

HOW CHINESE NEW MEDIA CONSTRUCT ELITE FEMALE ATHLETES:
GENDER, NATIONALISM, AND INDIVIDUALISM

by

QINGRU XU

(Under the Direction of Dr. Peggy J. Kreshel)

Around the world, sport is principally organized around masculinity. Women are often afforded limited access to sports participation, situated as “others” in a male-dominated domain. This gender inequality is mirrored in sports media; selective representations have a tremendous influence on people’s perception and understanding of sport, athletes, and society. In this study, I examined media representations of two Chinese female athletes of different status—specialized athlete, Ding Ning, and professional athlete, Li Na— in China, a nation in the midst of political/economic/cultural transformation and a sports reform initiative. Analyzing stories drawn from two Chinese web portals, I focused particularly on how gender, nationalism, and collectivism/individualism entered into media representations to determine if there were differences in the portrayals of these two female athletes. The portraits that emerged were very distinctive. A textual analysis revealed significant differences in each of the three conceptual areas. A fourth theme, which I have identified as “monetary value” also emerged. Possible explanations for and implications of differences in the media portrayals of the two athletes at this particular historical moment in Chinese society were provided.

INDEX WORDS: Sport, China, Media, Female athletes, Gender, Nationalism, Individualism-Collectivism, Framing, Capitalism, Communism, Textual analysis

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QINGRU XU

Major Professor: Peggy J. Kreshel

Committee: Welch Suggs
Carolina Acosta-Alzuru

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my grandfather, Xuesheng Wang.

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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is impossible to fully understand contemporary society and culture without acknowledging the place of sport. We inhabit a world in which sport is an international phenomenon, it is important for politicians and world leaders to be associated with sports personalities; it contributes to the economy, some of the most visible international spectacles are associated with sporting events; it is part of the social and cultural fabric of different localities, regions and nations, its transformative potential is evident in some of the poorest areas of the world; it is important to the television and film industry, the tourist industry; and it is regularly associated with social problems and issues such as crime, health, violence, social division, labor migration, economic and social regeneration and poverty.

Jarvie, 2013, p. 2¹

Introduction

Sport plays a powerful role in modern societies. As a social institution, sport reflects and actively shapes cultural understandings, reinforces values, and naturalizes notions of difference between men and women, rich and poor, and even between nations. Sport also “functions as a powerful cultural force that serves the construction of national identity and national unity” (Lu & Fan, 2014, p. 1).

Today, globalization and the emergence of international and regional sporting events—the Olympics, the World Cup, and numerous others—bring together athletes from nations very different from each other, not only in terms of economics, politics, and culture, but also in terms of sports cultures (Nauright, 2004; Lu & Fan, 2014). In this context, a global media system effectively promotes global patterns of sport (Dyreson, 2013), and in doing so, plays a crucial role in the creation and sustenance of sports culture. Sport has become an enormous business,

providing substantial economic support for the media system; the media in turn influence sports production, distribution, and consumption (Jarvie, 2013, p. 132). The digital and social media revolution has changed the ways in which sports are played, as well as how sports are viewed. International sporting events can be accessed through a seemingly endless number of media platforms and on a wide array of devices ranging from televisions to tablets, smartphones and smartwatches all over the world.

Living in what might be termed a media culture, the relationship between media and culture is so intimate that it is difficult to separate one from the other. In some sense, the media construct what it means to live in the modern world (Walters, 1995). Mass media selectively represent the social world and play an important role in framing public opinion, shaping attitudes, and reinforcing ideologies (Hall, 1992; Harris & Clayton, 2002; Jones, 2012). Mediated sport, too, provides selective representations of reality (Bie & Billings, 2015), and because many people experience sporting events through media, those representations can have a tremendous influence on people's perception and understanding of sport, athletes, the role of sport in society, and society itself (Jarvie, 2013). The process of defining and redefining an "athlete," specific athletes, and athletic teams and events reflects and shapes cultural and ideological understandings (Pirinen, 1997).

Sport is gendered terrain. Around the world, sport is principally organized around masculinity (Ayvazoglu, 2015; Billing, 2007; Bruce, 2009; Clavio & Eagleman, 2011), often constructed as an exclusive arena for male experience and male relations. Mishra (2014) has noted in this regard, that "sport was established as a male activity, not *human activity* in which women had equal rights to show their power and skills" (p. 384). As a result, women often have been afforded limited access to sports participation, situated as "others" in a male-dominated

domain (Houlihan, 2007; Messner, 2013). Feminists and sports sociologists routinely assume that sports are male preserves that reproduce a social structure of male dominance (Broch, 2016).

Gender inequality in sports participation is mirrored in media representations. The majority of studies across media platforms published over the past thirty years have shown that female athletes and women's sports have received only a fraction of media attention compared with male athletes and men's sports, regardless of the specific sport, type of medium, or host country of the media outlet (Kian, Fink, & Hardin 2011). In addition to limited coverage of women's sport, studies have shown that media use different framing strategies to represent male and female athletes (Martin & McDonald, 2012; Messner & Cooky, 2010; Smith & Wrynn, 2013). Male athletes are more likely to be described as consistent, strong, and independent, while female athletes are more likely to be characterized by their physical attractiveness and sexuality (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Eastman & Billings, 1999). Research has shown that the mass media consistently marginalize, infantilize, and sexualize female athletes in sports communication, thus reaffirming patriarchal gender stereotypes and promoting masculine hegemony (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013; Godoy-Pressland, 2015).

Positionality Statement

This study arose out of my personal experiences in China and the United States and my curiosity about media cultures, women's studies, and particularly about media representations of female athletes. Growing up in China, I personally experienced the hardships faced by girls wanting to be active in sport. For a Chinese girl, being good at sport was not the norm; in fact, she was perceived as an "oddity" by her peers. In China, girls are supposed to be thin, tiny, and fragile; to a large extent, the fear of being "not like a girl" prevented me from participating in

sport. It wasn't until I came to the United States and enrolled in women's studies and sports media classes that I came to realize that sport is much more than simply "playing a game." Sport is closely related to culture, and in many societies, the invisibility of women in sport reflects structural oppression; social institutions are structured in ways that prevent women's sports participation.

When I first came to study at the University of Georgia, I was surprised by the college football tradition. "Game days" in this town are like a great festival. Men and women, children and adults, students and alumni from across the state, passionate in their loyalty to the home team, come to spend the day "tailgating" before enjoying the game. I had never seen such an event in China, and I came to recognize that sports cultures could vary dramatically from nation to nation. In the United States, sport is highly professionalized and commercialized. By contrast, sport in China more overtly serves political ends: to win national glory at sporting events and to solidify national identity and unity (Dong, 2003; Liu & Fan, 2014).

China has been experiencing dramatic socioeconomic and political transformations since a market economy was introduced in 1978. As the second-greatest economic power in the world,² China currently has a considerable influence on world economy and politics. In the area of sport, not only do Chinese athletes play an important role in global sporting events like the Olympics, but China is also targeted as one of the largest potential sports industry markets on the globe.

In the decades since the economic reform, China is a transitional society in which the socialist political system is mixed with the market economy and in which the emerging individualism fights a close battle with the traditional values of collectivism. This transition has been mirrored in the Chinese sports system. Before the middle of the 1990s, a state-run sports

regime oriented toward winning medals for national glory had dominated the Chinese sports culture; nearly all of China's elite³ athletes were specialized athletes who were treated as state employees with limited individual freedom. With the introduction of economic and sports reform, Chinese traditional, specialized athletes have started to leave the state-run sports system to become professional athletes, claim more autonomy, and actively manage their own athletic careers.

As a Chinese citizen, I recognize the magnitude of this reform; athletes reflect a China experiencing the disorientation of its pseudo-capitalist culture and economy. Yet, despite the fact that Chinese athletes now participate regularly in international sports events, I found that while media portrayals of female athletes have been widely explored, a majority of those studies have focused on Western female athletes in Western media. Only a few studies have addressed media representations of Chinese female athletes in Chinese media. Additionally, I found no academic literature examining the differences in media portrayals of Chinese traditional specialized athletes and professional athletes.

An essential part of the social and cultural fabric, sport is closely interwoven with economics, politics, and culture in modern society. In *Sport, culture and society: an introduction*, Jarvie (2013) notes that, "it is impossible to fully understand contemporary society and culture without acknowledging the place of sport" (p. 2). Considering the fundamental role that sport plays, studying sport provides a valuable way of exploring the human world. In this research, I contribute to our understanding of Chinese sports culture as well as global sports culture by examining the portrayal of Chinese female athletes in Chinese on-line media and discovering whether representations vary between professional and specialized athletes.

Background

In this section, I briefly review the history of Chinese sport, focusing particularly on the role that Chinese female elite athletes have played in the Chinese sports system. I then introduce China's state-run sports regime, a winning-oriented sports system that has dominated the Chinese sports arena since the 1960s, as well as the challenges to that regime brought about by the introduction of the economic reform in 1978. Following a discussion of subsequent sports reform toward commercialization and professionalization, I describe two types of Chinese athletes competing in sporting events during this transitional period: the traditional specialized athletes and the emerging professionalized athletes. Finally, I introduce two athletes selected for this study—the professional athlete Li Na, and the specialized athlete Ding Ning.

