

Embodying the nation and the political contention: naturalised athletes changing (sportive) nationalism at the Beijing 2022 Olympics

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Abstract

During the 2022 Winter Games, China has lined its team up with an unprecedented number of athletes born and raised abroad. The two American-born sportswomen of Chinese descent, Gu Ailing and Zhu Yi, have been in the news spotlight for renouncing their US citizenship to compete under the Chinese flag, thus being caught in the middle of the Sino-US tensions. The article has a twofold purpose: on the one hand, it explores to what extent the US-China rivalry makes athletes pawns in the hands of states that struggle for supremacy; on the other hand, it seeks to show how the emergence of the phenomenon of athletes' naturalisation may contribute to the creation of a "multicultural nationalism" while leading to a surge of "negative" sportive nationalism, which assumes that the national interest comes at another nation's expense. The naturalisation of talents is no longer uncommon. Still, the way in which it is increasingly used in the context of the Games to feed the rivalry between states and shape the meaning of national identity is under-explored and therefore worth investigating.

Keywords: Sportive nationalism; US-China rivalry; global talent race; naturalisation; Olympic citizenship.

1. Introduction

In the span of a week, two American-born athletes of Chinese descent have been in the spotlight at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. The skier Gu Ailing and figure skater Zhu Yi,

born and raised in the US, opted to compete for China generating very different responses from the general audience. While Gu won gold and was hailed in China as a national hero (Global Times, 2022a), Zhu faltered on the ice during two consecutive showings and was accused by Chinese netizens of bringing “shame” to her adopting country (SCMP, 2022a). In stark contrast, some US media depicted Gu as a “traitor” and “ungrateful” like “the corrupt and weak corporations of America” that “turned their back on the United States of America in exchange for Chinese riches” (Fox News, 2022). Zhu was instead narrated as the one who “gave up US citizenship to compete for China” to then be ashamed on Chinese social media for performing badly (USA Today, 2022). Once seen as cultural ambassadors who could help build bridges between the two countries through sport, the young athletes have found themselves embroiled in deteriorating US-China relations (CNN, 2022a).

The article aims to explore the *changing* role of athletes and sportive nationalism in the contemporary Olympics through the lens of Gu Ailing and Zhu Yi’s experience at the 2022 Beijing Winter Games. The word “changing” is used both as a verb and as an adjective. The first refers to how the political contention between Washington and Beijing may transform athletes into pawns of the US-China “Great Game” and how athletes, in turn, may shape the trajectories of such a rivalry by opting for one Olympic citizenship rather than another or by giving lessons of coexistence between the two rival countries. The second looks at how changing athletes, meaning naturalised players increasingly trapped in the US-China contention, may lead to a surge of a “multicultural nationalism” – defined by Modood (2019) as an alternative political idea to monocultural nationalism – which takes on antagonistic tones that risk provoking a negative nationalism backlash. To piece together this puzzle, we investigate the following bidirectional relationships: 1. US-China rivalry *changing* athletes: athletes *changing* the US-China rivalry; 2. *Changing* athletes: *changing* (sportive) nationalism.

The first dimension investigates how athletes may be affected by the competition between states to extend their influence through talent-for-citizenship exchanges and how, in turn, athletes may shape the geopolitical game through their performances, statements and decisions to swap passports.

The second nexus sheds light on how changing athletes, who are increasingly swapped up in the states’ game, may unwillingly shape the nature of sportive nationalism towards something beyond the mere aspiration to see national athletes excel in the international arena but vis-à-vis the rival nation-state. In this sense, we explore to what extent the athletes’ naturalisation may promote the creation of fluid and multiple identities through processes of integration as well as differentiation, fuelling a “negative sportive nationalism” which risks cultivating a certain anti-American and anti-Chinese sentiment.

The article provides theoretical and empirical contributions that may help push forward the understanding of athletes’ politicisation in the fraying of US-China relations as well as its possible impact on what being Chinese and American means. The research places particular emphasis on Beijing’s perspective for several reasons. First, because of China being the hosting country of the 2022 Olympics and therefore highly committed to the creation of sentiments of unity and integration among the population as well as to stressing the exceptionalism of Beijing’s mega-event (Cabula and Pochettino, 2023). The second motivation concerns the level

of engagement in the public discussion on the two athletes' performances, which has reached historical highs on Chinese social media while comparatively remaining overshadowed in Western social networks. Finally, we noticed that while the academic literature widely explored the relationship between sport and nationalism in China (Lu and Hong, 2013), there is a lack of coverage on the role of naturalised athletes in shaping Chinese sportive nationalism. This gap is even more evident in the case of Chinese American naturalised athletes, who represent a typical example of an "integration paradox" as they become subjects of public debates on patriotism and national identification while being symbols of ethnic diversification and transnational migration processes (Seiberth *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, despite media playing a key role in shaping narratives of nationhood (Billig, 1995), it emerges a lack of knowledge on the manifestations of sportive nationalism in Chinese media and social networks to which only some recent publications have sought to compensate (Li *et al.*, 2023). On these premises, the article provides a literature review on the nexus between sport, nationalism and naturalised Olympic athletes and moves on with a discussion on the relationship between the US-China rivalry, Sino-American naturalised athletes and sportive nationalism. The content and discourse analysis of the selected Chinese and American media investigates the two countries' appropriation of athletes' origins and cultural heritage to showcase the strategic use of Olympic citizenship. The article also performs a thematic analysis which explores the attitudes of Chinese netizens towards the naturalised Olympians and, more broadly, regarding the theme of athletes' naturalisation.

