"The Championship of Ailing Gu": A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This article draws on the CDA structure to analyse two post-game reports about Ailing Gu. By conducting quantitative and qualitative analyses, this article aims to explore how sports journalism can be manipulated by political ideology on a lexical and transitivity level.

Keywords: sport news, critical discourse analysis, political ideology

1. Introduction

How does sports news convey political ideology? This article combines quantitative and qualitative analyses of two news reports about freestyle ski-jumper Gu Ailing's career, assessing the two news articles' vastly different emphases as informed by underlying ideologies. Although sports news is only one strand of far denser news media, it nonetheless provides a unique shaping influence on social life. Colorful language typical of sports commentary is known for stoking people's excitement and constructing athletes' larger-than-life personas (Rana, 2008). In Chinese sports press, most news focuses on the major sporting events and their impact on society. For example, take the coverage of "ping-pong diplomacy" around the 1971 World Table Tennis Championship, or more recently the hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, both of which brought tremendous media attention to the landscape of Chinese athletes, the progress of Chinese sportspeople, and even narratives on China's development as an international power.

As with political news, sports news can instigate trends in public opinion: News ostensibly reporting on sports events, outcomes, and impacts may moreover use a particular linguistic structure to convey the writer's view, or even prejudice, of this sporting world. These writers' views thus express an underlying ideology or set of positions on social issues (Van Dijk, 1997). These biases are easier to ignore when people read sports news for details on games and athletes, but sports news retains this capacity to influence social views.

To investigate this, studying discourse strategies enables identifying causes of controversy in sports journalism while understanding the roles of ideology. This research therefore contributes to the role of discourse shaping sports journalism, which fills a methodological gap in the literature, which lacks this critical discourse analysis of sports journalism.

Specifically, this essay will explore the ideologies underlying sports journalism by critically analyzing two stories about Ailing Gu, a freestyle ski jumper: One story by Cable News Network (CNN) and another story by China Daily. In each case, it explores the stance and reasons of linguistic structures. Among some media scholars, CNN is credibly attributed status as the most influential media outlet of the past 40 years, both in the United States and abroad (Bae, 1999). Meanwhile, China Daily is considered the most authoritative English-language publication in China. Through comparative analysis of the outlets' stories, this study answers the pertinent research question: How does sports news convey political ideology?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) emerged from critical linguistics literature, oriented toward social issues, where it favoured textual analysis as a means for insight into power relations and ideologies expressed through apparent linguistic forms (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). In CDA, discourse is dialectically related to institutions and social structures (Wodak, 1996). That is, discourses are shaped by experiences of reality, and reflecting diverse social practices. As CDA gained traction, discourses' social properties were elaborated: Research investigated how power-holders use language to defend their interests and manipulate others ideologically (Machin, 2013). Through its popularity, CDA now features across linguistics and social-scientific disciplines (Baker et al., 2008). The corresponding models in CDA continued to evolve, and in 1994 introduced Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), where linguists Halliday, Fairclough, and Van Dijk enriched research models with the Trivial Discourse Model (TDM) and the Social Cognitive Model (Van Dijk, 1995).

Beginning with SFG, the development emphasized how language builds connections in context, how it forms based on social experiences and social realities (Simpson, 1993). Corresponding research concentrates on transitivity, emotion, and theme—participants' choices and the ways in which actions are represented (Halliday, 2014). Hidden ideological meanings can then be expressed through four main processes: Material, mental, verbal, and relational (Fairclough, 1992).

