A car of one’s own? A critical discourse analysis of the representation of women drivers in the Chinese-language news media

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Abstract. Nowadays it is commonplace for Chinese women to drive cars either as a means of transportation or for a job. Meanwhile, the varied voices as to women’s capacity to drive are heard in media reports. This article examines media representations of Chinese women drivers on the official news website Chinanews.com. News reports from 2012 to 2021 were collected, sorted in Nvivo 11, and analyzed under the guidance of van Leeuwen’s socio-semantic approach. The results of the analysis revealed three dominant discourses about women drivers: problematic discourse, commendable discourse, and victim discourse, in which categorisation strategy, nomination strategy and passivation strategy, along with the description of material actions and semiotic actions were employed. This study sheds light on the contradictory expectations placed on Chinese women and the perplexity felt by media regarding the social context of the increased mobility and freedom women have attained due to recent economic and social changes.

Keywords. women drivers; Chinese-language news media; critical discourse analysis; discursive strategies; gender ideologies

1 Introduction
Today Chinese women have much more freedom and mobility thanks to cars than when they were confined to domestic affairs. As a result, the number of women drivers continues to increase. According to the data provided by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security, the proportion of Chinese women who drive has increased from 23.48% in 2014 [1] to 33.68% in 2021 [2].

As more women drive, many voices about their personalities and driving prowess appear in the news media. In order to draw readers’ attention, news headlines frequently use the term “woman driver” (Chinese character: 女司机; 拼音: nǔsījī) [3] in the reports about traffic accidents. This seems to encourage public prejudice against women drivers, who are routinely associated with clumsiness in driving. Indeed, when a woman driver is involved in a car accident, she is typically held responsible. For example, before any official investigation, a female driver of a private car in Chongqing, who collided with a bus that overturned into a river with fourteen people inside, was mistaken for the culprit, but turned out to be innocent [4].

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We primarily understand our environment in an indirect manner [5]. The primary way that people learn about the world is through the media. Direct or indirect experience of events seems to make less of a difference in learning about them, especially in the Internet era, when news is spread quickly. People do not get to see firsthand the traffic accidents that women drivers cause, but they still have strong opinions about them. The information people get through various communication channels and the cultural traditions to which they are attached shape these opinions. When describing an event, the media “tends to provide the dominant ways” [6] for the public to discuss it and the people involved. A similar news story will also gradually “penetrate into society’s subconscious as the given way of thinking” [7].

The topic of women drivers is not a recent one. In the early years of the new China, women were encouraged to take part in all professions, and stories about female train and tractor drivers were common topics in the press. Women who took up driving as a job and were committed to the construction of socialism were symbols of a gender revolution [8]. However, numerous recent studies show the persistence of stigma and discrimination against women drivers [9][10]. Women drivers are depicted in contentious ways, from being praised to being mocked and despised. In this study, we concentrated on the ideologies driving this discourse and its construction techniques. With the help of NVivo 11, we examined 120 news articles that were randomly selected from Chinanews.com between 2012 and 2021. Theo van Leeuwen’s social semantic approach [11] served as a theoretical framework from the perspective of critical discourse analysis. Three research questions are addressed:

1. What depictions of women drivers appear in the official Chinese news media?
2. What discursive strategies are used to create these images?
3. What is the underlying ideology?

2 Media representation and stereotypes of Chinese women

Since this world is “too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance” [5], people learn about events and their surroundings mainly through the media. However, these do not offer an objective image of reality, since their representation results from choices [12]. By including or excluding specific facts, events are presented differently. For van Leeuwen [11], everything is a representation of social practices in which actors and actions are the primary elements. Representing a social practice is a process of recontextualization, and there are many different ways to do so [11]. We try to investigate what is reported in the news, and how this plays a role in forging the public mind. For most of the public, knowledge about accidents involving women drivers comes from the media, and the representations in the news reports are based on their institutional interests and the journalists’ beliefs. According to Fowler, rather than presenting “facts about the world”, these reports present the “ideas” of the journalists [13]. When incidents involving women drivers are chosen from the numerous events which took place daily and presented from a particular angle, the very act of focusing on them reveals the beliefs, probably unconscious, of the journalist and the media. The images of women drivers reflect underlying social attitudes because newspaper agencies work as social institutions and produce news under the influence of “social, economic, and historical determinants” [13].