2. Sport, nationalism and naturalised Olympic athletes

Although sport is increasingly *transnational* in its institutional structure and "resolutely *international*" in its meaning, a fundamental role is still played by national, regional and local identities (Rowe, 2006, p. 431). The "anchorage in common cultural tradition" and the linking of national symbols with practices make sport an "invented tradition" inseparable from nationalism (Hargreaves, 2000; Hobsbawm, 1983). Despite the contrasting theoretical approaches applied in sociological and political studies of sport, the relationship between sport, nationalism and national identity is widely accepted (Whigham, 2021). By contributing to the concretisation of the nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) – which entails an exercise of abstract thought due to the impossibility of a single person knowing every aspect of a nation –, sports such as football make the imagined community of millions way more real as a sportive team of named people (Hobsbawm, 1990, p.143). Although the relevance of the concept of "imagined community" for the relationship between sport and nationalism, many scholars have argued that the community of the nation is concretely created through "habitus codes" (Maguire and Poulton, 1999) and unnoticed, ordinary signs of nationalism, labelled by Billig as "banal nationalism" (1995). By providing fans with an everyday and banal practice of the nation, sport creates a unifying sense of national identity through which the national populace could perform its "membership of the nation" (Hobsbawm, 1983). Whether such mobilisation of national sentiments is subconscious (according to Billig's definition of "banal

nationalism”) or conscious (as argued by Skey and Antonsich, 2017), sport represents a means for the daily reproduction of “the ‘established’ self-group of the nation and othering of the ‘outsiders’ of competitor nations” (Whigham, 2021, p.1840). In drawing the line between those who belong to the nation and those who are excluded from it, elite athletes play a key role (Bairner, 2001; Maguire and Poulton, 1999). By being the physical embodiment of the nation, representative athletes set the boundaries of national identity and can generate with their victories a surge in national pride and international confidence that strengthens the sense of national belonging (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008; Murray, 2018). However, in times when the recruitment of elite foreign athletes for national teams in sporting championships has become a common practice, the meaning of national belonging turned out to be controversial. The “thick” citizenship typical of athletes born and raised in the nationality they represent is growingly challenged by the “thin” type of citizenship, whereby athletes have never been associated with the country they play for (Oonk, 2020). The choice to compete under a “flag of convenience” (The Daily Mail, 2011) that characterises the phenomenon of athletes’ naturalisation – the practice of renouncing one’s own original nationality to voluntarily acquire the nationality of another country – is sparking numerous debates. A clear example is given by the 2012 “Plastic Brits”, which questioned the Britishness of foreign-born athletes representing Great Britain and depicted them as insincere, opportunistic and dishonest representatives of the nation (Maguire and Poulton, 1999; Jansen and Skey, 2020).

When it comes to naturalised Chinese American athletes, “debates over who counts as part of the nation, and on what grounds, become ever more contested” (Jansen and Skey, 2020). This is because manifestations of Chinese nationalism with anti-American sentiments and the expressions of Sinophobic narratives from the US have gained new momentum. Anti-Western and anti-American Chinese nationalism has a history that traces back to the last century, in particular after 1989 when it was created and encouraged by the Chinese Communist Party based on the past humiliations suffered by the West (Xu, 1998). However, in the last decades, it has been taken up independently by new generations of Chinese (Gries, 2005) making today’s identity discussions on Chinese social media necessarily pass through anti-foreigner and anti-American sentiments (Goldin, 2022). Likewise, modern scholarship has pointed out the many commonalities between the “Yellow Peril” discourse of the last centuries and the rise of Western Sinophobia during the Covid-19 (Zhang, 2021), which exacerbated the existing anti-Asian prejudices and served as a means of “nullifying the legitimacy of Chinese presence and expansion as a global power” (Ratuva, 2022). On the assumption that as Chinese nationalism rises so does anti-Americanism and vice versa, we claim that sports mega-events may contribute to the construction of a national consciousness that features anti-American and anti-Chinese sentiments. Indeed, as the representatives of the nation, athletes are bearers of countries’ national interest which, according to Morgenthau’s realist view, lies in “the protection of physical, political and cultural identity against encroachments by other nation-states” (1952). This means that while acting as “broad-brush diplomatic tools to increase a state’s international prestige” (Grix and Brannagan, 2016), world-class athletes may also work as a militant source and “proxy warriors” who fight the war for national survival and supremacy (Hoberman, 1984). With national identity often overriding gendered identity, sportswomen could also be

considered warriors who must fight for their nation (Bowes and Bairner, 2018). In light of the growing rivalry for global hegemony between the US and China, competing under the Chinese flag may entail running against the “American hegemony and its Perils” (MFA PRC, 2023) while performing Americanness may imply countering “the most serious long-term challenge to the international order (...) posed by the People’s Republic of China” (US Department of State, 2022). As such, athletes’ identities may fall into a binary logic that excludes the possibility of being Chinese while being American. By widening the traditional meaning of national identity and contributing to the creation of fluid identities, the phenomenon of naturalisation helps build an ideal citizenry (in defining who should be admitted to the national team) and the “Other” against which the ideal citizen is defined (Pottie-Sherman, 2013). By setting the boundaries between the national “us” and the external “others”, the governments’ strategic use of naturalisation might make athletes feel trapped as “an either this or that”. The application of a zero-sum mentality to naturalised sportspeople between China and the US that forces athletes to be either American or Chinese may transform them into objects of the game of states. From this perspective, we argue that elite athletes may not only embody the nation but also the political contention.