As shown in Figure 1, Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional model consists of three units of analysis: text, discourse practice, and socio-cultural aspects.
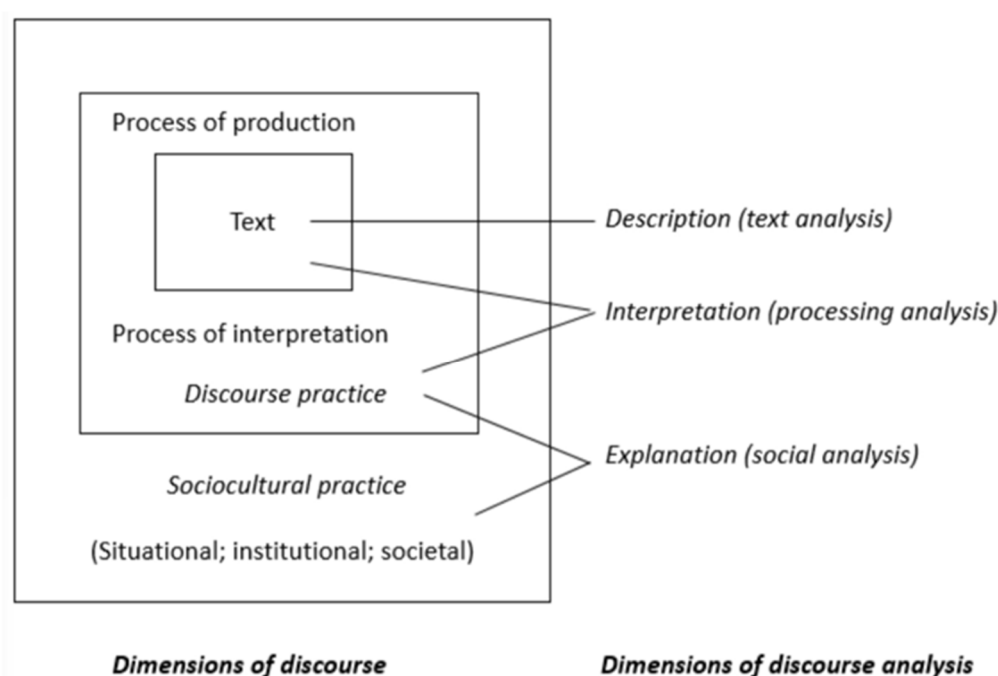

Figure 1. Three-dimensional model of Fairclough (2013)

The first, textual analysis, uses linguistic theory to describe textual features. It focuses on linguistic features of the text, like vocabulary, grammar, syntactic structure, and semantics. The second, discourse-practice analysis, focuses on how language is used to achieve broader objectives and how readers parse this language for hidden meanings. Lastly, social-practice analysis applies discourse analysis at a societal level, exploring how ideology and social values are encoded in language. For example, Van Dijk's (1995) socio-cognitive study analyses discourse by assigning positive terms to language reflecting the writers' values and positions and assigning adverse terms to language reflecting opposing viewpoints.

2.2 Existing Research

Although there exists some CDA scholarship on the discursive practices of sports journalism, and despite awareness that sports news is a powerful medium for social-power relations and ideological tendencies, the field is nonetheless seriously undertreated compared to journalism for political news (George et al., 2001; Lyons, 2000). An important first step was provided by Stevenson (2002) using Fairclough's TDM to analyse coverage of the Australian Open tennis tournament, discovering that male perspectives dominated the sports coverage. However, this study focused on female athletes' body shapes and clothing rather than exploring how these restrictions were

expressed in discourse. Here, Meân and Kassing (2008) offer a foundation, applying TDM and SFG to explore the role of ideologies in the reproduction of sports-journalism discourses, typifying how coaches and parents use discourses to influence youths' sports performance, and finding that age and social status can make youths feel athletically superior. While this study dissects the discourse in sports, it is more limited in its focus on the kinds of ideologies hidden behind sports news.

Several instructive examples also exist beyond Western sports media: Zhang and Jamil (2015) compared gender-based discourses among three Chinese media outlets reporting on Olympic athletes, claiming that news texts praised female Olympic athletes primarily by emphasising their conventionally masculine qualities. This illustrates a persistence of traditional gender norms in Chinese sports news biased against female athletes' performance. However, the study's validity would be clear and valid by analysing the based on lexical level and sentence structure separately. This was partly rectified by Dabir-Moghadam and Raeesi (2019), applying TDM and SFG in an Iranian sports-news context to analyse the percentage of modal verbs used and the structural function of language, finding that the language reflects the ideology of dominant political parties.

