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Eileen Gu or Gu Ailing? A discourse analysis of Zhihu comments pertaining to the presumed United States - China dual citizenship issue of Olympic athlete Eileen Gu

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Eileen Gu or Gu Ailing? A discourse analysis of Zhihu comments pertaining to the presumed United States – China dual citizenship issue of Olympic athlete Eileen Gu

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1. Introduction

Eileen Gu (谷爱凌 *Gǔ Àilíng*) was born on September 3, 2003 in San Francisco in the American state California to an American father and an ethnic Chinese mother. Gu began her professional freestyle skiing career in February 2018, competing in international sports events as a sportswoman that represents the United States (US). After representing the United States for more than one year, the International Ski Federation (n.d.-a) approved Gu's request in June 2019 to switch to China as the country she represents at international sports events. In the same month, on June 6, 2019, Gu announced on her accounts on both Weibo and Instagram, a Chinese and an American social media platform respectively, that she would represent China at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics (Gu, 2019; Gu, 2019).

Ever since Gu's 'country switch' and Gu's considerable potential to win Olympic medals during the 2022 Winter Olympics, Chinese and American media outlets and Gu's sponsors have commented on Gu's contested citizenship issue. Some of these media outlets reported sensational and outright erroneous news about Gu's US citizenship status. For example, Sina News reported that Gu renounced her American citizenship when she acquired her Chinese citizenship (Renouncing US, 2020). Yet, neither Eileen Gu herself nor official sources have confirmed that Gu gave up her American citizenship. Chinese netizens' lack of knowledge about which citizenship or citizenships Eileen Gu possess or possesses,¹ especially Gu's alleged continued possession of US citizenship alongside Gu's possible possession of Chinese citizenship, triggered speculative and fierce discussions on Chinese social media platforms, such as Zhihu. The name of Eileen Gu does not seem to appear on any of the lists of Americans that renounced their citizenship, neither on the list of the second quarter of 2019, nor on lists prior to and after that quarter (Federal Register, 2019). Gu's absence on the US citizenship renunciation lists effectively proves that she actually retained her American citizenship. If Gu continued to hold US citizenship simultaneously with Gu's presumed acquisition of Chinese citizenship in 2019, that would imply that Gu is a *de facto* US-China dual citizen. Such a situation of holding dual citizenship is in contradiction to the Chinese state's legislation as it runs counter to article 8 of China's Nationality law of 1980, which stipulates that holding other citizenships after acquiring Chinese citizenship is not allowed (National Immigration Administration, 2019).

¹ The term 'netizen' is a contraction of 'internet' and 'citizen'. It simply refers to an internet user.

In contrast to Eileen Gu's US citizenship status, it remains a question whether Eileen Gu actually possesses Chinese citizenship. The International Ski Federation (n.d.-b) states that in the case of a wish to change one's country, an athlete "must possess the citizenship and passport of the country for which he wishes to compete" (p. 5). In addition, the International Ski Federation (n.d.-b) mentions that the athlete has to live for at least two years in the new country prior to the country change, but that exemption from this two-year residency rule is possible if one of the athlete's parents is a citizen of that new country and at the same time has their residency there or has ancestors from that country. A possible scenario is that Gu became a Chinese citizen through her mother's retained or regained Chinese citizenship and circumvented the two-year residency rule, but whether this is the case, is not publically known. Contrary to the International Ski Federation's rules, the Chinese Consulate General in New York states that it suffices for Gu to simply gain permanent residency status in order to represent China at sports events (Deng & Silic, 2022). If what the Chinese Consulate General says is true, Gu could be a US citizen and a Chinese permanent resident, which sidesteps the Chinese government's disapproval of holding dual citizenship. This conundrum denotes that Gu has either Chinese citizenship or Chinese permanent residency status alongside her American citizenship in order to be able to represent China. Nevertheless, there is no definite answer on whether Eileen Gu actually possesses Chinese citizenship.

Despite representing China at sports competitions, Eileen Gu's personal circumstances differ tremendously with those of most Chinese citizens. As opposed to the majority of Chinese citizens' place of birth in China, Gu's place of birth is on the opposite end of the Pacific Ocean in San Francisco, which means that she is a US citizen since her birth. This means that Gu spent her formative years and went to school in the US. Moreover, Gu was raised binationally and biculturally, and has a mixed-heritage background. With all this background information of Gu in mind, this graduate research takes particular interest in what the Chinese netizens' opinions are about Gu's presumed dual citizenship. As Eileen Gu switched from being a American athlete to being a Chinese athlete at a pivotal moment in Gu's freestyle skiing career, what views do Chinese people have of Eileen Gu? Do Chinese people feel relatable to Gu or would they 'other' Gu? What topics arise in these Zhihu discussions about Gu? Bringing these questions together into one central question, the research question for this thesis is: 'How do Zhihu users discuss Eileen Gu's presumed United States-China dual citizenship?'.

As the table of contents already showed, this thesis consists of the following chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis, conclusion, reference list, and the appendices. In the literature review, I bring up key concepts and themes from academic research that are important to answer the research question, such as the differentiation between nation, nationality, citizenship, media's portrayal of sportswomen, online success, and the burgeoning phenomenon of 'naturalized' Chinese athletes. In the methodology chapter, I explain what a discourse analysis is, why I chose Zhihu as the source of my data, and how I shaped my research analysis. After that, in the analysis chapter, I present the findings of the discourse analysis that I conducted. In brief, Zhihu commenters discussed the possible legal statuses that Gu could have and portraying her in ways that make her an outsider to the Chinese people. In the conclusion, I go through the research findings and put forward suggestions for future research. Finally, in the appendices one can find the names of the Zhihu posts from which the comments were drawn and an overview of the comments that I selected for the analysis.

2. Nation, women in mediatized Olympics, gradations of digital success, and ‘naturalized’ Chinese athletes

This literature review surveys the academic literature on the various topics that are closely related to Eileen Gu’s dual citizenship discussions on Zhihu. This allows one to acquire sufficient familiarity with the topics that netizens brought up in the online debates with regard to Eileen Gu’s presumed US-China dual citizenship. In this chapter, I start with touching upon various topics, such as the scholarly perspectives on the definition of the nation and nationalism, the presence of Chinese nationalism during Olympic events, and what the conceptual differences are between ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship. This chapter’s subsequent subsections revolve around the media’s coverage and portrayal of Olympic sportswomen worldwide and in China and the conditions and challenges of attaining success in the Chinese digital environment. The final subsection delves into the nascent phenomena of foreign individuals that become ‘naturalized’ Chinese athletes and possession of dual citizenship.

2.1 Origins and development of the Chinese nation and Chinese nationalism

In the early twentieth century, the burgeoning national consciousness of the Han Chinese people started to take shape. At the cusp of a major political changeover in China in the 1910s, Han Chinese men cut off their Manchu-imposed queue hairstyle as a clear signal that the Han Chinese people refused to be associated with the Manchu people (Harrison, 2001). The rapid disappearance of the queue hairstyle became a powerful and visible watershed moment, which signified a sudden redefinition of one’s belongingness to the Chinese nation. As Han Chinese men across the country uniformly adopted this altered hairstyle, this striking transition exemplified an early emergence of the Chinese people’s national identity in modern times.

Throughout the past decades, increased scholarly attention emerged with regard to what entails a nation and the corresponding phenomenon of nationalism. Anderson (1991) asserts that the nation signifies an ‘imagined community’ that lives in peoples’ minds, as people feel automatically connected with other people of the same nation, even if they may never meet one another. It evokes the idea of a nation’s perpetuated tight-knit social fabric and a group of people that speak the same language, have a shared collective memory, and share a common culture. Smith (1991) complements Anderson by enumerating that the nation consists of “an

historical territory, common myths and historical memories ... for all members” (p. 14). Furthermore, another researcher asserts that there are states that encompass the geographical territory of one nation, i.e. nation-states, but that there are more states that consist of multiple nations (Gellner, 1983). Thus, the nation encapsulates the idea of a people’s connectedness based on historical, cultural and linguistic similarities.