The history of the Olympic Games provides many pieces of evidence on how world-class athletes, both men and women, may act as fierce partisans of their country. One of the earliest examples traces back to Peter O’Connor, an Irish track-and-field athlete who competed for Great Britain in the 1906 Athens Games (also known as “Intercalated Games”) and protested by climbing up the Olympic flagpole with an Irish flag for being considered a British competitor (McCarthy, 2010). Again, during the opening ceremony of the 1960 Games in Rome, Taiwan’s athletes entered with no name on their uniform because the International Olympic Committee (IOC) forced them to compete under the name Formosa instead of the Republic of China (Xu, 2008). Coming to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, remarkable was the Ukrainian skeleton athlete Vladyslav Heraskevych who displayed after his athletic performance the sign “No war in Ukraine” on a blue-and-yellow piece of paper matching the colours of his country’s flag (CNN, 2022b).

The above-mentioned are just a few of the many examples of athletes’ activism and partisanism, which have always characterised the Games and will most likely continue to do so. Yet, today’s presence of a measurable contention where great powers seek to enhance their influence in relation to one another leads the international sports arena to reflect a condition of states’ competition in which athletes risk being swapped up. Nonetheless, the Olympians’ attempts to set new “role models” with the mission to make sport not “divisive” but “all about inclusivity” may have a significant impact on the evolution of the rivalry for global hegemony and sportive nationalism (The New York Times, 2022). How great powers’ rivalry is making sportspeople the object of today’s political contention? And to what extent, in turn, representative athletes may shape the trajectories of the US-China competition and sportive nationalism? The next sections seek to provide a deeper understanding of the theoretical underpinnings that facilitate decoding these two far-reaching questions.

3. US-China rivalry changing athletes

Despite its growing prominence, the phenomenon of athletes' naturalisation has not garnered enough attention neither within the debate on China-US hegemonic rivalry nor in the academic literature on sport and International Relations. To contribute to the understanding of such an under-explored issue, this section seeks to conceptualise the nexus between the race for talent in the sports domain and the US-China contention.

The recruitment of global talents has emerged as a further fracture in the two countries' quest for global supremacy. In a context where technological competition between Washington and Beijing represents the bone of economic contention, talent flow is indeed at its core. As Shachar suggests, sporting nationality or Olympic citizenship is "the tip of the iceberg of a larger trend" of "picking winners" through fast-tracked and strategic grants of citizenship to advance a country's stature (2011, p. 2102). In the United States, the talent-for-citizenship strategy has long been utilised to advance national interests in the most diverse fields, from academia and media to science, technology and sports. America's capability to attract global talent has represented a unique competitive advantage that has been crucial to achieving the status of a global superpower. Today's O-1 visa – the so-called "genius visa" which targets individuals who possess "extraordinary ability or achievement in the sciences, arts, education, business, or athletics" (USCIS, 2020) – proves the efforts to make the country a prominent global hub for high-skilled people.

Quite on the contrary, China has long resisted the immigration of talents and the practice of athletes' naturalisation, decrying foreign mercenaries and emphasizing self-sufficiency (Sullivan *et.al*, 2022). However, in the wider framework of the "Chinese dream" and the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation", Beijing has been exerting an ever-increasing effort to recruit global talents in order to become more competitive and attractive on the international stage while avoiding the risk to reach the Lewis Turning Point¹ between 2020 and 2025 (Das and N'Diaye, 2013). During the last decade, Beijing has been courting overseas Chinese talent with national initiatives such as the "Thousand Talents Plan" (Wang and Miao, 2019) and has been striving to catch up with the US by improving domestic education and calling back overseas Chinese talents. Xi Jinping has defined talent as "the first resource" in China's drive for "independent innovation" (2018) and stressed the need for Beijing to expand its talent pool (Xinhua, 2021).

In order to fulfil China's ambition to become a "sports superpower" (*tiyu qiangguo* 体育强国), pulling in foreign talents to maximise the country's winning capacity and medal count at the Olympic Games has become a crucial component. The many operations of "global shopping" in the football industry – known as "buy buy buy" (*mai mai mai* 买买买) – have also been crucial in establishing the link between China's "buying power" (*goumaili* 购买力) and its "national power" (*guoli* 国力) (Lupano, 2017). Athletes' naturalisation has been increasingly used as a "crucial addition to the policy toolbox" (Shachar, 2011) for enhancing the host

¹ The Lewis Turning Point refers to a possible critical juncture which may occur as China's economy shifts from having an ample pool of low-cost workers to experiencing a scarcity of labour. This transition bears profound implications not only for China but also for the global economy.

country's influence and visibility in the international arena. Hence, the sport industry has gradually been affected by a "naturalisation fever" that sees a large number of foreigners with Chinese origins going back to mainland China. John Hou Sæter, Nicholas Harry Yennaris and Tyias Browning are just a few of the many names of naturalised Chinese football players with Chinese ancestry (Riva, 2019). The phenomenon also pervaded Olympic sports. After the London-born Alex Hua Tian competed for China in the equestrian triathlon in the 2008 Summer Olympics, around thirty athletes with Chinese origins and more than a dozen with no prior relationship with Beijing have been playing under the country's red flag. Encouraged by the country's economic and political status, overseas Chinese top players and athletes have increasingly decided to return to Beijing. However, despite the substantial mobilisation of resources to bring high-skilled people within the Chinese borders in order to boost Beijing's attractiveness, the Global Talent Competitiveness Index reports China at the 33rd position (2022) and still absent from the world rankings for best countries at attracting talents (Business Insider 2020; OECD 2023). Moreover, the relaxation of Chinese immigration laws in the sport industry has generated a backlash from some fans, leading for instance the football federation to promise not to recruit foreign players on a large scale (The Economist, 2019). As the US appears more frequently among the sourcing countries (see for instance the most recent naturalisation of the American NBA player Kyle Anderson to represent China at the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2023 as the first-ever naturalised basketball player), the sports arena and sportspeople have started to reflect more strongly the delicate state of the China-US relations. The experience of Gu Ailing and Zhu Yi analysed in the next sections is a case in point.

