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Article

National Icon or ungrateful Traitor? The fluid Identity of Eileen Gu in the U.S. Media Discourse

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Abstract: This study examines a February 2026 CNN report using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how US media construct the personal identity of Eileen Gu. The investigation focuses on the complex tensions arising from her dual belonging to China and the United States, identifying central themes, implicit viewpoints, and identity construction strategies. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates qualitative discourse analysis with topic modeling and sentiment analysis via the Orange text mining tool, analyzing the text comprehensively across word choice, modality, and transitivity. Results indicate the report defines Gu's identity through a dichotomy between China and the US, framing transnational belonging within state loyalty evaluations. Ethnically marked descriptions distinguish her from other Asian-American athletes, while frequent modal verbs convey fixed expectations regarding state duties. Transitivity analysis reveals divergent narrative representations: from a US perspective, Gu is the object of scrutiny and doubt, whereas Chinese public responses reshape her as a celebrated national figure. Although the report integrates various viewpoints and maintains a seemingly neutral stance, its content arrangement and linguistic formulations align closely with US perspectives on state loyalty. Ultimately, the study concludes that media discourses utilizing seemingly neutral linguistic techniques can deliberately ethnicize and politicize the identities of third-culture athletes.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; media discourse; identity construction; transnational athletes; sports journalism

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1. Introduction

News reports document social events in real time and transmit them to a global audience; such content does not constitute a direct reproduction of objective facts, but rather reflects human-mediated construction shaped by editorial selection and framing. The selection and presentation of news events are guided by established journalistic norms and professional practices [1].

Within this analytical framework, Eileen Gu—a Winter Olympic champion—has attracted extensive international media attention. Having grown up in the United States, she chose to represent China in international athletic competitions. Her background intersects questions of transnational upbringing, cultural affiliation, and public representation, rendering her a compelling subject for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Existing scholarship has examined media portrayals of her identity through lenses including social mobility, national belonging, and gender representation. However, comparatively few studies systematically compare how Chinese and U.S. media frame her ethnic and civic identity, particularly with regard to divergent discursive patterns in U.S. news coverage.

Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, this study investigates how CNN constructs Eileen Gu's identity in its reporting, identifying underlying ideological positions embedded in linguistic choices and narrative structures [2]. This leads to three central research questions:

1. What is the central narrative theme of this CNN report?
2. What ideological tendencies are embedded in the textual features of this report?
3. What identity attributes are ascribed to Eileen Gu in the report, and through what specific discursive strategies are these constructed?

2. Literature Review

With the progress of globalization and growing social plurality, personal identity is increasingly understood as dynamic rather than fixed. The identity system encompasses emotional values and social meanings, forming a framework that is continuously shaped through interaction. Within social identity studies, ethnic identity influences patterns of social engagement and relational dynamics. In many media contexts, racial categories are emphasized disproportionately, leading to explanations of social behavior and relationships primarily through the lens of racial distinction.

Media discourses often avoid overtly discriminatory language but convey underlying biases through ostensibly neutral expressions. Such implicit framing aligns with broader trends observed in international media research. Contemporary representations of race have shifted away from explicit biological determinism toward more subtle, ostensibly value-neutral narratives [3]. One prominent pattern is the presentation of norms, values, and lifestyles associated with certain demographic groups as universal standards, while other groups are implicitly positioned as departures from those standards.

Research indicates that individuals of Asian descent in the United States frequently encounter persistent assumptions about their social belonging, with questions about civic integration recurring across public discourse. Racial disparities remain evident across societal institutions, including education, making media a significant influence on collective perceptions of ethnicity. Media portrayals often diverge from demographic realities, assigning rigid characterizations to minority groups and situating them at the periphery of dominant narratives [1]. Such representations can undermine the self-perception and communal attachment of minority audiences, while simultaneously reinforcing dominant group identification through contrastive framing.

These implicit framing patterns become especially salient in U.S. media coverage concerning China and individuals of Chinese heritage. Such reporting frequently emphasizes geopolitical and ideological themes, constructs cultural distinctions in essentialized terms, and foregrounds narratives centered on national affiliation. Analyses of higher-education journalism reveal recurrent thematic pairings that position U.S. cultural frameworks as foundational reference points, while portraying China as an ideologically distinct counterpart [4]. Within this context, intercultural individuals receive favorable recognition primarily when aligned with prevailing cultural expectations—highlighting normative frameworks while implicitly marginalizing alternative modes of integration.

