

Constructing Chinese Identity of Naturalized Athletes: A Media Content Analysis of Chinese Coverage in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games

Abstract

This study examined Chinese newspaper coverage of US-born naturalized athlete Eileen Gu during Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. After winning two gold medals and one silver for Team China, Gu became one of the country's most popular and welcomed naturalized sports stars in early 2022. Based on theoretical framework of imagined community, national identity and framing theory, a content analysis supplemented by qualitative textual analysis of 164 articles was conducted to explore how Chinese media covered and constructed the naturalized athlete's national identity.

Results revealed that Chinese media has extensively depicted Gu as "one of Chinese", while the subtle change in the description of Gu's Chinese identity suggested a cautious attitude towards the risk of the Gu's nationality. Besides, Chinese media actively provided explicit legitimization of her naturalization by emphasizing the girl's Chinese-ness and athletic contribution to the nation. Most importantly, there were statistically significant differences in usage of identity features that constructed Gu's Chinese-ness. The athlete's acculturation to Chinese culture, mostly Chinese tradition and Chinese value, was found the most salient feature, far more often mentioned in coverage than the commonality in ethnicity and territory with Chinese nation.

Key words: national identity; naturalized athlete; framing theory, Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics

Introduction

Back in 2008, China has realized its dream to host the Olympic Games in Beijing during summer for the first time. 14 years later, the country embraced the Winter Olympic Games again in its capital, making Beijing the first “Double Olympic City” to host both Summer and Winter Olympic Games. Unlike in 2008 when China was desired to spread China’s “awakening” and a new face to the world (Fan et al., 2021, p. 13), Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games provides a chance for the country to show the international society how China, the world’s second largest economy, will act as “an advocate, builder and defender of a community of shared future for mankind” (Huang et al., 2021). China has undertaken initiatives to develop into a leading sporting power. In 2019, the State Council issued a work plan "Outline for Building a Leading Sports Nation," highlighting the Winter Olympics as a chance to achieve leapfrog development in ice and snow sports. However, despite over 30 years of development, China remains relatively weak in winter sports, having only placed in the top 10 of the Winter Olympics medal table once (Ma & Lv, 2016). China still has a long way to go to become a leading winter sports nation.

In the era of globalization, the transnational flows of sports talents have become increasingly common as human activities transcend conventional national borders, showing a trend of growth in the number of naturalized athletes and diversity in sports since the 1990s (Fabian, 2020; Jansen et al., 2018; van Campenhout et al., 2018). In view of China’s weakness in certain sports, importing elite foreign athletes is believed to help improve the medal chances in winter sports where a big gap exists if compared with western countries, and may benefit China’s overall progress in sports competitiveness (Huang & Li, 2021; Zhang & Cao, 2018).

At the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, China fielded an unprecedented number of over 30 foreign-born athletes, including some who had given up their original nationality, such as figure

skater Ashley Lin, short track speed skater Beverly Zhu, and freestyle skier Eileen Gu (Gu Ailing). Gu, who won two gold medals and one silver for China, became one of the country's most popular and welcomed sports stars.

However, the identity crisis of naturalized athletes intensifies in China. Since the country has kept a relatively high level of national consciousness and nationalism, immigrant athletes without “the root of Chinese nation” are hardly approved to compete for the nation under the Chinese traditional context (Huang, 2014; Lin, 2013). Regarding the dilemma facing naturalized athletes in China, few have paid attention to the media's role (Leng et al., 2021) in making naturalized sports talents more acceptable.

Drawing on Anderson's (1983) concept of “imagined community,” national identity is understood as dynamic rather than stable, and can be rhetorically constructed and reshaped within a given context. When athletes switch their national allegiance, it creates space to negotiate their national identities at the intersection of nationalism and citizenship (Chen & Mason, 2018; Oonk, 2020a; Shin et al., 2020). Goffman (1974) further suggested that media can interpret social reality and shape perceptions by “framing news coverage.

Though some previous academic work has already examined media portrayal of immigrant sports talents' identity in various regions across the world (Chen & Mason, 2018; Gehring, 2016; Poulton & Maguire, 2013; Shin et al., 2020; Su, 2014), few have studied how media in China articulate the national belonging of foreign-born athletes for the country has little experience of athletic naturalization until 2016 (Wan et al., 2017). The media portrayal of the widely focused American-born player in the Chinese newspaper thus provides a rich and unique case study that enables frame analysis of mediated constructions of national identity in the context of global migration.

While previous research has examined media portrayals of immigrant sports talents' identity across various regions (Chen & Mason, 2018; Gehring, 2016; Poulton & Maguire, 2013; Shin et al., 2020; Su, 2014), few studies have explored how Chinese media articulate the national belonging of foreign-born athletes, as China has limited experience with athletic naturalization until 2016 (Wan et al., 2017). Examining the media depiction of the American-born athlete Eileen Gu during the Beijing 2022 Olympics provides a rich case study for analyzing the mediated construction of national identity in the context of global migration of athletic talents.

Literature Review

Mediated sports and identity construction

With the nation-states burgeoning as political entities in composing the modern world, “national identity” is proposed as a key concept in describing citizens’ sense of common identity and belonging to a nation, the bond with nation members, as well as the distinction between other nations (Smith, 1991). In *National Identity*, Smith (1991) defines “national identity” as one kind of collective identity with high cultural homogeneity, with which members share “a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (p. 14).