4. Athletes changing the US-China rivalry

The experience of two Chinese naturalised athletes Gu Ailing and Zhu Yi shows how China's talents winning back has increased tensions between Beijing and the US, making athletes objects of political contention. Nevertheless, the rise of a global race for talent has significantly enhanced athletes' freedom of mobility. As Shachar notices, "the decision to accept an offer of expedited citizenship by the soliciting nation requires the active participation of the individual athlete" (2011, p. 2122). Hence, we argue that athletes are trapped in the states' competition as much as they are free to shape its course. The more the economic and status conditions of a country seem convincing, the more athletes may opt for that Olympic citizenship. Likewise, the more they go for it, the more the country's competition and performance level will increase (which is a fundamental reason behind athletes' choices to swap passports). By having the chance to opt for one Olympic citizenship rather than another, athletes have widened their capability to influence the direction of states' competition. This is particularly true when governments do not allow dual citizenship and athletes are consequently forced to make a choice. It was the case for instance of Yuko Kawaguchi, a Japanese figure skater who decided to give up her Japanese passport in exchange for a Russian one. "It was a very hard choice for me to make (...) People who follow sports understand that I'm not a traitor. I still consider myself Japanese", she told Reuters (Reuters, 2009). Like her, many other naturalised athletes found

themselves in the same constraint. The freestyle skier Ailing Gu seems to be an exception. Her declarations insisted on her equal Americanness and Chineseness, sparking debate about a possible concession of dual nationality – a condition that is not admitted by Beijing. Chinese fans started to be thrilled soon after her arrival in the city, when the 18-year-old skier posted on her Sina Weibo account a picture with the Chinese caption “Beijing dumplings, finished eating all of them” (SCMP, 2022b). It is within the duality that Gu embraced that issues regarding dual citizenship and multiculturalism have triggered debates over the meaning of national identity and the sense of national belonging, especially among Chinese Americans who have seen themselves in the young skier’s statements (The New York Times, 2022). While shaping the course of the global talent race, naturalised sportspeople throw the gauntlet of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism to the recruiting states. Indeed, they contribute to the development of flexible, fluid, pluralistic, and multi-layered identities which may have a great impact on sportive nationalism and the de-ethnicization and de-territorialisation of national identity (Peizi Han, 2006).

At the 2022 Beijing Games, naturalised athletes have been elevated by Chinese official media as examples of internationalism. The Global Times has presented Gu as “the result of Chinese tradition, training in the US, and internationalisation combined” affirming that “these moments belong to mankind” (2022b). The slogan of the 2022 Winter Olympics “Together for a shared future” remarked China’s commitment to world unity and inclusivity. At the same time, as noted by Cabula and Pochettino (2023), such philanthropic sentiments have clashed with the representation of the Chinese nation with accentuated “Chinese characteristics”. As Xi stated during his speech at the Olympic closing ceremony (2022), athletes’ victories at the Games represent “the duty to win glory for the country and the honour to make contributions to the nation” while “remaining confident in the path, theory, system and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

5. Changing athletes: changing (sportive) nationalism

As Smith and Porter suggest (2000), the fact that eleven men who appear in white shirts at Wembley are representative of “England” widens the possibilities for defining what it means to be “English”, which cannot be prescind from what happens on the playfield. In a similar fashion, we could claim that the Chinese Olympic delegations at the Beijing 2022 Games, and in particular its naturalised team members, raises questions of what it takes to be accepted as “Chinese”. The marketisation of citizenship shows the rise of a more calculated approach that is detached from the conventional genuine-ties interpretations (Jansen, 2019). As a consequence, most of the naturalised athletes in China have no direct connection to the country and they can hardly speak Mandarin, even though some of them have Chinese lineage. To mention one, Pedro Delgado, the Portuguese football player of Shandong Luneng who does not have any Chinese ancestry, has been defined as “the first non-Chinese naturalised player” (Riva, 2019). The expansion of the criteria for selecting athletes who want to become “Chinese”

may lead fans and the general population to reconsider the significance of belonging to the nation and change the nature of “sportive nationalism”, namely the “ambition to see a nation’s athlete excel in the international arena [which] may be promoted by a political elite or [...] may be felt by many citizens without the promptings of national leaders” (Hoberman, 1993, p. 16). Sportive nationalism fosters a purely emotional and “passionate nationalism” that transcends political, social and ideological boundaries. Yet, it can also take the form of “a kind of masochistic self-reproach that blames the nation for its inability to meet global standards of excellence”, thus becoming the expression of national feelings about the threats posed by competition (Hoberman, 2020, p.185). According to Hoberman, “sportive nationalism is not a single phenomenon; on the contrary, it is a complicated socio-political response to challenges and events, both sportive and non-sportive, that must be understood in terms of the varying national contexts in which it appears” (1993, p.18).

At the current stage of US-China relations, sportive nationalism may be interpreted as the product of interstate rivalries ending up in cultural polarization. In this scenario, a gold-winning sportswoman (Gu Ailing) who was born in the US but later decided to represent China “is bound to become the focus” (Global Times, 2022b). Therefore, the impact of the Olympians’ experiences on sportive nationalism may go far beyond the Olympic arena and have repercussions on feelings of national belonging. By offering “an important channel for the expression of alternative nationalist sentiments”, sportive nationalism has indeed the potential both to reinforce or undermine official nationalism (Bairner, 1996).

In the following paragraph, we briefly trace the importance of sport in building American and Chinese national identity as well as the challenges that *changing* athletes with their plural identities pose to it.

