



Constructing Chinese Identity of Naturalized Athletes

A Media Content Analysis of Chinese Coverage in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games

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Balancing National Identity and Olympic Glory: China's Strategic Reporting on Naturalized Athletes

- China has strategically improved winter sports performance by recruiting foreign-born naturalized athletes at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Eileen Gu, a US-born freestyle skier of Chinese descent, has achieved remarkable Olympics success for China.
- However, athlete naturalization often raises complex questions about national identity and belonging. For China, this process is particularly sensitive due to strong national consciousness, limited immigration history, and cultural homogeneity.
- This study aims to understand how Chinese media navigates this tension by examining how it portrays the national identity of Eileen Gu.



Construct Fluid National identity in Mediated Sports

Imagined Community (Anderson, 1983)

- National identity is a socially constructed concept, imagined and shared by members.
- Media plays a vital role in shaping these imagined communities through narratives, symbols, and shared experiences.

National Identity in Mediated Sports

- “Others”: International sports games enable the media to describe nation-states as rivals and create an “us versus them” discourse (Su, 2014).
- “Us”: National players are depicted in sport media symbolic figures who embody national values and aspirations, and their victory also symbolizes the success of the nation (Gleaves & Llewellyn, 2014; Fabian, 2020).

RQ1: What is the national identity of Eileen Gu presented in Chinese media coverage during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics?



Framing National Identity of Naturalized Athletes

Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974)

- Media coverage can influence public perception by selectively emphasizing certain aspects of reality.

RQ2: How did Chinese coverage of Eileen Gu frame her national identity during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics?

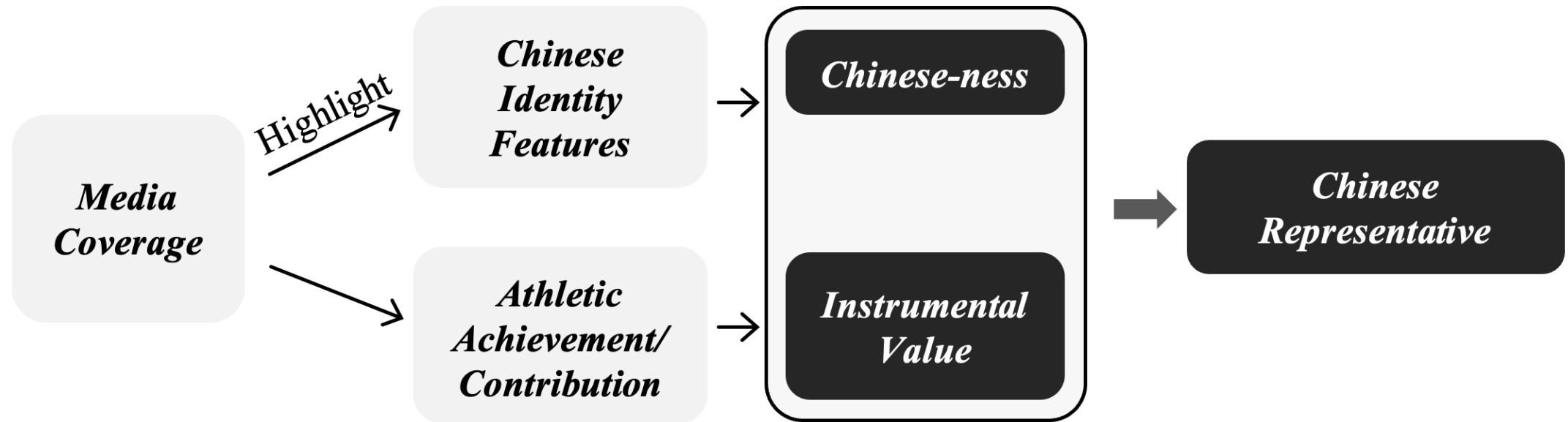
Legitimize Athlete' Representation of the Nation (Yung et al., 2021)

- **Instrumental value:** The athlete's athletic contributions to the nation's sporting success.
- **Instrumental-plus value (nation-ness):** The athlete's "genuine links" to the nation beyond athletic capabilities, including acculturations, living experiences, patriotic senses to the nations, etc.