Women and sport in China. Modern sport in China is not indigenous, but was imported from the West. The development of modern sport emerged and evolved in the context of the modernization of China that occurred between the 1840s and 1930s (Fan & Tan, 2002); this modernization also stimulated the liberation of women in China. After the national reform movement in 1896, more and more women, no longer constrained by the cruel practice of foot-binding, stepped outside their homes and began to participate in social activities (Dong, 2003). Thus, Chinese men and women took up modern sport virtually at the same time; there was no gender gap between males and females in the original development of Chinese sport.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 stressed the Communist belief in gender equality, in which women's sexuality was denied and "gender sameness" was established (M. Lee, 2012). Women were required to wear the grey-blue uniforms worn by men and cut their hair short to resemble men. De-gendered or de-sexed

through these practices, Chinese women were invited to enter the male world, to be “the men of women” or “iron women” (Dong, 2003).

Isolated by Western countries opposed to Communism, the Chinese government was keen to construct a positive national image; sport became as an important instrument to serve this political purpose.

Before the 27th World Table Tennis Championships in 1963, Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the PRC, told Chinese table tennis players that, “Friendship is more important than competitions... We Chinese athletes go abroad not only for competitions, but also for the diplomatic missions... Our team should promote the friendship with people from other countries.”

Yang & Zhang, 2015⁴

While men’s sports were fairly well established, women’s sport in the West had been slow to develop. As such, Chinese female elite athletes were able to compete more successfully and win more medals than male athletes competing against nations with more established sports traditions (Xiong, 2015). Motivated by the desire to win national recognition through women’s successful performances, the government prioritized its support of women’s sport. For example, to facilitate Chinese women’s dominance in international sporting events, the practice of “training with a male sparring partner” was widely adopted throughout the country; male athletes were required to train with female athletes to improve women’s techniques and strength (Dong, 2003). Mirroring the winning-oriented policy and the role female athletes came to play in the construction of Chinese national identity, media representations of female athletes in China focused primarily on their athletic ability rather than their sexual attractiveness or physical desirability (Watanabe, Nie, & Yan, 2013).

However, the de-gendered media images of Chinese female athletes gradually have been changing in response to the introduction of a market economy in 1978 (Hamamura & Y. Xu, 2015; Ong, 1997). Capitalism has been given a green light; economic reform has transformed

China into “a pseudo-capitalist market economy” (Steele & Lynch, 2013). Driven by the rapid development of consumer capitalism, the commodification of female corporeality has increased considerably (Liebler, Li, & Peng, 2016; Yang, 2011). Watanabe, Nie, and Yan (2013) analyzed the Chinese sport-broadcast commentary from 1984 to 2008, and found that the representation of femininity among female athletes was becoming an emerging theme.

The Chinese state-run sports regime and traditional specialized athletes. As has been noted, to a large extent, China’s participation and interest in modern sport were initially motivated by nationalism (X. Xu, 2006). Sport has served as an instrument for enhancing a positive Chinese national image, self-esteem, and unity. Using a model based on the Soviet Union, a state-run sports regime in which the government-supported elite athletes with nationwide financial and political assistance, was founded in the 1960s (Chen, Tan, & Lee, 2015). Motivated by the desire to win medals and national recognition that flowed from that success, the state-run sports regime has made a tremendous contribution to Chinese elite sport. China has been among the top three nations in the number of gold medals earned in the summer Olympics since 1992.⁵

In China, athletes who serve the state-run sports regime are called specialized athletes. They receive monthly payments from the state and participate in training and competition under the control of particular sports management institutions. Their training costs, such as hiring coaches and providing practice facilities, are covered entirely through government funding. The goal of specialized athletes is to win medals and glory for the country in international sporting events, such as the Olympics and World Championships. Within the state-run sports regime, specialized athletes are required to adhere to various principles and have limited freedom in choosing their athletic and commercial activities. For example, they cannot freely choose their

own coaches; can participate only in government-sanctioned sporting events; and cannot be involved in commercial activities without official permission. The state insists that the achievements of the athletes are entitlements for the country and the government (Wei & Fan, 2010). In that regard, specialized athletes fall under the umbrella of national interests (Tang & Gregg, 2010).

Chinese sports reform and emerging professional athletes. After the PRC was founded in 1949, the Communist Party of China (CPC) installed a planned economy in China. That economy was slow to develop due to an inefficient economic system and an unstable political environment. To salvage the failing economy, reformists within the CPC turned to a market-oriented economic reform in 1978 (Brandt & Rawski, 2008).

The introduction of a market-oriented economy has also given rise to challenges to the state-run sports regime. In the mid-1990s, massive reform toward commercialization and professionalization was initiated in the Chinese sports system. The reform aimed at promoting Chinese sport to “stand on its own feet” rather than relying on national funding. Influenced by this reform, commercialized leagues, tournaments, and associations such as the *Chinese Football Association Super League (CSL)* and *Chinese Basketball Association (CBA)* were established. Although institutional regulations from the state are unavoidable, to a large extent, sports competitions in China are now managed in a more commercialized way. For instance, the associations sell tickets to the public, receive sports sponsorships from large corporations, and sell their broadcast rights. Athletes in this system are identified as “professional” athletes, though they continue to resemble specialized athletes in a number of ways.

The state-run sports regime continues to dominate the Chinese sports system to this day; a majority of Chinese elite athletes are identified as specialized athletes. Still, sports reform has

gradually brought Chinese sport into “a multi-level and multi-channel system” (Fan, Wu, & Xiong, 2005, p.514). In the last two decades, there have been several “real” Chinese professional athletes who have attracted a great deal of public attention. Professional athletes compete professionally to earn their own livelihood. Different from specialized athletes who are paid by the government, professional athletes’ salaries largely depend on competitive winnings and commercial sponsorships. In other words, their salaries are largely dependent on their athletic performance.

Among the limited number of Chinese professional athletes, Yao Ming is well-known both in China and the U.S. He is a retired Chinese professional basketball player who played for the *Shanghai Shark* of the CBA and the *Houston Rockets* of the *National Basketball Association (NBA)*. He was selected to start for the Western Conference in the NBA All-Star Game eight times, and was named to the All-NBA Team five times. When Yao Ming decided to play for the NBA in 2002, he organized a group of advisers to form the “Yao Team,” which was known as his private agent, the first professional sports agent in Chinese sports history.⁶ This team exclusively served Yao Ming as an individual athlete, in an effort to maximize his athletic, social, and commercial influence in the world. In this sense, Yao Ming actively managed and controlled his own athletic career, rather than submitting to any outside institutions.

Following the 2008 Beijing Olympics, in an effort toward reform, four Chinese female tennis players—Peng Shuai, Li Na, Zheng Jie, Yan Zi—were allowed to leave the national tennis team to become professional athletes. As professional athletes, they were allowed to hire their own coaches, schedule their own time, and choose their preferred commercial endorsements (Xu & Chen, 2013). In turn, they financially support their private training/advising teams. This reform is recognized as a breakthrough in Chinese sports reform.

Professional athletes remain obligated to participate in significant national sporting events such as the Olympics and the Asian Games, and are required to give a portion of their annual incomes, usually between 5% and 12%, to the state. Although these athletes are not purely professionals by Western standards, they claim much more autonomy than Chinese traditional specialized athletes, and represent a new professional status of Chinese elite athletes.

Introducing Chinese Female Athletes Li Na and Ding Ning

This study explores the differences in media representations of Chinese female athletes with different athletic statuses. I selected female athletes according to the following criteria: first, the athlete must be a world-famous athlete; second, she must have won a world championship during a significant international sporting event in the last two years; and third, athletes representing different athletic statuses in China should be included. Only a limited number of Chinese professional female athletes have achieved great accomplishments; in fact, only one professional athlete—Li Na—met the criteria to qualify for this study. Ding Ning was selected as the Chinese female specialized athlete. I briefly introduce the two athletes here.

Li Na is a former Chinese professional tennis player, who is the first and only Grand Slam singles champion from Asia. Prior to becoming a professional athlete in 2008, Li Na was a specialized athlete on the Chinese national tennis team. Following the 2008 Beijing Olympics, as a part of sport reform efforts, Li Na and three other female tennis players were allowed to leave the national team and became professional tennis players. Li Na is regarded as China's tennis pioneer and trailblazer. As one of the few female professional athletes in China, she competes professionally for her livelihood instead of being paid by the government. She is the first and only Asian female athlete to win Singles Grand Slam titles—the 2011 French Open singles title

and 2014 Australian Open singles title. Li Na has also achieved the highest world ranking of any Asian female tennis player in history (No. 2).

Ding Ning is a traditional specialized Chinese table tennis player who was the women's singles champion in the 2011 and 2015 World Table Tennis Championships. She has been ranked as world No.1 or No. 2 among female table tennis players since 2014. As a specialized athlete within the Chinese state-run sports system, Ding Ning is viewed as a state employee and is paid monthly by the government. In return, the state charges her with winning the glory for the country during international sporting events. Table tennis developed as China's national sport and has blossomed largely as a result of the state-run regime. The sport even played a crucial role in Sino-US relations in 1971.⁷

Having considered the role of female elite athletes in Chinese sport and the development of the Chinese sports system, in this research, I will focus on the media portrayals of Chinese female specialized athlete Ding Ning, and Chinese female professional athlete Li Na during international sporting events. In the chapter that follows, I introduce the theoretical foundation and conceptual lenses that provide the framework for this research, and review the relevant literature.