In both the US and China sport is intertwined with the construction of national identity, “but its role in that construction reflects the difference between an established world superpower and a nation seeking to establish itself as a superpower after a century of national humiliation” (Brownell, 2005). As Brownell argues, the US had control over the terms of its own identity formation, while China was compelled to see itself through the eyes of the other and reject its past “in order to claim a place in the modern world order” (2005, p.1190). If all the Olympic Games hosted by Washington were occasions for bolstering patriotism and creating national myths, the two Beijing Olympic Games symbolised respectively the participation in world modernity and then the contestation to that international order designed without Beijing’s inclusion (Diodato and Strina, 2023). Indeed, the Beijing 2008 and 2022 Games meant not only the creation of a national imagined community but also the elevation of the “Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) within the reign of “world nations” (*shijie minzu* 世界民族) to create a global imagined community with China at its centre.

The athletes’ naturalisation in China presents some of the characteristics of cultural assimilation (*wenhua tonghua* 文化同化), sinification (*Zhongguohua* 中国化) or sinicization (*hanhua* 汉化) which are reserved to foreigners integrated into the *tianxia* 天下 (literally “all under the heaven”) on the condition they accepted the supremacy of Chinese culture *zhongwen* 中文 (Riva, 2019). The increased country-hopping in the name of economic advantages has been eroding the principle of athletes-as-member of the nation as the Olympic citizenship shifts the focus

from the idea of *membership* “to the *transaction* of turning citizenship grants into instruments for gaining a relative advantage in a competitive environment” (Shachar, 2011, p. 2106). Advancing the country’s status by utilising the citizenship expedient is therefore challenging its traditional meaning, which consists of membership in a political community (Heywood, 1994). This type of instant membership risks producing a boomerang effect and weakening the power of sport as a collective glue of national identity. Thus, naturalised athletes may contribute to transforming sportive nationalism towards a more inclusive but antagonistic nationalism, which is increasingly contested between “Americanness” and “Chineseness”.

6. Case study

The study of the two Chinese naturalised athletes Gu Ailing and Zhu Yi may offer insights into athletes’ potential to weaken or strengthen political contention and build a national identity informed by sportive nationalism. By employing the article’s theoretical framework, we structure the analysis into the following three sections, which represent the main hypothesis of the research:

- a) US-China rivalry *changing* athletes;
- b) Athletes *changing* the US-China rivalry;
- c) *Changing* athletes: *changing* (sportive) nationalism.

The first dimension is studied through a media content analysis and discourse analysis as informed by Fairclough (1995) of some of the most-read US and Chinese outlets, in particular The Global Times (the tabloid newspaper under the auspices of the Party in the English language), the China Daily (the daily newspaper owned by the Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party) and, on the American side, the CNN and the BBC’s American section. Such a framework for critical discourse analysis focused on the socio-cultural level, rather than textual analysis or discourse practice, helped us to understand how the same Olympic event acquired opposite meanings in different social and political contexts. This part of the research showcases how media coverage, whether Chinese or American, has made athletes the centre of the US-China political contention.

The second dimension explores how athletes may instead change the course of the US-China rivalry through their decisions to swap passports and official statements regarding their national belonging. In this section, we showcase how naturalised athletes are bearers of multiple identities and, as such, could give lessons of coexistence between competing countries while sparking debates over the practice of dual nationality, as in the case of Gu Ailing.

Finally, a brief thematic analysis of Chinese netizens’ reactions to Zhu Yi and Gu Ailing’s performances on the social media China Weibo is conducted. This last section provides some hints about the changing nature of sportive nationalism which is increasingly permeated by the US-China geopolitical tensions. The understanding of Chinese netizens’ feelings vis-à-vis the two young athletes may suggest new trends in the development of Chinese national identity as both inclusive and antagonistic to Americanness.

6.1 US-China rivalry changing athletes

The way in which both Chinese and USA media introduce Gu Ailing and Zhu Yi reflects the countries' contention over the two athletes' identities. Starting from their nomination as participants for the Chinese teams and throughout all the phases of the 2022 Olympic Games, a significant role was attributed to their national belonging. Before the beginning of the Games, when the news of the two US-born athletes spread, Chinese newspapers would stress their Chinese origins and highlight the commendable choice of playing on the Chinese side. As the *Global Times* writes in 2019: "A fluent Chinese speaker, Gu calls herself a Beijing girl, and gets confused when people ask her why she speaks Chinese so well." (*Global Times*, 2019). And again in 2021: "Speaking fluent Chinese, Gu told media that she has decided to postpone admittance to the prestigious university to focus on her preparation for the Beijing Winter Olympics." (*Global Times*, 2021)

The attribution of Chinese characteristics and cultural belonging has been even more careful in the case of California-born athlete Zhu Yi, whose selection as a female figure skater representing China raised not a few eyebrows among figure skating fans, as it came at the expense of other very appreciated Chinese athletes.

Zhu Yi started figure skating at the age of 7, she quickly showed her extraordinary talent (...) her nickname is "Yoyou" (悠悠), which is taken from a poem describing the Yellow Crane Tower in Wuhan, Hubei – "The yellow crane will never return, and the white clouds will be empty for thousands of years". Zhu Songchun (NDR Zhu Yi's father) once said in an interview with the media that he grew up in Hubei, and homesickness is an eternal emotion (*Hubei Daily*, 2022).