Together, these academic writings point similarly toward sports discourse concealing the oppression of athletes by political actors and normalising traditional gender biases. A useful opportunity emerges here for this essay: These CDA works have not assessed the discourses created by athletes who change the country they represent, and thus change the underlying set of a country's political ideologies and gender norms. Therefore, this paper builds on these two gaps in ideology and gender, assessing political ideologies' influence on athletes given changes in the country they represent, focused on the presentation of female athletes' influence in news coverage.

3. Methodology

This paper applies a three-dimensional model of analysis in the vein of Fairclough (2013). First, it performs a textual analysis, focusing on naming and referencing, word choice and classification, and other linguistic-level analytic tools. Second, through discursive-practice analysis, the paper elaborates on transitivity, transformations, and quotations from two reports, analysing journalists' views. Third, through sociocultural contextual analysis, the paper explores underlying structural influences on the reports, namely the cultural influences and current political circumstances.

4. Analysis

Both reports concern the Winter Olympics hotshot Ailing Gu, an American-born and mixed-race athlete, won the Olympic championships on behalf of China. Based on her special background of American and China and the multiple identities, CNN and China Daily have reported with different emphases, as shown in the following analysis.

4.1 Naming and References

Table 1. Naming and Referencing

	CNN	**China Daily**
Naming	Eileen Gu	Gu Ailing
References	▪ Teenage Olympic sensation	▪ Olympic champion
	▪ Snow princess	▪ Most versatile skier
	▪ Model	▪ International superstar
	▪ Brand ambassador	▪ Incoming Stanford university student
	▪ The 18- year-old	▪ Part-time fashion model
		▪ 18-year-old-girl
		▪ Accomplished piano player
		▪ Bright sports star
		▪ Amazing athlete

According to Richardson (2007), the way news subjects are named influences how readers perceive them. As can be seen from Table 2, CNN uses English name, Eileen, and the US naming order, first name followed by surname. In contrast, China Daily uses the phonetic translation of Gu Ailing with the Chinese name order. This difference reflects the different perceptions of Ailing's identity. CNN wants to identify her as an American, while China Daily considers Ailing Gu to be Chinese.

Both CNN and China Daily use diverse identities to refer to Ailing Gu, but it is clear to see that in CNN, adjectives are rarely used. However, in the China Daily, the reference to Ailing Gu is preceded by a number of positive adjectives. Such a choice of words implies that the writer praises and admires Ailing Gu and facilitates the portrayal of a positive image of Ailing Gu in the reader's mind. CNN's limited evaluative adjective use appears in more objective stand, but actually attempts to weaken the positive impacts of Ailing Gu, implying its dissatisfaction with her not representing the United States in the Olympics.

4.2 Categories

Lexical classification was first proposed by Fowler (2018), describing Party A and Party B with different words to convey potential value judgements. Both reports contain reflecting subordination, which are counted in Table 2:

Table 2. Categories of words used in subordination

	CNN	China Daily
China-related words ("China's …")	▪ Social media platform ▪ Unofficial face of China's Olympic ambitions ▪ National team ▪ Hottest young star	▪ Burgeoning winter sports ▪ Third gold medal ▪ Freeski Olympic champion ▪ Affinity with China ▪ Chinese mother ▪ House in Beijing
US-related words	▪ American-born ▪ Born and raised in California ▪ The status of American citizenship ▪ US citizen	▪ US father

Here, CNN only writes "China's" to preface "social media platform" and Olympic-related content, such as "China's Olympic ambition" and "China's Olympic teams", never using the words to describe the athlete's identity. These uses of different owner-member relationships indicate that CNN is reluctant to broach Ailing Gu's nationality. In contrast, China Daily uses different owner-member relationships to emphasise Ailing's ties to China, like visiting her Chinese mother and grandmother.