CHAPTER 2.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I begin by introducing framing theory, which provides the general foundation of my approach, and the three conceptual lenses used in my analysis—hegemonic masculinity, nationalism, and the collectivism-individualism continuum. In the review of literature which follows, I focus on how these three conceptual tools have been applied in sports media: exploring how sports media portray female athletes in an arena globally organized around masculinity, that is hegemonically male; examining the use of sport in the construction of national identity; and emphasizing how cultural values of collectivism and individualism affect media narratives in sports media. I then explain the relevance of these three conceptual lenses to the current study, and clarify the research questions that emerged.

Framing Theory

Framing is an important way in which the media emphasize some ideological perspectives and manipulate salience by directing people's attention to certain ideas while ignoring others...The narratives organize experience and bring order to events. As such, they wield power because they influence how we make sense of the world.

Kendall, 2011, p.5⁸

This study begins with the understanding that our reality is a socially constructed reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Any single event can be constructed in a number of ways. Goffman (1974) proposed that journalists package news stories and in that process, give stories meaning. Tuchman (1978) suggested that, “the news frame organizes everyday reality.” That is, framing helps to construct reality rather than merely to construct a “picture of reality” (p.12).

Insofar as mass media re-present the social world, they play a crucial role in shaping values, attitudes, and cultural understandings in modern society (Eagleman, Burch, & Vooris, 2014). While news texts have multiple meanings that can lead to a variety of interpretations, systematic framing can maximize the possibility of getting preferred or intended meanings across (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Highlighting some ideological perspectives and manipulating the salience of certain ideas while omitting others, the media bring the order of importance to events, and thus, *selectively* construct a reality to appeal to desired audiences (Eagleman, Glavio, & Kwak, 2011; Entman, 1993; Kendall, 2011). Onwumechili (2009) identifies framing as the “basic skeleton carrying the flesh of a story” (p. 454).

Millions of people experience sporting events and come to “know” athletes through media representations; “over 100 times as many people consume the Olympics through mass media than do in person” (Billings, 2007, p. 329). How sports journalists select topics, define issues, and frame athletes, athletic events, and controversies surrounding athletics plays an essential role in the public perception of sport (Denham, 2010). Fans who consistently encounter similarly framed sports news stories, gradually become a part of that framing system (Onwumechili, 2009). They begin to see the world in ways that conform to the journalists’ frame (Jarvie, 2013).

By way of example, the frame, “white men cannot jump,” has been widely applied by the media to form a basis for the portrayal of white basketball players (Denham, Billings, & Halone, 2002; Stone, Perry, & Darley, 1997). Although this frame ignores the unique abilities any specific white player may have, research shows that audiences tend to rate black players significantly higher than white players in physical strength and natural ability (Ferrucci, Tandoc, Painter, & Leshner, 2013).

Framing theory has been used in a variety of studies in sports communication (Billings, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2003; Eagleman, 2011; Wensing & Bruce, 2003). Eagleman (2011) used framing theory to explore differences in frames used to describe athletes. She found that stereotypes based on race and nationalities persisted in the top two American general-interest sports magazines, *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN The Magazine* between 2000 and 2007. Billings (2007) analyzed 70 prime-time hours of NBC's 2004 Olympic telecast of four sports events through the lens of framing. Results indicated that media coverage of gymnastics and diving contained more gender-marked differences in portrayals of male and female athletes; swimming and track/field yielded far fewer differential gender treatments. Bruce (2016) examined research findings from studies of media representations of female athletes around the world and identified 13 framing "rules" which were apparent in the media coverage. (Her research will be discussed more fully in the next section.)

Having identified framing theory as the general understanding on which this research is based, the following sections introduce and review relevant research in three conceptual areas, each of which provides a lens used in my analysis.

Gender and Hegemonic Masculinity in Sports Media

An overwhelming amount of [sport sociologists'] studies, in a variety of ways, concludes that sports and media sports are foremost by men, for men, about men and, accordingly, reproduce male dominance.

Broch, 2016, p. 567⁹

Gender is frequently—and incorrectly—conflated with sex; that is, mistakenly viewed to be biological. While gender *is* rooted in sex differences, gender is a social product that depends on daily construction (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Lorber & Farrell, 1991). Connell (2005) argues that gender is a social structure in which sex differences become the basis of a social life

that is unequal for men and women. Patriarchy, then, is symbolically masked as *hegemonic masculinity*, a masculinity that not only subordinates all women, but also non-white and non-hetero men.

The gender binary, classifying gender into the two opposite and relational forms of masculine and feminine, has been dominant in a majority of societies (Rosenblum, 2000). Masculine and feminine stereotypes work to organize, reinforce, and naturalize unequal lives of men and women; they work to maintain the gender power hierarchy in a patriarchal society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Characteristics such as competitiveness, aggression, and determination are typically assigned to masculinity, while femininity highlights compliance, weakness, and dependence as expected female characteristics.

As Broch (2016) suggests in the comment opening this section, sport, with its emphasis on intense competition, is usually recognized as masculine terrain. From childhood through adulthood, compared with females, males are more frequently encouraged to participate in sports, in order to build strong bodies and construct masculinity. In this regard, sport was not established as a social institution in which men and women shared the equal rights and opportunities to show their skills and power (Mishra, 2014). Compared with men, women usually have been afforded limited access to sports activities, situated as “others” in the sports field (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006; Houlihan, 2007; Messner, 2013).

Sports media also have been identified as a hierarchy that privileges men and denies women equal exposure and opportunity (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006). Numerous studies have affirmed that in the mass media, sport is overwhelmingly constructed as a male terrain; professional male sport represents the pinnacle of sporting values and achievements (Wensing & Bruce, 2003). Despite increased sports participation opportunities for girls and women since the

passage of Title IX in 1972, in the United States, women's sport and female athletes are often excluded from mainstream media coverage and receive only a fraction of the attention devoted to men's sport and male athletes (Smith & Wrynn, 2013; Kian, Fink, & Hardin, 2011). Messner and Cooky (2010) found that, in the United States, the ESPN *SportsCenter* focused just 1.4% of its total airtime on women's sport in 2009. While the media coverage of female athletes rises to levels comparable with male sports during significant sporting events like the Olympics, female athletes continue to be hugely under-represented in "routine" periods (O'Neill & Mulready, 2015). Still, analyzing the online coverage of the 2008 Olympics, Jones (2013) suggested that online news stories of male athletes outnumbered those of female athletes by a 4 to 1 ratio.

In addition to receiving limited coverage, research has shown that the mass media often represent female athletes in a manner that trivializes their achievements, thus, creating and reaffirming patriarchal ideologies and promoting masculine hegemony. (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013; Cooky, Wachs, Messner, & Dworkin, 2010; Godoy-Pressland, 2015; Kian, Bernstein, & McGuire, 2013; McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, & Schweinbenz, 2012; Ponterotto, 2014, Weber & Carini, 2012). Male athletes *are more likely* to be described as consistent, strong, and independent, while female athletes *are more likely* to be characterized based on their physical attractiveness and sexuality (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Eastman & Billings, 1999).

Considering the prevalence of a perceived incompatibility between femininity and physical strength (Knoppers & McDonald, 2010), female athletes' skilled performance on the sports field challenges the stereotyped image of women, and thus, sports media tend to highlight sportswomen's feminine qualities—such as romantic relationships with men—to balance their "masculine" sports performance and to assure their identity as women (Bruce, 2016; Tseng, 2015). Researchers suggest that emphasizing female athletes' heterosexuality is a practice aimed

at obscuring lesbian identities, because of a prevalent and persistent assumption that female athletes with physical strength and competitiveness may be lesbian, and a fear that sports can inappropriately masculinize women (Messner, 2010).

By highlighting stereotyped feminine qualities and packaging female athletes as wife, mother, or girlfriend, sports media significantly undermine women's involvements and athletic accomplishments and reinforce both heterosexuality and homophobia. Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum (2013) conducted a study that examined six weeks of the televised sports news media coverage on KABC, KNBC, KCBC, and ESPN *SportsCenter*, revealing that in the limited media coverage devoted to women's sports, female athletes were often portrayed in stereotypical heterosexual roles, such as wives or girlfriends. They found the media rarely presented women's sports in a respectful tone, offering little or no coverage of their athletic performance in sporting events. Ponterotto (2014) applied a corpus-assisted analysis to explore the media coverage of tennis player Maria Sharapova in both Italian and English newspapers and discovered two basic discourse strategies in the media portrayals—eroticizing Maria Sharapova's body by highlighting her sexual attractiveness and sexual desirability; and infantilizing Maria Sharapova as a naïve child-like girl rather than an excellent athlete. Wolter (2015) conducted a critical discourse analysis of the media coverage of *espnW*, and suggested that, compared with male athletes; female athletes were described using more emotional language. Again, media focused on physical/personal attributes rather than athleticism.

In a 2016 “meta-analysis” of global research related to media representations of female athletes, Bruce identified thirteen “rules of traditional media coverage.” These rules are essentially framing strategies used by the media when portraying female athletes. Among these strategies, several especially relevant to this study were: *gender marking*, *infantilizing*,

emphasizing non-sport-related aspects, compulsory heterosexuality, and sexualization (see Table 1). Bruce concluded that the application of these framing techniques served to significantly undermine women's involvement and athletic achievements in sport and reinforced stereotypical gender expectations.

