



# How the Chinese Media Shape Eileen GU in Beijing Winter Olympic: A Text Analysis of News Reports

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**Abstract.** 18-year-old Eileen Gu is the undoubted spotlight of the world with a three-medals debut in 2022 Winter Olympics. As the host country, China has crafted overwhelming media coverage towards the naturalized skier to boost national pride. This paper aims to explore the media portrayals and narratives of Gu in China through a text analysis of 341 news reports about her. It's revealed that the Chinese media adopted a depoliticized and nationalistic narrative strategy and in the cocoon of information created by the Chinese media, controversial points surrounding her such as "dual nationality" have been selectively ignored, and she has been portrayed as a naturalized athlete passionate about traditional Chinese culture, a Gen-Z feminist with dual success in terms of academics and her sports career and a female ambassador exhibiting friendliness, modesty, and generosity to her competitors and teammates. Chinese media try to capture everything related to China in Eileen Gu's behaviors on and off the arena, and through multiple details to continuously reinforce her self-identification and sense of belonging as a patriotic "naturalized athlete". Gu's family education and the impact of her mother and her grandmother as strong women in their careers are also quoted frequently as a hinted explanation for her success. Gu herself also consciously touches upon the topic of feminism and gender equality amid sports participation on public occasions, which proved to be safe and newsworthy in both America and China and fits in the media agenda well. Apart from that, the Chinese media also aim to break the stereotype of Chinese woman athletes by covering Gu's record-breaking performance of winning 3 medals, her Olympic spirit of caring for her teammates, and her business success as an ambassador for more than 20 brands.

**Keywords:** Media image; Eileen Gu; Chinese female athletes; Text analysis

## 1 Introduction

For a considerable period, men have dominated sports in China and female athletes have been relatively disadvantaged, among which the selective coverage of the media plays a notorious role. With the rise of female sports participation, however, many Chinese female athletes have emerged in the world arena and attracted attention and Eileen

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X. Ding et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2023 4th International Conference on Big Data and Social Sciences (ICBDSS 2023)*, Atlantis Highlights in Social Sciences, Education and Humanities 12,  
[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-276-7\\_47](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-276-7_47)

Gu is one of those prominent representatives with a stunning debut in the Beijing Winter Olympics. Different from any of her predecessors, Gu, as a naturalized athlete, straddles a growing geopolitical rift between China and the U.S.A, and her decision to transfer her citizenship and represent China in the Olympic Game makes her an ideal candidate for propaganda of the Communist Party of China.

## 2 Literature Review: Media portrayals of female athletes in China

Media portrayals of Chinese female athletes have been a topic of concern for scholars in the past decade. Though content analysis, Yu and Chia-Chen found that news reports paid special attention to the achievements of women divers from China. Xu and Kreshel have examined how Chinese media constructed Li Na and Ding Ning, two elite Chinese female athletes in terms of gender, nationalism, and the individualism-collectivism continuum<sup>[1]</sup>. Xu et al. compared photos posted on social media by Chinese and American athletes during the Tokyo Olympics and concluded that Chinese women athletes actively display more nationalistic ideas than their American counterparts, and male athletes wear more revealing clothes than female<sup>[2]</sup>. On the whole, research into media portrayals of Chinese female athletes since the founding of the country has roughly gone through four periods.

From 1949 to the end of the century, China was still try recovering from World War II and trying to strike a subtle diplomatic balance with the U.S.A and Soviet Union and international sports competition were usually colored with strong geopolitical sense. With such a background, Athletes competing in the national sports system and their achievements were directly linked to the image of the country<sup>[3]</sup>. Big names such as Lang Ping of the Chinese Volleyball Team, Sun Wen of the Chinese Football Team, and Zheng Haixia of the Chinese Basketball Team have led their teams to a new height on the international stage and were thus honored as role models who strived for the national honor, rose to adversity and valued team working and persevere. Selective representation of reality by media has a huge impact on the public's cognition and understanding of sports competitions, athletes, and society. And in this way, China tried to "emphasize the role of elite female athletes in the maintenance of the CPC's ideological dominance by inspiring nationalist sentiment"<sup>[4]</sup>.