In the past, Chinese women were restricted to the confines of their families. “[D]omestic skills and household management” were to be mastered [14]. The nei-wai (inside-outside) division of men and women in ancient China caused women to be hidden from society. They were less educated, submissive and confined to their families. After the founding of the new China, women were encouraged to enter the workforce, with strong female role models dubbed

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“iron girls” [15]. The “degendered division of labor” [15] took effect, since women were given more opportunities to work in occupations previously reserved for men.

3 The representation of women drivers in the Chinese media

Previous studies on media representations of Chinese women drivers have centered on two distinct stages: the early period of the new China and the recent years following the reform and opening up. Research on the former period focused on women who took up driving as a profession and manifested their devotion to the nation, while the latter concentrated on female private drivers involved in traffic accidents.

Ma [16] examined the portrayal of the first female train driver in various forms of propaganda during the 1950s, when the Chinese government was doing its utmost to construct a socialist society and the women’s liberation movement was in full force. Ma [16] pointed out that images of women drivers and other women operating machines in factories established a new identity for women as part of the workforce, shoulder to shoulder with men. The image of women machinists appeared in films as a model for women, shattering the boundaries of traditional gender roles and showing the success of socialism and women’s liberation [8].

Nowadays, private cars have gone from a luxury to a necessity thanks to China’s reform and opening-up policies, which have brought economic prosperity and improvement of people’s living standard. Due to the increase in women drivers, the media show a particular interest in them when a traffic accident occurs. According to studies by Dong [17] on Sina News and Lu [18] on Baidu News, women drivers were usually portrayed as having poor driving skills, breaking traffic laws and being impolite. Li and Luo [19] compared images of women drivers involved in accidents in Chinese newspaper articles and on Weibo, a popular social media platform. They found that Weibo posts were more biased against female drivers, while the image of “bad female drivers” was standard in both media channels.

In addition to studies on the texts of news reports about women drivers, there are studies on the professional ethics of news producers and the attitude of news readers on women drivers. Academics have argued for the objectivity of journalists [20], against degenerate headlines [4], and in favor of rationality in the digital age [21].

Most of the previous studies on the news reports concerned with women drivers were conducted in the field of communication studies, guided by agenda setting [18] and frame theory [17]. The sociological concept of stigmatization was also discussed in terms of its characteristics, causes and possible remedies. Nevertheless, little is done about how socio-semantic strategies are used to create these negative perceptions about women drivers. Additionally, the studies mainly focused on the media images of “bad women drivers”, and the hard-working portrait of women drivers, who were actively advocated as good examples at the founding period of China, apparently disappeared, except for a passing mention of the traits like devotion and kindness [17][18] women drivers have demonstrated. This study aims to critically examine the media discourse on women drivers, discover how language and ideology shape textual representations, and contribute to the construction of a full view picture of women drivers in the news reports.

4 Theoretical framework and data collection

This study adopts van Leeuwen’s socio-semantic approach, which views all discourses as “representations of social practices” [11]. This approach explores media discourse to provide a unified framework for analysis by focusing on different aspects of social practices, i.e. social actors and social actions. Categorisation, nomination, and passivation strategies are helpful
categories in analyzing the social actor data. In addition to who they are through nomination strategies, the identities of the women drivers are formed through categorization strategies based on the types of vehicles they drive and the jobs they hold. Sometimes women drivers get into dangerous situations and become victims. In the social action aspect, women drivers are involved in both material actions and semiotic actions when they play an agent role.

Three reasons led to the news on Chinanews.com being selected as our research data. First, with an estimated 400 million users, Chinanews.com is an official website run by China News Service, a state level news agency with thirty-one branches on the mainland and twenty-one abroad. The quality of the news under scrutiny is ensured by the many news gathering sources and the professional journalists, who are expected to follow “journalistic norms and routines”. Second, China News Network qualifies as a mainstream national media due to its influential official status, which “has long ranked fourth among the official state websites”. Because of its underlying ideology on a national level and its likely “cumulative effect” on its readers, news reports from official mainstream media deserve close examination. Third, the Chinanews.com website offers a convenient search function in that a keyword can be located either in the news headlines or in the full texts and the time period of news can also be designated in search engine.