RQ3: Which identity features (genuine links) are salient in Chinese coverage of Eileen Gu to frame her national identity during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics?



Theoretical Framework



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



Methodology

Sampling

- **Source:** 18 China's central news organizations
- **Time:** February 4, 2022, to February 20, 2022 (Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics)

Analytic Strategy

- **Content Analysis:** Identify media presentation of Eileen Gu's national identity and find salient identity features.
- **Textual Analysis:** Examine the subtle shift in language usage in news articles.

Table 1. Overview of News Coverage ($N=164$)

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



Methodology

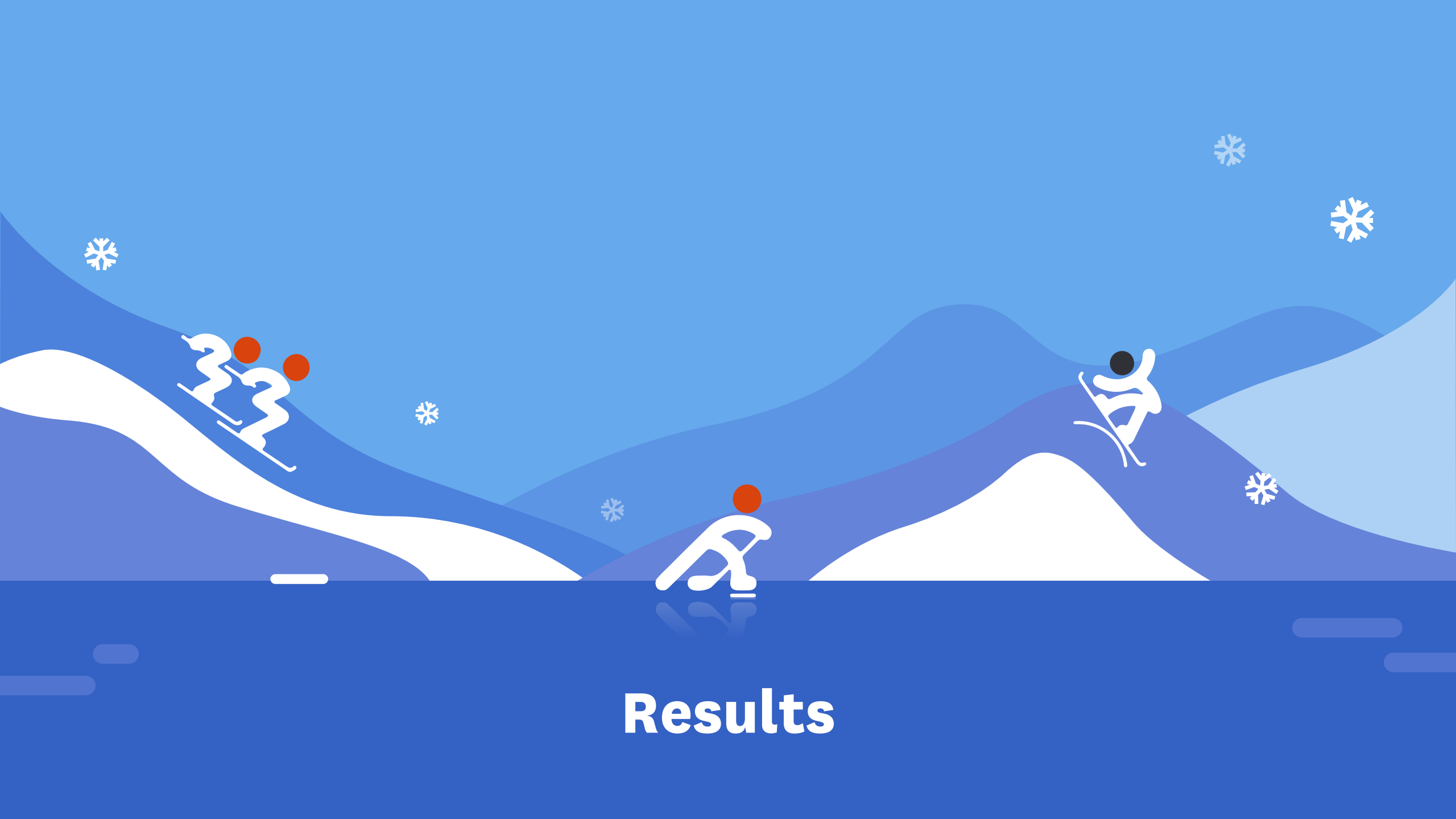
Coding Procedure

- **Analysis unit:** Single article
- **Intercoder reliability:** 0.779
- **Overall reliability:** 0.923