Such framing is further amplified in sports-related coverage, where athletes are commonly interpreted as symbolic representatives of collective identity. Research confirms that media narratives emphasizing personal achievement and biographical detail contribute significantly to the formation of positive public perceptions of national athletes [5]. A recent analysis of media portrayals of Eileen Gu illustrates how athletic identity is constructed through culturally resonant markers—such as linguistic fluency, culinary preferences, and expressive style—to affirm alignment with national cultural frameworks. From this perspective, media serve as key sites for identity articulation, with athlete imagery strategically deployed to support objectives including social cohesion, moral exemplarity, and shared cultural affirmation.

However, assigning static identity labels to athletes risks oversimplifying multifaceted personal and cultural affiliations, reducing complex lived experiences to singular political interpretations [6]. To describe individuals navigating multiple cultural contexts, scholars have introduced the concept of 'third-culture athletes'—those raised across intercultural environments and possessing layered cultural and national orientations. Their backgrounds invite diverse interpretive responses, and public discourse around their identities extends beyond cultural comparison to encompass considerations of socioeconomic positioning, institutional policy, and commercial dynamics.

Eileen Gu, a U.S.-born athlete of Chinese heritage, exemplifies how media narratives can intensify polarized interpretations of identity. Existing scholarship has largely focused on coverage within Chinese-language media or her self-presentation on digital platforms [7]. Few studies examine how U.S. media frame the identities of interculturally situated athletes. To address this gap, the present analysis draws upon a CNN report to investigate the construction of Eileen Gu's media identity and examine the underlying conceptual frameworks informing such representation.

3. Research Methodology

The data for this study are drawn from a publicly available report published by CNN in February 2026, focusing on public discourse surrounding the skier Eileen Gu [8]. As an internationally recognized media organization, CNN contributes to global news coverage. The selected report is structured into four thematically organized sections: the first outlines Eileen Gu's biographical background; the second presents a range of perspectives circulating in U.S. public discourse; the third details the societal attention she received alongside her athletic achievements; and the fourth highlights expressions of encouragement originating from China. These sections collectively present a multifaceted and nuanced portrayal of her identity as a transnational athlete.

Critical Discourse Analysis is a well-established method for examining relationships between language use and broader social contexts. This approach enables systematic investigation of how discourse reflects and reinforces social structures and values. It facilitates identification of culturally embedded patterns in textual representation, including tendencies toward marginalization or asymmetrical framing. The selected CNN report exemplifies such patterns, with its narrative structure centering on divergent interpretations of Eileen Gu's identity [9].

A mixed research design is employed, prioritizing interpretive qualitative analysis. The examination focuses on lexical choices, modal expressions, and transitivity patterns within the report. For computational support, the text mining platform Orange is used to conduct topic modeling and sentiment analysis. Topic modeling identifies recurring thematic clusters based on word co-occurrence and distribution, thereby clarifying the report's conceptual architecture. Sentiment analysis evaluates evaluative language at the sentence level, detecting positive or negative affective orientations. These quantitative outputs serve to inform and strengthen the qualitative interpretation [10].

4. Analysis

4.1. Word Analysis

4.1.1. Themes

Results of topic modeling and word cloud analysis are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The word cloud in Figure 1a shows that terms such as "China", "American", "Chinese", and "Gu" appear most frequently and constitute central lexical elements of the report. Figure 1b presents relative frequency and weight of selected keywords; terms associated with China and the United States are prominently represented. This pattern is reflected not only in statistical metrics but also permeates the overall narrative structure of the report [11].



Figure 1a

Words & weights	
Weight	Word
5	compete
5	media
5	america
5	said
5	others
5	become
5	liu
6	time
7	many
8	also
8	chinese
9	us
10	american
18	china
22	gu

Figure 1b

Figure 1. Lexical Frequency Patterns in the CNN Report. (A) Word Cloud of the CNN Report; (B) Word Frequencies and Weights of Selected Keywords.

The report frames Eileen Gu's identity in binary terms centered on national affiliation, overlooking her transnational, multifaceted, and evolving personal identity. Phrases such as "traitor", "should", or "represent America" implicitly assign moral valence to national association, presenting it as a singular, definitive alignment. Within this discursive framework, identification with one country is portrayed without acknowledgment of concurrent or layered affiliations [12].

Results of topic modeling and TF-IDF calculation in Figure 2 confirm this narrative emphasis. Figure 2a shows that "gu", "china", "american", "us", and "chinese" are central theme keywords. Figure 2b indicates high TF-IDF values for "gu", "china", and "american". Overall, the report consistently situates Eileen Gu's identity within the context of China–United States relations, rather than treating her athletic journey and personal experiences as autonomous subjects of analysis [13].