The time span of data collection was set between January 1, 2012 and December 31, 2021. We gathered the news stories of a decade to ensure that the news reports were comprehensive and representative. On Chinanews.com, the search term núsiji (“woman driver” in Chinese) was entered within the specified time frame, and we gathered the news stories where the search term appeared in the headline. After removing irrelevant news from the data, we were left with 1,002 news reports. We randomly selected one news item each month and used 120 for our study. Nvivo 11 was then used to annotate the chosen samples. Because Nvivo 11 offers a multilevel coding scheme and the frequency of each level, it is useful for semantic analysis. Both features allow an accessible overview of the data and help discover the dominant discourses. Coding was performed flexibly within the texts rather than limited to a specific boundary. Since Yu claimed there was no fixed list of linguistic realizations for each socio-semantic category, the most important characteristics of the category were identified, ranging from a simple sentence to a group of sentences. In order to ensure consistency, we annotated 30% of the data twice, two weeks apart, and worked out any discrepancies with the help of a CDA scholar.

5 Results and analysis

We found that Chinanews.com contained three kinds of dominant discourses about women drivers: problematic (65 instances; 54%), commendable (32 instances; 27%) and victim (21 instances; 17%). The first two types of discourses present two sets of conflicting media representations of women drivers in different sectors, with the first one portraying women drivers in private cars as rude and unruly, and the second presenting positive images of women drivers dedicated to their work in public sectors. The third type of discourse consists of news reports in which women drivers are victims of disputes or crimes. These discourses are constructed using various strategies, such as categorisation, nomination, passivation, and descriptions of material and semiotic actions. In the next section, we will analyze these three discourse types with examples from our data. The following examples were translated from Chinese into English by the author of this paper and proofread by a native English speaker.
5.1 The problematic discourse

This kind of discourse makes up most of the data. In the traffic-related news reports, the representations were critical of all kinds of problems of women drivers: poor driving skills, violation of traffic rules, irrational behavior, to name a few. As for the women drivers involved in the accidents, their identity was constructed through nomination and categorisation strategies.

Example 1
The girl, surnamed Yu, was born in 1992 and came from Chun’an. She is only 21 years old. (2013-03-01)

In Example 1, the woman driver, arrested for drunk driving, is identified by her family name. In twenty-six out of sixty-five cases, the female drivers involved in the accident are named. However, in twenty-five of them, only family names are provided. This “name obscuration”\[11\] of female drivers might be attributed to the disgrace that people associate with accidents or troublemakers. Alternatively, in the journalists’ opinion, the specific name is less significant than other identifiers in the portrayal of those women drivers.

Example 2
At this time, parked in the middle of the ramp, the car door opened, from which came out a woman in her 20s. (2013-10-10)

Example 3
The driver was a middle-aged woman with sunglasses. (2015-05-02)

The women drivers’ age and the car’s physical characteristics are revealed in the news reports through categorisation strategy, which compensates for the missing name information. The exact age of the female driver “21 years old” is given in Example 1, and sometimes a guess is made, as in Example 2 and 3. In Example 2, a woman driver, unable to drive her car out of the underground parking lot and coming to a stop halfway up the ramp, is “in her 20s”. Sometimes, the age estimate is even more imprecise, as in Example 3 the expression “a middle-aged woman” is used to indicate the woman driver’s rough age range, whose car collided with street guardrails.

Twenty of the twenty-one instances in which age-related information is disclosed involved women drivers who are young or middle-aged. Besides their age, women drivers are also identified by the characteristics of their cars, such as the license plate and the car model. This comprehensive information about their vehicles appears to be another facet of the women drivers’ identities.