Table 2. Coding Scheme

Category	Identity features	Variables	
Chinese Identity	\	National player	0 = unclear 1 = presented
		Foreign rivals	
Chinese-ness	Ethnicity	Ancestry	0 = no mention 1 = mention
	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





Results

RQ1: Chinese identity of Eileen Gu

Chinese media have commonly described Gu as **one of Chinese**, with 82.3% of articles clearly reporting Gu's Chinese identity ($n=135$).

Table 3. 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



RQ1: Chinese identity of Eileen Gu

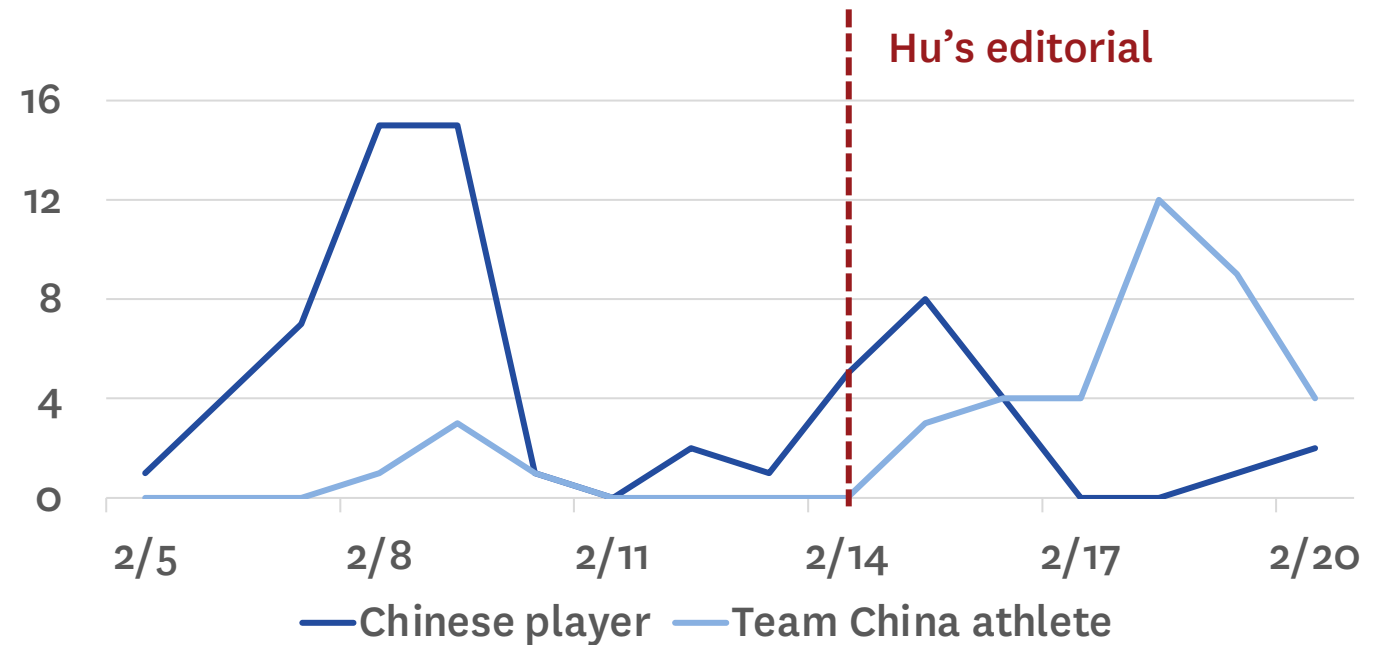
After February 15, 2022, the usage of **“Chinese player”** showed a trend of decrease. Instead, the usage of **“Team China athlete”** started to increase.