Strictly speaking, China is not a nation-state, as it is a country that has multiple nations that live in it. However, the PRC concept of the ‘Chinese nation’ (中华民族 *zhōnghuá mínzú*) encompasses a unified nation consisting of multiple ethnicities, which is a political creation that strives to emulate the notion of a nation-state (Hu & Liang, 2019, pp. 19-20). A quintessential example of the strong visual depiction of the Chinese nation is a scene during the 2008 Olympics opening ceremony. A group of children that wore ethnic attires surrounded the Chinese national flag, which emanated the ethnic groups’ peaceful co-existence and unitedness in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s conveyance of Chinese national identity. State-designated ethnicities emerged when the CCP devised a Soviet-style classification of 56 ethnic groups in the 1950s (Mullaney, 2011), which is still in place until the present day. In spite of the ethnic heterogeneity within the Chinese borders, China, somewhat paradoxically, presents itself as a strong and unified nation-state.

References to the nation and nationalist elements permeated the realm of Chinese elite sport. Nationalism is closely related to the nation and national identity in that nationalism is the explicit expression of quintessential characteristics that are associated with the nation. Gellner (1983) defines nationalism as a political tool that holds the nation and the country together. Billig (1995) states that citizens encounter subliminal forms of ‘banal nationalism’ in their everyday lives. The ubiquitous presence of symbols that refer to one’s nation also appear on the stages of the Olympics, which offers a platform for the display of national flags and the playing of the national anthem. Both the top-down and bottom-up variants of nationalism appear on the stages of the Olympics. While the masses are emotionally invested in the celebration of their countrymen’s achievements, the state can use sport as a means to strengthen national identity and forge closer ties with their citizens (Cha, 2008). The 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony served as a culmination of Chinese nationalism. It imbued the Chinese viewer with the display of Chinese national symbols, such as the raising of the Chinese flag and the patriotic Chinese audience (Schneider, 2019). As it turns out, the

celebration of the Chinese nation and the successful achievements of its athletes at the Olympic Games served as a catalyst for fostering the Chinese people's nationalist feelings.

Sports heroes hold a special place in the construction of Chinese nationalism. In the first few decades of the PRC, the socialist state's overall planned structure encapsulated the elite athletes' actions and sports ethos (Hu & Liang, 2019, pp. 29-30). In the 1980s, the array of successes of the Chinese women's volleyball team became the epitome of the Chinese nation's pride. The Ministry of Sport saw the winning streak of the Chinese women's volleyball team as analogous to the ascendancy of socialist system (Hu & Liang, 2019, p. 31). Despite the stringent sport training schemes that Chinese female athletes undergo, in which they constantly push the boundaries of physical endurance (Dong, 2003, pp. 157-159), this is not the picture that the media paints. Chinese media oftentimes portray sportswomen as physically weak, which perpetuates gender stereotypes, and underline the connection between the state and female athletes (Hu & Liang, 2019, p. 37). This particular media portrayal amplifies a patriarchal rhetoric that ties the female athletes to the state. However, sometimes the state's demanding expectations take a negative toll on athletes. Chinese elites' morbid obsession with winning gold medals reached a culmination at the 2008 Olympics as the achievement symbolized the strong nation and international prestige, a situation, according to critics, that was at the expense of the Olympic athletes' health (Lu & Fan, 2019). Thus, Chinese sportswomen's performances are inextricably linked to the Chinese state's ideological interests and nation-building endeavors.

In order to avoid misunderstandings in the rest of this thesis, it is necessary to differentiate the meanings of the terms citizenship and nationality. The use of the terms citizenship and nationality became conflated, and therefore, virtually synonymous in colloquial speech. Cambridge Dictionary's definitions for both terms show minimal difference to an average layperson, except that having a citizenship means that rights are conferred to someone while having a nationality does not. It provides these definitions: "The state of being a member of a particular country and having rights because of it" (citizenship) and "the official right to belong to a country" (nationality) (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Piattoeva's (2015) encyclopedia entry expounds that an individual's possession of citizenship comes with a broad array of rights and responsibilities within a country. Piattoeva (2015) disagrees with the Cambridge Dictionary's nationality definition of an individual's belonging to a socio-political entity and instead puts nationality in the same category as a nation's

member in the same line of thought as the ‘imagined community’. This clarification transpires that the notion of citizenship has the concrete meaning of membership of a territorially-bounded country that comes with benefits and burdens, while nationality essentially does not transcend the boundaries of notions pertaining to imagined nationhood. So, this means that someone that has citizenship of the PRC is a Chinese citizen. Given the discrepancy between these terms, this thesis prefers to use the term citizenship over the term nationality in Eileen Gu’s citizenship controversy.

Despite the previous terminological disentangling of citizenship and nationality, it might induce confusion that China’s government body National Immigration Agency (NIA) refers to the Chinese citizenship legislation as the ‘Nationality law of the People’s Republic of China’ (中华人民共和国国籍法 *zhōnghuá rénmin gònghéguó guójífǎ*). Therefore, please note that this thesis uses ‘Chinese Nationality law’ (official name of the law) and close variants of that and ‘Chinese citizenship legislation’ (term that refers to the law) interchangeably.

Thus, with the elaboration of all these concepts, how can one make sense of Eileen Gu as a ‘Chinese’ (中国人 *Zhōngguó rén*)? There are essentially two ways to look at it. As explained above, one can be a ‘Chinese’ in the sense that one is part of the government-constructed ‘Chinese nation’ or one can be a ‘Chinese’ that is a citizen of the People’s Republic of China. If Eileen Gu acquired Chinese citizenship, then Gu would be a Chinese citizen, which means that she is a full member of the PRC’s society. However, that does not translate directly to belonging to one of the 56 ethnic groups, as Gu only has half ethnic Chinese blood. Despite not being born as a Chinese citizen and not being a ‘full member’ of the ‘Chinese nation’, Gu still represents China in the field of sport and functions as an embodiment of the Chinese national identity on the Olympic stage. These differentiations of ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship are important to keep in mind in general, but especially in the context of Eileen Gu’s identity.

2.2 Media coverage and media portrayal of female Olympic athletes on a global level and in China

The media are one of the main conveyors that give prominence to Olympic athletes and give the general public exposure to them. This means that the media has significant influence on

the amount of attention that it spends on Olympic athletes, on the way it presents Olympic athletes, and on the perceptions that people have of them that ultimately consume the media's content of the Olympics. This section starts with an exploration of female Olympic athletes' media attention and media portrayal on a global level. Thereafter, the focus shifts toward how Chinese media cover and portray Chinese female Olympic athletes.

In contrast to the attention that male Olympic athletes receive in the media, media coverage of female Olympic athletes remained an underrepresented aspect in newspapers globally. Although research concerning the amount of media coverage of female Olympic athletes at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics is insufficient at the time of writing, the overall attention that media pay to female Olympic athletes has increased over time. One study shows that, starting from the 1980s, female Olympic athletes gained more than 10 percentage points in newspaper coverage during an Olympic event over a period of two decades (Bruce et al., 2010, p. 5). In this period, the study showed that the media coverage level of female Olympic athletes increased to at least 30 percent of the total media coverage.

There are certain factors that helped spur Olympic sportswomen to come into the media's limelight. The aforementioned study asserts that two aspects that have a positive effect on the increased visibility of Olympic sportswomen in the media are their potential of winning Olympic medals, and their ability to showcase themselves as an epitome of national identity (Bruce et al., 2010). With regard to the general media framing of Olympic sportswomen, researchers found that the media engages in the practice of dismissing the performance-related aspects of sportswomen and instead highlighting peripheral matters when it comes to the portrayal of female Olympic athletes during their Olympic performance. More than two decades ago, Koivula (1999) paints a very bleak picture of the media portrayal of sportswomen, stating that they are "often marginalized, made invisible, trivialized, infantile, and reduced to sex objects" (p. 591). More recently, the downplaying of female athletes' sports performances appears to continue. One study asserts that the media's employment of various recurrent frames contained gender biases against female athletes in a sports media landscape in which athletes are portrayed in a hegemonic masculine fashion (Fink, 2015). The same study mentions the media's use of unfavorable practices, such as infantilization, referring to sportswomen as "girls" or "young ladies" or calling them by their first name (Fink, 2015, p. 334). Another issue that the same study detected was the media's use of different framing patterns with regard to sportsmen and sportswomen, such as attributing a

female athlete's success to external factors, while the culpability of failure is blamed on a sportswoman's mental or physical shortcoming (Fink, 2015, pp. 334-335).