Example 4
At 1:20 p.m. on April 4, a dangerous accident occurred on Guangchang Bei Road in Lanzhou. A champagne-colored BMW with registration number Gan AC9199 lost control of the wheel and stopped after it hit dozens of middle guardrails on the road. (2016-04-05)

Example 5
An Audi with a “Beijing J” license plate drove into a gas station in the wrong direction. (2012-04-01)

Example 6
Shenzhen police’s preliminary investigation revealed that Yang had driven a Mercedes Benz with license plate Yue BA495Q to the airport departure deck at 15:32 that day, but had lost control of the vehicle at the bend. (2015-03-02)

In Example 4, 5 and 6, the car brands “BMW”, “Audi” and “Mercedes Benz” are reported as part of the news. These are well-known expensive cars in the eyes of the public, and owning them is an indicator of wealth. The license plate may not be as indicative as the car brands, but an unusual number like 9199 in Example 4 also conveys the driver’s status, since
people can get their favourite plate number at a high price. Van Leeuwen points out that “physical features tend to have connotations, and these can be used to obliquely classify or functionize social actors”[11]. The media are experts at conveying connotations to readers and achieving the marketing effect on the topic of women drivers in luxury cars, especially in this period when China experiences an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth, and there is public resentment towards the wealthy[17][24]. This image of women drivers’ is constructed in the news reports with strong implication that they are capricious, clumsy, and causing troubles in the act of driving.

In describing accidents or inappropriate behavior, material actions, particularly transactive (thirty-six out of sixty-five instances of problematic discourse), are mainly performed by women drivers. The transactive actions involve two parties, and the women drivers acted as the action’s agents, sometimes with disastrous results that “have an effect on others”[11].

Example 7
A woman BMW driver confused reverse gear with drive mode. The car hit two people who were enjoying a nighttime snack at a barbecue stand, leaving one dead and one injured. (2015-09-07)

Example 8
When a traffic police officer came to check an illegally parked car, the woman driver in the car unexpectedly drove forward for 180 meters with the police officer in the car’s front. The car also hit another traffic police assistant and a police car. (2013-04-02)

Example 9
After the car hit a pedestrian, the female driver got out, blamed the pedestrian, grabbed her hair, and pushed her to the ground. The accident took place at the intersection between Huaihe Road and Suzhou Road at two o’clock yesterday afternoon. (2014-03-03)

Example 10
A woman was about to make a U turn at a Shahu Fruit Wholesale Market corner when a cat barged out unexpectedly. The woman panicked and steered the car toward the market’s enclosure wall to avoid the cat. The car plunged through the wall and ended up sitting on top of it. (2016-10-02)

In Example 7, the woman driver shows clumsiness while driving and accidentally pushed the gear into the wrong position. The direct result is “hitting two people who were enjoying a nighttime snack at a barbecue stand”, leaving one dead. In addition to the on-road collision in Example 7, women driver acted ignorantly in Example 8. The action “driving a car against a police officer” with the traffic officer on duty as the object, shows the woman driver’s contempt for traffic rules and disregard for human life. The irrationality of women drivers is also shown in the shrewish actions in Example 9, where the driver angrily blamed the pedestrian and “grabbed her hair and pushed her to the ground”. Example 10 shows that a running cat startled the woman driver and she “steered the car toward the market’s enclosure wall”. The inability to handle the emergency calmly is added to the women drivers’ poor driving skills and bad temper. The women drivers’ actions not only have perilous consequences for other people, as shown in Example 7, 8 and 9, but also for themselves, as shown in Example 10, in which the driver herself was put in a potentially fatal situation.

5.2 The commendable discourse
In the commendable discourse, women drivers display personalities that deserve encouragement according to traditional Chinese cultural values. They demonstrate kindness,
courage and perseverance. The identity of women drivers in this type of discourse is constructed through nomination strategy and categorisation strategy. In contrast to the drivers in the problematic discourse, identified in the news report only by their family names and the physical characteristics of their cars, the drivers in the praise discourse are identified by their full names and vocations. In Example 11 and 12 both family names and given names “Li Guixiang” and “Lu Fengxian” are given to refer to the protagonists of the news reports. In the commendable discourse, twenty-nine out of thirty-two instances use the same nomination strategy. It appears that the nomination of women drivers gives them a status of unique individuals. Admirable traits or abilities are unique personal qualities. However, the categorisation strategy essentially dissolves the impact of individuality on broader social relations.