Inversely, the frequency of US-related word usages and sentences within the CNN report is four times higher than similar word usage in China Daily. As noted by Berelson (1952), a quantitative analysis of communication contents can reveal underlying tendencies and inter-subjective connections. This substantial disparity made by CNN is because it attempts to construct a clearly American-made sports figure by priming the American half of Eileen Gu's heritage.

As seen in Table 3, CNN only uses "China's" to describe social media and Olympic-related content, such as ambition and teams, never using it directly to qualify the athlete, Gu Ailing. These uses of different owner-member relationships probably imply that CNN is skeptical of Ailing Gu's nationality. In contrast, China Daily not only uses it to modify Ailing Gu but also to emphasize Ailing's ties to China, such as spending time with her mother and grandmother (both of whom are Chinese).

In addition, it is clear that the frequency of use of words and sentences about the US in the CNN report is 4 times, obviously higher than 1 time in the China daily. As noted by Berelson (1952), quantitative analysis of communication contents reveals underlying tendencies and inter-subjective connections. CNN attempts to imply the superiority of her American citizenship and American ancestry by reinforcing the portrayal of Ailing Gu's one-half American heritage.

4.3 Transitivity

In line with Thompson (2013), sentence processes and participants should be analysed by parsing how processes are caused or occur independently. Table 3 summarises four such processes. First, material processes relate to physical behaviour, focusing on the use of transitive or intransitive verbs and the sentence actor and goal. Second, verbal processes focus on verbs used as expressions. Third, mental processes express the writer's feelings, thoughts, and actions toward subjects (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Lastly, relational processes emphasise different states of possession (Gerot, Linda & Wignel, 1995).

Table 3. Types of process in CNN and China Daily

	CNN	**China Daily**
Material process	She grew up skiing on the slopes of Lake Tahoe.	She took the slopes of Northstar in Tahoe, California, aged 8.
Mental process	She felt American in the US.	
	She decided in 2019 to compete for China.	
Verbal process	She dodged answering each time.	
Relational process	Gu was born and raised in California.	Gu was born in the United States to a Chinese mother and US father.
	Gu has become the unofficial face of China's Olympic ambitions.	She is on track to become a bright sports star in the world's populous nation.
	She was still a US citizen.	
	Gu's father is American.	

Huge differences are observable in the psychological and relational processes versus the material and physical processes with respect to Ailing's nationality and sense of belonging. Notice, for example, CNN's usage of the words links Ailing Gu to the US frequently. Crucially, such choices by CNN serve a particular ideology that conveys a corresponding political view, wherein Ailing Gu may be a dual citizen and she should be a member of the US. It also implies her excellent performance is creditable to—and cannot be separated from—the sports-dominant environment of the United States.

4.4 Transformations

The main transformations in the discourse are nominalisation and tense transformation. "Nominalisation" refers to how processes and properties can be portrayed with verbal adjectives. For example, take the following sentence:

"It is unclear whether she renounced her American citizenship—usually a requirement for Chinese naturalization, since the country does not allow dual citizenship."

Here, the verb "require" is transformed into the noun "requirement", making readers aware that dual citizenship could not allowed in China in a long term, conveying CNN's underlying purpose that this gold medal for Gu Ailing cannot belong to China. This sentence is also notable for its tense, which is in the general present tense, whereas the rest of the report is written in past tense. The general present tense is used when journalists ascribe the significant features of a fact, such as normality and universality (Chovanec, 2003). As a further example:

"Her newfound success has also come with increased scrutiny from critics in the West."