On understanding the formation of national identity, Ernest Gellner (1983) and Benedict Anderson (1983) have provided two different explanations. Compared with Gellner’s (1983) view that national identity emerges as a necessary consequence of the nation-state’s uprising, Anderson (1983) stressed more on identity construction through social and cultural interactions, especially through print media (Schlesinger, 1991). Drawing on the notion that identity is a cognitive construct, Anderson (1983) has introduced the concept of “imagined community” to

unpack the meaning of nation and national identity. Anderson's theory of imagined community argues that the shared idea of nation and identity is created in imagination, because community members "will never know most of their fellow-members" but have all in mind the image of their communion (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). This sense of nationhood and connection among community members, in Anderson's (1983) view, was largely generated through the consumption of newspaper narratives. He explained that the development of mass printing has encouraged the spread of a common language, which creates and carries collective memory across time, space, and geography, as well as unifies people in an imagined community.

Following Anderson's (1983) theory, mass-mediated sports are considered powerful in shaping and reinforcing national identity (Gleaves & Llewellyn, 2014; Jiang, 2013; Shin et al., 2020; Vincent et al., 2018). As Hobsbawm (1992) argued, "the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people" (p. 143). During the sports ceremony, when the flag is hoisted and the national anthem is played up for the national player's victory, the athlete is the bearer of national pride, on whom the public will project their national identity and affection (Shor & Yonay, 2010). Routine phrases used in sports coverage such as "our heroes" and "our victories" also subtly point to the existence of an imaginary community (Su, 2014), where national players are turned into the embodiment of nations (Gleaves & Llewellyn, 2014) and their victory also symbolizes the success of the nation (Fabian, 2020).

"Identity" conveys a way in which people conceive of themselves and are characterized by others (Vertovec, 2001). National identity, originated from identity, can also be conceived as a "double-edged relationship" (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 599), as it is formed in interaction not only from commonality within the nation but also differences from other nations or ethnic groups. Furthermore, as Anderson (1983) argued, the boundaries of imagined communities are

distinguished “not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (p. 6). The international sports games enable the media to describe nation-states as rivals and create an “us versus them dichotomy” (Su, 2014, p. 477), where “they” are embodied as national teams of other countries. The rivalry between athletes thus emphasized the presence of “others”, providing the audience with a sense of national belonging through the understanding of “who they are” (Gleaves & Llewellyn, 2014).

In this case, sports media can (re)present and circulate ideological images of national identity through symbolic narratives of athletes and sports rituals (Jiang, 2013), which creates conditions for the media to construct athletes’ national identity (Chen & Mason, 2018; Shor & Yonay, 2010).

Athletic naturalization and fluid national identity

Naturalization refers to “the practice of voluntarily switching one’s nationality” (Lin, 2013). The notion of “citizenship”, according to Oonk’s (2020b) interpretation, indicates a formal membership legally recognized by a country (p. 1048). Though naturalization will change one’s citizenship in law, it may leave his/her national identity in ambiguity (Oonk, 2020b). It has been argued that symbolic boundaries, which cognitively separate people into groups and generate feelings of group membership, remain between those who are born citizens naturally and those who need to be naturalized (Fassin & Mazouz, 2009).

International sports stipulate that participant athletes compete in national teams for a country with players from another country, and national players are therefore given a unique status of representing those nations and their nationals (Gleaves & Llewellyn, 2014; Lin & Li, 2018; Oonk, 2020b; Pop, 2013; Shor & Yonay, 2010; Yung et al., 2021). Naturalization in sports further changes national allegiance of athletes, who will represent other countries than their

homelands in international games (Lin, 2013, p. 451). For athletic naturalization, as Fabian (2020) captures, “although all of these athletes are citizens, they are not all, in fact, nationals” (p. 2). Naturalization does not necessarily imply that new citizens are viewed equally as national members of their new country, and meeting citizenship requirements is still an insufficient condition for naturalized athletes to be considered a rightful representative (Winter, 2021; Yung et al., 2021). When naturalized athletes compete in international events for a country they weren’t born in, disputes are always accompanied about the national identity of “who they are” and “where they belong to” (Huang, 2014, p. 29), and whether they can compete and win honors on behalf of the nation (Chiu, 2021).

This public debate over nationality swapping has made the issue around national identity one of the most significant topics in media when covering naturalized athletes. Under the conceptual framework of Anderson’s (1983) imagined community, many scholars have examined the mediated identity of naturalized athletes and identified two very contrasting media portrayals (Chen & Mason, 2018; Chiba et al., 2001; Gehring, 2016; Poulton & Maguire, 2013; Shin et al., 2020; Shor & Yonay, 2010). On the one hand, national sports players are extensively depicted as model nationals and patriots who fight for the glory of the country and nation (Vincent & Crossman, 2012). Coverage of naturalized athletes in some countries like Korea, Israel and Germany may follow this pattern, characterizing those athletes into “one of us” of the nation and actively providing legitimation to their naturalization (Shin et al., 2020; Shor & Yonay, 2010). On the other hand, some media tend to take a more critical stance in news articles about athletic naturalization with immigration narratives. In this case, naturalized athletes in Japanese, British and Canadian media coverage are identified as “others” and excluded from imagined communities (Chen & Mason, 2018; Chiba et al., 2001; Poulton & Maguire, 2013).

When considering the media portrayal of athletes' national belonging in China specifically, China is home to 56 ethnic groups, as Choe (2006) stated, and maintains a state-centered national identity, with all members conceiving themselves as one of "Chinese nation" (Zhōng Huá Mín Zú in Chinese). Given the history of foreign aggression against the Chinese nation during the two world wars, the success in international sporting events has been described in Chinese media as a symbol of national revival for long (Lu, 2011; Wang & Li, 2014). Chinese national players, especially the gold medalists, are praised as national heroes, or "the light of the Chinese nation" (Lu & Fan, 2019, p. 7). In media's presentation, athletes in the national team then undoubtedly belong to the Chinese nation.