Example 11
In Nanjing, most buses have hard, uncomfortable seats, but those riding the No. 136 shuttle bus can sit on soft seats. On this route, Li Guixiang, the woman bus driver, purchased the soft seat covers on her own initiative. (2014-01-02)

Example 12
The weather cleared up after the drizzle. Tower crane operator Lu Fengxian of the Shanghai Branch of China Construction Second Engineering Bureau Co., Ltd. climbed “swiftly” onto tower crane No. 2 at the construction site. Her job is transporting steel bars for the workers on the ground. (2021-03-08)

Van Leeuwen states that “the category of ‘belonging to a company or organization’ plays a more important role in identification”[11]. This fits well with our data illustrated by Example 11 and 12. In the praise of a woman bus driver who bought “soft seat covers” for the seats in Example 11, the number of the bus route “No. 136 shuttle bus” is provided in the news reports. This establishes a relationship between the bus company and the particular woman driver and situates her among the group of drivers who drive on the same route. The same relation identification occurs in twenty-nine out of the thirty-two instances in the commendable discourse. Example 12 tells the tale of a female tower crane operator at a construction site. Her employer’s name, “Shanghai Branch of China Construction Second Engineering Bureau Co., Ltd.”, appears right before her full name, functioning as a modifier and an identity marker. In both Example 11 and 12, the women drivers are placed in a larger context of the companies they work for so that the association of individual acts and collective group is created.

Example 13
Qian Yanling is the head of the Leigu Town post office of China Post Beichuan Branch. On May 9, she was driving to Huagai from her hometown of Heqing. She saw a truck dragging a tricycle behind. On the tricycle were an older man with his head bleeding and a girl, calling for help. Qian Yanling took the risk and stepped on the gas pedal to overtake the truck. After chasing for two kilometers, she stopped the truck; the old man and the child who were stuck on the tricycle were rescued. (2021-05-13)

Five of the thirty-two instances in the commendable discourse mention women drivers operating either private cars or trucks when the incident occurred. However, in describing their helpfulness and heroism, there are two instances that not only mention women drivers’ full names but also reveal their workplaces, the information of which do not appear at all in the news reports about women private car drivers in the problematic discourse. In Example 13, the name “Qian Yanling” and her title “the head of Leigu Town Post Office of China Post Beichuan Branch”, precedes the description of her pursuit of the truck involved in the accident.

The nomination and categorisation strategies have constructed the media image of women drivers as both individuals and members of a larger organization. Individuality and
collectivity each have a stake in the representation of women drivers in praise discourse. This emphasis on an individual’s collectiveness is rooted in the cultural conviction that an individual’s progress is integrated with and dependent upon the progress of the organization he or she works for.

In addition, women drivers are portrayed through both material actions and semiotic actions, which interpret social actions as “doing” and “meaning” respectively. According to van Leeuwen, material action refers to actions which have a material effect since it is the act of doing, while semiotic action may take the form of the quote, in which the wordings of the represented social actors are included. In our data, the material actions women drivers are involved in are represented with the primary purpose of praising their personalities, such as kindness, consideration for other road users, and dedication to their jobs, and the quotations from women drivers demonstrate their inner thoughts to set up man as the ideal they constantly strive to achieve.

Example 14
A heartwarming and moving scene was witnessed by the No. 260 Bus at noon on August 6. When Ma Huanjun, a woman bus driver, noticed a man with paralyzed legs, she stopped the bus and helped him board. (2016-08-11)

Example 15
Yesterday morning, a careless young man left his engagement ring which was worth more than 10,000 yuan on the bus, on his way to the shopping mall. Fortunately, the woman bus driver found it and went to the mall to look for the owner by the mall broadcasting. (2018-02-13)

Example 16
At 7 a.m., 41-year-old Luo Zhongyan drives the bus of the scenic spots on time to the gate of Hunan’s Tianmen Mountain National Forest Park and welcomes the first group of tourists. During the National Holiday, she drove the bus about 10 round trips daily on the winding mountain roads, taking more than 2,000 turns. (2018-10-06)