At the beginning of the 21st century, since China announced hosting the 29th Olympics Game for the first time after years of efforts, the numbers of a gold medal is regarded as an indicator of economic growth and national soft power improvement. Consequently, skill-oriented sports that the Chinese good at such as diving, gymnastics, trampoline, and table tennis was primarily tasked with medal targets and several female Olympic champions such as Guo Jingjing, Liu Xuan, and He Wenna enjoyed nationwide popularity. During this period, the media focused on body narratives and stressed the "physical beauty" of female athletes when covering their stories, and nicknames such as "Diving Queen" and "Trampoline Princess" that had obvious gender implications are employed in the headlines. The media also focused on the private lives of athletes, such as their marital status or love affairs. the visual image of female athletes

in the media was marginalized and objectified by the cultural concept of masculinity<sup>[5]</sup>.

After the 2008 Beijing Olympics, middle-generation female athletes represented by Li Na and Feng Shanshan came into the spotlight. They broke through in highly-professional mainstream sports dominated by European and American countries such as tennis and golf and became exemplary figures in developing countries to break the monopoly and make new history. Words like "The First" and "History-Making" are often seen in media headlines<sup>[6]</sup>.

Entering the Rio and Tokyo Olympic period, the grand narratives of national glory and sports dominance are being diluted, and the media portrayals of the new generation of female athletes are becoming diversified and civilianized. New stars of the post-00s sports world, represented by Tsinghua University student Yang Qian, the youngest Olympic champion Quan Hongchan, and Skier Eileen Gu, have become the focus of media and audiences' attention for their academic ability, family environment, and commercial value. It's a top-down administrative directive trying to break the western stereotype of China as an athlete factory greedy for gold medals<sup>[7]</sup>.

To sum up, the evolving media portrayals of Chinese female athletes reflect the country's economic and political development and a key trend is to promote the dual liberation of women's body and spirit, strengthen national identity and enhance the country's external image<sup>[8]</sup>. However, it is still difficult for them to get out of the predicament of "being stared" and there is still much media coverage focusing on amplifying the femininity of female athletes to balance their masculine athletic performance<sup>[9]</sup>. With more and more Gen-Z female athletes appearing on the world stage, the attention to their media portrayals has become particularly important, but little research has yet focused specifically on this group or individual. Under this circumstance, we believe it's necessary to probe into the evolving media portrayals of Chinese female athletes especially the young generation, among which Eileen Gu emerges as a desirable subject for the case study as she has both the universality as a representative of the new generation of Chinese female athletes and particularities that deserve extra attention. On the one hand, she is a young, competent, and social media-savvy champion like her peers and representing China to compete with western countries in skiing. On the other hand, she enjoys unparalleled media attention in both America and China as a naturalized athlete and achieves dual success in schoolwork and her sports career. Therefore, by making a comprehensive text analysis of coverage of Eileen Gu, this paper aims to figure out how Chinese media build up a perfect female athlete that's totally different from those in the past on its home-hosted Beijing Olympics and thereby boost national pride through a series of innovative media narratives.

### 3 Methodology

First of all, we searched in the Wisers News Database with the keyword "Eileen Gu", and grabbed 341 news pieces from June 1, 2019, to April 14, 2022, via various outlets including newspapers, TV, magazines, applications, etc. Then we used KH Coder, a text data mining software developed by Japanese scholar Koichi Higuchi, for further

in-depth text analysis. The software has powerful text mining functions with word frequency and similarity calculation, lexical analysis, contextual keyword search, automatic classification and clustering, summary production, and visualization (e.g., bar chart, line chart, mesh chart, scatter chart, bubble chart, and cluster analysis tree chart) [10].