The action of scrutinising is nounized as "scrutiny", coaxing the reader to perceive that criticism is a state of being and thereby inducing the reader to consider how much criticism the change of nationality has caused. This approach from CNN emphasises firstly how China has long disallowed the practice of dual nationality, and secondly how Eileen Gu may be a dual national and therefore not Chinese according to official Chinese stances on dual nationality. Consequently, CNN communicates a set of political circumstances leading American readers to believe that the gold medal truly belongs to the US, not China.

4.5 The Use of Direct and Indirect Quotations

Direct and indirect quotations directly inform the authenticity and reliability of written pieces. The quoted words and opinions of others can circumvent the journalist's view of the reports' content (Bell, 1991). However, the process for selecting different quotations, discriminating between all options, necessarily reflects journalists' discourse choices (Caldas-Coulthard, 2002). Journalists will quote favourably for their position, shaping the reader's understanding in line with their own perspective. Most direct quotations come from those overtly involved or from lesser-known insiders, while indirect quotations are mostly paraphrased and may quote ideas differently from the original understanding to support the journalist's view more favourably.

Table 4. The frequency of Citation Methods in CNN and China Daily

	CNN		**China Daily**	
Citation Method	**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Direct	2	18.18%	9	81.81%

Indirect	3	75%	1	25%

The comparison tabulated above reveals a significant imbalance in journalists' choices of direct and indirect quotations. CNN paraphrased the ideas of journalists and trends on Western social media to substantiate their commentary on Eileen Gu's championship and its linkage to her nationality, even commenting on Gu's deliberate avoidance of the issue. This identifies the contours of CNN's bias on the issue of Gu's nationality, but meanwhile, China Daily's quotations identify a substantively different bias. That is, China Daily's quotations draw on interviews with Gu Ailing, emphasising her love for, and familiarity with, China. These differences show that China Daily is able to promote its messaging with a mode inaccessible to CNN: Direct quotations from the sports figure.

5. Discussion

Both news articles' vastly different emphases reveal how their reporting was informed by underlying ideologies. In China's case, Gu Ailing was praised by Chinese media for adopting Chinese nationality and winning the women's freestyle ski-jump for the Chinese team, elevating the Chinese team's performance in this event. As a result, China Daily reinforced Gu's personal connection to China in their sports commentary, linking this to many of Gu Ailing's traits, like her excellent results, wide range of interests, and focus on female power.

Meanwhile, in the American case, CNN argues American education and culture determined Gu's Olympic success and personal achievements. CNN even credits the US with rightful ownership of the gold medal because Gu was raised in the US and studied in the US education system. Before 2019, she represented the US and won various other medals. Therefore, CNN repeatedly addressed the issue of dual nationality in the article, as China's official position against dual nationality was used to support CNN's perspective on which nation deserved credit for the gold medal.

The major difference between these two reports and their assessments of Gu Ailing arises a result of current political circumstances. The international relationship between China and the US has been tense and sensitive in recent years. The US placed some Chinese high-tech companies on a list of sanctioned entities relating to intellectual property disputes, impeding the exchange of labour and technology between the two countries. Both states also became embroiled in a trade war following the Trump administration's escalation of tariffs on Chinese goods, intending to exert political pressure on China's government to address the intellectual property issue favourably for US interests. In this context of antagonism and rivalry between the US and China, Gu Ailing became a symbolic pressure-point as a half-American, half-Chinese celebrity whose achievements are desirable for both sides. Here, news outlets are observed constructing the narratives favourable to each ideological theatre: CNN guides its viewers toward belief that Gu's achievements are American achievements, while China Daily interprets a Chinese achievement.

6. Conclusion

This paper illustrated how CDA frameworks at the levels of lexicality and transitivity can reveal the political ideology underlying sports news, exemplified through reporting by CNN and China Daily on Gu Ailing's sporting achievements. However, this remains by necessity a partial analysis: More differences are certain to arise with further analysis of these two reports' construction of sentences, such as modality, presuppositions, and rhetorical tropes. Further, considering that I am Chinese, analysis of political issues may already be prejudiced. Therefore, further analysis and alternative perspectives are needed to fully recognise how political ideologies are instrumentalised by news discourse.

