayoral Election are generally considered to be likely to win a subsequent presidential election. All the popularly elected presidents of Taiwan held this position before being elected president.⁵ Therefore, the parties have always dedicated more resources to the Taipei Mayoral Election than to elections in other cities.

2.3 Background of the Two Main Candidates

2.3.1 Wen-je Ko

Born in 1959, Ko grew up in a modest family. He was an attending physician and Chairman of a Department of Traumatology before participating in politics. In the 2014 Taipei Mayoral Election, Ko beat the candidate from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the biggest opposition party, and gained the support of the DDP and other opposite parties, running as an independent candidate.

Ko's Wife: Pei-chi Chen

Chen was also born in a humble household. She is a paediatrician and the director of obstetrics for Taipei City Hospital. She also has two children with Ko.

2.3.2 Sean Lien

Lien was born in 1970, in a prestigious political and merchant family. Following in his father's political footsteps, he won the Kuomintang primary as the party's candidate for the mayoral election in Taipei in 2014. Kuomintang is the current ruling political party in Taiwan.

Lien's Wife: Patty Tsai

Tsai was born to a merchant family. She moved to Canada when she was fourteen. Her dual Canadian-Taiwanese citizenship became one of the debates during the campaign. She was a doctoral candidate who gave up her studies after her marriage to Lien. Now she is a housewife, and has two children with Lien.

2.4 The Goal of This Study

In the social context where a phobia about women who interfere in politics exists, and where using dirty tactics is common during the elections, attacking the spouse of a rival for the reason that his wife might interfere in political affairs has become an unprecedented tactic in the intensified Taipei Mayoral election.

To investigate this topic, the research questions of this study are as follows: (1) What are the *should-be* images of women when political affairs are concerned in present Taiwanese society? (2) What do those images mean?

2.5 Methodology

For the data collection, this study selects the media news during the three months before the election, using the names of these two candidates' spouses as the target words. Twenty texts concerning each of Pei-Chi Chen and Patty Tsai were selected. In addition, ten texts where both women's name are mentioned in the same article are included as well. In all, the corpus contains fifty texts, comprising 36,224 words.

To investigate the relation between discourse and gender inequality represented by journal texts, more specifically, how women are associated with negative images during the political campaign to serve as a strategy to gain or lose points for each candidate, this study adapts critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Van Dijk (1993b) as the theory of analysis.

3. Results

After the analysis, four main ideal images are discovered. Women should be quiet, beautiful housewives who sacrifice their lives for their husbands.

3.1 Women Should Be Quiet

During the election campaign, Pei-chi Chen, the wife of Wen-je Ko, often posted her opinions on Facebook to defend her husband against defamation from the opposition. For example, when his rival falsely accused Ko of money laundering and tax evasion, Chen announced publicly all the details of their bank accounts and tax records to clarify her husband's innocence. Expressing many opinions, she was accused by the KMT and the media that she would interfere in politics in the future.

On the contrary, Patty Tsai rarely expresses her opinions in front of the media. Even during interviews, she is usually smiling, asking the voters to support her husband, or talking about softer topics, such as cooking or fashion. With a quiet and sweet image, Tsai is widely supported by the older generation because in Taiwanese tradition, people still prefer a quiet, obedient daughter-in-law who does not express her opinions.

Knowing that Taiwanese prefer this kind of image of women, Ko's rival camp attacked Chen:

The wife of Sean Lien, Patty Tsai, like the First Lady Mei-ching Chow and the wife of the former President Deng-hui Lee, Wen-hui Tseng, is rarely interviewed by the media, and never advises her husband on what to do. They are quieter. Nevertheless, the wife of Wen-je Ko, Pei-chi Chen, is like the wife of the former President Shui-bian Chen,⁶ Shu-chen Wu,⁷ more active and has more opinions, who often directs her husband what to do, the director-general of KMT said.⁸

By comparing those two types – the first, a lady with a ‘quiet’ image who seldom express her opinions, and the other one who speaks in front of the media, and is often blamed for her husband’s corruption – the intent of the KMT is obvious: to associate Chen with a negative image that is *too active* in public to depreciate Ko’s reputation, and to link Tsai with a positive evaluation, namely being quiet, which contrasts positive SELF to negative OTHER.