The above 341 reports were imported into KH Coder for pre-processing and word frequency calculation and the top 100 high-frequency words were manually cleaned to further eliminate prepositions, adjectives, or nouns with no practical meaning, such as "more" and "big", etc. Meanwhile, sports-related terms or fixed expressions such as "freestyle skiing", "Qualifying Round" and "Beijing Winter Olympic Games" are manually added to the pick-up keyword list to ensure accuracy. Based on the word frequency statistics, a keyword co-occurrence network is developed.

## 4 Results

With the automatic processing of the text mining tool KH Coder and manual data cleaning, a list of high-frequency keywords is generated as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Top 30 High-frequency Keywords from Chinese Coverages about Eileen Gu

No	Key Words	Frequency	No	Key Words	Frequency
1	Eileen Gu	3628	16	World Champions	300
2	Freestyle Skiing	971	17	Difficulty	290
3	Final	953	18	Performance	282
4	Champion	727	19	Su Yiming	274
5	Gold Medal	645	20	Man	266
6	Skill	624	21	Arena	262
7	Beijing Winter Olympic	577	22	Ranking	259
8	Training	508	23	Team China	238
9	Achievements	495	24	History	237
10	Slopestyle	465	25	Represent	229
11	World Cup	386	26	Like	227
12	Take the gold	366	27	Advancing	222
13	Qualifying Round	347	28	Fault	212
14	Season	336	29	Target	212
15	Mother	335	30	Appearance	205

By connecting all the keywords, it's clear that news media coverage of Eileen Gu is focused on the fact that she, as one of the Team China, won gold medals in big air and halfpipe and a silver medal in slopestyle at the Beijing Winter Olympic. To be more specific, most of the Chinese report will cover her advancing path from the qualifying round to the final, difficulty of her moves, her training, and faults in the arena. Her



she has charmed and her followers rushed to comfort her on social media platforms. This case, under the narrative of Chinese media, demonstrates that people who used to be obsessed with gold medals only now enjoy the match itself and show more empathy towards athletes.

The blue cluster is focused on the past achievements Gu has made in the past seasons. As early as June 2019 when Eileen Gu announced switching her national affiliation to represent China at the 2022 Olympic Winter Games, the Chinese media started the agenda setting and closely followed her story in the coming three years. Except for scattering coverage of her outstanding performance and gold medals winning in major games like the FIS Alpine Ski World Cup, World Snowboarding Championships, and X Games, etc, three personal documentaries about her sports journey and training routines are also launched, which is a privilege that none of Gu's Chinese predecessors have enjoyed. It implies that the efforts to build Eileen Gu as a star of Beijing Winter Olympic propaganda has started years ago and the massive media coverage of Eileen Gu comes from political instructions from the top down.

The first documentary *Peak of Ice and Snow* is directed by the Chinese state-owned media organ CCTV and focuses on how Gu strikes a balance between her school learning and daily training with the help of her mother Gu Yan. The second one, named *Eileen Gu: I am 18 years old*, is made and promoted by Chinese Internet giant Tencent and supported by her major sponsor Mengniu, a nationwide-famous milk brand. The last one is a 46-minute-long episode from a Tencent online documentary series called *My Legacy and I*, and it captures the whole process of which Gu managed to recover from the four-month-long rest due to the pandemic lockdown and improve her skills. To sum up, the shared narrative behind these documentaries is that Gu is a Chinese world champion with both borne gifts and typical diligence that Chinese people are usually admired for.