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Appendix

CNN News Report

URL: https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/08/china/eileen-gu-wins-big-air-olympics-intl-hnk-spt/index.html

Eileen Gu fans temporarily crashed China's leading social media platform on Tuesday, as tens of millions rushed online to celebrate the teenage freeski sensation winning her first gold medal of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

American-born Gu, 18, jumped into the top position at the women's big air competition with her third run, scoring 94.5 with a 1620 and a perfect landing -- making her total score 188.25 in the event's debut at the Winter Olympics.

She narrowly beat out France's Tess Ledeux, who took silver with a score of 187.50. Switzerland's Mathilde Gremaud won the bronze.

"That was the best moment of my life. The happiest moment, day, whatever—of my life. I just cannot believe what just happened," said Gu after her win, according to the Olympic site.

"Even if I didn't land it, I felt it would send a message out to the world and hopefully encourage more girls to break their own boundaries," she added. "That was my biggest goal going into my last run. I reminded myself to have fun and enjoy the moment and that, no matter what, I was so grateful to even have this opportunity to even be here."

Fans filled the stands to cheer for Gu, who was born and raised in California but decided in 2019 to compete for China. Known as the "snow princess" among her Chinese fans, Gu—already a reigning world champion—has become the unofficial face of China's Olympic ambitions, and saw her popularity skyrocket in the lead-up to the Games.

Ledeux, who had been leading the competition until the last run when she overbalanced on the landing, sank to the ground in tears after the final result. Gu and Gremaud both knelt on the snowy floor to console her, pulling Ledeux into a hug and rubbing her back.

Gu's victory sparked joyous scenes online. The topic dominated searches on China's Twitter-like platform Weibo, where seven of the 10 top trending topics were all about Gu's win. Fans on her Weibo, where she has 2.6 million followers, left more than 90,000 comments in less than 30-minutes after her win.

Related hashtags, such as "Gu Ailing won the gold medal," received more than 300 million views within an hour—eventually crashing the entire Weibo site due to the massive number of users.

Chinese authorities were also unusually quick to congratulate Gu. "We are glad to hear that Gu Ailing, a Beijing athlete, won a precious gold medal for the Chinese sports delegation and honored for the country with her perfect performance in the final of the women's freestyle ski platform at the Beijing Winter Olympic Games," said the Beijing Municipal Government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Beijing Committee, referring to Gu by her Chinese name.

Gu's father is American and her mother is Chinese. She grew up skiing on the slopes of Lake Tahoe, and had reached her first World Cup podium by the age of 15.

Though she switched to compete for China, it's unclear whether she renounced her American citizenship—usually a requirement for Chinese naturalization, since the country does not allow dual citizenship. Gu has never publicly commented on the status of her American citizenship, though an article on the official Olympic site referred to her "dual nationality" in January.

At a news conference after her win on Tuesday, reporters asked Gu several times if she was still a US citizen. She dodged answering each time, saying only that she felt American in the US and Chinese in China.

Since joining China's national team, Gu's face has been splashed across magazine covers and billboards in the country. She has landed numerous sponsorships and brand deals, and is fast becoming one of China's hottest young stars—though her newfound success has also come with increased scrutiny from critics in the West.

Apart from her skiing career, she's also a model, brand ambassador, and was accepted into Stanford University, which she plans to attend in the fall.

China Daily News Report

URL:https://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202202/09/WS62030a5ea3109375516e9a70.html

Gu shines to win her first Games gold

With the world hailing the arrival of a new sports superstar, China's freeski Olympic champion Gu Ailing wants to remain the girl next door to inspire more youngsters to push their own boundaries.

Carrying the host nation's biggest medal hope on the snow, Gu, a versatile skier competing in three events at the Beijing Winter Olympics, delivered big time on Tuesday. The 18-year-old won the freestyle skiing big air event's Olympic debut with dazzling maneuvers.