Taken as a whole, research in sports communication has shown that sports media tend to marginalize, infantilize, sexualize, and ridicule female athletes, reaffirming patriarchal gender stereotypes and promoting masculine hegemony.

Table 1. Bruce's rules of traditional media coverage of female athletes

Framing Strategies	Definitions
Gender marking	Labeling a sporting event as a women's event, implying that this is not a "real" (men's) sport
Infantilization	Calling female athletes "girls," "young ladies," or using only their first names to imply their physical inferiority
Non-sport-related aspects	Stressing female athletes' non-sport-related aspects, such as appearance, relationships, and personality
Compulsory heterosexuality	Representing female athletes' feminine, physical, and emotional characteristics; assigning them primary status as girls, wives, or mothers, rather than athletes
Sexualization	Portraying female athletes as sex objects by highlighting female athletes' sexual attractiveness

Nationalism and Sport

Sport is, after war, probably the principal means of collective identification in modern life.

Bale, 1986, p.18¹⁰

As a political ideology, nationalism can be perceived as a belief in a nation's superiority, and the promotion of that superiority over other nations. Nations might best be viewed as "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983), in which a common social identity is constructed and reconstructed in a variety of ways, among them: "received" historical accounts, public and international policy, ritual and symbols like the national flag and a national anthem. Even in the

smallest nation, Anderson suggests that, members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). They share a common understanding of what it means to be a citizen of the nation, and a sense of loyalty to and pride in that nation (Rothi, Lyons, & Chrysoschoou, 2005).

In *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Hobsbawm (2012) pointed out that sport has proven uniquely effective in defining national identity and creating a sense of belonging. Sport, whether traditional or modern, involves an antagonistic relationship, a competition in which a dichotomy of “us vs. them” is established, nurturing a sense of national consciousness as each side engages in a quest for superiority (Billing, Angelini, & Wu, 2011; Tseng, 2015). The “nation” is represented through sport by national flags, national anthems, and athletes competing in national uniforms. Athletes, as well as the media re-presentations of those athletes, in a sense, are critical articulators in the construction of a symbolic marking of a nation (von der Lippe, 2002). “Sport enables depictions not only of us but also others—not only how we wish to see ourselves but also of how we wish others to regard us” (Broch 2016).

Because of the long-standing tradition of male sport as the pinnacle of sporting values, sports nationalism—the ability of sport to create and sustain national identity—is typically established on the experiences and achievements of male athletes (Wensing & Bruce, 2003). Because sports media have a history of dismissing women’s sport, and infantilizing female athletes, often representing them as “little girls,” national identity has rarely been based on the experience of female athletes (Borcila, 2000). In this regard, Harris and Clayton (2002) analyzed how femininity, masculinity, and physicality were created and represented in two English tabloid newspapers—*The Sun* and *Mirror*—over the duration of 2000 Wimbledon and the early stage of 2000 Euro, and found that physical appearance was perceived as far more important than

nationality in women's sport, while nationalistic discourse was prevalent in media representations of men's sport.

In some instances, nationality supersedes gender as the framing device. Wensing and Bruce (2003) analyzed media coverage of Cathy Freeman, an Aboriginal Australian runner, during the Sydney 2000 Olympics and found that nationalism rather than gender became the primary media-framing device. In constructing Freeman as a symbol of national reconciliation, her identity as an Australian was more important in media representations than her identity as a woman, though she was described in stereotypically masculine terms. McCree (2011) examined the media narrative surrounding the death of Salandy—a female boxer in Trinidad—in 2009, and noted that her death provided an opportunity to construct her as a national sports hero.

Some researchers have suggested that as female participation in athletics increases, sports nationalism may increasingly come to be established on the achievements of female as well as male athletes (Bruce, 2016; Hargreaves, 1994). Recently, Tseng (2015) examined Taiwanese sports documentaries on female athletes produced between 2002 and 2009. The very existence of these documentaries suggests an attempt to recognize women's outstanding sports performances as symbols of national identity.

Compared with the Western liberal-capitalist societies in which the prevalent ideology is a hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005), Communism—at least theoretically—proclaims women's liberation and gender equality between men and women (Weigand, 2001). As Hargreaves (1994) noted, in Communist societies, such as the Soviet Union and China, “female champions were used as national assets to promote patriotism at home and political prestige abroad” (p. 225). In a historical review of Chinese women's sport between 1949 and 1979, Xiong (2015) claimed that Chinese elite female athletes were portrayed largely as national

heroes with androgynous bodies, and this was closely associated with national identity constructions. J. Lee (2009) examined the media representations of female boxers in the North Korean media, revealing that sports media tended to give priority to “nationalism over feminism” (p.193); no negative or sexualized descriptions were found. However, both studies pointed out that the positive media portrayals of female athletes as national identity carriers did not reflect a genuine sense of gender equality, but served “a broader political structure based on the state patriarchy” (J. Lee, 2009, p. 193).

In sum, due to prevailing gender stereotypes, female athletes are far less likely than male athletes to be constructed as national identity carriers, especially in the West. However, differences in understandings of gender enter into the construction of national identity in culturally specific ways.

Collectivism-Individualism Continuum in Sports Media

In his classic study of national values, Hofstede (1984) suggested that national cultures systematically differ from each other on a number of dimensions, one of which was individualism and collectivism. This dimension refers to “the degree to which people in society are integrated into groups.” The relationship between individualism and collectivism can be viewed as an “I” focus versus a “we” focus in societal norms. In an individualistic society, personal goals are emphasized over those of a group, and “ties between individuals are quite loose. Everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 51). Alternatively, in a collectivistic society, people are more “other-directed” than “inner-directed” (Riesman, Glazer, & Denney, 2001). Thus, they are integrated into cohesive groups, in which the well-being of the group is usually placed above any individual

interests (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). When categorizing countries on the collectivism-individualism continuum, Hofstede (1984) suggested that, compared with the Western world, the Chinese-majority countries—PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore—scored considerably higher on collectivism.

Sport can provide a platform to examine how the cultural values on the collectivism-individualism continuum influence and become visible in media narratives (Hua & Tan, 2012). Individualism suggests that individual athletes should be allowed to freely express their own self-confidence and individual skills in sporting competitions. Media narratives are more likely to stress athletes' personal attributes—personal autonomy, personal goals, personal responsibility, and personal fulfillment—in explaining their athletic accomplishments. In a collectivist sports narrative, however, the common goals and common values of a group are given a priority, while the personal is recognized as a component serving the well-being of the group. In media portrayals of athletes in collectivist cultures, the situational and contextual attributes of a particular group—a team or a nation—tend to be emphasized when explaining the success of athletes (Dumitrescu, 2006; Hua & Tan, 2012).

China is generally identified as a collectivist culture (Hua & Tan, 2012; Michailova & Hutchings, 2006; Steele & Lynch, 2013). Influenced by the Communist takeover, collectivism can be found in many facets of Chinese culture and society. Hofstede (2001) described the Chinese as “we-focused.” That is, they valued social relationships, depended on their in-groups for protection and resources, and remained loyal to their group in order to maintain group cohesiveness. However, the market reform launched in 1978 represents an attempt to use capitalism to develop the economy in socialist China (Ong, 1997). In the last four decades, the economic reform has transformed China into “a pseudo-capitalist market economy” (Steele &

Lynch, 2013). Chinese society has gone through dramatic socioeconomic and political transformations driven by the rapid economic growth (Hamamura & Y. Xu, 2015).

Individualism is a key characteristic of capitalist ideology (Steele & Lynch, 2013). Recent studies have suggested that social changes accompanying the development of a market economy have led to increasing individualism in China. Yan (2010) identified the rise of individualization as a twofold social transformation that had taken place in the twenty-first century in China. Viewing the increase in individual choices as the most significant change, he noted that the concepts of market economics and privatization gradually took the place of Maoist collectivist modernity. Zhang and Shavitt (2013) conducted a content analysis of 463 advertisements exploring the cultural values promoted in current Chinese advertising. Their research suggested that the value of individualism predominated in Chinese advertising, especially in advertisements targeting the Chinese X-Generation (aged 18–35 years with high education and income). More recently, Hamamura and Y. Xu (2015) examined individualism-collectivism changes in Chinese culture through an examination of personal pronoun usage using cultural product analysis. The analysis of a Chinese corpus¹¹ dating from 1950 to 2008 indicated an increasing usage of individualistic pronouns and a decreasing usage of collectivistic pronouns.

Watanabe, Nie, and Yan (2013) analyzed Chinese Olympic broadcast commentaries televised by the state media between 1984 and 2008, and found that more recent sports commentaries were increasingly concerned with individual skills and personalities. The researchers concluded that individualism and collectivism appeared to be merging in current Chinese sports media. Hua and Tan (2012) conducted content analysis of broadcast and newspaper coverage from both American and Chinese media during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and found that Chinese media attributed the success of Chinese athletes largely to “situational

factors such as support and encouragement from socially important others, societal motivation, and national pride” (p. 546). Their research suggests, that to some extent, China remains a collectivist culture. The findings of these studies suggest the complexity of assessing the degree of cultural transformation in China today.