*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.”***

- Hu Xijin (February 14, 2022)

The former editor in chief of *the Global Times*

Figure 1. Usage of “national player”-like phrases describing Eileen Gu in news articles



RQ2: Depicting Eileen Gu as a National Hero

Both Gu's **Chinese-ness** ($n=81$, 49.4%) and her contribution or the **instrumental value** to the country ($n=76$, 46.3%) were highly praised, complying with the widely used “national heroes” discourse of other local-born Olympic champions in Chinese media.

Table 4. 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

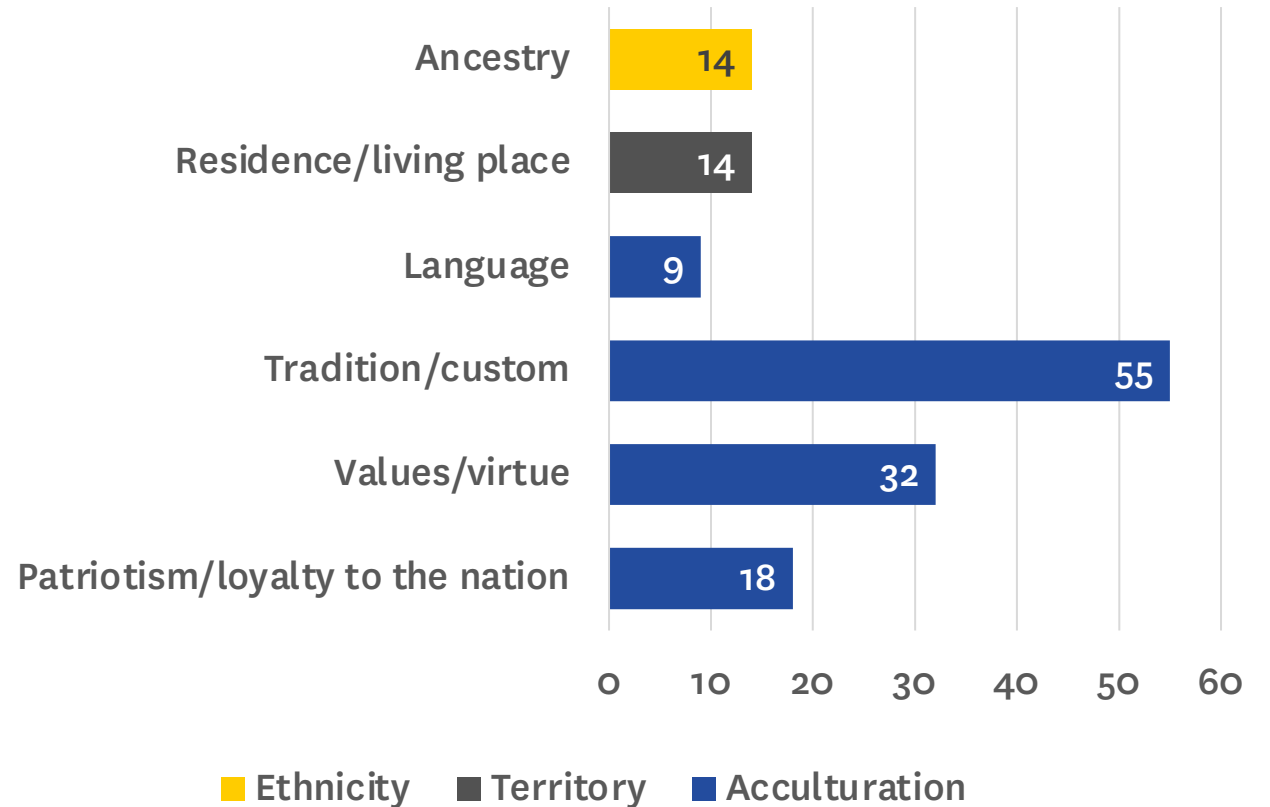


RQ3: “Being Chinese”