However, the condition may vary when athletes are not born-Chinese. China is hard to be considered an immigration country, as official statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2021) show that China had only 845,697 foreigners residing in the 31 provinces of mainland China in 2020, less than 0.05% of its total population. The strict stringent immigration control policies also prevented foreigners from naturalizing into China, as proved by the figure of only 1,448 naturalized citizens by the end of 2010. Though China is a multi-ethnic country, it remains a high level of homogeneity in nation and culture (Wang & Li, 2014). Hence, the Chinese have had mixed feelings about athletic naturalization. Some believe it is a way to stimulate the development of certain sporting events in China, while others show reluctance to immigrants and still believe that nationality did not amount to national identity, and view foreign-born athletes who obtained Chinese citizenship as "outsourced workers" simply for sports success, rather than members of the nation (Huang, 2014; Leng et al., 2021; Wang & Li, 2014).

The contradiction between mediated symbolic meaning of athletes and public unwillingness to immigrant “mercenaries” in China has left space to negotiate the national identity of naturalized athletes. In review of the literature above, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the national identity of naturalized athletes presented in Chinese coverage during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics?

Framing national representative

In various media practices for identity construction, Goffman’s (1974) framing theory may provide a way to explain the process of how media reshapes people’s perceptions. In his work Frame Analysis, Goffman (1974) proposed that “frame” is considered an explanatory mean to help individuals organize and perceive social issues and information.

In media studies, Entman (1993) further notes that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (p.52). Media frames give a kind of organizing principles to guide the construction of meanings, including how media screen out, emphasize and represent the reality from multiple viewpoints (Carter, 2013). By using frames, media can convey certain information that stimulates readers’ interpretive understanding of an issue by “selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The media are therefore given the power to shape audience perceptions and influence the policy-building agenda (Billings & Eastman, 2006; Su & Borah, 2021), even in the case of a highly salient and polarizing issue like immigration (Blinder & Jeannet, 2018). In terms of sports media, Billings and Eastman (2006) have found that the Olympic media can utilize multiple framing devices to present athletes’ gender, race and

nationality in different ways. The above literature then laid a theoretical foundation to examine the media framing of the naturalized athlete.

As discussed on the relationship between sports and nationalism earlier, Yung et al. (2021) argue that both the instrumental and “instrumental-plus” value (namely nation-ness) of naturalized athletes are influential in altering the public’s view on their representativeness of the nation.

Regarding naturalized athletes’ instrumental value, Yung et al. (2021) found that sports fans valued a lot of athletic achievement of naturalized athletes, or their importance to the nation’s Olympic success and sports development. Shin et al. (2020) found that South Korean media always highlighted the superior careers, physicality, and playing skills of those foreign-born athletes, who were even called “saviors” in South Korean news. According to Jiang (2013), Chinese athletes, especially gold medalists, would achieve a conditional status as national heroes or representatives of China in Hong Kong newspapers.

Another instrumental-plus value, according to Yung et al. (2021), refers to some other “genuine links” (Yung et al., 2021, p. 4) to the nation, which transcend purely instrumental value. Research on public attitude toward naturalized athletes found that if foreign-born athletes have those “genuine links”, they will be more acceptable to become national members and representatives (Chen & Chiang, 2019; Leng et al., 2021). Taking the case study of Xavier Chen for example, Chen and Chiang (2019) found that the Belgian-born football player becomes a role model in Chinese Taiwan mainly related not only to his athletic excellence but also his Taiwanese origin and academic achievements in line with Confucian values. Leng et al. (2021) also observed a similar view in mainland China that apart from athletic performance, people attach great importance to naturalized football players’ Chinese ancestry and level of

acculturation. For the athletic naturalization in Hong Kong region of China, Yung et al. (2021) found that naturalized athletes are more likely to be treated as “Hongkongers” when they show local lived experiences, familiarity with Hong Kong culture, the efforts to speak Cantonese and the attitude treating Hong Kong as home more than a workplace. The representativeness of national players largely depends more on “genuine links” in terms of birth, blood, prior residence or acculturation, than legal citizenship only (Jansen, 2019, p. 972).

The genuine links refer to a set of features fellow-nationals share in common, including “a belief in common descent and/or to a common culture, namely a system of traditions, ideas, symbols and patterns of behavior and communication that are shared by the members of the community” (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 599). These elements of nation-ness, which is believed to constitute a pool of potential identity features by Triandafyllidou (1998), may provide frames of reference to define one’s national identity. This way, media coverage can frame one’s Chinese identity by highlighting some features of Chinese-ness, or “being Chinese”.

Given this, the following research question is proposed to examine how Chinese media frame Gu’s representativeness and Chinese identity in particular:

RQ2: How did Chinese coverage of naturalized athletes legitimize their representation of Chinese nation during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics?

RQ3: Which identity features are salient in Chinese coverage of naturalized athletes to frame their Chinese identity during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics?

Methodology

In the case study of Eileen Gu, a quantitative content analysis (supplemented by ancillary qualitative textual analysis) was employed on Chinese coverage to explore how the national identity of naturalized athletes was constructed during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

Content analysis refers to a “research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, p. 13), and is extensively used to describe content and identify repeat themes in the news coverage (Su & Borah, 2021). As the purpose of this study is to examine the media portrayal and find salient identity features, the method of content analysis is appropriate.