A considerable body of sports media research has explored a variety of intersections of sport, gender, nationalism, and the cultural values of collectivism/individualism. This is true especially in Western academic research. That research, however, is limited in its vision, focused as it is primarily on Western media.

The current study contributes to sports media and sports sociology literature by expanding that focus to China, a nation in the midst of political/economic/cultural transformation and a sports reform initiative. I examine how gender, nationalism, and collectivism/individualism enter into sports media representations in Chinese on-line media coverage of domestic elite female athletes. Recognizing the role of female elite athletes in Chinese sport and the development of the Chinese sports system, I focus on media portrayals of Chinese specialized athlete, Ding Ning, and Chinese professional athlete, Li Na. This textual analysis of media stories drawn from two on-line web portals will consider the following questions:

RQ: Are there differences in media portrayals of Chinese female professional athlete Li Na and specialized athlete Ding Ning during international sporting events? If so, what are those differences?

- a) Are there differences in media portrayal of these two athletes in terms of hegemonic masculinity? If so, what are those differences?
- b) Are there differences in media portrayal of these athletes in terms of nationalism? If so, what are those differences?
- c) Are there differences in media portrayal of these athletes in terms of cultural values of collectivism-individualism? If so, what are those differences?

CHAPTER 3.

METHOD: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Hall (1975) defines texts as “literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions, and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense (p. 17).” Texts have multiple meanings, that is, they are open to multiple interpretations.

Both content analysis and textual analysis can be and have been applied to analysis of texts in media studies (Feldstein, 2001). I chose to use textual analysis in light of the assumptions that underlie the study:

1. Reality is socially constructed. Any single event can be constructed in a number of ways (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).
2. Communication is best understood not merely as the transmission of information through time and space, but as the shared construction of meaning (Carey, 1989).
3. Journalists produce “news”—media texts—that give stories meaning (Eagleman, 2011; Goffman 1974).
4. Media texts selectively re-present the social world, and as such play a crucial role in shaping values, attitudes, and cultural understandings.
5. Providing traces of a socially constructed reality, texts enable researchers to understand the meanings within a particular context (Brennen, 2012).

Unlike content analysis, which focuses on quantitative counts of words and concepts, textual analysis aims to uncover the latent meaning of texts. The object of textual analysis is not

the meaning of the text, but the construction of that meaning through the text (Acosta-Alzuru, 1996, citing Lester Massman 1989).

Textual analysis is an evidence-based interpretative method. As such, the role of the researcher is critical. Dow (1996) notes that research is “always the product of socially situated persons who make arguments that are enabled but also limited by their experiences and perspective” (p. 3). I have provided a positionality statement (p. 3) locating myself relative to the topic and the research process. I acknowledge that I am presenting *my* interpretation, that is, one possible reading, of the selected text. It is my responsibility to present the text material as evidence so that readers may better judge the veracity of my interpretation.

Textual analysis is widely used in sports studies, especially in efforts to understand the media construction of athletes. For example, McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, and Schweinbenz (2012) used textual analysis to explore how media managed and constructed British female elite athlete Paula Radcliffe’s identities within the context of motherhood and sport. The researchers found that Radcliffe was primarily constructed as a mother; being an athlete was portrayed as her secondary identity. Vincent and Crossman (2012) used textual analysis to explore the interaction between national identity and gender in media coverage of the Canadian and U.S. ice hockey teams in the 2010 winter Olympics. Their analysis suggested that “overall the discourse failed to fully recognize the athleticism and agency of the women’s teams” (p. 104).

Procedure

Selection of media platforms. In this study, I analyze news stories from online web portals, examining media representations of Chinese female athletes. Online web portals are specially designed websites that bring together information from diverse sources in a uniform

way (Wan, 2010). With the development of the Internet, web portals have become one of the most important platforms for spreading information. During the 2012 London Olympic Games, research showed that 46.3% of Chinese netizens used web portals as the most important platform to gather sports information, and 78% of Chinese netizens used web portals to read sports news (J. Liu, 2013).

Less restricted than print and broadcast by space and time, web portals have far fewer practical constraints that typically affect media coverage. Digital media storytelling capabilities have changed the way in which the news stories are presented, particularly through interactivity, including hyperlinks, surveys, videos, and other interactive elements. Research has indicated that online media coverage of female athletes was more balanced and extensive, with less bias. Then too, online news stories are more likely to avoid gender stereotypes and to include more positive content than the coverage in print media (Hyun, Postelnicu, Ramoutar, & Lee Kaid, 2007).

Moreover, the CPC strictly censors the press. In China, the government owns nearly all print newspapers; by contrast, thanks to the economic reform and the rapid development of the Internet, some web portals are commercialized media owned by private companies. According to *Regulation of Internet News*, an official document the government issued in November 2000, commercial web portals in China are not qualified to gather or write their own news stories (Zhong, 2007). In practice, however, web portals are given a tacit permission to produce news in the arenas of sports and entertainment, since these typically include less ideologically sensitive information than political and economic news (Zhong, 2007). In a sense, compared with Chinese print newspapers, web portals have more available space, fewer gatekeepers, and less state censorship. These facts suggested that web portals would provide a more authentic “spectacle” for my research.

I selected two web portals based on the following criteria: first, the portals should represent the “popular press”—the selected web portals should have the highest readership in China; second, the selected web portals should be well-managed and be able to produce news of high quality; and finally, the selected web portals should have a particular channel devoted to sport, paying close attention to international sporting events.

After careful examination, I chose two commercial web portals for this study: Sina.com and QQ.com. Sina.com is the largest Chinese-language web portal. In 1997, it became the first Chinese portal with an independent sports channel (Wan, 2010). QQ.com is a web portal managed by Tencent, the fourth largest internet company in the world.¹² QQ.com has been recognized as one of the largest web portals in China. I will analyze news stories gathered from the sports columns in the two web portals to explore the media portrayals of the two Chinese female elite athletes introduced earlier—Ding Ning, a traditional specialized athlete and Li Na, a professional athlete.

Selection of sporting events and time periods. The most recent international sporting events in which the two athletes competed were selected for this study—the 2014 Australian Open and the 2015 World Table Tennis Championship. Both athletes were champions in their event. In order to include coverage of the entire competitive events, I analyzed news stories during a time period beginning two days before the event and ending two days after the event (*see Table 2*).

Table 2. Selected athletes and corresponding events

	Li Na	Ding Ning
Sport	Tennis	Table Tennis
Nationality	China	China
Status	Professional Athlete	Specialized Athlete
Sporting Events	Australian Open	World Table Tennis Championships
Time (Beijing)	01/11- 01/28, 2014	04/24- 05/05, 2015

After defining the sporting events, time periods, and platforms, I selected the stories that would become the text in this research. According to van Dijk (1991), news stories follow a hierarchical schema, also called “superstructures,” that consists of conventional categories such as headlines, leads, main events, context, history, verbal reactions, and comments. Among these, the headlines and lead sentences typically include the most crucial topics involved in the story. I examined the headlines and lead sentences of news stories related to Li Na and Ding Ning, to identify a total of 326 news stories in which they were the main characters.

Analysis Process

In the “Introduction” to *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change, 1935-1965* (Smith, 1975), Hall identifies three stages involved in textual analysis. During the first of these stages, the “long preliminary soak” (p. 15), I read all 326 news stories. This immersion in the news coverage provided a panorama of understanding of the athletes and the events. Given the time and care required in rigorous textual analysis, a sample of 326 news stories was deemed to be too large. Because the analysis involved two athletes, two events, and extended periods of time, stratified random sampling was used to ensure that news stories focusing on each athlete and each period were included in the study. Despite the disparity in the number of relevant stories about each athlete, I included a total of 50 news stories, twenty-five for each, in the analysis (*see Table 3*). All the texts and photos in the 50 news stories were included in the analysis.

Table 3. Number of related news stories on two web portals

	Pre-Event	During-Event	Post-Event	Total
Li Na	12 (1)	146 (13)	123 (11)	281 (25)
Ding Ning	5 (3)	11 (6)	29 (16)	45 (25)
Total	17(4)	156 (19)	152 (27)	326 (50)

Note 1: The athletes' first competition and last competition in sporting events were used to divide texts into pre-event texts, during-event texts, and post-event texts. Note 2: The number in brackets indicates the number of news stories analyzed. For example "17 (4)" means that there were 17 news stories related to this athlete, and 4 of them were selected for analysis. Note 3: The number of stories selected in each case was the result of application of the ratio of number of selected stories to total number of relevant stories. For example, in Ding Ning's case, the ratio is 25:45, thus, the number of selected pre-event stories is the nearest integer of $5 \times (25:45)$, 3.

The second step in the process involves a close reading of the text and an initial identification of patterns, strategies, and themes. I proceeded with this step as follows. First, I closely examined every selected news story through the three conceptual lenses I had identified: hegemonic masculinity, nationalism, and the collectivism-individualism continuum. In order to assure consistency and accuracy, I created an informal "cue sheet" of sorts, highlighting a variety of indicators of each conceptual frame (*see Table 4*). I then read the stories several times with the goal of identifying indicators of the three frames, as well as any other thematic frames that might emerge.