As fans' attitudes towards naturalised sportspeople in China depend heavily on athletes' language and cultural competencies (Sullivan *et al.* 2022), Zhu and Gu's ascription to profoundly localised Chinese roots match the willingness to attribute "Chineseness" to the young athletes and legitimise China's government choice to naturalise them. Narrating the return of overseas talents to mainland China is also functional to elevate Beijing's status over the US and justify China's investments in reversing the "brain drain" phenomenon. As *The Global Times* remarks: "When both the US and China were racing to add her into their national teams, Zhu returned to China without hesitation." (*Global Times*, 2022c)

The athletes' decision to go back is often explained because of a better Chinese environment that allows greater personal development: "The choice of Chinese nationality reflects Gu's belief that conditions in China are more conducive to personal development" (*Global Times*, 2022d). The US harsh reaction to the athletes' choice is described by the Chinese newspaper as a matter of the US' general resentment for Beijing's rise, which goes beyond the sportive competition: "Gu's phenomenon formulates the perfect description of the rise of China and the US' reaction to that rise." (*Global Times*, 2022e)

USA-based newspapers, in striking opposition to the Chinese counterpart, referred to athletes with terms such as "American-born", "California-born", "American" and even "undeniably

American” in a twofold attempt to appropriate the national origins of gold medal winner Gu Ailing on one hand, and to condemn the choice of renouncing to American citizenship of Zhu Yi following the numerous negative comments she received on Sina Weibo after her performance on the other.

In the case of Gu Ailing, the merit for instilling the young athlete with a passion for sport and training her adequately is of the US:

Snow princess Gu Ailing set to shine at home Olympics, read one headline in state-run media Xinhua, referring to Gu by her Chinese name. But Gu, 18, has another home: the United States, where she was born to a Chinese mother and American father, and where she first discovered her love for the sport (CNN, 2022c).

The US credit in Gu Ailing’s talent is so evident that her choice to swap passports is inevitably sensitive and questionable:

A San Francisco native who learned to ski on the pristine slopes of California’s Lake Tahoe, she is representing China, not the USA, in the Olympics - a move that has come at a sensitive time for Sino-American relations, and has inevitably placed Ms Gu at the centre of a global debate on geopolitics and representation” (BBC News, 2022a).

The operation of localising Gu’s American origins goes beyond a mere indication of her birthplace, implying how her talent is to be attributed to the training she received when she formed as a professional skier on California’s slopes. For Zhu, the narrative is different. The attempt is to stress how wrong she was to renounce her US nationality for China, a country that is cyber-bullying her performances on social media: “California-born figure skater Zhu Yi was eager to prove herself to the Chinese public. Instead, the 19-year-old is facing a firestorm on Chinese social media after she fell flat on the ice” (CNN, 2022d).

The Insider (2022) remarks: “Figure skater Zhu Yi gave up her US citizenship to compete for China. Now, she’s being attacked by Chinese social-media users after falling in her Olympic debut.

Anglophone newspaper The Guardian, with more than 50 million American monthly readers, when commenting on the performance of athlete Zhu Yi also stresses her American origins and the political value of the athlete’s choice to perform for Team China:

Zhu Yi is a 19-year-old Chinese figure skater. She was born and raised in California, and called Beverley Zu until she switched allegiance to her parents’ homeland four years ago. The day before Zhu had skated in the women’s short programme team event. It was a disaster (The Guardian, 2022).

The athlete, performing for China at the 2022 Olympics, pledged allegiance to a homeland which, as implied in this last passage, is not hers and which led her to a “disaster”. Moreover, the Chinese netizens’ attack against Zhu Yi according to CNN “highlights the pressure these naturalised athletes face to compete under the Chinese flag” (CNN, 2022d).

The instrumentalisation of Zhu Yi’s performance by US media has been harshly condemned by athletes like Gu Ailing and Chen Hongyi, a Chinese female figure skater who had been passed

over for the slot in favour of Zhu. China Daily news did not wait to appoint Washington as the mover of Zhu Yi's performance downplay:

While they (US journalists) faithfully report the harsh comments on Weibo following her fall, for some reason they fail to mention that other comments on Weibo were more encouraging (...) they were downplayed in the US headlines. (...) The US media's emphasis betrays a kind of ridicule, mixed with schadenfreude. The fact that Zhu Yi turned away from the US in 2019 to compete for China is regarded as a kind of betrayal by the United States and US media (China Daily, 2022).

Whether Chinese or American, the above-mentioned news not only reveals the importance of athletes' cultural-political membership to the nation, but they are also emblematic of the "proxy warrior" role attached to national athletes in the sporting arena who, as The Economist suggests with some exaggeration (2022), made the athletes "Cold War Warriors".

6.2 Athletes changing the US-China rivalry

To understand to what extent athletes' plural identities may shape the states' competition for world talents, the article develops a content analysis of the official declarations made by the two naturalised Chinese athletes regarding their national affiliation.

Gu Ailing's statement "I'm just as American as I am Chinese. I'm American when I'm in the US and Chinese when I'm in China" (The New York Times, 2022) has risen a wave of concerns among Chinese people. The appearance of naturalised players in China indeed challenges the conventional idea about Chinese nationality as traditionally connected to a single territorial state. Controversies broke out at the Beijing 2022 Olympics as the young sportswoman, Gu Ailing, has allegedly been granted dual nationality on an exceptional basis. In an interview with the Xinhua outlet, which described her as "swiftly switching between her Beijing dialect and California accent" the athlete stated that she hoped to build more bridges between different cultures through sports: "Sports have no boundaries. They don't have age, gender, race or cultural limits. Everybody can participate. That's the easiest way to form a communication between different countries, and to foster interconnection" (Xinhua, 2022).

Gu's declaration reflects how, as much as stuck within states' competition on talents, athletes are to some extent able to direct the course of it by giving "lessons of coexistence", as titled by a piece on the Global Times which specifies: "What is happening to Gu is the epitome of China-US relations and it may offer some clues to the US how to have a correct view of China and coexist with China when bilateral relations are at a low ebb unseen in the last half-century" (Global Times, 2022b). The declarations of Ailing Gu seek to strike a balance between the two countries. One of her Instagram posts at that time states: "This was an incredibly tough decision for me to make, I am proud of my heritage and equally proud of my American upbringings."