Sampling

All sample data for analysis were collected from the digital news archive WiseSearch, which covers over 1200 Chinese publications and was utilized by previous framing studies (Jiang, 2013). The time period was set from the opening ceremony to the end of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic (February 4, 2022 to February 20, 2022). Eighteen China’s listed central news organizations were set as news sources for the study (Cho & Wang, 2021).

An in-text keyword search of “Gu Ailing” in Chinese character was used to generate newspaper coverage, and 486 articles were collected in total. An article used for analysis was operationally defined as “a hard-news story, an opinion column, or a staff editorial” (Denham, 2004, p. 173), and duplicate items and irrelevant articles like incidental mentions, corrections to former news reports, letters to editor, Games schedule and advertisements, were thus excluded from the study (Bie & Billings, 2015). The reorganized sample included 164 newspaper articles of various news types, ranging from sports news stories to commentary, feature, interview, and editorial. In all, 13 of the 18 news sources were analyzed (see Appendix B, Table B1).

Coding Scheme

Each unit of analysis in this study is a single article, and a coding scheme was developed to address the research questions on the ground of the above previous theoretical foundation and scholarly work.

Foundational coding items consist of article ID, headlines, sources, date of publication, and the number of words (see Appendix B, Table B2). Firstly, the media portrayal of Gu's national identity was identified. Then, according to the theoretical framework (see Appendix A), six attributes that compose three major identity features (ethnicity, territory, acculturation) and Gu's athletic contribution to the nation, were carefully examined in the media discourse. All media coverage will be closely read and coded. Each article could employ multiple classifications.

Chinese Identity

Each article was firstly coded for whether the article suggests the Chinese identity of the naturalized athlete. According to Su (2014), phrases like “national players” can act as “constant reminders of nationhood”, conveying the national belonging of athletes. If the article used such phrases to refer to Gu, the item is coded as 1 = “presented”. Considering the effect of “others” on identity construction (Triandafyllidou, 1998), it is also necessary to code the item as 1 when the article refers to a competitive opponent from another country. If there is no evident clue to the athlete's national identity, then code the item as 0 = “unclear”.

Chinese Identity Features

National identity is a complex construct composed of various interrelated components, including ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic, and legal-political elements (Smith, 1991). Triandafyllidou (1998) further proposed the “pool of potential identity features,” which helped this research identify three major types of identity features – ethnicity, territory, and acculturation. Each set of identity features with their attributes is designed inductively from previous findings on mediated national identity construction. The item will be coded as either 1 = “mention” or 0 = “no mention”, depending on whether the article characterized Gu with some of

these attributes in line with the Chinese nation. Frequency counts of stories connected to the three identity frames and six attributes were calculated to measure their visibility.

Ethnicity

Ancestry and shared ethnic origins remain crucial criteria for national identity, even in modern, diverse societies (Bechhofer & McCrone, 2014; Vlachová, 2019). Foreign-born athletes with Chinese ancestry are more acceptable to the Chinese public and their national identities are more easily recognized (Huang & Li, 2021; Ma & Sun, 2017; Xin & Zhao, 2015).

Territory

In addition to ancestry, a historic territory or homeland is considered to be the basis for another type of political community, which Smith (1991) called “the territorial nation” (p. 9). The shared living experience thus becomes an important criterion for one’s nation-ness, as Yung et al. (2021) have observed that sports fans recognize those naturalized players who grew up in Hong Kong as “Hongkongers”. Shin et al. (2020) also found residence in the naturalized country a major topic in news stories of naturalized athletes, which actively justify their new national identity. In the operating process, if the article covers the living experience of naturalized athletes in China, the naturalized country, then code the item as 1 = “mention”.

Acculturation

Acculturation is found another salient part of national identity (Shin et al., 2020; Shor & Yonay, 2010), since the nation is essentially constructed based on shared culture, history, and values (Gellner, 1983; Hall, 1990; Hobsbawm, 1992). Acculturation is described as the process of change in cultural practices that immigrants or members of cultural minorities go through to conform to dominant societal group (Kontos & Breland-Noble, 2002).

Existing literature has identified several dimensions of acculturation to the naturalized country, including language, values, tradition, virtue, and patriotism or loyalty to the nation (Bechhofer & McCrone, 2014; Shin et al., 2020; Shor & Yonay, 2010). Therefore, the item will be coded as 1 = “mention” when it mentions: (1) familiarity with Chinese language and (2) customs in terms of food, clothing, communicative manners, etc., (3) their spirit that fits Chinese virtue and traditional Confucius value¹ (i.e., outstanding academic performance, filial devotion to parents, family harmony, etc.), as well as (4) their patriotic words and behavior (i.e., draped in Chinese national flags, singing Chinese national anthem).

Instrumental Value

Considering that the desire to succeed in weaker sports games is one of the major motivations for countries to recruit foreign athletes (Huang & Li, 2021; Oonk, 2020b), how these naturalized players perform in the sports events while representing the new nation has been always in the spotlight (Leng et al., 2021). The result of Leng et al. (2021)’s study revealed that a certain number of Chinese netizens have given the priority to athletic competitiveness over all other factors. According to Yung et al. (2021), terms such as “skills, attitudes, experience and tactical needs” can all be categorized into this topic (p. 9). Hence, if the article mentioned any term related to this, the item will be coded as 1 = “mention”; if not, then 0 = “no mention”.