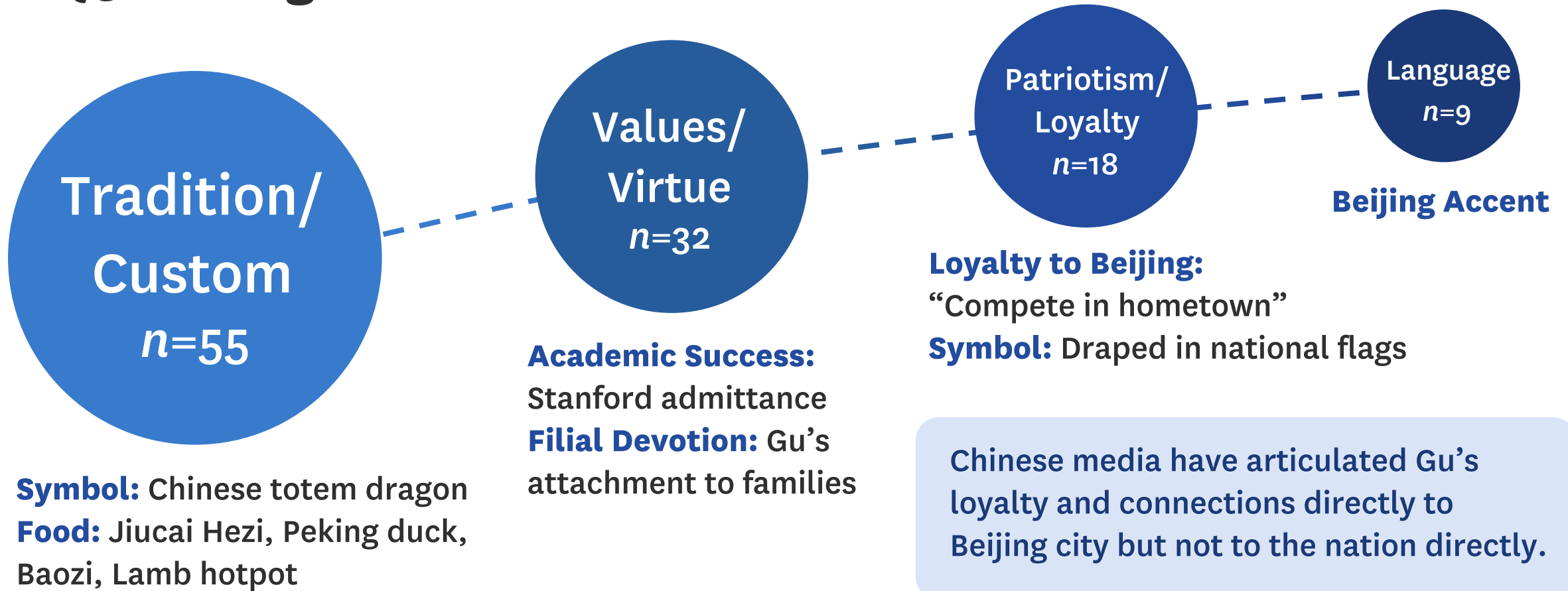
Table 5. Identity features that construct Chinese-ness ($n=81$)

Identity features	Count	Percentage (%)
Ethnicity	14	17.3
Territory	14	17.3
Acculturation	78	96.3

Gu’s **acculturation** ($n=78$, 96.3% of 81) to Chinese culture was overwhelmingly used by Chinese media. The other two features, ethnicity ($n=14$, 17.3%) and territory ($n=14$, 17.3%) often appeared in same articles.



RQ3: “Being Chinese” – Acculturation



RQ3: “Being Chinese” – Ethnicity & Territory

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 news coverage.

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, China News Service).

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, China News Service).