Whereas the previous paragraph had more of a worldwide, if not a Global North, focus, the final part of this section takes a look at the media coverage and depiction of Chinese female Olympic athletes in a Chinese context. Although Chinese female Olympic athletes won more than 1.5 times as much gold medals as their Chinese male counterparts at the Athens 2004 Summer Olympics, a regional Sichuanese newspaper gave Chinese Olympic sportswomen hardly more attention than Chinese Olympic sportsmen (Wu, 2010). This particular case study demonstrates that achieving Olympic success does not translate directly to the expected commensurate media attention for Chinese female Olympic athletes. There are also more recent studies on the portrayal of Chinese female Olympic athletes in Chinese media. One study found that China Central Television (CCTV) commentators covering the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympics commented 10% more about the female gymnasts' personality or body than those of their male counterparts (Xu et al., 2018, p. 165). In a similar study, albeit with a shifted focus on several sports at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, the CCTV sports commentators made a similar number of comments about the personality or physicality of athletes of both sexes (Xu et al., 2020, p. 758). That same study cautiously alludes to the negligible difference between Chinese sportsmen and sportswomen in the Chinese media's portrayal of them might be a continuation of the Chinese state's historical portrayal of desexualized and defeminized Chinese female athletes (Xu et al., 2020, pp. 761-762). The academic literature seems to show a discrepancy in the media's portrayal of female athletes in the Global North and China. While one can discern the trivialization of female athletes' sport achievements in the media of both the Global North and in China, female athletes seem to be considerably more subjected to objectification in the Global North's media than in Chinese media.

2.3 Success and failure in the Chinese digital landscape: *Wanghong*, trends, and misogynistic attitudes

The existing scholarship on achieving popularity and receiving recognition and, the other side of the coin, falling in disfavor and inflicting antagonization in the Chinese digital landscape demonstrates a diverse range of various noteworthy netizen-driven phenomena. In the contemporary competitive Chinese digital landscape and continued proliferation of social

media platforms, in which the road to achieve popularity is oftentimes not straightforwardly achievable, social media influencers and athletes, such as Eileen Gu, try to materialize their success in the digital world. Another phenomenon includes Chinese netizens conveying nationalist messages toward Chinese women's actions or expressions that netizens deem inappropriate, which result in the burgeoning and spread of enraged mobs in the digital realm.

The development of the *wanghong* (网红) phenomenon in the 2010s refers to Chinese internet celebrities' rapid rise to fame (Zhang & De Seta, 2018). As for the lexical composition of the term *wanghong*, it came into being as a contraction of the words *wangluo* (网络, internet) and *hongren* (红人, popular person). The particular character *hong* in *hongren* means red, a color which in Chinese symbolism is related to "wealth, success, and popularity" (Zhang & De Seta, 2018, p. 59). Contrary to commonly used Chinese terms for famous people, *wanghong* celebrities refer to those people that achieved their fame status specifically through building a successful following on visually-oriented social media platforms (Zhang & De Seta, 2018). While the term *wanghong* is not entirely applicable to Eileen Gu's rise to stardom on a one-to-one basis, *wanghong*'s aspect of becoming famous overnight is somewhat analogous to Eileen Gu's sudden celebrity status that she attained after winning multiple Olympic medals.

On the other hand, Zhang et al. (2022) assert that the *wanghong* phenomenon is not merely applicable to famous humans, but that the phenomenon has an adjectivized applicability on popularized architectural objects as well. With their coinage of the term ' *wanghong* urbanism', Zhang et al. (2022) demonstrate that inanimate urban spectacles can be the center of attention that gain popularity through digital platforms, shifting the focus of stardom from the human dimension to the spatial dimension. On an emotional level, the popularization process of these internet-famous urban spectacles seem to rely on the social media users' 'place attachment'. Simply put, the core aspect of place attachment refers to an individual's emotional tethering to a particular place (Altman & Low, 1992). Increased offline and online engagement with the *wanghong* urban spectacle makes people more emotionally invested in a particular place. Moreover, Harvey's (2019) reconceptualization of spaces that renders spaces into an absolute, relative, and relational dimension is also useful for understanding the changes that *wanghong* urban spectacles undergo. While the *wanghong* urban spectacles usually do not undergo major changes in the absolute sense after going viral, changes in the relative and relational dimension are observable. As more people share content of the *wanghong* urban spectacle on

social media, it evokes feelings of recognition between social media users. In turn, as the digital popularity of the *wanghong* urban spectacle increases, new tourist flows flock the *wanghong* urban spectacle, which changes its once unobtrusive atmosphere into a swarming hive of visitors. Likewise, the increased popularity induces a new group of people with admiration for the *wanghong* urban spectacle, establishing a closer connection between the admiring people and the architectural eye-catcher.

The exclusionary acts of Chinese populism and nationalism demonstrate the capriciousness of being the center of attention. One study discerns that one category of bottom-up online Chinese populists referred to the Chinese people as 'the Chinese nation' (中华民族 *zhōnghuá mínzú*), which functions as a discursive 'ideological glue' in this context (He, 2023, p. 95). Imbued with nationalist rhetoric and iconography, this branch of Chinese populism delineates 'the Chinese nation' through the practice of antagonizing alleged hostile foreigners and elite members of the in-group that are deemed to be involved in treacherous acts. Another phenomenon that is slightly more specific in the context of designating people as enemy of China or Chinese people is the *ruhua* (辱华, insulting China) phenomenon. This practice refers to the vilification of people that act in a way that runs counter to the Chinese state's interests or the *ruhua* adherents' opaque and sensitive moral boundaries that the *ruhua* offender overstepped. Unlike the abovementioned populist practice of running counter to the 'Chinese nation', the accusatory label of *ruhua* is often attributed to foreign brands, celebrities from abroad and from the non-mainland Chinese sinosphere areas. Examples of *ruhua* behavior are engaging in racist practices against Chinese people, committing cultural faux pas, and making sensitive comments about the PRC's political stances (Huang, 2022, p. 79).

With the people's increased use of online platforms, nationalism became a common occurrence in the Chinese digital realm. These online platforms connect netizens with each other, which paves the way for the facilitation of "networked actors" that exchange their nationalist views (Schneider, 2018, p. 17). One researcher illustrates a Baidu-based community's involvement in a concerted online intimidation campaign on the Facebook account of Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen (He, 2023, pp. 95-96). These nationalist members inundated Tsai's social media page with nationalist symbols, phrases and visual references to quintessential Chinese scenes after Tsai took the side of fellow compatriot Chou Tzu-yu after Chou stated that she was Taiwanese. In the eyes of these Chinese nationalists,

Chou made a political faux pas, because Chou's statement runs counter to Taiwan's place in the One China policy. Somewhat differently, another researcher lays bare "the ungrateful traitor" trope, in which, instead of conveying vindictive messages, patriotic netizens uphold patriotism as an irrefutable principle and correct the 'violate' of what offensive remarks he or she made about their beloved China (Huang, 2022, pp. 83-85). In these examples, Chinese nationalists express their nationalist views through digital networks in order to seize the moral high ground and impose their moral values of nationalism on other people.

Several scholars suggest that women fall prey to receive unsolicited gendered comments in China's digital participation in particular instances. One study highlights the downside aspects of being a female internet celebrity in the *wanghong* economy, which are the regular occurrences of receiving moralistic and condescending remarks about one's modified appearance, such as being called a *wanghong lian* (which translates literally into *wanghong* face; Zhang & De Seta, 2018, pp. 64-65). On the other hand, another study mentions that online discussions, which typically revolve around a Chinese woman's insufficient patriotic feelings, degenerate into personal attacks toward these women (Huang, 2022, p. 88). In these instances, patriotic netizens make flimsily corroborated or outright unsubstantiated misogynistic and lewd slut-shaming comments with regard to the particular woman's sexual preferences and/or intimate life. Parallel to Zhang and De Seta's negative appearance-oriented commentary targeting *wanghong* celebrities, Huang (2022) also detected an online phenomenon in which digital vigilantism participants have the inclination to ridicule women's uncomplimentary pictures and adding vile comments to them about their appearances. As digital vigilantism participants shared these self-made memes on social media, the proliferation of these memes reached sizeable online audiences across the Chinese digital environment. As these cases make clear, the misogynist, and sometimes, nationalist behavior of this particular segment of Chinese-speaking netizens contribute to the perpetuation of the victimization and vilification of Chinese women and the deliberate tarnishing of Chinese women's image.

2.4 ‘Naturalized’ Chinese athletes and the emergence of dual citizenship

The Nationality law that became effective in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1980 remains valid until present day.² The PRC Nationality law explicitly states in article 3 that the PRC does not acknowledge dual nationality (National Immigration Administration, 2019). In recent years, there is an increase in athletes with a ‘foreign’ background that have been making their appearance in the Chinese sports world, including the ‘naturalized’ Chinese athletes Eileen Gu and Zhu Yi who were both born in the US. This subsection focuses on the changing Chinese immigration policy in recent years, Chinese people’s attitudes toward naturalized Chinese athletes, and the Chinese and American news media’s reports on the naturalized Chinese athlete Eileen Gu.