Topic Modelling	
Topic	Topic keywords
1	gu, china, american, us, chinese, also, many, time, america, become

Figure 2a

	Words words	TF-IDF
1	gu	0.42777
2	china	0.349993
3	american	0.194441

Figure 2b

Figure 2. Topic-modelling and Tf-idf Results for the CNN Report. (A) Topic-modelling Results and Identified Keywords; (B) Tf-idf Scores of the Key Terms.

4.1.2. Naming and Reference

Reference is a linguistic mechanism through which pronouns and nominal phrases point to persons or objects within the text, enhancing textual coherence and shaping reader perceptions of social actors. In the CNN report, variation in reference strategies forms distinct lexical chains that reinforce coherence while rendering differences in ethnic identity salient.

Table 1 shows how the report designates Eileen Gu, Alysa Liu, and Chloe Kim—three third-culture athletes—using divergent reference patterns, thereby constructing distinct identity associations. Professional labels such as "freestyle skier", "figure skating superstar", and "snowboarder", along with achievement-based descriptors like "world's highest-earning" or "youngest-ever Olympic freestyle skiing champion", emphasize shared athletic excellence. However, these uniform positive characterizations are accompanied by asymmetrical ethnic attributions: Eileen Gu's Chinese heritage is repeatedly foregrounded, whereas Liu and Kim are consistently identified only as "American" or "second-generation American", without additional ethnic specification.

Table 1. References to Eileen Gu, Alysa Liu, and Chloe Kim.

Name	Reference
Eileen Gu	she, a 22-year-old Stanford undergrad, a fashion model, one of the world's highest-earning female athletes, freestyle skier, the San Francisco native, a child born to a Chinese mother and American father, the youngest-ever Olympic freestyle skiing champion, traitor, snow princess, pride of China, superstar Olympian
Alysa Liu	the figure skating superstar, a second-generation American
Chloe Kim	snowboarder, a two-time Olympic women's halfpipe champion, a second-generation American, isn't a traitor

Through contrastive framing, the report constructs evaluative distinctions: Liu and Kim are portrayed as representative of successful integration within U.S. society, while Eileen Gu is positioned in ways that echo online discourse associating her with disloyalty [14]. This differential representation reflects contrasting public narratives—Liu and Kim are affirmed as exemplary figures, whereas Gu's transnational affiliation elicits contested interpretations.

4.2. Modality

Modality is a linguistic resource for expressing certainty, possibility, and obligation. As part of the interpersonal function of language, it shapes relational stances between interlocutors and contributes to the articulation of perspectives in public discourse (As shown in Table 2).

Table 2. Modal Expressions in Selected Comments.

Serial	Commenter	Comment
1	Social media users	casting Liu and Kim as examples of what they believe a second-generation American should be.
2	US Vice President JD Vance	He said he had no idea what Gu's status should be.
3	US Vice President JD Vance	He hoped athletes who grew up in the US and benefited from its systems would want to compete for the country.
4	Social media users	But would you not do the same...why wouldn't she compete for China?
5	Social media users	Others joked that if given the opportunity, they, too, would take a paycheck over representing America.

In comment 1, "should" is used to construct an idealized image of Liu and Kim and to prescribe norms for how a "second-generation American woman" is expected to present herself, thereby reinforcing alignment with U.S. national affiliation. In comment 4, the repeated use of "would" invites readers to adopt a particular viewpoint; combined with the rhetorical question "why wouldn't she compete for China?", this formulation renders Eileen Gu's choice more comprehensible and conveys implicit endorsement.

Comment 5 employs similar modal framing. According to the sentiment analysis in Figure 3, the sentence registers a positive value of 0.282 and a neutral value of 0.718, indicating an overall positive orientation. The modal "would" positions readers empathetically relative to Eileen Gu's perspective and partially affirms her decision. However, the verb "joked" attenuates this affirmation. Furthermore, the term "paycheck" introduces an economic dimension, suggesting a potential link between her choice and material considerations [9].

Info	include title	content True	positive	negative	neutral	compound
1 instance (no missing data) 4 features No target variable. 3 meta attributes	1	Others joked...	0.282	0	0.718	0.6249

Figure 3. Sentiment-analysis Result for Sentence 5.

The remarks attributed to a senior U.S. official display distinct linguistic patterns (Figure 4): the text registers predominantly neutral sentiment, with a neutral value of 0.885 and a modest positive value of 0.115; no explicitly negative formulations appear [3]. The modal "should" signals ambiguity regarding Eileen Gu's national identification, while "would want to" expresses an expectation: individuals who matured within the U.S. system and benefited from its resources are presumed to prefer representing that country in international competition.