The final step in the analysis is the interpretation of the findings in the framework of the study. That is, I considered the text as a product of a particular culture at a particular moment; crucial elements of culture and ideology make their way into the analysis during this step (Flener, 2008). I examined the connection between the themes arising through the focus of the three conceptual lenses as well as emerging themes and the social structure, to understand "why-the-content-is-like-that" (Hall, 1975, p.16), the social implications behind the narratives or strategies applied in the examined media coverage.

As a native Chinese person, I am qualified to address the subtleties of the culture, language, and particularly the idiomatic expressions used in the texts. As a researcher, I can fully understand the social structure and culturally shared/conventional knowledge within media representations of the two athletes. I am careful to provide adequate and detailed quotations from the text as evidence to “persuade readers that the evidence has been thoroughly examined and convincingly interpreted” (Acosta-Alzuru & Lester-Roushanzamir, 2000).

Table 4. Texts related to the targeted framing themes

Framing Themes	Related Texts
Hegemonic masculinity	Athletic performance, Sexuality, Infantilization, Appearance, Emotional and physical strength, Family roles, Unique feminine characteristics, etc.
Nationalism	Role model, National hero, Representative of the nation, Winning/losing, Glamour of sport, etc.
Collectivism-individualism	Attributes of success, Unique personal characteristics, Expressing own opinions, Relationship with coaches/seniors, etc.

CHAPTER 4.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Snapshot of the Champions and their Events

Ding Ning is a 26-year-old specialized athlete who grew up in the state sports institution. She is a rising young player in Chinese table tennis field, and has been ranked the world No.1 or No. 2 female table tennis player since 2014. In the 2015 World Table Tennis Championships, Ding Ning first defeated four foreign table tennis players in the four round matches with overwhelming superiority. She then defeated three Chinese table tennis players in the quarter- and the semi-finals, as well as the final. At the beginning of the final, Ding Ning was in a disadvantaged position, she was not playing well; and then, she got injured. After 10-minutes of emergency medical care, she hobbled back to the field, reversed the situation, and eventually won the singles title.

In the 2014 Australian Open, Li Na beat seven foreign opponents during the seven matches. Winning the Grand Slam Singles title, Li Na became the first and only Asian tennis player ever to have won two Grand Slam Singles titles.

In China, Li Na has long been a controversial athlete. She had served the Chinese national tennis team before becoming a professional athlete in 2008. In 2002, she quit the national tennis team because she felt she didn't "fit" with the regime's demands and schedule. She returned to the national team in 2004. Because she had publicly criticized the state-run sports regime, Li Na had been warned by the state institution several times; later, after becoming a professional athlete, she openly expressed her refusal to be a representative of the country. For

example, in the 2011 Australian Open, Li Na told journalists, “do not say I represent the state, I play tennis for myself.” At Wimbledon in 2013, a journalist asked Li Na whether she was under great pressure to be a representative of the state. She replied, “why I should represent a state?” *People’s Daily*, an official newspaper of the CPC, criticized Li Na for being too wayward and asserted that her willfulness should be limited. Western media, like *The New York Times Magazine*, labeled her “China’s tennis rebel.” The question of Li Na’s love for her motherland was hotly debated in China. Li Na did not get along well with Chinese media, and she confessed that she wanted to retire because of that tension.

Overview of Analysis

In the textual analysis of the online news stories, I found that gender, nationalism, and cultural values of collectivism-individualism, entered into journalists’ storytelling and media portrayals of Li Na and Ding Ning. A fourth theme, which I have identified as “monetary value” also emerged. I found no effort to sexualize these athletes in the selected text. Descriptions of Ding Ning, were always gender-neutral. By contrast, gender stereotyping was evident, in media stories featuring Li Na; personal information and non-sport-related comments were often included in her portrayals. Then too, despite Li Na’s adamant denial that she represented the state, stories about her were strongly nationalistic in tone. Again by contrast, narratives about Ding Ning, a specialized athlete, rarely portrayed her with any nationalistic purpose. Ding Ning was constructed as a young, less-experienced athlete, integrated into the regime, and overshadowed by her seniors. Li Na, was represented as a fighter who had overcome a variety of hardships to realize *her* dream. Monetary value was often emphasized as evidence of Li Na’s success, but was rarely mentioned in the media portrayal of Ding Ning.

“The Table Tennis Player” vs. “The Good Wife”

Media stories about Ding Ning, told of a great table tennis player. Positive descriptions of her athletic performance during the event, athletic skills and achievements, and the bravery, with which she endured injury, quietly “celebrated” her competence. Twelve of the seventeen pictures accompanying Ding Ning’s stories were “action shots.” Ding Ning serving; Ding Ning rigorously returning the ball; hair flying; often shouting, mouth opened wide, following a successful score. In texts, Ding Ning was frequently described in stereotypically masculine terms: she defined herself as “ruthless;” she often was said to “roar loudly;” and displayed an “iron spirit,” upon returning to the match to earn her victory.

After the last game, Ding Ning roared loudly with her fists raised. She said: “When I started the final, I told myself to be ruthless.” (Tencent, 5/2/2015)

In the roaring voice of her fans, Ding Ning kept calm and won the final with her strong will... With the injured foot, it was hard for her to walk at that time. But she still tried her best to return and attack with her clear mind, and held out until the last minute with the admirable toughness. (Sina, 5/2/2015)

After 10 minutes of emergency medical care, Ding Ning stood up again. Although she was injured, she eventually won the competition with her iron spirit and excellent skills. (Tencent, 5/3/2015)

Ding Ning found herself in a disadvantaged position in the final competition after sustaining an injury. She received medical care, hobbled back to the table, and ultimately won the singles title. Emphasizing her endurance to overcome the injury, the media portrayed her as a brave, strong, and determined athlete:

Ding Ning got injured in the final on occasion. After immediate medical care, she hobbled to the playing field and eventually won the title... With the help of doctors, Ding Ning hobbled to the ambulance. Because of the pain or exhaustion, she was sweating heavily. (5/2/2015, Tencent)

The scheduled press conference was delayed because of Ding Ning's injury, and she went to hospital in a hurry... When she came back from the hospital, she swallowed her pain as she walked to the medals podium. (5/3/2015, Tencent)

In sports media, a cultural fascination with injury has been found to be closely aligned with what Sabo (1994) identified as the “pain principle,” a patriarchal belief that “pain was inevitable and that the endurance of pain enhanced one’s character and moral worth” (p. 3). “Sports media served as a theater for male sacrifice” (Sabo & Jansen, 1998, p. 210), often representing accidents without consequence; the injury was dramatized in sports media and served in the construction of hegemonic masculinity. By contrast, the “pain principle” is typically utilized to highlight women’s physical or emotional weakness. In the pictures accompanying the stories of Ding Ning’s injury, she sat on the floor, obviously in pain, or surrounded by concerned medics. Thus, in this case, instead of communicating the fragility of Ding Ning’s female body, the sports media constructed something of a masculine narrative of pain and injury. Ding Ning, endured pain, returned to the match, and emerged to win the competition.

Yet, despite her construction as a tough, determined athlete, the media frequently identified her as a “girl,” instead of using her name.

Let's applaud this 25-year old girl! For her great courage and spirit! She won the glory and passed sportsmanship to the audience as the world best table tennis player! (Sina, 5/2/2015)

Fortunately, the Lady Luck is on the side of this diligent girl. The doctor said that the condition of her right foot was not too bad, which means that she still has chance to win another title in this championships. (Tencent, 5/3/2015)

In Western media, calling successful adult female athletes “girls” or “young ladies,” or using their first names, is viewed as infantilization, one way to stress gender differences between male and female athletes. Sportswomen are portrayed as vulnerable female teenagers in need of protection. As is true in Western sports culture, in China, calling female athletes “girls” stresses their sexual passivity. Within the state-run sports regime, specialized athletes are chosen to train in special institutions at a very young age. To promote full concentration on training, strict rules regarding dating and marriage have been enforced since the 1960s. In 2004, four table tennis players were dismissed from the national team for having a girlfriend or boyfriend.¹³ According to a 2015 news report on Chinese specialized athletes, personal relationships are still discouraged, although the regime currently maintains a relatively generous attitude toward dating and marriage.¹⁴ Growing up isolated in a state-run sports institution with strict rules, specialized athletes, especially women are expected to be virgins (M. Lee, 2012). In other words, calling female athletes “girls” reinforces their sexual passivity, as well as their submission to the rules of the state. This might also explain the absence of any sexualization of Chinese female athletes in the media text analyzed here.

As a specialized athlete, viewed as an employee of a national sports institution, Ding Ning was represented primarily as an athlete in a gender-neutral tone. The media portrayal of Li

Na, a professional tennis player, was noticeably different. Li Na's identity was constructed not solely as an athlete, but multi-dimensionally; her athletic performance, family role, aspirations, and personal characteristics were all a part of Li Na's portrait.