Over the last decade-and-a-half, there is a discernible divergence between the strict Chinese citizenship legislation and eased immigration measures, as well as a rift between the government’s and people’s views on immigration. While Chinese politicians’ pre-2010 proposals to ease the single citizenship principle failed, China saw the introduction of a new Chinese “foreign talent” visa in 2013 and the adoption of a permanent residency policy in 2016, predominantly aimed at attracting ethnic Chinese talent from abroad (Habicht, 2022, pp. 34-35). These policy changes signposted a shift in the state’s view on immigration, but also meant that the single citizenship principle remained unchanged. This meant that the Chinese state continues to adhere to the single citizenship principle and, in turn, also upholds the non-recognition of dual citizenship, which seems to signify that Eileen Gu’s dual citizenship situation is in violation with the Chinese single citizenship principle.³ However, in 2020, an outspoken minority on Weibo, which consisted of Chinese nationalist netizens, expressed their ire directed at a government's proposed relaxation of PRC permanent residency legislation. Unlike the aforementioned policy changes, the permanent residency policy amendment of 2020 was aimed at attracting a wider pool of foreign talent than solely foreign ethnic Chinese talent. The resistance of nationalist netizens impacted the debate

² In light of Eileen Gu’s presumed US-China dual citizenship situation, this footnote summarily expounds on the historical background of the Chinese and American citizenship legislation. The PRC Nationality law is historically based on a *jus sanguinis* principle (citizenship acquisition based on one’s bloodline) (Dan, 2009, pp. 12-14), whereas the American citizenship law is largely based on a *jus soli* system (citizenship acquisition based on one’s birthplace) (Brooks, 2019, pp. 35-36).

³ It is not a recent phenomenon that Chinese Americans have dual citizenship, in fact, such people already existed more than one hundred years ago. For an excellent historical overview of the challenges that the Chinese Americans encountered due to their US-China dual citizenship in the early twentieth-century China, I can recommend one to take a look at Charlotte Brooks’ book *American Exodus: Second-Generation Chinese Americans in China, 1901–1949*.

surrounding the permanent residency policy change in such a way that the government retracted the proposed permanent residency draft so as to reconsider its implementation, staving off further proliferation of the netizens' backlash against the plan (Speelman, 2023, pp. 116-117). The fairly arduous policy development processes pertaining to the 'settlement climate' in China and the netizens' oppositional reactions to the relaxation of the long-term stay of foreigners in China demonstrate that citizenship, immigration, and accommodating foreigners remain contentious and sensitive issues in both Chinese politics and society.

The increased number of sportspeople that became 'naturalized' Chinese citizens did not escape the attention of the Chinese people and media, especially in the Chinese soccer enthusiasts milieu. Naturalization refers to "the act of making someone a legal citizen of a country that they were not born in" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Starting from the mid-2010s, the Chinese Football Association (CFA) set in motion a series of policies conducive to the naturalization of foreign soccer players, with the aim of bringing the Chinese men's soccer to a higher performance level on the international sports stage (Han et al., 2024, p. 259). One study maintains that surveyed male-majority Chinese soccer forum users expressed their preference for partial and full ethnic Chinese naturalized soccer players over those that were not of Chinese descent (Sullivan et al., 2023, p. 600). However, these Chinese soccer forum users expressed their leniency to those that obey the rules set out for soccer players, understand the culture and speak the language of their newly adopted homeland. Han et al.'s (2024) study discerns a similar sentiment of ambivalent attitudes among interviewed Chinese soccer fans that had a strong preference for soccer players to have a physical appearance resembling that of an ethnic Chinese. In the same study, other Chinese soccer fans embrace naturalized soccer players as a member of the Chinese nation if they maintained a sufficient Chinese language proficiency level or displayed patriotic behavior (Han et al., 2024, pp. 266-269).

The preference for partial or full ethnic Chinese naturalized athletes among soccer fans does not necessarily translate to the Chinese wider public's unconditional acceptance of partial or full ethnic Chinese naturalized athletes. Aside from the bulk of newly naturalized Chinese athletes in China's ice hockey teams, freestyle skier Eileen Gu and figure skater Zhu Yi were two of the most salient naturalized members of the 2022 Chinese Winter Olympic community (Li et al., 2024, p. 42). In spite of both athletes' partial (Eileen Gu) and full (Zhu Yi) ethnic Chinese heritage, the Chinese public's reactions toward these two naturalized female Olympic

athletes divulged a striking contrast in attitudes. Chinese netizens have nicknamed Gu as ‘genius girl’ and ‘snow queen’ and that the topic of Gu’s Olympic medals reached virality on Weibo (Han & Zhao, 2024, p. 62). In addition, the Chinese public probably sees Eileen Gu in a positive light, since Gu speaks with an unadulterated Beijing accent, visits family and friends in Beijing almost every summer, and stars in Chinese documentaries (Branch, 2022). Gu’s close relationship with China and Chinese people emanates her Chinese identity toward the Chinese public. On the other hand, Gu’s fellow naturalized athlete, Zhu Yi bore the brunt of Weibo users’ intense backlash after an unpromising Olympic performance. Chinese netizens discredited Zhu’s ‘Chineseness’ owing to Zhu’s limited ability to speak Mandarin and netizens’ skepticism about her talent (Han & Zhao, 2024, pp. 62-63). Netizens also openly called into question Zhu Yi joining the Chinese Olympic team through the actions of Zhu Yi’s family, which was suspected to have an elite background (Han & Zhao, 2024, p. 63). This occurrence is a textbook example of the aforementioned Chinese populist views that ‘the people’ should denounce the elite adversary. As far as the academic literature concerns, gold medal-winning Eileen Gu did not endure such significant online backlash. Nevertheless, there are reasons that populist netizens could use to condemn Gu’s elite background under unfavorable circumstances. For example, Gu’s university-schooled mother is a daughter of a late Chinese government official and the Gu’s live in an affluent San Francisco neighborhood on a stone’s throw away from the iconic Golden Gate Bridge (Branch, 2022). Overall, the stark difference in Olympic performance and close affinity with China between Eileen Gu and Zhu Yi appear to be the main reason in the Chinese public’s reactions and attitudes toward both sportswomen.

In the specific case of Eileen Gu’s citizenship question, one can observe a discrepancy in the media reporting between the established Chinese and American media, but also between established Chinese media news reports and Chinese social media discourse. Gu’s alleged dual citizenship issue remained a largely absent matter in Chinese media. Instead, a large number of Chinese news media depicted Eileen Gu in a favorable light in connection with the Olympic medals that she won, her predilection for Chinese food, and her seemingly strong family ties (Lyu et al., 2024, pp. 492-493). Conversely, the focus of American media’s reporting on Eileen Gu focused heavily on Gu’s dual citizenship controversy, which the American media linked to the political tensions between the US and China (Zhang et al., 2024, pp. 70-71). As opposed to the Chinese media’s and Weibo users’ praise for Eileen Gu, Gu’s presumed dual citizenship became a topic of debate on Weibo about Gu’s belongingness

and loyalty to China (Li et al., 2024, p. 51). As this thesis moves closer toward the analysis chapter of Zhihu discussions about Eileen Gu's dual citizenship, it is useful to keep these Chinese media's depictions of and netizens' reactions to Eileen Gu in mind and see if these tropes reoccur in Zhihu discussions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Discourse analysis

Studying a discourse, in its core, refers to the scrutiny of verbal and written communication. The noted French philosopher Michel Foucault's refined formulations of the notion of discourse served as a foundational bedrock for the development of discourse theory. Foucault asserts that discourse is the collection of statements that fits within one particular overarching context, a context that is subject to change and malleability (Foucault, 1972). This means that discourses are not static compositions of a particular language, but that that particular language, that constitute a discourse, changes over time. A discourse is not the accumulation of figments of people's imaginations, but a collection of people's communication that render material reality (Jäger & Maier, 2016, Chapter 5, p. 112). The creation of these material realities underline the significance of discourses in the societal context.