Celebrities' return to China has always been an extremely popular media narrative employed by CPC to stimulate patriotism among the mass. Gu's story is nothing different from that of professors Shi Yigong and Yan Ning, marking a self-explanatory victory amid the ideological divide and increasingly intensive competition of global talents around all sectors. Patriotism is closely linked to national identity, which refers to people's perception of the country to which they belong, and includes both identifications with the country's political system, the operation of power, and cultural identification with fellow nationalities, symbolic cultures, etc.<sup>[11]</sup>. The authority is well versed in subtle infiltration propaganda and Chinese media have been trying overwhelmingly hard to reinforce Gu's identity as a Chinese by making a fuss about her behaviors on and off the track. She is shaped by the Chinese media as a Beijing Girl speaking fluent Mandarin with strong accents and even ate leek boxes while waiting for the judges' scores, which are presented to the global audience through live-streaming. Gu's love for Chinese snacks is also highlighted by President Xi during the awarding ceremony and triggered a new round of news coverage. She also completed her competition debut dressed in a ski suit printed with a traditional Chinese golden dragon, which is claimed to be a "symbol of energy, confidence, and sometimes magic and "will bring me fortune during the competition". Every choice of food, clothing or language is "hinting at love of Chinese culture has been obsessed over in local media."

## 4.2 Feminism on and off the arena

The secondary narrative consists of the yellow and purple clusters in Figure 1. The yellow cluster is made up of keywords like history, mother, girls, fashion, life, and love, which revealed that the media usually dig into the impact of her family, her achievement, and her fashion career. By connecting all the dots, it's easy to figure out the underlying media narrative: An American-Chinese girl, under the guidance of her mother and grandmother, chose to practice men-dominated skiing sports and finally make ground-breaking achievements. With all her achievements in the arena, she becomes a popular fashion model trusted by brands and aspires more girls to join winter sports. It's such a perfect narrative well-received by the Chinese and it also explains the reason why Gu is so popular and is named the most beloved player for her charm in a survey conducted by a state-owned media China Youth Daily.

Gender theory suggests that people's gender consciousness is not innate, but develops gradually in response to their family and social environment. Studies have also shown that children of highly educated and working mothers are more "de-traditionalized" in their gender perceptions. Gu comes from a single-parent family where both her mother Gu Yan and her grandmother Feng Guozhen have excellent educational backgrounds and work experiences and are good at sports. Gu Yan graduated from Peking University and Sandford University and later became a Wallstreet investor and part-time skiing coach while Feng used to be a basketball player in her schooldays and spent most of her time in the Ministry of Transport of PRC as a senior engineer. It's not surprising why Gu has repeatedly mentioned that "My mother and grandmother are my biggest idols, both of them are very confident, brave, and powerful women". The environment of growing up with excellent female parents has given Gu the main strength to break through gender stereotypes. For example, when she was a child, her mother, Gu Yan, led her to try skiing, horseback riding, archery, surfing, and many other adventurous sports to develop and discover her true hobby. At the same time, Gu Yan also often encouraged her not to care about success, whether it was a competition or a college entrance exam, but to find her passion. The inspiring education of female parents has given Gu indomitable courage and self-confidence, which explains why she can achieve excellent results in skiing, and constantly motivate young women to break through themselves and make bold attempts.

New York Times commented that it seems to be a multigenerational, multicultural story of three strong women <sup>[12]</sup> and Gu's family roots, the cultural bonds with her mother and grandmother is a very popular storyline in China. Additionally, Gu spoke about her wish to inspire new Chinese skiers, particularly women and girls in nearly every interview. "I guess my biggest message is for the young people out there, especially young girls, to not feel discouraged, especially in extreme sports. I just wanted to encourage all those young girls out there to keep it up and keep doing their own thing <sup>[13]</sup>." When asked about body anxiety in China, she also commented that "Beauty is not about being slim with an unhealthy diet. It's about your power and competence in your profession <sup>[14]</sup>." Her quote went viral on the Chinese short video platform Douyin and won millions of likes among the netizens. Feminism is proved to be quite a safe and politically right choice both in America and China given that the #MeToo campaign is

in full swing in American and gender dichotomy sparks endless discussions on the Chinese Internet in recent years. In this way, wall-rider Gu, with the interpretation of the media, is regarded as an outstanding feminist in eyes of the Gen-Z generation, especially for young girls in China.