Li Na's athletic performance was one of the frequently discussed issues in the media coverage. Highlighting Li Na's excellent athletic skills and performance, the media portrayed her as the best tennis player in Asian history:

In these competitions, Li Na's forehand and approach shot are her deadly weapons. Her double service is out of ordinary as well. During matches with Makarova and Pennetta, Li Na intentionally used more approach shots, which led to great success. Approach shots rarely scored directly, but it caused the opponent's error rate to rise.
(Sina, 1/25/2014)

A double-fault from the opponent at 15-15 brought Li Na a chance. Then, Li Na used her good backhand to reach two break points. Affected by the emotional fluctuation, Dominika Cibulková [the opponent] did not perform very well on her first serve. Li Na took this opportunity and successfully attacked the opponent, firstly reaching the break point. (Sina, 1/25/2014)

Even lauding Li Na's athletic prowess, Chinese online media stories enthusiastically emphasized her role as wife and future mother. Her marriage was widely discussed in the media; her husband, Jiang Shan, was called "*the guy who got more media attention than Li Na*" (Li Na's word). When Li Na won the *Daphne Akhurst Memorial Cup* in the 2014 Australian Open, instead of viewing the victory as an individual achievement at the conclusion of a long line of hardships, the media focused on Li Na's trophy as an anniversary gift for her husband:

Li Na gave this Grand Slam trophy to her husband as the anniversary gift. Her husband was so touched and cried at the stadium. (Tencent, 1/26/2014)

At the ceremony, Li Na said Jiang Shan was so lucky to find her as his wife because his “Chinese good wife” would give him the Daphne Cup as the anniversary gift. (Sina, 1/25/2015)

In this way, the media successfully diverted attention from Li Na’s athletic achievement to her marriage, shifting her primary identity from tennis player to wife. Discussion of Li Na’s retirement plans—raising babies and cooking for her family—reinforced cultural understandings in China that the domestic sphere was women’s place.

Because Li Na has focused on tennis for many years, their plan to have a baby has been delayed several times. Her grandfather has always wanted a grandchild, and this is also her mother and stepfather’s wish. (Sina, 1/28/2014)

Li Na has always said, “after I retire, I will definitely be a good wife. I will raise babies and cook for Jiang Shan (her husband), which might be the best way to compensate him.” (Sina, 1/26/2014)

Totally concentrated on tennis, Li Na had delayed fulfilling her family’s wish for a child. In Chinese culture, this was considered “improper” behavior, and made Li Na a less “qualified” wife who owed her husband a great deal. Thus, she promised to be “a good wife” after retirement—raising babies and cooking for the family—to “compensate” her husband (her word). Media portrayals highlighting Li Na’s domestic ambitions elevated the importance of being a wife and mother over athletic achievements; the underlying suggestion was that the two roles were mutually exclusive.

The Li Na emerging in media stories was an emotionally unstable and self-abased woman. Her father's death when she was a child provided an explanation for what the media portrayed as Li Na's deep insecurity and emotional dependence on her husband:

After the 2012 French Open,¹⁵ Li Na usually got angry at Jiang Shan for no apparent reason... She was so self-abased that she needed to use exasperation to hide her weakness... At that time, she struggled with self-abasement and desperation. (Sina, 1/26/2014)

In fact, Li Na emotionally depends on Jiang Shan. When they went back Wuhan (Li's hometown), Jiang Shan sometimes played card games with his friends, and Li Na always stayed with him like a little girl. Sometimes she just watched how Jiang Shan played the game, sometimes lying down and reading a book, maybe even falling asleep there. When Jiang Shan stayed up the whole night, Li Na stayed with him. (Tencent, 1/26/2014)

Portraying female athletes as emotionally unstable is a common strategy in media coverage of sportswomen, both in the US and China. Underscoring emotional instability provides a counterweight to athletic performance. Emphasizing Li Na's emotional instability and her child-like devotion and dependence on her husband, in some media accounts, Li Na seemed to become a vulnerable woman rather than a strong athlete. In a sense, this served to reinforce both stereotypically feminine gender roles, and the hegemonic view of sport as predominantly masculine.

Although Li Na achieved great athletic success in tennis, the media reminded readers that she remained a "traditional" woman, interested in "feminine" things. Media stories called attention to her love of shopping and provided detailed descriptions of her wardrobe, and accessories, complete with the inclusion of high-end brand-name mentions.

At the airport, Li Na kept silent. However, her Rolex watch and gray Hermes Birkin were eye-catching... Li Na said she always went out shopping when she arrived in new places: "I am obsessed with handbags. Every time I see a lovely bag, I cannot help myself." (Sina, 1/26/2014)

[When Li Na was waiting for the interview] Another feature of Li Na's personality emerged . . . She set aside her caution and talked about something that women were particularly interested in with the journalist. (Tencent, 1/27/2014)

In sum, the media rarely used stereotypically gendered terms, but nonetheless constructed Li Na through strongly gendered narratives. In sports media, these gendered narratives are typically secured by a tacit but strongly indicated subtext: media representations of female athletes occur within a framework that trivializes and marginalizes women (Weiller & Higg, 1999). Highlighting Li Na's emotional instability, feminine interests, and identity as wife, the news stories clearly situated her as a heterosexual woman in a patriarchal structure. Li Na's portrayal stands in sharp contrast to that of Ding Ning, who emerged almost without dimension beyond her athleticism: the strong, iron-spirited, table tennis player.

"Enjoy the match" vs. "Celebrate Our Great National Hero"

Emphasizing outstanding athletic performances and achievements to represent and improve a nation's international image is a frequently used strategy, particularly in socialist countries (Tseng, 2015). Within the state-run sports regime, specialized athletes are viewed as state employees who are charged with winning glory for the country. Professional athletes in China, outside of the regime, play for their own livelihood and have more freedom in their athletic career. This would suggest that media portrayals of specialized athletes would be

celebratory in tone, with a strong emphasis on “being Chinese,” while portrayals of professional athletes might be less so. However, this was not the case in the stories analyzed here. Instead, narratives about Ding Ning, were only weakly nationalistic in tone, while Chinese media coverage of Li Na, embraced her warmly as “one of us.”

In a nationalistic narrative, competition results—winning or losing—are typically perceived as being far more important than the glamour of the sport itself; the medals, victories, and achievements of an athlete become the triumphs of the nation. The phrase “winner takes all” commonly has described competition results in Chinese sports media (Watanabe, Nie, & Yan, 2013). Somewhat paradoxically, in media stories about Ding Ning, the specialized athlete, emphasis seemed to shift from winning or losing, to the importance of enjoying the sport.

It is hard to predict who will win and who will lose. From another perspective, we have come here to enjoy a fantastic match. If they both try their best, who wins or who loses is not the most important issue. (Sina, 4/26/2015)

Yang Ying (one commentator) said, “In fact, the audience does not need to care too much about winning or losing. What is more important is that we can enjoy this match between the world’s best players in the final of the World Table Tennis Championships.” (Sina, 5/2/2015)

Perhaps reflective of the “us vs. us” rather than an “us vs. them” competition—all the opponents in the quarter- and semi-finals as well as the final were Chinese specialized athletes—the media spoke of them with an empathy and respect not often seen in media stories. Although Ding Ning won the title in the event, the media narrative told of the trials of her opponent:

This result [being defeated by Ding Ning in the final] is hard for Liu Shiwen to accept. Her objective is to participate in the 2016 Rio Olympics. Only winning the world

championships would give her the chance... Although Ding Ning's injury seemed to put Liu Shiwen in an advantaged position, it also disturbed her performance. (Sina, 5/2/2015)

Ding Ning, too, had praise for her opponent:

Liu Shiwen is an athlete I sincerely respect. She is very competitive and powerful during the competition. (Sina, 5/3/2015)

Winning glory for the nation seemingly was superseded by narratives focusing on enjoying the game, and respecting opponents. Still, in some sense the narrative remained nationalistic because China had no way to lose, any one's triumph at that stage was a triumph for China.

By contrast, the portrayal of Li Na was rich with nationalism. Stories focused primarily upon her accomplishment and happiness in winning the *Daphne Cup*. Pictures accompanying those stories rarely included action shots, but instead pictured a smiling Li Na embracing the trophy.

As noted in the snapshot opening this chapter, Li Na was a highly controversial figure in China, having openly criticized the state-run sports regime publicly on several occasions. During an interview with *The New York Times Magazine*, Li Na dismissed any suggestions that she represented China, saying, "I really, truly think that I am just an athlete. I can represent nothing but myself."¹⁶ The magazine labeled her "*China's Tennis Rebel*." Yet, in the news stories analyzed here, Li Na was not a rebel, but instead, a celebrated representative of her nation. *The New York Times Magazine* interview largely was ignored (intentionally?), and on the one occasion it was mentioned, the story suggested the episode had been a Western media misunderstanding.

Claiming Li Na's significant achievements as China's own, in media stories, Li Na, indeed, emerged as a representative of the country, a national hero, a role model of Chinese sports reform.

When Li Na earned the highest glory in tennis, a Grand Slam Singles title, China was labeled "Grand Slam Champion" for the second time. (Tencent, 1/27/2014)

Her success at the Australian Open was the outcome of ten-year's hard work. The Daphne Cup now has the name 'China Na' carved on its surface. This is the best gift Li Na could give to all of the Chinese fans during this Spring Festival. (Sina, 1/24/2014)

"Athlete as role model" is a common strategy used to reinforce national unity. Li (1998) suggested that in China, athletic role models were urgently needed to empower the society. As a professional athlete who had played for the national team until 2008, Li Na's "solo flying" was recognized as a breakthrough in Chinese sports reform. Zhu Yanlin (2016), a sports journalist at *Titan Sports*, noted that in recent years, the state-run sports regime has gradually lost its authority in China; people have become hungry for a systematic reform. Li Na again, had become a role model, this time, for Chinese sports reform.