Power and knowledge play a key role in the furtherance of the existence of a particular discourse. Foucault argues that power and knowledge are elements that are intimately intertwined (Gutting, 2005, pp. 50-51). The interplay of power and knowledge is discernible in the bidirectional motions in the development mechanism of discourses. On the one hand, the development of discourses in a particular direction exert power to the degree that people change their thinking and speech (Jäger & Maier, 2016, Chapter 5, p. 117). On the other hand, societal actors that successfully challenge hegemonic discourses could spark political debates that could cause an inflection to those discourses. (Jäger & Maier, 2016, Chapter 5, p. 118). Thus, one can see that the dynamics between power and knowledge have a large influence on the reification of discourses.

There are certain aspects to keep in mind when one tries to discern discourses during a discourse analysis. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) emphasize that discourses are "a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world" (p. 6). This shows that solely analyzing the text does not reveal the entire picture, as the social context plays an important role in bringing about a discourse. One way of organizing the different codes when one explores a discourse in a particular context is dividing a discourse into different discourse strands. Discourse strands are bundled categories of a particular theme within a discourse that in turn consist of several subthemes (Jäger & Maier, 2016, Chapter 5, p. 121). This is a useful concept to use in a discourse analysis as it allows one to discern the different topics in a particular discourse.

While discourse analysis is useful method for dissecting the broader context of a person's conveyed messages, it does not divulge a person's thought process behind their communication (Schneider, 2023, pp. 161-162). This limitation has no impact on this study, because this graduate thesis looks merely at what Zhihu users say about Eileen Gu's presumed dual citizenship issue and how to make sense of their comments in the larger scheme of things.

3.2 Justification for choosing Zhihu as data source

This thesis uses Zhihu (知乎) comments as data for its discourse analysis. Zhihu is a Chinese language question-and-answer platform that one can access through their website and their app. Zhihu is comparable to – but not entirely similar as – the multilingual question-and-answer platform Quora. Almost 15% of all Chinese social media app users used Zhihu in December 2017, which attracted significantly less digital traffic compared to the approximately 40% share that Weibo held in that same month (China Internet Network Internet Center, 2018, p. 47). In 2023, the website and app of Zhihu attracted a combined average of 105 million unique monthly users (Zhihu, n.d., p.6). In spite of the large gap in both social media platforms' popularity and, presumably, the difference in the number of comments about Gu's dual citizenship issue, I want to provide a justification for why I find Zhihu comments more suitable for this research than those of Weibo.

The main reasons for choosing Zhihu as the main data source rather than other Chinese social media platforms are the users' educational background and the profundity of the users' comments. Demographic information about Zhihu users show that they live in top-tier urban areas and that the vast majority of them hold a university degree (Yang, 2018, as cited in Zhang, 2020, p. 96), which indicates that Zhihu users are likely to be more intelligent and more eloquent in comparison with the ordinary Chinese citizen. Furthermore, as opposed to Weibo, Zhihu's text-based environment elicits users to express their opinions in a more profound way and, therefore, are inclined to contribute more meaningfully to discussions. As Weibo users tend to have quite adamant and unnuanced opinions (Medaglia and Zhu, 2017, p. 538), I express my preference to analyze Zhihu comments that I assume contain more shrewdly formulated comments and reflect a wider range of diverse viewpoints than those on Weibo. My intention was to add a screenshot of the Weibo comments with regard to Eileen Gu's dual citizenship issue to provide a glimpse of the discussions there vis-à-vis the Zhihu

discussions. Unfortunately, Weibo posts from the period of the 2022 Winter Olympics seem to be irretrievable for me.

Zhihu itself also provides some demographic information about its users. As there is little personal information available about the commenting Zhihu users, it is, therefore, not guaranteed that all analyzed comments originated from Zhihu users that are from China. In contrast to the more recent Zhihu posts that make known the IP location of the posters, the selected Zhihu posts for the analysis are at least two years old at the time of writing.

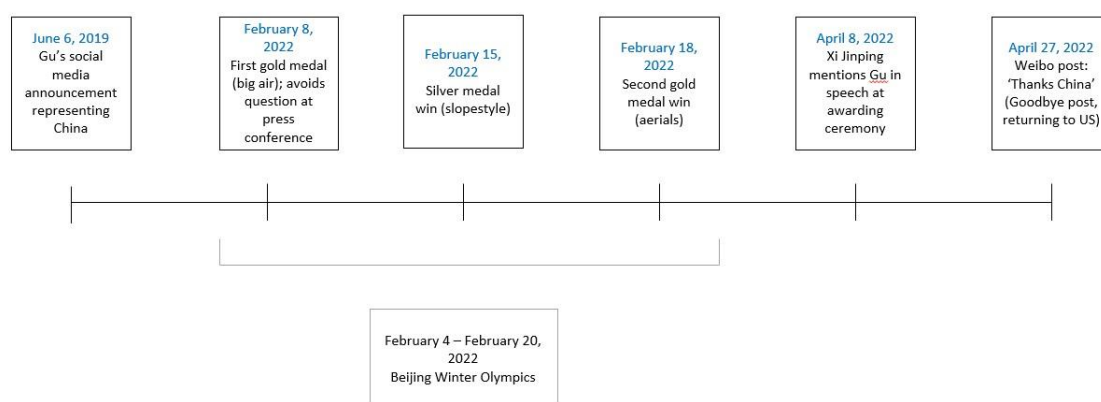
Unfortunately, this means that the posters' IP locations of the selected posts for the analysis is no longer available. Generally speaking, the vast majority of the displayed posters' IP locations are those of Chinese provinces or similar administrative divisions, sporadically interspersed with the display of IP locations of countries that are not China. As the vast majority of the posts and comments on Zhihu are written in simplified Chinese, which is most commonly used in mainland China, it is ostensibly safe to assume that most Zhihu comments originate from Chinese netizens.

3.3 Research design

With Zhihu as the preferred Chinese social media platform for this qualitative research, I began my quest by looking for suitable data to collect. When I searched for Zhihu posts regarding Eileen Gu, many posts discussed whether she retained her American citizenship after being a naturalized Chinese citizen and, therefore, if she held United States-China dual citizenship. I used the Zhihu search bar and entered search terms in Chinese, such as 'Eileen Gu' (谷爱凌 *Gǔ Àilíng*), to see the overall number of posts about her. This search query yielded 186 Zhihu posts, which also consisted of posts that revolved around subjects that were less relevant to this research as well. I also conducted search queries with more specific search terms, such as 'Eileen Gu' in combination with 'citizenship' (国籍 *guójí*), 'dual citizenship' (双重国籍 *shuāngchóng guójí*), 'citizenship controversy' (国籍争议 *guójí zhēngyì*), 'naturalization' (归化 *guīhuà*), or 'Winter Olympics' (冬奥会 *dōng'ànhuì*). This round of search queries resulted in around 20 posts that appeared in the first half of 2022. The number of responses to these posts ranging from around 90 comments up to almost 3,300 comments. As this is an overwhelming amount of collected data and my decision to refrain from using – in my understanding – complicated machine learning models in the analysis

section, I have to narrow down this data in order to keep the project feasible. Therefore, I will explain my data selection strategy at a later stadium in this subsection.

The Zhihu posts that are most fitting for the analysis part are those that touch upon the different aspects of Gu's presumed United States-China dual citizenship issue. To give an idea of eligible aspects: the reconcilability between dual citizenship and the Chinese nationality law, Gu's reaction on a journalist's question about the dual citizenship issue and open questions about Zhihu users' opinion on Gu's presumed dual citizenship. This also means that this study does not take into consideration posts that deviated from the dual citizenship issue and delved into ancillary matters. This study considers posts that addresses frivolous subjects about Eileen Gu, such as Gu's physical appearance or Gu's sleep rhythm, as ineligible for the analysis. As mentioned earlier, I will apply a discourse analysis on the content of the selected Zhihu comments in order to dissect what the various talking points are and how those talking points situate in the larger context. As I want to present the discursive strands of Zhihu comments in an organic way instead of using pre-determined categories, I will use an inductive coding method in the analysis.



This timeline highlights the most salient events of Eileen Gu's life as a Chinese athlete.