Coding Procedure and Intercoder Reliability

In addition to the author, an undergraduate journalism student was invited to participate in the coding work to ensure the reliability of the coding process. 15% of full sample were both coded independently by the student and author, and the results were used for the intercoder reliability test.

¹ The study referred to Chinese value items in the Chinese Values Instrument (CVI-II) developed by Yu et al. (2016), and the Chinese Value Survey (1987).

The intercoder reliability was calculated with Cohen's kappa (κ) coefficient in SPSS software. The intercoder reliability exceeded .779 in all items (e.g., Chinese identity; ancestry; residence) with overall reliability exceeding .923. When proper intercoder consistency was achieved, the author coded all the remaining articles.

Results

Chinese identity of Eileen Gu

RQ1 explores the presentation of Eileen Gu's national identity in the selected newspaper coverage. Results showed that Chinese media have commonly described Gu as one of Chinese, with 82.3% of articles clearly reporting Gu's Chinese identity ($n=135$). Specifically, 124 articles (75.6%) have called Eileen Gu "Chinese player" or "Team China athlete", while 44 of them also reported Gu's rivals who represent other countries. In total, 55 articles have mentioned foreign rivals, making up 33.5% across all articles (see Appendix C, Table C1).

Though the routine phrases such as "national player" were frequently appeared in Chinese coverage to remind Eileen Gu's Chinese identity, the language was found subtly different over time. Data showed the trend in mentions of the terms "Chinese player" and "Team China athlete" used to describe Gu (see Appendix C, Figure C1). After February 15, 2022, the usage of "Team China athlete" started to increase in Chinese media, while the usage of "Chinese player" showed a trend of decrease. This change may be a response to the concern over potential controversy about Gu's nationality, as explained in an opinion piece by Hu Xijin, the former editor in chief of the *Global Times* (February 14, 2022):

I want to send a reminder that media publicity about her should be moderate, and limited to the scope of her athletic success and her Olympic spirit rather than

patriotism. Phrases like “winning glory for the country” should be replaced with “winning glory for Team China.”

This is because Gu Ailing has just turned 18, and her life will probably base in the United States for at least the next few years. There is uncertainty about how she will determine her nationality and articulate her national identity in her persona in the future. Chinese media should leave some space in ambiguity when publicizing her story to prevent future passivity. (Hu, 2022)

The subtle difference in the depiction of Gu’s Chinese identity indicates that Chinese media had some scruples in reporting naturalized athletes’ national identity, considering the risk that they may change their national affiliation in the future.

Depicting Eileen Gu as a National Hero

RQ2 investigates how Chinese media legitimize Eileen Gu as a representative of Chinese people through highlighting her Chinese-ness and instrumental value. Results showed that both two types of themes were greatly contributed to this legitimation (see Appendix C, Table C2), and the frequency of Gu’s Chinese-ness ($n=81$, 49.4%) mentioned in Chinese coverage is slightly higher than instrumental value ($n=76$, 46.3%). Among them, 34 articles have mentioned both two themes, accounting for 20.7%.

Unlike local-born athletes, naturalized athletes have to justify their national identity and the status of representing the nation. The Chinese public expected them to perform better than local athletes, otherwise they are not enough qualified to represent “us” (Leng et al., 2021). This study found that the portrayal of Gu complies with the widely used “national heroes” discourse of other local-born Olympic champions in Chinese media (Jiang, 2013; Zhong & Wang, 2018), as most coverage has praised how Gu’s victory made enormous progress for the Olympic success

of China as a host, particularly for the nation's winter sports development. A typical example appeared in *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* (February 9, 2022):

With this jump, Gu Ailing jumped out of her new self and onto the top podium of the Winter Olympics. This jump also won China its second gold medal in the history of snow sports after 16 years. (Ma et al., 2022)

Like South Korean media (Shin et al., 2020), Chinese media also highlighted the difficulties in some sports facing China and the contribution of naturalized athletes to the success, which actively argued the necessity of their representation. An article published on the official newspaper of China's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) wrote (February 20, 2022):

It was a difficult situation for Winter sports in China because it started late, had weak foundation and insufficient talent reserve... From Ye Jinguang (Brandon Yip) to Gu Ailing, naturalized athletes took an active part in the Beijing Games and have played a positive role in supplementing talents and improving the level of Team China. They also made history by competing in all the events in 15 disciplines across seven sports at the Beijing Games, compared with 53 events in 12 disciplines across five sports in the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. (Shen & Lv, 2022)

Within this discourse, Gu's winning was equated with the success of the nation, and the girl thus achieved a status as the representative and national hero of China.

“Being Chinese”

RQ3 further examines the usage of identity features in Chinese coverage to frame naturalized athletes' Chinese identity. As the most important part, it helps identify salient features

used for constructing Chinese-ness in coverage of naturalized athletes. Data revealed that (see Appendix C, Table C3) Gu's acculturation ($n=78$, 47.6%) to Chinese culture was overwhelmingly used by Chinese media when compared with other two features, ethnicity ($n=14$, 8.5%) and territory ($n=14$, 8.5%).

More narrowly, as each identity feature was coded present with a total of one to four attributes, the frequency of each attribute mentioned in the coverage of Gu was calculated (see Appendix C, Figure C2). In ethnicity frame, newspapers from selected media have 14 articles of her Chinese ancestry, usually by emphasizing the descent of Gu's mother or grandmother, who are both born Chinese. In territory frame, all 14 articles have mentioned Gu's living experience during summer holidays in Beijing, China.