Conclusions

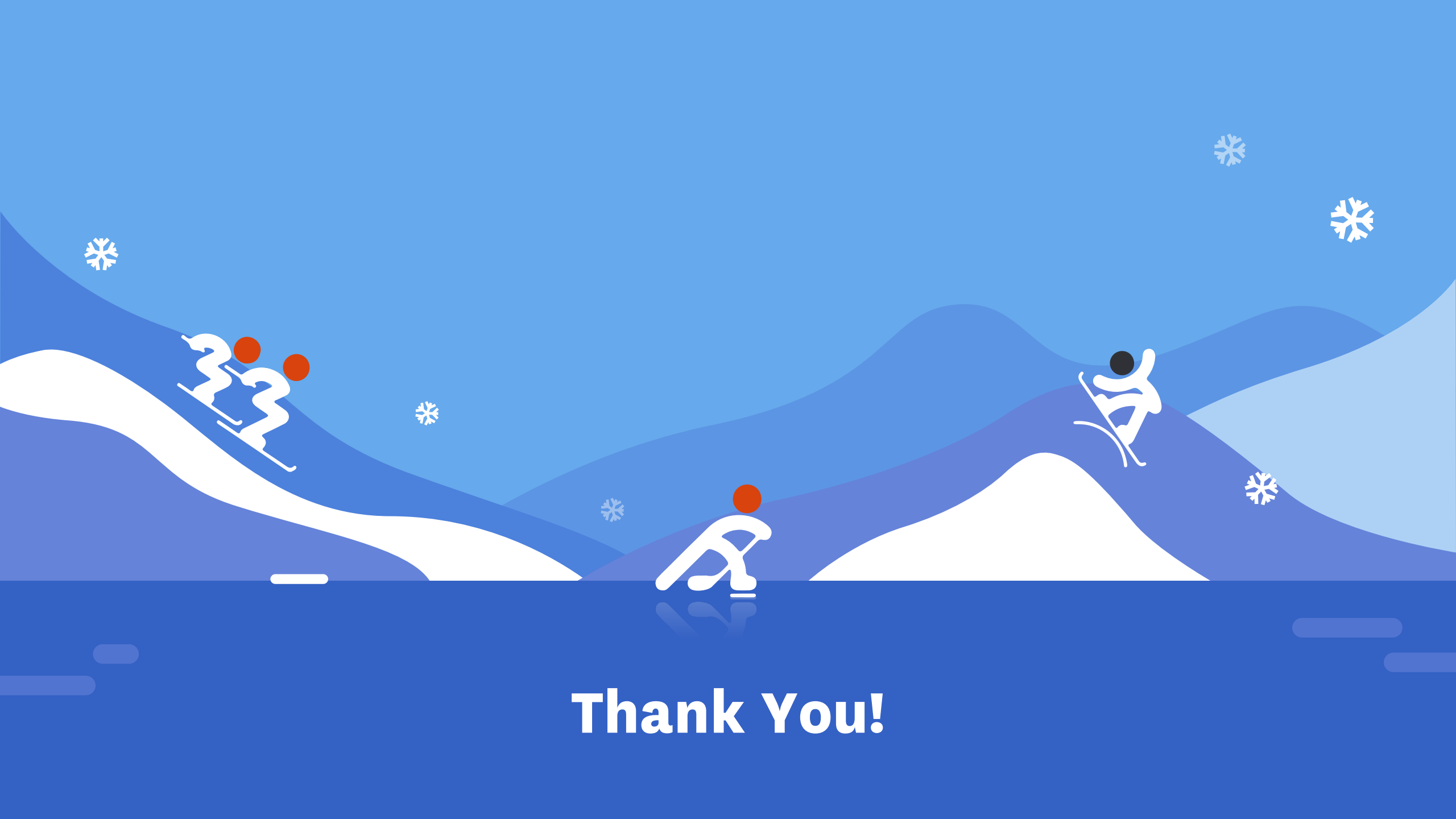
- Chinese media extensively reported Eileen Gu as a “national hero”, legitimizing her naturalization by emphasizing her Chinese-ness and contributions to the nation.
- Cultural acculturation, particularly familiarity with Chinese traditions and values, was the primary method of constructing Gu's national identity, overshadowing ethnic or territorial connections.
- Media adopted a cautious approach in articulating Gu's national identity. They highlighted more on 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. Meanwhile, one day after Hu's warning, Chinese media subtly shifted from direct calling Gu as “national player” to “Team China athlete”.



Limitations

- The analysis was restricted to coverage during the Olympic Games, which may have heightened attention on athletic performance. This will also potentially limit insights into media framing variations over time.
- Additionally, though intercoder reliability was established, the coding process somehow relied partly on researchers' subjective inferences and some ideas may overlap with each others (like “Beijing is my hometown” will be coded as both under territory and loyalty to Beijing).
- Future research could compare how origin and recipient countries' media articulate the national identity of naturalized athletes.





Thank You!