The material actions described in Example 14 and 15 show the virtuous behavior of women bus drivers, as in “she stopped the bus and helped him board” and “the woman bus driver found it and went to the mall to look for the owner through the mall broadcasting”. The two material actions, helping the weak and returning the found valuables, highlight praiseworthy virtues, and those who exhibit these virtues are an example for others. Example 16 depicts a female bus driver’s skillful driving for tourists, such as “she drove the bus about 10 round trips on the winding mountain roads” and “taking more than 2,000 turns” via a material action description. Nevertheless, the example emphasizes her hardworking attitude as well as her superb driving abilities in that the numbers “10 round trips” and “2000 turns”, along with the adverbials “7 a.m.” and “on time”, all convey the implications of long working hours and devotion to the job.

Example 17
In 2018, Li Runlan effortlessly backed the 17-meter-long semitrailer into the factory building to have her trailer loaded with coal in Datong, Shanxi, much to the astonishment of the men drivers present. (2021-11-08)

Example 17 is part of a news report about a woman private truck driver. In the description of her adeptness in handling the massive truck via material action “backed the 17-meter-long semitrailer into the factory building”, the reactions of the men drivers present are given as evidence. i.e., they were astonished at the skills a woman driver could possess. Men drivers’ surprise suggests that women drivers are not typically expected to drive with such skill...
and that only excellent men drivers can pull this off. Similar implications can be seen in Example 18 and 19, which use semiotic actions to illustrate the challenges and driving-learning motivations.

Example 18
From the time she learned to drive until she became a bus driver, Wu Jinmei can be said to demand of herself to be a “manly woman”. “In an earlier time, we learned to drive in an outdated Jiefang truck without an electric power assist system for the steering wheel. Being a girl with limited strength, it was challenging. In the drivers’ training class, I was the only female.” (2019-05-03)

Example 19
“I have been unyielding since childhood. I believe girls can do the same as boys, and even better,” Hang Ziqing said. (2020-01-11)

The semiotic action takes the form of a quote from women public service drivers. In the reports of women drivers in the public sector, mental activities, such as what they thought about their jobs, how hard they worked in their jobs, and what motivated them to make the decision to take up a driver’s job, are detailed. Example 18 is a quote from a woman bus driver who states that she has always been a “manly woman”, and the fact that she is “the only female” in the drivers’ training class not only expresses her pride of having unusual strength but also implies that it is her masculine traits that enable her to handle the tough training as the other men. In Example 19 the quotation from a female high-speed train conductor, “girls can do the same as boys”, is again an illustration of the general rule of setting up man as a standard in the evaluation of women’s capacity. The quotations from women drivers in Example 18 and 19 imply that women with “manly” characteristics and “unyielding” spirit are as able as men, but otherwise they are inherently inferior. Quoting implies the journalist’s approval of the views expressed in the quotations, but without actually saying the words, but still with the effect that “I couldn’t have said it better myself”[11].

5.3 The victim discourse
In the victim discourse, women motorists endure a variety of misfortunes. In contrast to being an agent in a material action, as in the two preceding types of discourse, women drivers assume the role of a patient or “goal in a material process”[11]. The examples listed below illustrate instances in which they were beaten or kidnapped. The victim discourse includes eleven women driving private cars and ten women driving in the public sector, which is a relatively equal proportion.

Example 20
A woman driver was attacked while waiting for a red light by a man in a car behind her after she failed to cross the intersection in time because she was allegedly playing a cell phone game. (2016-02-04)

Example 21
Liu and his girlfriend Hu rented Wang’s taxi and demanded to be taken to Pangying Village. When the taxi arrived at its destination, Liu pulled out a kitchen knife he was carrying, kidnapped Wang, and robbed her of the cash and valuables. (2013-11-03)

Example 22
Upon observing a male passenger board the bus with his dog, Ren Sha said “Dogs are not allowed on the bus,” but she was kicked by the man. (2011-11-01)

Women drivers are victims in Example 20, 21 and 22. They were participants directly involved in material actions, such as “was attacked by a man in a car behind her”, “Liu pulled
out a kitchen knife he was carrying and kidnapped Wang”, “was kicked by the man”. The passivation strategy is used to portray the women as victims. Facing rude male passengers or drivers, women drivers are at a disadvantage because of their physical weakness. They are consequently more likely to be placed in a passive position and be victims.