In acculturation frame, the athlete's familiarity and fondness with Chinese traditional food and festival custom is a dominant topic, which appeared in 33.5% ($n=55$) of total articles. The second most mentioned attribute of acculturation frame in coverage of Gu turned out to be Chinese values or virtue ($n=32$), accounting for 19.5%. Gu's patriotism ($n=18$, 11.0%) and Chinese language fluency ($n=9$, 5.5%) composed another two topics in representing her intimacy toward Chinese culture.

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Although Chinese ancestry has been found the most concerned feature for the public in China when talking about naturalized athletes' national identity (Leng et al., 2021), the media did not attach much importance to Gu's ancestry. Only 8.5% of articles ($n=14$) related to this topic, equal to the frequency of territory frame that emphasizes living experience in China ($n=14$, 8.5%). Often, the two frames were mentioned in same articles. Compared with speaking about Gu's Chinese ancestry directly, the Chinese media reported more on Gu's living experience in Beijing, the birthplace of her mother. Her US-born father, meanwhile, is almost invisible in the coverage. The Beijing city was thus called the root of Gu in Chinese coverage. Two articles published by *China News Service* reported:

This girl of Chinese descent... Almost every summer, Gu returns to Beijing, China with her mother. This is the city where her mother was born and raised, and this trip is what Gu views as “coming back home”. (Chen & Wang, 2022)

As her mother is a Beijinger, every summer Gu returned to Beijing and lived there for a period of time. Therefore, Gu calls herself “the child who grew up in the hutongs.” ... Her biggest wish is to “compete in the Winter Olympics in her mother's hometown Beijing”. (Yuan, 2022)

In comparison with the former two features, Gu's acculturation into Chinese culture was more prominent. By covering the athletes' daily life and behaviors characterized by Chinese culture, the media actively stressed commonality of Gu with ordinary Chinese and imagined her connection to the nation that surpasses the limitation of ethnicity and territory.

Overall, how much the athlete is familiar with Chinese tradition was heavily emphasized, becoming the most salient attribute of acculturation. The Chinese dragon and Jiucui Hezi were found two of the most frequently mentioned traditional elements in coverage of Gu. Chinese

dragon is a Chinese totem with exclusive symbolic meaning to represent the Chinese nation. Lasting for thousands of years, the dragon signifies national cohesion to the Chinese (He, 1999). Jiucui Hezi, a Chinese traditional snack Gu ate during her break, has captured by the Chinese media and was in the spotlight. Similar language can be found in both *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* (Feb 9, 2022) and *China News Service* (Feb 19, 2022):

“It’s the New Year period and I’ve been eating quite a lot of dumplings lately; I haven’t had any Peking duck yet.” Gu quipped at the press conference, “speaking of which, I’m hungry.” (Kong, 2022)

She incorporated the element of “dragon” into her costume, helmet and skateboard, and said that “I don’t want to be human; I want to be (a) dragon.” She ate Jiucui Hezi while waiting for her score, baozi during the mixed interview, and Beijing lamb hotpot after the game... She is keen to become a Chinese “gourmet” and has made no secret of love of food. (Chen & Wang, 2022)

Chinese traditional value was found the second most valued attribute used in coverage of Eileen Gu ($n=32$, 19.5%). Similar to Jeremy Lin’ case in Taiwan region (Chen & Chiang, 2019; Su, 2014), whose Harvard degree made him a role model of Confucian values, Gu’s Stanford admittance was greatly praised in Chinese coverage of her story. *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* wrote, “Gu Ailing never left her studies behind on her way to becoming a top athlete. She finished high school early with straight A grades and scored near perfect on the SAT (the US “gaokao”) in 2020, gaining the admission to Stanford University” (Kong, 2022).

Her filial devotion to her grandmother and dependence on family members served as another significant indicator close to Chinese traditional value covered by media. Here’s how *China News Service* (Feb 8, 2022) reported:

After reaching the top podium at the awards plaza on the evening of [February] 8, Gu Ailing said, “I wanted to hug my cat and my grandmother after the game. I had talked to my grandmother about going to Italy together during summer holidays and going to the beach for a holiday. Because I’ve been training rather frantically for the past few years, I’ve had very little time at home, so I wanted to go with her to celebrate.” (Yuan, 2022)

In stories of Gu, her mother and grandmother are important figures whose presence not only suggest the girl’s Chinese ancestry but also that Gu shares similar “family-centered” value with Chinese nation. As Yu et al. (2016) argued, Chinese people attach great importance to the family, emphasizing “family harmony, unity, continuity and prosperity” (p. 76). This family-centered value, according to Yu et al. (2016), is reflected in major traditional festivals and in people’s daily greetings to each other. In Chinese coverage, greetings from Gu for the Lantern Festival also related to this value. She wished people to “spend the festival with their families and do what they like and are happy about”, a report by *China News Service* (Feb 15, 2022) said.