My initial plan for selecting posts was to choose posts between Gu's naturalization announcement (June 6, 2019) and the day that Eileen Gu left China after participating in the Winter Olympics of 2022 (April 27, 2022). I expected to see the most Zhihu posts in this period of time and perhaps observe how opinions change over time. However, it turned out that Gu had not yet established considerable name recognition prior to 2022, which meant that Gu's naturalization announcement in 2019 did not lead to the creation of discussion posts on

Zhihu. This means that the posts that discussed Gu's dual citizenship are mostly concentrated in the one-and-a-half month timeframe of the duration of the Winter Olympics in February 2022 and the days after it (February 4, 2022 until February 22, 2022). However, content of these posts are not exclusively from this time period. Two posters edited their post in May 2022 and comments from as late as July 2022 appear in these posts. Within this time period, the aforementioned refined search queries yielded 12 Zhihu posts. In a post, Zhihu arranges the comments automatically in a default setting, but generally speaking, comments that received more hearts are located in the upper part of the comments section. Although some posts about the citizenship issue are sporadically posted after the delineated period of time, the Zhihu users' attention for the issue seemed to taper off significantly after mid-March 2022.

I devised a data selection strategy by first selecting six Zhihu posts, and subsequently include the five top comments of each chosen post, including its (at most two) readily visible sub-comments, in the analysis. Therefore, the total number of comments that are included in the analysis is 87. The selected Zhihu posts all seem to accept it as truth that Eileen Gu is a naturalized Chinese athlete and some posts mention that Gu possibly still holds US citizenship, which sets the stage for the Zhihu users' input. The selected comments form a representative sample of the most popular comments of each post, which gives an impression of the comments that resonated the most with the Zhihu community. This way of selecting comments also shows one the interesting interaction between Zhihu users instead of just analyzing single units of comments. Another consideration in choosing this selection method is that it keeps the workload of the analysis section within manageable bounds. Important to note is that Zhihu posts that have been edited show the edited date instead of the original publication date. From the earliest publication date of the comments of the post, one can retrieve the possible original publication date of the Zhihu post.

4. Research findings

In this chapter, I will give an overview of the main findings of the analyzed Zhihu comments. I will go through the identified discourse strands one by one and point out the most salient aspects of it. When I perused the comments during the analysis, I identified three discourse strands, which are Eileen Gu's legal statuses, 'othering', ephemeral success. Throughout the sections, one can find that the text is interspersed with Zhihu comments that exemplify a particular discourse strand.

4.1 Eileen Gu's legal statuses

Since all selected posts revolve around the subject of Gu's legal status in either China and/or the United States, it is therefore not surprising that most comments talked about this particular issue. It seems that Zhihu users are sucked into the rumor mill of the presumed dual citizenship that Gu holds, as Zhihu users' stances reflect the multitude of the sometimes contradictory flows of information in the media about Eileen Gu's legal statuses.

Within this discourse strand, the issue that draws in the most attention from Zhihu users are the remarks that Eileen Gu made at a press conference on February 8, 2022. This press conference took place after Eileen Gu won her first Olympic gold medal in her sports career at the big air component of freestyle skiing, which increased the media's attention for Eileen Gu and her unclear American citizenship situation. During the press conference, an English-speaking journalist asked Gu to clarify on the pressing issue if Gu is still an American citizen. Gu answered the question in English: "I am American when I am in the US and I am a Chinese when I am in China" (Reporters press, 2022). The problematic matter with Gu's formulation of being a 'Chinese' is whether she means that she is a Chinese citizen or someone that belongs to one of the Chinese ethnic groups, or that she means both. While Gu's reply sheds light on the fact that she has ties to both countries, it does not state clearly what Gu's legal statuses are in the United States and China. Therefore, the actual meaning of Gu's answer are entirely left open to one's interpretation. A considerable portion of the Zhihu users mocked Gu's answer by parroting her or making jokes about it. This comment illustrates the incorporation of humor:

I am American when I am in the US and I am Chinese when I am in China. The question is: From which country is she when she is in the United Kingdom?

[Comment no. 52]. February 12, 2022. 90 likes

Gu's reply did not give the satisfactorily clarification many people hoped for and therefore the Gu's ambiguous answer ignited discussions on Chinese social media. Despite Gu's opaque remarks, commenters assumed that they were able to read between the lines of what Gu tried to say with regard to her legal statuses, namely that it is possible to draw the conclusion from Gu's reply that Gu holds dual citizenship.

Eileen Gu did not answer directly to the foreign journalist whether he [she] still is an American citizen, but expressed that sport does not distinguish national boundaries. This is very clear

[Comment no. 16]. February 9, 2022. 2753 likes

In Chinese internet slang usage, saying that someone has a high emotional quotient (EQ) refers to that person to not straightforwardly answer a question. The 'high EQ slang' encapsulates the notion of one having the mental capacity to manipulatively avoid answering questions. Nevertheless, if a person granted 'high EQ' to someone, the person also acknowledges that that person simply is emotionally and intellectually smart. Owing to the ambiguous connotation that this slang carries, many Zhihu users found that this slang fits the ambiguous formulated answer that Gu gave. Multiple Zhihu users mention that Gu had 'high EQ' in her press conference answer. The fact that Gu tries to actively beat around the bush with regard to the journalist's citizenship question makes people suspect that Gu actually has and tries to conceal Gu's presumed dual citizenship status. To illustrate this, take a look at this commenter's reply to the previous commenter:

That is what I think as well! The thing that I do not understand is that many netizens comment below that a certain person have high EQ and praise that person. It is true that her answer is very high EQ, but the important point is that she also evaded the question. [She] did not directly acknowledge that she renounced US citizenship. [This] means that she possibly has dual citizenship [facepalm emoji]

[Comment no. 17]. February 9, 2022. 1424 likes

In these Zhihu debates, there are Zhihu commenters that are aware of the existence of the PRC Nationality law of 1980 and what it entails. These comments pointed out what the Nationality law's stance, and thus the Chinese state's stance, is with regard to what the parameters are of possessing Chinese citizenship. Excerpts from the Nationality law of 1980 made inroads into the Zhihu debates. Multiple Zhihu commenters quoted directly from article

8 of the Nationality law, which states that someone who acquired Chinese citizenship is not in the position to hold foreign citizenship(s) (National Immigration Administration, 2019). By stressing the Nationality law's explicit disapproval of possessing dual citizenship, the commenters indicated that Gu's presumed dual citizenship is an issue that is irreconcilable with the legislation of the country that Gu presently represents in the field of sport. It appears to be that these Zhihu commenters attach value to the abidance of the citizenship legislation of their country instead of turning a blind eye to Gu's presumed dual citizenship.

Article 8 of the Nationality law: Any person who applies for naturalization as a Chinese national shall acquire Chinese nationality upon approval of his application; a person whose application for naturalization as a Chinese national has been approved shall not retain foreign nationality.

[Comment no. 65]. February 17, 2022. 146 likes

Another category of comments within this discourse strand is the belief that Gu is a Chinese permanent resident instead of a Chinese citizen. These Zhihu users obtained their information from the statement that the Chinese Consulate General in New York made, namely that acquiring Chinese permanent residency status or naturalization is required for joining China's Olympic team (Deng & Silic, 2022). These commenters take the consulate's requirement of Chinese permanent residency status as absolute truth and see this as evidence for Gu's legal statuses mystery. The requirement of the International Ski Federation (n.d.-b) that citizenship and passport of the country one wants to represent is not mentioned in the selected comments. It is not verifiable whether these users were unaware of this latter rule or that they were aware of this rule, but decided not to take it into their consideration.

That is true. After 2020, the state relaxed the law for foreigners to obtain the right of permanent residency. This time Gu represents China in competitions. [Her] citizenship is still that of the US. The Consulate General in New York answered the doubts that everybody has. You are all still confused

[Comment no. 30]. February 11, 2022. 246 likes

Some Zhihu commenters tie the permanent residency policy amendment of 2020 specifically to Eileen Gu's presumed acquisition of Chinese permanent residency status. While the Chinese authorities retracted the residency policy amendment in 2020 (Speelman, 2023, p. 117), this commenter is convinced that the amendment has been implemented and its

implementation eased becoming a permanent resident for people like Eileen Gu. The comments in this category do not refer to the Nationality law, as the combination of simultaneously having US citizenship and presumed Chinese permanent residency status is legally allowed in China.

All in all, Zhihu users hold various beliefs about Gu's legal statuses that span across a broad spectrum of the possible legal statuses that Gu could have. Aside from the reliance on Gu's own words, the Zhihu commenters relied strongly on information from the Chinese legislation and Chinese authorities. The lack of clarity of Gu's legal statuses and presumed dual citizenship gave way for an undercurrent of skepticism toward Gu in the Zhihu comments.