Here, four steps are involved to access the discourse: (1) Quiet women are valued as positive, whereas women who express their opinions are regarded as negative. (2) Associate the negative category, namely expressive women, with the rival candidate’s wife, and the positive category, namely quiet women, with their own candidate. (3) How one’s wife is evaluated plays a role in her husband’s public image. (4) Chen’s negative evaluation would depreciate the rival candidate’s support, and Tsai’s supportive image without many personal opinions, would be considered a plus point to her husband.

To defend herself, Chen laughed and said:

Some people doubt that I will interfere in politics. If there is a scientific number about how many people will not vote for my husband because of the fear of my interference in politics, then I say, we’ll get divorced after my husband’s victory to reassure everyone, how is that? ... Is a smart candidate with a stupid wife the most accepted combination by the supporters in a political campaign?⁹

This case indicates that in public mind, or at least, in the mind of the KMT and their targeted supporters, women are still expected to be quiet, and should not express their opinions. By attacking Chen, KMT not only tried to depreciate their rival’s image, but also reinforce the legitimation of the power of speaking of men. On the contrary, Chen’s reply demonstrates the absurdity that relating a woman to *trouble water* that would interfere in politics just because she has her own ideas.

3.2 Women Should Be Beautiful

Inevitably, the appearance of the candidates’ spouses are compared. Some magazines, political programs and even the news reported the physiognomy of these two women to judge which face has more ‘fate’ to help her husband, because in Chinese culture, it is believed that a woman’s facial characteristics could help or damage her husband’s career. Those characteristics, in fact, represent the standards of beauty in the society.

Media recently reported that, if we look at Taipei mayoral election from the physiognomy [of the spouse of the candidates], the physician Wen-je Ko’s wife lacks the fate to help her

husband, and cannot compare with Sean Lien's wife, Patty Tsai, who has double eyelids, a high nose, and a rising curve of the mouth.¹⁰

Furthermore, not only the beauty, but also age, voice, and dress are all taken into consideration in this beauty contest, which shows that a women's value depends on her beauty. If a woman is beautiful – if she meets the standards of beauty – she gains a plus point for her husband and thus has the 'fate' to help her husband.

3.3 Women Are Expected to Be a Housewife

The careers of the candidates' wives are also compared, since the backgrounds of Chen and Tsai are opposite: one is a paediatrician, and the other is housewife. A doctor is considered a high-valued job in Taiwan, which violates the traditional image of women who are expected to stay home, or do a more humble job. Lien even criticized Chen about her job:

Sean Lien says, as his wife is a housewife, he thinks that to be a housewife is a job that cannot take leave during 24 hours and 365 days in a year, or the house would be chaos. He implies: "I believe that each housewife is respected, it is not that having a great job means you are better. Being a housewife is, in fact, the hardest work."¹¹

However, Lien ignores an important fact that most career women also have to do the housework. Even as the labour participation rate of women has become higher,¹² it has not brought much change to the division of housework, as suggests in Lu and Yi's work (2005). That is, housework is still regarded as women's work,¹³ and Chen is just the model of a career women and a housewife in the present day, as she replied:

I insist on doing well the work that I have to do as a housewife and a career woman. I can proudly say: "I am a career woman, as well as a responsible, all-year-round housewife."¹⁴

For the quotes above to make sense, some context should be provided concerning the family background of the candidates. As Lien and Tsai are both from wealthy families, Tsai need not go out to work, whereas Ko and Chen, both from a humble family, have to work to support the whole family. However, Lien's speech indeed reflects the traditional view that is still rooted in many Taiwanese people: having a job is not really better; being a housewife, on the contrary, is valued more positively. Ironically, it just shows the plight of women in the society:

being career women, they are also expected to take responsibility for the housework.

3.4 Women Should Give up Their Life for Their Husbands

As a Chinese proverb goes, *if you are married to a chicken, you follow the chicken; if you are married to a dog, you follow the dog*, which means being a woman, you should give up your life to follow your husband, no matter who he is and what he is doing. During the campaign, each candidate launched propaganda for promoting himself. One of Lien's documents tells the story of him and his wife, and how he thanked her for sacrificing her opportunity to obtain a PhD degree to dedicate to the family. By doing this, Lien and his team presented the idea of giving up one's life for her husband as positive, so that he could use her wife's sacrifice to improve his public image. Another example is Tsai's dual nationality. In Taiwan, nationality is a sensitive issue. If a candidate or his family members have dual nationality, his patriotism and national identity would be doubted. For this election, Tsai was forced to give up her Canadian citizenship. In response to this, Lien said, 'For my election, she is forced to give it up, this is my wife's sacrifice, so I thank her very much for being willing to do this for me!' This case indicates not only the irrationality of examining too closely the family of the candidate, but also the value that considering a woman's sacrifice for her husband as positive.