Info	include title	content True	positive	negative	neutral	compound
1 instance (no missing data) 4 features No target variable. 3 meta attributes	1	He said he h...	0.115	0	0.885	0.4404

Figure 4. Sentiment-analysis Results for Sentences 2 and 3.

Overall, the source presents commentary from multiple perspectives, maintaining an appearance of balanced reporting on Eileen Gu's athletic representation. While surface-level neutrality is preserved, the selective deployment of modal expressions reveals underlying normative assumptions about national affiliation, without explicit editorial positioning [5, 9].

4.3. Transitivity

Transitivity is a central analytical category in linguistics, examining process types and participant roles within sentences; variations in transitive structure shape distinct conceptualizations of events and social actors [10].

Figure 5 shows that verbal processes occur very frequently in part 2, whereas part 4 employs more material, mental, and relational processes. Part 2 presents discussions surrounding Eileen Gu primarily through statements made by various external sources, adopting an observational stance. Part 4, by contrast, foregrounds Eileen Gu's personal perspectives, public responses, and audience reception through mental and relational constructions, thereby reinforcing her affiliation with China.

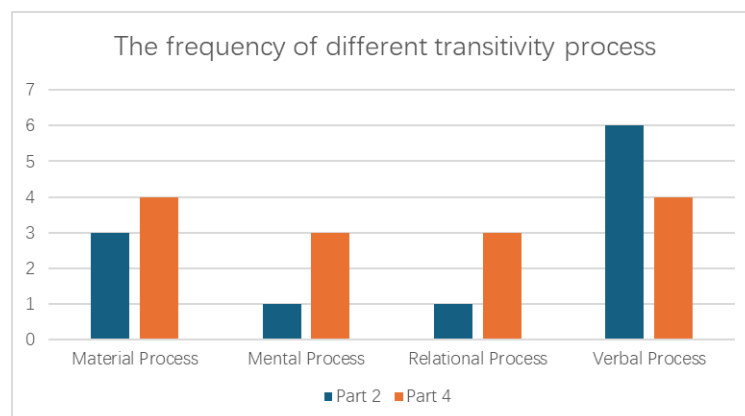


Figure 5. Frequency of Different Transitivity Processes in Parts 2 and 4.

Features of relational processes in part 2 were previously discussed in the reference section: linguistic choices associate Eileen Gu with negative descriptors and distinguish her from other Asian-American female athletes. Verbal processes predominate in part 2 and serve as a principal vehicle for conveying evaluative commentary and amplifying

public discourse. Table 3 outlines the core components of verbal processes in this section: speaker, verbal process, content of statement, target, and circumstances.

Table 3. Verbal Process Analysis in Part 2.

Sayer	Verbal	Verbiage	Target	Circumstance
Gu	announced	she would switch to compete for China	/	in 2015
Critics	pointed out	human rights abuses...	China	/
Freedom	branded	traitor	Gu	in an X post
Freedom	accusing	'disappearing' whenever the topic of human rights come up	Gu	/
Republican politicians	accusing	supporting American adversaries	Gu	/
unclear	was asked	whether he thought Gu was 'treasonous'	Vance	/

In part 2, Eileen Gu consistently appears as the recipient of evaluations and commentary; such assessments originate from diverse commentators, policymakers, and public figures. Verbs such as "branded" and "accusing" carry strong evaluative force. Some commentators also associate topics related to China with their assessments of Eileen Gu. Terms such as "treasonous" frame her personal athletic choice in terms of broader civic commitment, intensifying the evaluative weight of the commentary [11]. Her own perspective is comparatively muted; her decision to compete for China is reported using the neutral verb "announced", which downplays subjective agency.

Part 4 exhibits a marked shift: speaker–target distribution becomes more balanced (Table 4). Eileen Gu emerges as an active speaker, granted greater space to articulate her attitudes and emotions. Verbs introducing statements are predominantly neutral or favorable. Her remarks are typically introduced with "said"; positive public responses employ verbs such as "hailed". The circumstance "with a rueful laugh" accompanies her response to online criticism, contributing to a more nuanced and humanized portrayal [6].

Table 4. Verbal Process Analysis in Part 4.

Sayer	Verbal	Verbiage	Target	Circumstance
User	commented	Real champion	Gu	/
CCTV Sports Channel	hailed	As the "pride of China"	Gu	/
Gu	said	She hoped to inspire	other Chinese girls on the slopes	/
Gu	said	I want to protect other	others	With a rueful laugh

The affirmative identity construction in part 4 is further reinforced through relational processes (Table 5). Eileen Gu frequently functions as carrier and is associated with affirming attributes such as "nationally beloved", "snow princess", or "pride of China".