4.2 'Othering'

The Zhihu users that were engaged in the discussions did not solely discuss what the legal statuses of Gu were, but also what Gu's 'foreignness' entailed for Gu's representativeness of Chinese national identity. While the identity construction of Gu of speaking Chinese and having regular contact with Chinese friends and family is mainly positive (Branch, 2022), this image of Gu's Chineseness clearly did not reverberate in the Zhihu discussions. Zhihu users' practice of pointing out the parts of Gu that makes her the 'other' is a common reoccurrence through the Zhihu discussions.

In fact, many comments seemed to distance themselves from Gu by othering her qualities that are associated with her being a foreigner, especially the parts that exemplify Gu's Americanness. In other words, the 'imagined community' that consists of people's automatic connectedness to other people that are considered as part of the same nation that share cultural, linguistic and historical ties with each other is considerably absent in these discussions (Anderson, 1991). Zhihu users expressed their doubts how to reconcile Gu's Americanness with their personal struggle to feel proud for Gu's medal wins that they feel no relatability with on a 'national' level. A case of point is this comment:

If she has American citizenship, accepts American education, [then she] has to return to the US to live [her] American life later on. Like this preceding part of this text, does such a gold medal make us proud?

[Comment no. 68]. February 17, 2022. 378 likes

Concomitant with labeling Gu as a foreigner, commenters also expressed their reluctance to exhibit nationalist feelings for Gu's sport performances. Billig determined that a nation's people are subconsciously exposed to 'banal nationalist' elements in their daily lives (1995), such as the apparitions of the Chinese flag, the netizens' praise for Gu, and the cheering for Gu in the tribune at the Olympic stage. However, while Zhihu users take notice of these ubiquitous nationalist elements, it appears to be that Zhihu users are not susceptible to accept these nationalist views. This means that the Zhihu users in this discourse strand are wary of participating in the nationalist sentiments that celebrates Gu's successful Olympic performance(s). This comment illustrates the reservedness of being nationalistic for Gu:

Some netizens are selectively blind. Some were blind in the first place. Because the things that you understand, they just do not understand. Matters such as dual citizenship are too distant for them. I remember that I said previously that very little number of people in this country have passports. So, [I] can only reluctantly accept those comments and bullet screen comments. You will lose if you take those seriously. As long as China is red [Chinese nationalist sentiment after achieving success], they will ride on a wave

[Comment no. 18]. February 9, 2022. 650 likes.

It becomes clear from this comment that this commenter thinks that his fellow netizens display herd mentality. From the commenter's formulation one can gather that the commenter thinks that Gu's presumed dual citizenship is highly problematic, and therefore Gu is not worthy of praise. The commenter takes the moral high ground by distancing himself/herself from the nationalists that praise Gu due to the success it gives to the country, while at the same time implying that those nationalists gloss over Gu's possession of American citizenship.

The third component of this 'othering' discourse strand is the users' shunning of Gu as a member of the elite. To brush up the academic literature, Chinese netizens made comments about Zhu Yi's family's alleged elite background as reason for her participation in the Olympics (Han & Zhao, 2024). It appears to be that Eileen Gu is also subjected to accusations of being a member of the elite in Zhihu discussions. There was also the online phenomenon of Chinese populists' opposition against China-unfriendly foreigners and elite members of the in-group (He, 2023, p. 95). A similar 'populist' undercurrent was detected in the discourse on Zhihu, but there are side notes that make it different from He's detected online populism. As many Zhihu users point out Gu's belonging to the US instead of China, she would not entirely

be seen as an elite member of the in-group, but the similarity with He's detected online populism is still noticeable. Another difference with the aforementioned form of Chinese online populism is that the vast majority of the Zhihu users belong to the Chinese middle class, have a flourishing position in society, and therefore, are fairly closely positioned to the elites. Yet, there were comments that othered Gu as part of the elite class, which insinuate that Gu has a different blueprint for life starting from her birth and has access to a broad range of opportunities. Admittedly, individual Zhihu users can be part of a social class below the middle class. However, due to the demographic composition of Zhihu users, this makes one think that Zhihu users relate more to the common people than to the elite people.

This is the so-called gap. When a person is born, he/she carries a program and a background with them. We, common people, do we have those conditions? We can only play in the mud and climb the haystack. But [I] do have some questions. If you make vague high EQ comments, then I find that a bit strange

[Comment no. 49]. February 12, 2022. 86 likes

Interestingly, the Zhihu users that engaged in the othering of Gu yielded different results than those from previous studies on Chinese soccer fans' views on naturalized Chinese athletes. In those studies soccer fans showed leniency toward naturalized athletes that acquired familiarity with the linguistic and cultural aspects of China (Sullivan et al., 2023; Han et al., 2024). The disparity between those soccer fans' and these Zhihu users' views toward new athletes might be caused by the soccer fans' support for the Chinese soccer team's endeavor of success and Zhihu users' objection of Gu's legal statuses issue. Contrary to the many cases of misogynistic attitudes toward successful women on the Chinese internet (Zhang & De Seta, 2018; Huang, 2022), the researched Zhihu comments did not seem to contain language or figures of speech of misogynistic nature. It follows that Gu is mainly brushed aside on three fronts, namely regarding Gu as not a representative of the nation, the invalidation of nationalist feelings for Gu, and the 'populist' shunning of Gu as an elite member.

4.3 Ephemeral success

The final discourse strand exposes the Zhihu users' discussion about the durability of Eileen Gu's success. These comments suggest that as fast as Gu rose to stardom, that attained fame could also fade away just as quickly.

Apart from Gu's sport performances, the Chinese public also acquainted oneself with Gu's name and face that appeared in the commercial activities Gu engaged in. Around the period of the 2022 Winter Olympics, Gu endorsed 20 brands, which is around three times the number of brands that she endorsed in the years before 2021 (Shen, pp. 21-22). Gu started to appear in advertisements for Chinese and non-foreign brands in a wide range of commercial sectors, as well as in fashion shows, and fashion magazines. This meteoric rise to stardom is reminiscent of the *wanghong* phenomenon, in which people suddenly become famous (Zhang & De Seta, 2018). Zhihu users also took note of Gu's commercial rise to prominence, but questioned if Gu is able to maintain her commercial success.

She is an American baby. The internet is rife with her marketing and advertisements. Her public persona. There will be a day that a public persona that has such a serious political issue will collapse

[Comment no. 1]. February 8, 2022. 254 likes

This commenter begins his/her comment with the fact that Gu is an American-born person. Through that information, he/she infers that Gu is an American citizen, because of the *jus soli* principle (citizenship acquisition through birth on American soil). As Gu can be seen in many advertisements and is embroiled in the public's dual citizenship discussions. The commenter expresses severe doubts how long Gu's commercial success can hold on with the public's scrutiny on her legal statuses.

She is an American all along. [She] just represented China at the Olympics. Once the competitions are done, the money as a brand ambassador is earned, it will not stop her from returning to [her] country. The Beijing Olympics is a collaboration of mutual benefit, that is all.

[Comment no. 28]. February 10, 2022. 1123 likes

The commenter above also points out Gu's American identity in relation with her commercial presence in China, but sees the matter in another light. Whereas the previous commenter thinks Gu's success will cease, this commenter sees Gu as an American economic opportunist who benefits from her liminal identity during the Olympics. Both the previous commenter and this commenter question the pure intentions of Gu's participation in the Olympics. They see Gu more as a money-grubbing person that comes to tap into the large Chinese commercial market. Note how the commenter uses 'returning to [her] country' (回国 *huíguó*) to refer to

Gu's expected return to the US to underline that she lives her life in the US. The term is usually used to refer to 'returning to China' in Chinese.

Besides the comments that allude to Gu's economic opportunism, there are also comments that highlight the capricious hero status trope. These comments point to the sudden and unpredictable downturn of an athlete's success as a result of suffering one or several setbacks. The name of the famous Chinese athlete Liu Xiang is mentioned several times as a harbinger that a once celebrated athlete can be shunned by nationalists after an unsuccessful sport outcome. Liu Xiang is the epitome of a Chinese nationalist athlete that had some successes in the mid-2000s, after which the successes remained absent (Hu & Liang, 2019, p. 34).

Every Chinese athlete or athlete that holds Chinese citizenship should all engrave the painful lessons of Liu Xiang, Sun Yang, and Fu Yuanhui in their mind. Internet trolls turn hostile faster than turning through [the pages] of a book. You became famous, attain big glory and make a profit. Subsequently, if there is only one detail that does not satisfy them, they will immediately discredit you.

[Comment no. 62]. February 17, 2022. 302 likes

5. Conclusion

The research question that I posed at the beginning of this thesis was: ‘How do Zhihu users discuss Eileen Gu’s presumed United States-China dual citizenship?’. In order to find an answer to this question, I conducted a discourse analysis of Zhihu comments on this issue around the period of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. This was the period when Chinese netizens discussed this issue most intensely.