4. Conclusion

In the end, Ko won the election. Of course, a candidate's failure can be attributed to many reasons, just as a collapse of a dynasty. The comparison of those two candidates' wives was one of the episodes during this election, and all of the defamations of either candidate or their wives ended with this election war.

By examining the critiques and comments from the media and from the rival camp of these two women, this study revealed the women's ideal images when associated with politics. With a Chinese history of *women-phobia* in the political field, women are expected to not have too many opinions or a too active professional life. As Chen has these characteristics, the rival camp associated them with negative evaluation, trying to evoke the fear of women's interference in politics. On the contrary, being a quiet and beautiful housewife was regarded as *plus-points* to Tsai's husband's public image. Finally, a woman's sacrifice for her husband is considered a virtue, which was shown in Lien's propaganda.

However, these expectations toward women have been changing in Taiwanese society. Although Chen had been much criticized, she has a lot of supporters as well. Being a professional career woman and daring to express her points of view were praised by the younger generation. Nevertheless, from these seemingly positive changes, we could still observe the plight of Taiwanese women: First, even being career women, they are still expected to be responsible for housework.

Traditional thinking about gender roles is still deeply entrenched in Taiwan. Second, women are still regarded as an appendage of their husbands. A woman's appearance, personality, and career could all be judged according to social standard criteria from the media if she has the fate to help her husband, and thus serve as plus or minus points for her husband.

Notes

¹ A famous example is Bao Si, King You's concubine of Zhou dynasty. As Bao Si was hard to please, the King even fooled his armies just to make her laugh. By lighting the warning beacons, which were employed to summon armies in times of danger, the nobles arrived at the court and found themselves laughed at by Bao Si. Afterward, the King continued to abuse his use of warning beacons to impress his lover and so lost the trust of the nobles. In the end, when the real invaders came, nobody came as they no longer trusted the King when he lightened the beacons. The King You's death marked the end of the Western Zhou, and Bao Si's example became the first story recorded how one beauty can topple a nation.

² The different forms (English last name v.s. pinyin) of those two candidates and their wives' name are based on their habitual use. As both Sean Lien and Patty Tsai had lived abroad for a period of time, they use their English last name in public, whereas Wen-Je Ko and Pei-Chi Chen do not have this preference.

³ As most candidates are male, this tactic is restricted to *wife card* rather than *husband card*.

⁴ The 9-in-1 elections were held on 29 November 2014, to elect the Municipal Mayors, Municipal Councilors, Chiefs of indigenous districts in municipalities, Councilors of indigenous districts in municipalities, County Magistrates (City Mayors), County (City) Councilors, Township Chiefs, Township Councilors and chiefs of village (borough) in 6 municipalities and 16 counties (cities) (Data from Wikipedia).

⁵ Teng-hui Lee: serving as Taipei Mayor from 1978-1980, and held the president from 1990-2000. Shui-bian Chen: serving as Taipei Mayor from 1994-1998, and held the president from 2000-2008. Ying-jeou Ma: serving as Taipei Mayor from 1994-1998, and held the president from 2008-now.

⁶ Shui-bian Chen served as President of Taiwan from 2000 to 2008. He was sentenced to life in prison after being found guilty of corruption.

⁷ Based on some reports, Chen's corruption was attributed to his wife, Shu-chen Wu, as she often wore jewellery and famous brands, which gave the public an impression of being greedy.

⁸ Taiwan People News, 11/10/2014.

⁹ Taiwan People News, 02/10/2014.

¹⁰ Sanlih E-Television News, 05/12/2014.

¹¹ Liberty Times, 02/11/2014.

¹² The labour participation rate of women is 50.50%, among which 49.76% of women are married, while 60.48% not married, data from National Statistics, R.O.C. (Taiwan) in 2014.

¹³ 75% of the women take the responsibility of the household, compared with men's 31%, data from Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, R.O.C. (Taiwan) in 2004.

¹⁴ ETTV News, 02/11/2014.

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