The last two attributes of acculturation, namely the acquisition of Chinese language ($n=9$, 5.5%) and Gu’s patriotism and loyalty to China ($n=18$, 11.0%), were relatively less mentioned in Chinese media coverage. In terms of language, it is found that media will highlight the strong “Beijing accent”, a description with distinctive local features. For example, the following story appeared in *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* (Feb 9, 2022):

Often referred to as a “Beijing girl”, Gu Ailing switched between English and Chinese freely when answering questions from journalists at the post-match press conference. Her authentic Beijing dialect made the Chinese journalists in the room feel particularly affectionate and proud. (Kong, 2022)

When reporting Gu's patriotic words or behaviors, there were several categories to which the media paid attention: (a) calling Beijing "home", (b) her pride and affection of China, (c) draped in national flags. Among them, the discourse of calling Beijing city "homeland" is quite common. For example, an interview released on February 9, 2022 reported:

Gu said, "the Beijing Winter Olympics is my first competition at home and it meant a lot to me. When I used to compete in other countries, there were French and German staff everywhere, so I often could not understand what people were talking about. But now I can understand everyone around me here, and it is a really different feeling to compete in hometown." (Zuo et al., 2022)

In comparison, there are very few direct quotes that call the country "motherland" in coverage of Gu, with only one piece by *Xinhua Daily Telegraph* (February 9, 2022) reporting:

"Winning a gold medal here is the biggest honor and the biggest dream for me," Gu Ailing said. "Thank the country for everything prepared for this Winter Olympics." (Ma et al., 2022)

The results showed that the Chinese media have articulated Gu's loyalty directly to Beijing city but not to the nation directly, and Gu was more depicted as a "Beijing girl" in the process. This also indicated a cautious stance of Chinese media in reporting Gu's patriotism, as Eileen Gu tried to avoid questions of geopolitics and her mixed-identity in interviews. "When I'm in the U.S., I'm American, but when I'm in China, I'm Chinese" (Tumin, 2022). In addition, this finding may indicate that Chinese media are utilizing a strategy previously proposed by Huang et al. (2021) to dilute the presentation of ideology and highlight the winter sports and Beijing characteristics.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study examined the coverage of Eileen Gu and explored how Chinese media report her Chinese identity during Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. Results of the analysis showed several important findings.

First, it is found that Chinese media extensively reported Eileen Gu as a member of the Chinese, and provided legitimation to Gu's naturalization with emphasis on Gu's Chinese-ness and contribution to the nation. Both themes were greatly mentioned, with very little difference in numbers of frequency. An article mentioned both often used a "national hero" narrative, in which case Gu was frequently depicted as a model national who wins Olympic medals and glory for the country.

Then, for identity construction, the exposure of three identity features in coverage of Gu was examined. Results indicated that the ethnical or territorial features, which are based on natural ties, were far less mentioned in news stories than the athlete's acculturation to Chinese culture. The familiarity with Chinese tradition occupied the largest part of articles that create Gu's Chinese-ness, followed by Chinese traditional values and patriotic words. Only a small part highlighted the athlete's acquisition of the Chinese language.

Besides, based on careful reading and context of Gu's case, it is interesting to find that Chinese media have taken a cautious approach when articulating Gu's Chinese identity and her patriotism directly. The Chinese media have avoided directly calling Gu "Chinese player" since February 15, 2022, one day after Hu's warning. Meanwhile, instead of the country, they have attempted to highlight the ties with Beijing of Gu, where she shared a similar language accent, love of local specialties, living experience, as well as loyalty to the city.

While this study contributes to understanding Chinese media's portrayal of naturalized athletes within the context of national identity and sports nationalism, it has several limitations. First, the analysis was restricted to coverage during the Olympic Games, which may have heightened attention on athletic performance. This limited timeframe could prevent identifying potential fluctuations in media framing over time (Peng, 2004). Additionally, the coding process relied partly on researchers' subjective inferences, though intercoder reliability was established.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide insights into patterns in Chinese media's coverage of immigrant athletes, an emerging talent pool for China's sports development. The emphasis on cultural factors over blood-ties or residential experience suggests Chinese media have attempted to expand the imagined community of Chinese identity beyond homogenous ethnic or territorial boundaries in the era of globalization.

As this study focused solely on Chinese media, future research could compare how origin and recipient countries' media articulate the national identity of naturalized athletes. Given China's recent embrace of athletic naturalization, it would also be valuable to identify effective media strategies for improving public acceptance of these athletes. Exploring how different coverage features shape audience perceptions could inform China's future policies on recruiting immigrant sports talents.

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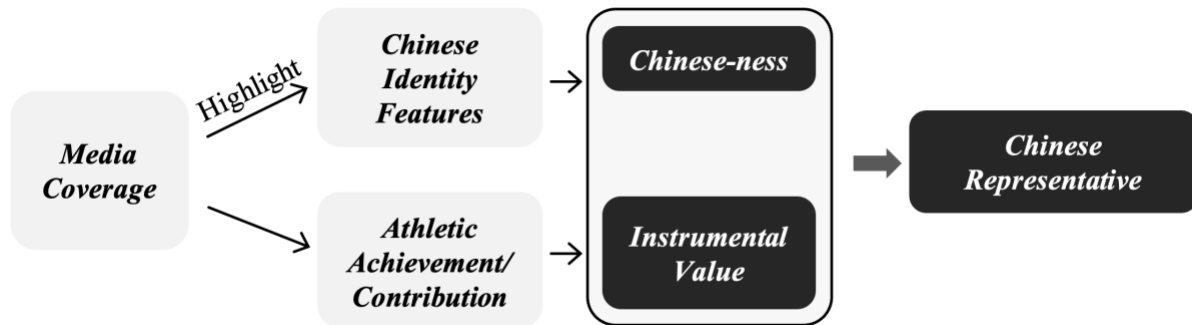
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Appendix A

Theoretical Framework for Research Questions



Appendix A. Theoretical Framework

Source: Goffman (1974); Anderson (1983); Smith (1991); Triandafyllidou (1998); Shin et al. (2020); Yung et al. (2021)

Appendix B

Sampling and Coding

Table B1. Overview of newspapers ($N=164$)