During the conduct of the discourse analysis, three discourse strands were discerned. The first discourse strand focused on Gu’s possible legal statuses that she holds in China and the US. The evading answer that Gu gave at a press conference after the first gold medal win were the catalyst for the burgeoning internet discussions around Gu’s legal statuses. While Zhihu users made assumptions and speculated about Gu’s legal statuses, most of their information seemed to be based on Chinese laws and Chinese authorities. There were many unserious comments that made fun of Gu’s formulation of having a liminal identity, however, Zhihu users also acknowledged Gu’s intelligence in being able to avoid answering the journalist’s question directly. The most talked about possible outcomes are that Gu was either a China-US dual citizen or that she was a US citizen with Chinese permanent residency status. There were also commenters that pointed out that China does not recognize dual citizenship, which means that Gu’s presumed dual citizenship is irreconcilable with Chinese citizenship legislation.

While Zhihu users talked the most about Gu’s dual citizenship issue and her legal statuses, there were two other discourse strands that encompass the selected Zhihu comments. Gu’s ingratiation with Chinese culture, language, and people did not withhold Zhihu users’ ‘othering’ of Gu. In this second discourse strand, users underlined the foreign and non-Chinese elements that are tied to Eileen Gu. Zhihu users othered Eileen Gu on the basis of Gu’s Americanness, which can be seen in her possession of American citizenship and being educated in the US. As these foreign aspects are fundamentally tied to Eileen Gu as an individual, who happens to represent China at the 2022 Winter Olympics in the Chinese capital, many users casted their doubts whether Gu is someone that appropriately represents their country. It seems that these Zhihu users have a higher threshold of relating to Eileen Gu than those Chinese people that praised Eileen Gu’s sport performances and accepted her as a fellow member of the Chinese nation. The language that these users used conveyed that they distanced themselves from Eileen Gu. Moreover, users also othered Gu in a ‘populist’ way due to her privileged life and family background, which is strange considering Zhihu’s highly-educated demographic.

The third discourse strand pertains to the possible short-livedness of Gu's success. Users questioned Gu's true intentions of participating in the Winter Olympics and representing China. Throughout the last few years, Gu's brand endorsements increased considerably. Comments within this discourse strand alluded to Gu's fixation on the Chinese market, which makes her an economic opportunist. The possible deterioration of the dual citizenship issue or the short duration of the Olympics puts a potential strain on Gu's success. Another aspect of ephemeral success that Zhihu users hinted at is the presage of Chinese athletic heroes that fell into disgrace, which could happen to Gu as well.

Within the selected comments, users generally did not have profound discussions about Gu's ethnic background. Other topics that one might expect in these discussions, but remained absent, are misogynistic attitudes, Gu's sport performance, and criticism toward the government for endorsing a presumed dual citizen.

Due to time constraints and the lack of software skills, I analyzed a limited number of Zhihu comments about Gu's presumed dual citizenship issue. In retrospect, the use of a machine learning program would have been useful to have a broader overview of the various talking points and discourse strands that emerge from a larger section of the discussions. In addition, as Eileen Gu plans to represent China again at the 2026 Winter Olympics (Pells, 2024), it might be interesting to see how people's opinions of Eileen Gu's legal statuses have developed and to what extent a change in discourse is discernible if similar discussions arise.

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7. Appendices

Table of the origin of the Zhihu posts from which comments were selected:

Name of poster	Post title	Date	URL
zhzh	Where is Gu from? Why did she attain Chinese citizenship?	Feb 8, 2022 (last edited on Feb 11, 2022)	https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/464866492
wangjf74	Does Gu have dual citizenship? Let's speak with the truth	Feb 8, 2022	https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/465004116
由繮	Talking about Eileen Gu's 'dual citizenship' and how to correctly understand 'The PRC does not recognize Chinese citizens to possess dual citizenship'	Feb 11, 2022	https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/465951049
jz sai	The reaction of Eileen Gu when [she] talked about the citizenship issue	Feb 12, 2022	https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/466491903
CROFT	Random thoughts: Gu's citizenship issue	Feb 14, 2022 (last edited on May 12, 2022)	https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/467388223
西龙说	Does Gu still hold American citizenship?	Feb 22, 2022 (last edited on	https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/469915965

		May 11, 2022)	
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Table of the metadata of the selected comments:

Comment number	Name of poster	Date
Where is Gu from? Why did she attain Chinese citizenship?		
1	知乎用户 s2yvKd	February 8, 2022
2	红烧肉	February 9, 2022
3	STELLA 彦翎	February 9, 2022
4	钟珍妮小朋友	February 8, 2022
5	指向意识的长指针	February 8, 2022
6	俊秀	February 8, 2022
7	醉为笑苍生	February 9, 2022
8	红烧肉	February 9, 2022
9	仙岛海上明月	February 11, 2022
10	桥安众	February 9, 2022
11	kathyv	February 13, 2022
12	韩士龄	February 13, 2022
13	美丽新世界	February 8, 2022
14	张飞 gg	February 9, 2022
15	guan	February 9, 2022
Does Gu have dual citizenship? Let's speak with the truth		
16	Jacksunnn	February 9, 2022
17	Belloc	February 9, 2022
18	L3onardo	February 9, 2022
19	卧底辅助带崩三路	February 9, 2022
20	Sy-R	February 10, 2022
21	海凝	February 9, 2022
22	带着板凳来学习	February 9, 2022
23	不知道	February 9, 2022

24	新一代网友	February 9, 2022
25	纯 men	February 9, 2022
26	pheobepheobe	February 9, 2022
27	一个琳	February 9, 2022
28	国家八级保护跳蛙	February 10, 2022
29	Better	February 10, 2022
30	断眉	February 11, 2022
Talking about Eileen Gu's 'dual citizenship' and how to correctly understand 'The PRC does not recognize Chinese citizens to possess dual citizenship'		
31	Yak	February 12, 2022
32	不亦	February 12, 2022
33	Kline	February 12, 2022
34	AK 谢	February 11, 2022
35	不亦	February 12, 2022
36	AK 谢	February 12, 2022
37	兰陵笑笑生	February 14, 2022
38	hahahaha	February 18, 2022
39	渐修新羽	February 27, 2022
40	马里奥绝不倒下	February 14, 2022
41	Ktome	April 7, 2022
42	莫奈	May 25, 2022
43	谎言	February 17, 2022
44	开始吧	March 10, 2022
45	tiancaims08	February 20, 2022
The reaction of Eileen Gu when [she] talked about the citizenship issue		
46	即将被封禁的账号	February 12, 2022
47	fkkk	February 14, 2022
48	我不是木木啊	February 18, 2022
49	Jlruuu96	February 12, 2022
50	1 玖 7 捌开天辟第	February 13, 2022

51	雪海无疆	February 16, 2022
52	炎太	February 12, 2022
53	为了梦	February 13, 2022
54	wyu	February 14, 2022
55	当归	February 12, 2022
56	简单	February 14, 2022
57	朝夕催人	February 19, 2022
58	知乎用户 ZoCE2h	February 13, 2022
59	金长老	February 14, 2022
60	知乎用户 ZoCE2h	February 13, 2022
Random thoughts: Gu's citizenship issue		
61	蓦然回首	February 17, 2022
62	蓦然回首	February 17, 2022
63	公孙青羊	February 17, 2022
64	知乎用户 5AA9F4	February 15, 2022
65	混在直隶	February 17, 2022
66	捞起月亮的渔民	February 17, 2022
67	芯片	February 14, 2022
68	盐辛	February 17, 2022
69	理性勇蜜	February 17, 2022
70	tiger	February 17, 2022
71	义武奋扬	February 17, 2022
72	tiger	February 17, 2022
73	紫峰天月	February 17, 2022
74	6666	February 19, 2022
75	itfkib	February 17, 2022
Does Gu still hold American citizenship?		
76	南昌故郡	February 22, 2022
77	东亚贸易主航道	February 22, 2022
78	潘神	March 10, 2022

79	黄业翔	March 25, 2022
80	别趣	April 29, 2022
81	西龙说	April 29, 2022
82	wkk	March 17, 2022
83	wkk	May 2, 2022
84	wkk	May 3, 2022
85	一只大灰熊	February 22, 2022
86	知乎用户	June 1, 2022
87	马门一中信徒	April 28, 2022