Gu was pushed hard by silver medalist Tess Ledeux of France, who finished the first two runs on top. On her third and final run, Gu gambled on a trick she'd never done in competition before－a left double cork 1620 jump that involves four and a half spins while rotating two times off-axis in the air.

To a rousing reaction from the small crowd, Gu landed the maneuver to take the gold with a winning total of 188.25 points, which included 93.75 from her first run after she landed a double cork 1440. Competitors do three runs and only the two best scores count toward the final total.

Ledeux had a chance to win the gold, but failed to nail her final run. She had to settle for the silver, while Mathilde Gremaud of Switzerland took the bronze.

"I've thought about it a lot, but to put it down (the double cork jump) for the first time on my third run in the first Olympic freeski (big air) final in history means the world to me," Gu said after her victory.

"My mom called me asking me to play (it) safe before the third run as I'd secured a medal. But I didn't listen to her and gave it a go, not trying to beat anyone but to elevate myself to the next level."

Ledeux, the 2019 world champion in the event, slumped to the snow in tears after missing out on the gold, but was gracious in her praise of Gu, despite her own disappointment.

"She works very hard," 20-year-old Ledeux said of Gu. "There is a very good ... (atmosphere) in freestyle skiing in general. She is very focused on her job, and she is an amazing athlete."

Gu's victory at the Big Air Shougang venue in western Beijing was China's third gold medal of the Games, following wins in two short-track speed skating events; the mixed team relay and the men's 1,000-meters.

After her golden start, Gu, a two-time world champion, will contest the halfpipe and slopestyle events at the Genting Snow Park in the co-host city, Zhangjiakou, Hebei province, starting Feb 13.

If she succeeds in her multievent campaign, she will be recognized as the most versatile freestyle skier at a Winter Olympics and drive China's burgeoning winter sports market.

Gu was born in the United States to a Chinese mother and US father. When she announced in June 2019 she would represent China at the Beijing Winter Olympics, she was subjected to criticism and unfair comments on social media in the US that her decision was driven by commercial benefits from the host nation.

Gu said at a news conference on Tuesday she was not trying to make anyone happy when she was questioned on the criticism she had faced following her decision to represent China.

"I know that my reasons for making the decisions I do are based on a greater common interest and something that I feel is for the greater good," she said.

"And so if other people don't really believe that's where I'm coming from, then that looks like they do not have the empathy to empathize with a good heart perhaps because they don't share the same kind of morals that I do."

Despite her newfound fame, Gu insisted she'd continue living her life like any other teenager.

"What? Am I already an international superstar now? No way! I cannot even imagine that," an excited Gu told reporters. "I feel I am still an ordinary 18-year-old girl who just loves freestyle skiing. I still get to call my grandma after this, look after my cat, hang out with friends and play games on my phone. I don't really consider people who watch me and support me as my fans. I'd rather treat everybody as friends."

She said she wanted to send a message to young people, especially girls interested in winter sports, to "just go for it and try to push the boundaries as much as they can."

Gu has pushed boundaries her entire life. She took to the slopes of Northstar in Tahoe, California, age 8.

"I was the only girl on my team…and people would say, 'Oh, you're skiing like a girl. What are you doing?'," said Gu, who is known as Eileen in the US.

Today, Gu is an Olympic champion, an incoming Stanford University student, part-time fashion model and an accomplished piano player.

She is also on track to become a bright sports star in the world's most populous nation, which she visits during summer vacations. She is called the "Snow Princess" by her 3.4 million followers on Weibo.

Gu prides herself on understanding the two cultures she straddles, and her affinity with China is strengthened by her family's ties with Beijing.

"You can see from the top of the Big Air course there is a tower, and I can also see it from my house in Beijing as well. So I really felt like there was a sense of coming home competing at the Games," she said.

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