The light purple and pink cluster consist of five keywords: high school, college, Sandford, important, and passion. The keyword chain here reflected another fact that Gu is a curve wrecker admitted into the prestigious Sandford University with a high score of 1580 in the SAT examination. The reason why Chinese media mentioned this fact so many times is that professional players in China are usually bad at academics while Gu is an exception with dual success in both schoolwork and her sports career. Wide media coverage of Gu's story also exacerbates the anxieties among the middle-class community in China as Gu has set a perfect example for their children. They are longing for making a class leap through elite education and immigration amid ongoing social status entrenchment and the widening gap between rich and poor. Ironically, Gu benefits from such social anxiety and cashes in big in China with numerous partnerships including global luxury brands Louis Vuitton, Tiffany & Co., and Swiss watchmaker IWC Schaffhausen, as well as Chinese E-commerce giant JD and coffee chain Luckin Coffee. It is estimated by CBN Data that Gu earned about USD 31.4 million in 2021 which makes her one of the highest-earning female athletes in the world <sup>[15]</sup>. She also graced the cover of top luxury lifestyle magazines, including Bazaar, Marie Claire, Cosmopolitan, ELLE, and Vogue, which marks a new height that never has other Chinese female athletes managed to reach. In this way, the authority aims to break the stereotype of Chinese female athletes who used to be perceived as masculine, introverted, obedient, and unattractive in the sport market. It is proved to be right for the Chinese media to bet on a feminist narrative for Gu as her personality and initiative well echo with the rising Chinese woman middle class exhibiting strong consuming ability and tending to buy brands that advocate the independence and equality they yearn for.

### 4.3 Practices of Olympic Spirit

The third narrative comprises of the orange, green and purple clusters. It mainly demonstrates Gu's courtesy for her opponents and teammates and unwavering efforts to challenge herself by trying movements with new high difficulty. On the Olympic freestyle skiing big air held in Zhangjiakou, Gu was faced with a great challenge from Switzerland's Mathilde Gremaud and French skier Tess Ledux, but she managed to stomp her first-ever left side double cork 1620 on her final jump which secured a gold medal for her. After the high-class final, Gu approached the frustrated silver medalist Tess Ledux who hid her face and cried after the competition and hugged her. It is not the first time that Chinese media tries to highlight the personality and charm of Gu in the arena. On Women's halfpipe final, Gu expressed her concern about her teammate Zhang Kexin who fell and hit her head and spoke highly of her performance in the interview, "My teammates performed very well. I am also learning from Zhang Kexin, she competed in the last Winter Olympic Games and has more experience than me, I hope to learn from her." In eyes of Chinese media, warm and heart-touching acts of such kind are in



line with the new Olympic Motto Faster, Higher, Stronger, Together and fully demonstrated the friendliness, modesty, and generosity of Chinese athletes to the world.

The success of Gu, to a great extent, represents the best Chinese athletes of the post-00s generation, and has also prompted the media to discuss how the new generation of Chinese sports talent is being nurtured. The common conclusion that Chinese media arrive at is that Gu is a fusion of Chinese and Western cultural traits and can be seen as the epitome of China's opening up to the outside world over the years. She has repeatedly emphasized that "sports have no borders" and encouraged everyone to "build friendships with an open mind, keep learning and make the world a better place". This not only conveys positive, healthy, and uplifting values to the new generation but also tells a more exciting Chinese story to the world most vividly and palpably.