This cautious attitude resonates well with Gu's decision to serve as an ambassador for the US bid to host the 2030 or 2034 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. The decision is emblematic of how the athlete, incarnating both national identities, shifts from Team China to Team USA being able to exit a national citizen trap and exploit the US-China rivalry at her convenience. The

athlete commented on her choice “I think that’s a beautiful example of globalism and of the capacity that we can use (...) sport to connect people” she told TIME senior sports correspondent Sean Gregory in New York City at the summit (2022). The news roused passionate debates on Chinese social media, especially on Sina Weibo platform, where the hashtag was viewed more than 150 million times within a few hours (Global Times, 2022f) triggering both congratulating reactions, praising her influence and ability to hijack political matters under the name of sports but also provoking harsh critiques on her disloyal choice.

Not much has been said by Zhu Yi regarding her national belonging and the way in which she felt when she opted for China. Zhu’s declarations generally tend to justify first and foremost her identity as an Olympian after her bad performance. In an Instagram post, she writes: “I am an Olympian- nothing can take that away from me”. Following her exhibition, she told reporters: “Honestly, I’ve trained really hard and I think the main thing is coping mentally. I’m trying not to get distracted by outside influence” (CNN, 2022e). Such declarations also aimed at debunking rumours about the prominent position of Zhu’s father that allegedly guaranteed her a spot on the Chinese Olympic team. By showing the enormous pressure the Chinese public puts on sportspeople regardless of their origins, Zhu Yi gave the US media a pretext to build a narrative of China as a harsh scrutinizer of naturalized athletes that exclusively aims at bolstering its medal count. Zhu Yi’s experience demonstrates that athletes’ performances are the first source that determines whether Olympians are Chinese or American enough, making them “pressure points” whose achievements are desirable or non-desirable for both sides (Lin, 2023). Whereas Ailing Gu exploited such tension at her convenience, Zhu Yi was overwhelmed by performance anxiety but turned her participation in the Beijing 2022 Olympics into a life lesson – “It’s all about the journey”, she declared in an Instagram post.

6.3 Changing athletes: changing (sportive) nationalism

To understand how sportive nationalism may shape political nationalism, it is here considered appropriate to exit the realm of national media (which - to a different extent in China and the USA - somehow reflect upon official national narratives) and to explore how it permeates the society. In particular, as the case study revolves around two athletes who have been naturalised with Chinese Olympic nationality, it is here believed relevant to explore the reaction (of acceptance or disown) of Chinese people to the athlete’s citizenship and performances, to understand how - and if - its reception displays the reinforcement of official nationalism within the sports arena. To pursue the goal of understanding the perception of Gu and Zhu’s cases from Chinese netizens, an examination of the Chinese social media platform Weibo posts is performed.² The platform (also known as “Chinese Twitter”) has been chosen as it represents

² Due to deontological reasons the authors chose to avoid social media author’s nicknames, pictures or any other sensitive information that could redirect the reader to users’ personal information. To comply with the terms and conditions of Chinese social media platforms and avoid the direct employment of original posts, an original translation into English has been conducted throughout the analysis. These measures have been implemented with care and respect for ethical considerations and the principles of privacy. The primary objective is to maintain the confidentiality and protect the identities of individuals whose posts are included in this analysis. Readers are encouraged to keep these considerations in mind while interpreting the findings presented in this article.

the preferred social media by users that want to express their opinion on trending topics, allowing them to tweet brief considerations and follow the most debated topics.

This section analyses representative instances of the “changing sportive nationalism” tendency, suggesting how the US-China rivalry and the athletes’ performances affected national pride and contestation sentiments. The main concerns addressed by Chinese Weibo users revolved indeed around the performance of the athletes embodying their national (or acquired-national) identity in a context of competition between Washington and Beijing at historical highs. Despite not being representative of the whole Chinese netizens’ position on the matter, the Weibo post/content analysis suggests (the presence of) and fuels the debate over the nationalistic role attributed to athletes and the ability – or inability – of Olympic citizenship to respond to their expectations. The comments have been chosen after an in-depth analysis using trending hashtags and keywords, and are considered insightful of how netizens’ posts – even when expressing different positions on the topic - are imbued with nationalistic instances, reflecting how sports represents an occasion for the reproduction of national identity stances.

The Weibo posts containing hashtags related to the names of the two naturalised athletes have been read respectively 3 billion and 650 thousand times for Gu Ailing and 150 million times for Zhu Yi. More interestingly, hashtags containing descriptions of performances or salient news circulated on the platform in extremely high numbers: “Zhu Yi has fallen” quickly became a top trending topic on Weibo, obtaining more than 200 million views in just a few hours, before it was later completely censored (SCMP, 2022c). Hashtag “Gu Ailing to be US Olympic bid ambassador” #谷爱凌将担任美国申奥大使# has been viewed 480 million times in the last year, fuelling an animated debate around the athlete’s choice to serve as the ambassador for US bid to host the 2030 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City in 2030 or 2034.

It is interesting to analyse how posts under such hashtags, no matter if positive or negative, always contain opinions that exit the world of sports and always intermingle with political and nationalist opinions. After Gu’s declaration, a Weibo account used the “Gu Ailing to be US Olympic bid ambassador ” #谷爱凌将担任美国申奥大使# hashtag to comment: “The U.S. bid for the Olympics needs a Chinese person to be their ambassador for the Olympics. No matter what you think, it’s embarrassing for the United States.” The post author recognises Gu Ailing as a full-Chinese citizen and attributes national identity to the athlete in opposition to the American one, demonstrating how coexistence is not a possibility.