Table 5. Relational Process Analysis in Part 4.

Carrier	Relational	Attribute
Gu	is	National beloved/known as "snow princess"
Real champion	Aren't defined	Defined by gold medals
Gu	as	The "pride of China"

These relational constructions directly align Eileen Gu with nationally and culturally resonant positive meanings [3]. Concurrently, the text addresses concerns about competitive outcomes with the observation "True champions are not defined only by gold medals", fostering an inclusive atmosphere of recognition.

In summary, part 2 frames Eileen Gu within a context of public scrutiny and divergent commentary, while part 4 reconstructs her image as a widely admired national figure whose emotional resonance with Chinese audiences is emphasized. These two sections deploy contrasting linguistic patterns, yielding distinct narrative representations of her identity.

5. Discussion

Regarding the first research question on central themes, the findings indicate that CNN frames Eileen Gu's identity through a dichotomous lens centered on national affiliation. This framing reflects long-standing patterns in international media discourse. CNN not only reflects prevailing public sentiment but also reinforces this dichotomy through deliberate lexical and modal choices. The attribution of national belonging is reframed as a matter of social expectation. The use of the modal verb "should" introduces a prescriptive tone: without overtly stating a position, the report implicitly conveys expectations regarding national alignment. This aligns with established understandings of how media language can render ideological positions appear self-evident and widely shared. Although the report incorporates multiple viewpoints, its structural organization—including information sequencing and grammatical constructions—favors interpretation from a U.S.-centric standpoint [14]. Such patterns demonstrate how seemingly impartial language may still carry implicit evaluative weight.

Concerning the second research question on underlying ideologies, the text exhibits asymmetrical representation in the portrayal of national and ethnic identity [9]. In contrast to other individuals discussed, whose backgrounds are presented without explicit ethnic specification, Eileen Gu's identity is consistently articulated through reference to parental origin—"a mother from China, a father from the USA." This differential treatment reflects broader conventions in media representation, where certain identities are treated as default or unmarked, while others require explicit qualification. Such asymmetry contributes to the naturalization of particular social positions within discourse.

The structural organization of the report further shapes interpretive outcomes: critical perspectives originating from U.S. sources appear earlier and in greater detail, whereas supportive statements from Chinese sources are placed toward the conclusion, thereby granting greater prominence to the former. Research indicates that textual sequencing significantly influences reader interpretation. Moreover, the relative frequency of quoted U.S. voices exceeds that of Chinese voices, reinforcing a directional emphasis in the presentation of viewpoints.

With respect to the third research question on identity construction, the analysis confirms that linguistic choices in the CNN report reduce Eileen Gu's multifaceted transnational background to a binary national choice. While Chinese-language coverage often emphasizes cultural markers—such as speech patterns or daily practices—to affirm her connection to China, CNN incorporates similar descriptive elements but assigns them different interpretive weight. Positive assessments from Chinese sources are consolidated in the concluding section, positioning the image of Eileen Gu as a national figure as context-specific rather than universally endorsed.

A comparative examination of verb usage reveals a disparity in rhetorical positioning: statements critical of Eileen Gu from U.S. sources are conveyed with greater syntactic objectivity and authority, whereas affirming remarks from Chinese sources tend to be framed with affective or subjective markers. Transitivity analysis further shows that in dominant narrative segments, Eileen Gu functions primarily as a grammatical object—subject to evaluation by others—rather than as an active agent. Even when her own statements appear later in the text, her discursive presence remains limited; external interpretations continue to predominate in shaping her public identity [12].

6. Conclusion

In summary, this paper examines the discursive strategies employed by CNN in constructing contrasting portrayals of Eileen Gu in relation to China and the United States. Within this framing, two distinct representations emerge: one positions her as a contested figure whose allegiance is questioned, while the other foregrounds her connections to China through verbal and relational processes—affirming her choices, celebrating her achievements, and presenting her as a widely recognized national figure.

These divergent portrayals illustrate how a third-culture athlete's multifaceted identity is interpreted through nationally anchored interpretive frameworks. Rather than representing her transnational identity as inherently fluid or contextually adaptable, the discourse situates it within a comparative national context. Consequently, her identity is shaped not only by personal agency but also by the linguistic and ideological structures that frame her public representation.

A limitation of this study lies in its focus on a single online news source, which constrains the scope of media coverage examined. Future research could broaden the analysis to include additional reports across diverse platforms and examine how varying editorial stances influence the representation of third-culture athletes.

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