#### 4.4 Empowerment of social media

Except for the help of Chinese media, social media also plays a significant role in the image building Gu. Like her peer at home and abroad, Gu is one of the aborigines of the Internet who shares moments of her daily life regularly and is even active on her social media hours ahead of her match. Gu considers herself "not an idol, but a friend of everyone" and usually interacts with her followers in comments. Such a friendly two-way interaction makes her "relatable and respectable" image more vivid and three-dimensional. In the past, the relationship between athletes and audiences was like Metz's analysis of the movie viewing mechanism, where both parties were always "in a more or less unsatisfied state"<sup>[16]</sup>, with limited possibilities for dialogue and a closed communication style. With the advent of social media, athletes began to approach their audiences through a panoramic media field. Especially for Generation Z athletes represented by Eileen Gu, have a strong desire to express themselves and can easily play with social media in various ways like Plog, Vlog, and broadcasting. Moreover, her audience, the Gen-Z generation, in particular, sent tons of encouragement and compliments to Gu, mainly in response to her performance on the track. They also sent holiday and birthday wishes to Gu, reminding her to pay attention to safety in both competition and training with affectionate nicknames like "my dear friend", and "princess Eileen". These distinctive intergenerational nicknames are common expressions used by Generation Z on Internet and they have built an "imaginary community" in the digital social media space, and conveyed their resonance through their discourse practice and symbolic interaction, thus consolidating their intergenerational identification with Eileen Gu as the model of Generation Z<sup>[17]</sup>.

Many players' social media accounts are usually managed by professional agencies who know better how to better use social media, and public opinion winds to create a better buzz for themselves and thereby gain benefits such as winning more sponsors. Objectively speaking, social media has made Chinese female athletes more palpable, achieving a balance between storytelling and commercialization. The highly developed social media has, on the one hand, freed Chinese female athletes from the dilemma of being "gazed at" and "portrayed" and regained the right to self-expression. On the other hand, social media platforms have also allowed the influence and reputation of female athletes to be quantified and materialized to the greatest extent through the number of

fans and comments, which opens up a broader commercialization space for them. The balance of self-storytelling and commercialization on social media platforms has brought Chinese female athletes a step closer to freedom and self-actualization. It also explains Eileen Gu's popularity and has been proven effective by her compatriots like WNBA player HAN Xu, and tennis new star ZHENG Qinwen as well.

## 5 Conclusion

To sum up, Eileen Gu, as a new female athlete icon, emerged as a perfect puppet for Chinese propaganda due to a combination of her transferred citizenship, her historical achievements in winter sports and her family background and personal charm. Based on these conditions, China has kicked off its propaganda machine three years old and its media strategies could be boiled down to three perspectives, namely patriotism, feminism and Olympic spirit. Gu is shaped as a naturalized athlete passionate about traditional Chinese culture, a Gen-Z feminist with dual success in terms of academics and her sport career and a Chinese sportsmanship ambassador exhibiting friendliness, modesty and generosity to her competitors and teammates.

The three narratives above are proved to be really effective and well absorbed by the Chinese audience with all age ranges as most of them are isolated from the global Internet with a long-standing firewall and the stated-own media would never write about controversies about Gu due to strict censorship. Thus, in the cocoon of information created by the Chinese authority, Gu dominated the trending topics on both news media outlets and social media platforms during the whole Winter Game period with a stunning follower soar of 10 million within five days on the nationwide popular short video platform Douyin, and 1.5 million in merely one day on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter. In fact, discussions surrounding Eileen Gu have long gone beyond the realm of sports and become a social and cultural phenomenon worthy of consideration and it did demonstrate the Chinese media's innovations in storytelling and the liberation of Chinese female athletes.

However, the flawless image of Gu collapses soon after her return to America alongside tempting fame and financial rewards as a viral celebrity. It is such a shameful lesson for the Chinese to come to know via news imported from western countries via VPN that the hero and idol they admired seem to be a fence-sitter trying to behave in the way people like in China and America respectively. Illusory as Gu's media image is, the years-long campaign yielded satisfying results since Gu's completed her mission and win big with her dual nationality while the authority managed to achieve their propaganda goals and win more gold medals in the home-hosted Winter Olympics.

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