The assumption that sportive nationalism is also the product of interstate rivalries is widely reflected in the way netizens adopt national identity references and warfare terminology to discuss Gu Ailing’s performance online. The Chinese nationality of the athlete is often linked with the pride towards her excellent performance. Olympians are not just *yundongyuan* 运动员 (athlete, sportsman) nor other common words to describe a sport player such as *yundongjia* 运动家 (athlete, sportsman, activist) or *xuanshou* 选手 (athlete selected, selected contestant, player) but a rather *jianer* 健儿. The term translates to “top athlete” and has a second meaning of “heroic warrior”. The usage of such a specific term, instead of more commonly used words employed by official documents and Olympic spokespeople reflects the users’ standpoint on

the role that Gu Ailing represents within the contest, not only as a common athlete performing her role but as a heroic warrior fighting on the Chinese side (Bowes and Bairner, 2018).

Positive posts about Gu's performance exit the realm of mere appreciation and provide a demonstration of how sportive nationalism may reinforce official nationalism: "The strength of the nation is the underlying logic of Gu Ailing's success". These words reflect nationalist pride while attributing the reasons for the athlete's success to her nationality. Entering the realm of 逻辑 *luoji* "logic", there is a shift from the achievement of the gold medal to the nation's prosperity, which works as the logical argument for the skier's success.

On the other hand, the Americanness of the competing athlete represents an element of disowning for some users, that justifies the netizens' unacceptance of patriotic discourse from the Olympians: "There is no need to discuss the nationality issue. Netizens are angry that she (Ailing Gu) is advocating patriotism, but she is actually an American. Feeling like being played around." Such posts imply how "to love China" 爱国 is incompatible with "actually being American" "实际是美国人", as the condition of the athlete being American would oppose her advocating patriotic feelings thus justifying netizens' anger and sense of being fooled around.

In regards to Zhu Yi, whose poor performance created a division in Chinese netizens' reactions, Weibo posts were trending under the hashtags "Zhu Yi has fallen" and "Zhu Yi's Winter Olympics debut is not perfect" #朱易冬奥首秀不完美#. The first hashtag, which reached more than 200 million views in a few hours, was removed from the platform and more than 300 negative posts on the topic were deleted (BBC News, 2022b). The second hashtag gained more than 33 million views within a few hours from the performance and reached more than 80 million views in the last year. Under the latter, Weibo users' posts are divided between those criticising the athlete's performance, and those defending her and attributing reasons for the fall to inappropriate training received in the US. Some users also attributed negative comments to a malicious operation of American media. One post cites:

I am Chinese by roots and instead of condemning Zhu Yi after her fall, I encouraged her to get up (...) It's the training methods they reserved for you in America, maybe the US coaches hold back on you. Wait until you are in "the land of the motherland" (NDR: China), the coaches of "the motherland" (China), will have no reservations on your special training! (...) Why is the American media bullying a little girl like this? Nothing more than being jealous that Chinese athletes have won 2 gold medals and American athletes have not won one! Why didn't the American athletes win? Same thing as above, improper training practices in the US! (...)

The user stresses his being a real Chinese "我是根正苗红的中国人" (as if this translates into knowing the actual Chinese netizens' stance on Zhu Yi performer, as the opposite of what US media claim to know). The author's attack on USA media matches the direct criticism towards the American way of training and treating their athletes, insinuating that this is the reason behind America's zero golden medals won during the competition. Posts like the one reported thrive with nationalism when referring to China as the "motherland" where the athlete is invited to get trained and treated, mirroring it with the achievements of the two gold medals won by Beijing throughout the event. It emerges a widely diffused sense of favourable feelings

towards those Olympians who had become citizens through naturalisation (Li et al., 2023), rather than a direct criticism towards the sportsperson itself.

7. Final remarks: embodying the nation and the contention

The article has argued that naturalised Chinese American athletes at the 2022 Winter Olympics not only embodied their own nation but also the contention between the two countries, thus being used as geopolitical tools in the hands of states to advance their position in relation to one another. However, the increased employment of athletes' naturalisation for bolstering the country's status has opened new possibilities for world-class athletes to shape the trajectories of the US-China competition more than in the past. Elite sports people's decisions to opt for an Olympic citizenship rather than another and playing under a "flag of convenience" have implications that reverberate beyond the sporting arena and may impact the states' race for global supremacy through the talent race as well as the evolution of sportive nationalism. The analysis of Chinese social media indicates the existence of a trend towards an inclusive attitude towards naturalised athletes which, however, unavoidably leads to the construction of an ideal citizenry that comprises those who have been selected to represent the nation and an "Other" against which the ideal nation is juxtaposed. Hence, sportive nationalism becomes the product of interstate rivalries expressed through the polarisation between Chineseness and Americanness. The experience of the two athletes Ailing Gu and Zhu Yi has put Olympic fans and governments in front of the dilemma of how to define the "Other" as American or Chinese if being Chinese or American comprises being the "Other". Such a distinction seems to be determined first and foremost by athletes' performance. The instrumentalisation of Olympic nationality by states showcases the strategic importance of this means to push forward the countries' sport industry and global attractiveness while being exploited by athletes at their convenience. The mixed-media analysis we developed has revealed the controversial role of naturalised athletes between China and the US and its relevance in national identity building. Ambassadors, cultural bridges, warriors and pawns of states: the complex and changing nature of naturalised Olympians represent a fertile soil for further studies aimed at decoding the relationship between the rivalry for global hegemony, Olympic citizenship, nationalism and national identity, to which this article attempted to provide a first theoretical and empirical basis.

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