6 Conclusions

This article has critically analyzed news reports about women drivers on Chinanews.com. As a result, three main types of discourses are identified: problematic, commendable and victim.

Through nomination and categorisation strategies, together with material actions, the problematic discourse portrays the women drivers of private automobiles as unruly. In contrast, in commendable discourse, women drivers, a majority of whom are employed in the public sector, are represented as people with strong motivation, determination and perseverance. In both problematic and commendable discourse, nomination strategy, categorisation strategy and descriptions of semiotic actions are employed. In the victim discourse, women drivers are directly affected by the material action, i.e. they were attacked, kicked, kidnapped or robbed in the incidents.

The images of female private and public sector drivers form a heterogeneous discourse on Chinanews.com. Media discourses are “barometers of cultural changes” [12], and its heterogeneity and inconsistency indicate “the tentative, unfinished, and messy nature of change” [12]. Contradictory depictions of women drivers in China allow us to trace the sociocultural evolution of attitudes toward women in China.

In Mao’s era, after the establishment of the new China, women were encouraged to seek employment outside the home. The founding of China was accompanied by the slogan “Women can hold up half the sky” [26] to encourage women’s mobility within society and their participation in the labor force. During this time, women’s emancipation was incorporated into the national ideology and became part of the official discourse [27]. To encourage more women to take part in the construction of socialism, examples of hardworking and successful women drivers in the public sector were created. Female train and tractor drivers appeared on posters and in films [8]. Jin [15] researched the editorials published on Women’s Day in Renmin Daily, a prominent official newspaper, from the 1950s to the 1980s, which revealed that the primary intention was to encourage women’s active participation in constructing socialism.

This tradition of encouragement continues today on Chinanews.com. According to our data, this explains why women public sector drivers exhibit perseverance, determination and kindness. Focusing on the women’s commendable personalities and the excellent service they provide to the public rather than on their driving skills reveals the media’s intention to create exemplary images of women [8] regardless of their professional skills.

If the exaltation of public sector women drivers in the official media is viewed as the government’s opinion, then the tendency to create sensational news about private car drivers reveals the media’s practical goal of increasing readership and profits. Moreover, because of rapid economic development and profound changes in communication methods, marketization and consumerism significantly impact the media, transforming them from news producers into news advocates [4]. Under these conditions, women’s clumsy driving skills and occasional bizarre behavior are unquestionably effective means of attracting readers’ attention and helping newspapers “plunge into the market for profits” [28].

In addition to the issue of profits, conflicts in social expectations also contribute to the hostile and ironic attitudes towards women private car drivers. Women are expected to fulfill
contradictory roles. As the women’s liberation movement spreads and the need for nation building and family support increases, they are encouraged to leave the house and work as men do. Meanwhile, they are expected to stay home and take on their domestic responsibilities, as required by the traditional roles of housewife and mother. Eventually, they end up “damned if they behave like men, and damned if they don’t”[29]. Driving a car has brought not only mobility but also the societal fear of “abandonment of women’s traditional roles” [30]. As Hanson [31] argues, mobility is not just about the individual but about “the individual as embedded in, and interacting with, the household, family, community and larger society”. Women driving and traveling rather than staying home has probably brought what Fairclough calls the “problematisation of conventions” [32] to the media. Faced with circumstances in which there are no previous examples of reports to follow, they are likely to fall back on the stereotypical femininity associated with “passivity, emotion, and irrationality” [33]. As “the world’s largest car-owning nation” [34], cars in China have significantly altered people’s lifestyles and challenged traditional gender roles. Today, it is common for Chinese women to go to work and own a car, but they still have a long way to go before gaining society’s genuine respect.

This paper has adopted a static perspective on a ten-year data set, and its analysis might have overlooked subtle or significant changes during the decade. Future research should collect data over a more extended period and conduct a diachronic analysis to determine how media portrayals of women drivers have changed in response to the shifting social context.

7 References


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