Newspapers	Number
People's Daily	10
Xinhua Daily Telegraph	13
People's Liberation Army Daily	4
Guangming Daily	14
Economic Daily	2
Science and Technology Daily	1
Ren Min Zheng Xie Bao	5
ZHONGGUO JIJIAN JIANCHA BAO	9
China News Service	74
Workers' Daily	9
China Youth Daily	14
China Women's News	5
Farmers' Daily	4

Table B2. Coding Scheme

Category	Identity features	Variables		Source
Chinese Identity	\	National player	0 = unclear 1 = presented	Su (2014); Triandafyllidou (1998)
		Foreign rivals		
Chinese-ness	Ethnicity	Ancestry	0 = no mention 1 = mention	Shor and Yonay (2010); Bechhofer and McCrone (2014); Shin et al. (2020)
	Territory	Residence/living place		
	Acculturation	Language		
		Tradition/custom		
		Values/virtue		
		Patriotism/loyalty to the nation		
Instrumental Value	\	Athletic achievement/contribution	0 = no mention 1 = mention	Shin et al. (2020); Yung et al. (2021)

Appendix C

Results

Table C1. Presentation of Gu's national identity in news articles ($N=164$)

National identity	Count of articles	Percentage (%)
Chinese identity	135	82.3
National player	124	75.6
Foreign rivals	55	33.5
Both	44	26.8
Unclear	29	17.7
Total	164	100.0

Note: *Both* indicates that articles mentioned both frames and were counted repeatedly.

Table C2. Legitimation of Gu's representativeness ($N=164$)

Thematic categories	Number	Percentage (%)
National representative	123	75.0
Chinese-ness	81	49.4
Instrumental Value	76	46.3
Both	34	20.7
Unknown	41	25.0
Total	164	100.0

Table C3. Identity features that construct Chinese-ness ($N=164$)

Identity features	Count	Percentage (%)
Ethnicity	14	8.5
Territory	14	8.5
Acculturation	78	47.6

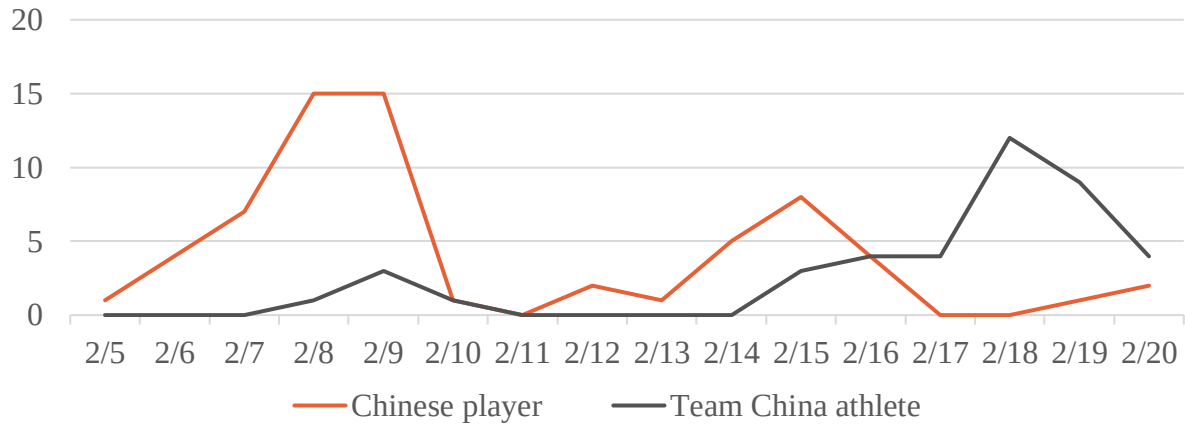


Figure C1. Usage of “national player”-like phrases describing Eileen Gu in news articles

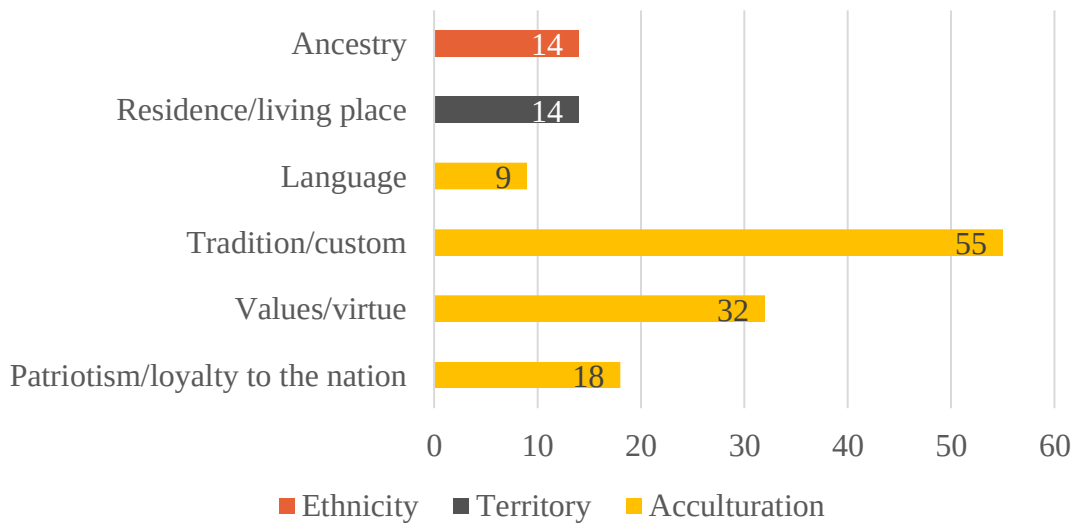


Figure C2. Attributes of Chinese identity features