Liu Guoliang, a former Chinese tennis player, said, "Li Na is the greatest national hero in Chinese sports in recent years." Liu Guoliang praised Li Na for enjoying the happiness tennis brought to her. . . . "I feel that professional athletes like Li Na could enjoy more freedom and happiness than our specialized athletes. That might be one of the reasons why she has maintained her excellence at her age now [31 years old]. They can be more relaxed about winning or losing; our specialized athletes cannot do that now." (Tencent, 1/25/2014)

Sun Jinfang, the director of the State General Administration of Sports, said, "Li Na's

success is a great break for the Chinese sports system. She is a role model of China's future sports professionalization.” (Sina, 1/25/2014)

The performance of Li Na in the Australian Open showed her confidence, maturity, and inspiring fighting spirit. I believe she can be a great model for us. Admiring her spirit, we hope Li Na will promote a quick development of Chinese tennis. (Sina, 1/25/2014)

Li Na's pursuit of professional tennis without the support of national funding exemplifies a relatively new relationship between the state and professional athletes emerging in recent years. Although Li Na was a professional athlete “outside the national sports system” and was portrayed as “China's tennis rebel” in Western media, as a world famous athlete who had won two Grand Slam Singles titles, Li Na came to signify the strength and power of China on the global stage. Although she had personally refused to be a representative of the nation on several occasions, the strong sense of nationalism and pride in her achievements allowed her no escape from the “nationalistic mission of the state.” The media repeatedly and enthusiastically emphasized Li Na's loyalty to the country, and her love of the motherland, often using Li Na's own words.

Li Na expressed her love for her motherland and also talked about her hometown Wuhan: “When people ask me where are you from, I always tell them with pride, I am from Wuhan, not a very big city with a population of 10,000,000.” (Sina, 1/24/2014)

[Journalists asked Li Na whether she would migrate to Melbourne in the future] Li Na stopped smiling and replied seriously: "I've never thought about living in any other country except China. This is the idea I have stuck to since I was a child." When Li Na was a child, the 10-month experience living in the US confirmed her determination to live

only in the country where she was born. Here is her family, and everything she cares about. (Tencent, 1/27/2014)

Emphasizing Li Na's loyalty to China, constructing her as a national hero, and portraying her as a role model of Chinese sport all suggest an intense nationalistic purpose underlying these media stories.

“The Marionette”¹⁷ vs. “The Tenacious Fighter”

Despite evidence of an emerging individualism, China has been traditionally identified as a collectivist culture in which the well-being of the group is valued above the interests of the individual. In a typical sports narrative in China, media are more likely to construct athletes within an authoritarian structure while ignoring their personal characteristics (Hua & Tan, 2012). These stories contrast with individualistic sports narratives, in which athletes are celebrated as independent individuals, voicing their own opinions and expressing self-confidence in their performance. In these narratives, emphasis on personal characteristics and efforts are frequently cited as the basis of athletic success (Dumitrescu, 2006).

In media representations, Ding Ning was portrayed as something of a marionette, overshadowed and controlled by her seniors and coaches. She was portrayed as almost childlike, a “little girl” who could not carry the world No.1 title in female table tennis. By contrast, Li Na was given autonomy. She emerged from media stories as passionate about tennis and persistent in attaining her personal dream. Li Na is a tenacious fighter who achieved a great success at the end of a long journey.

Zhang Yining, Ding Ning's senior, was an almost constant presence in media stories about Ding Ning. As a former Chinese female table tennis player, Zhang Yining had held the

world No.1 ranking continuously from 2003 to 2009, except for a brief period in 2008. She was recognized as one of the greatest female table tennis players in history.¹⁸ Although Zhang Yining is nine years older than Ding Ning, they both served on the Beijing Table Tennis Team and the National Table Tennis Team. According to the tradition in the state-run sports regime, the elder players are charged as role models who positively influence, help, and guide younger players. Zhang Yining had started to help Ding Ning with her daily training when Ding Ning was ten years old.¹⁹ To some extent, Zhang Yining played the role of Ding Ning's coach.

In the 2015 World Table Tennis Championships, Zhang Yining appeared as a television commentator. Her guidance and positive influence on Ding Ning were frequently mentioned:

As a senior on the Beijing Tennis Team, Zhang Yining has guided Ding Ning from when she was ten years old. Zhang Yining said that was why she cared more about Ding Ning. (Sina, 5/4/2015)

(Ding Ning expressing her gratitude to her seniors) My senior (Zhang Yining) and I were on the same team. She started to guide me when I was ten years old. She and Guo Yan (another former player) came here to encourage me, and I do not want to let them down. (Sina, 5/2/2015)

Guo Yan, another former Chinese table tennis player, was also Ding Ning's senior, and now is one of Ding Ning's coaches on the National Table Tennis Team. In a news story, Guo Yan expressed her wishes for Ding Ning to win the singles title, yet—whether as senior or coach—the fact that Guo Yan was Ding Ning's supervisor and authority, was never in doubt in media stories:

Supervising the competitions, Guo Yan said she would not show additional mercy on Ding Ning. "I will not intentionally take care of her. As she (Ding Ning) said, she would

be nervous if I watched her during competitions. Because I was particularly strict to myself during training, and now I treat her in the same way.” (Sina, 4/27/2015)

Next to Zhang Yining and Guo Yan, Ding Ning was often portrayed more like a little girl, not a sports star. Although Zhang Yining had been retired and Ding Ning held the current world No.1 ranking, Zhang Yining was still identified as the “Leading Lady,” the top female table tennis player. Beyond diligence and modesty, there were few hints of Ding Ning’s personality; her individual opinions were seldom voiced:

After winning the world title for the first time in 2011, Ding Ning has held the title of “world No.1 female table tennis player” that belonged to Zhang Yining. However, the title seems too heavy for this young girl to carry. (Tencent, 5/3/2015)

Zhang Yining recalls, “Ding Ning is a very diligent athlete. She always trains more during the break. Also, she is a very humble person.” (Sina, 5/2/2015)

Communication between Ding Ning and her seniors was depicted in media accounts largely as top-down supervision rather than interaction. Zhang Yining and Guo Yan, both world-famous table tennis players, were Ding Ning’s seniors; their comments on Ding’s athletic performance were loaded with authority. In media narratives they emerged almost as Ding Ning’s coaches, taking care of their little girl. Alongside her seniors, Ding Ning was a quiet and humble athlete who focused on table tennis without expressing her own personality. In this sense, the relationship between Ding Ning and her seniors reflected the hierarchical relationships established between institutional leaders and employees, coaches and athletes, senior and junior athletes in the state-run sports regime.

Compared with Ding Ning, who was largely devoid of individual identity in media portrayals, Li Na was represented in more individualistic terms. Instead of being motivated by

winning medals, Li Na was represented as an athlete motivated by her passion for tennis and her *personal* dream:

Li Na said, “In fact, I did not think too much about it. But it is my own dream and I have to try my best to achieve it. I do not want to let myself have regret in the future.”

(Tencent, 1/25/2014)

Li Na’s journey to the championship was almost a staple in media narratives. On her long march to the Grand Slam Singles title, she was portrayed as an athlete who went through a variety of hardships: when Li Na was 14 years old, her father passed away; before becoming a professional athlete, she had had hard time fitting in the state sports institution; after winning her first Grand Slam Singles title in the 2011 French Open, the public doubted her loyalty to China, and her relationship with the press also became turbulent, leading to a long-term depression and loss of self-confidence; her athletic performance then diminished rapidly, and she battled emotional fluctuations. Yet, the media story goes, although Li Na had wanted to retire on several occasions, she overcame all hardships and won her second Grand Slam Singles title in the 2014 Australian Open:

“[Li Na said] At that time, I wanted to retire because of the pressure media brought to me.” (1/16/2014, Sina)

In Li Na’s life, it seems that there is always a strong enemy who forces her to fight. When she was 14-year-old, her father passed away; when she was 20-year-old, she felt deeply depressed about the environment (the state-run sports institution); after turning 29, she was suffering due to media and public criticism—Li Na said: “There are 1.3 billion people in China, if everyone spits on me once, I will drown.” However, Li Na will

not let herself be drowned. She never gives up and always tries to change herself.

(1/27/2014, Tencent)

Li Na's coach, Carlos, played a crucial role in Li Na's journey. While Ding Ning's story sometimes became less her story than that of her seniors, Li Na was always the star of her story. Compared to the authoritarian relationship between Ding Ning and her seniors, Li Na and Carlos were portrayed almost as friends interacting as equals. On Li Na's journey to the Grand Slam Singles title, Carlos emerged as a highly supportive, caring, and helpful coach and friend. He not only provided scientific training methods but also helped Li Na deal with emotional hurdles. He was the person who helped Li Na find her passion and confidence, and contributed to her success:

After the 2011 French Open... Li Na's athletic performance was falling down rapidly... Until she hired Carlos, she had struggled with the low of her athletic circle for over one year. Many people even thought Li Na had passed her golden period in tennis...(With the guidance of Carlos) Li Na shows us a completely new outlook of her athletic performance. (1/25/2014, Sina)

In the communication with Carlos, what the Argentina [Carlos] emphasized most was enhancing Li Na's confidence but not changing Li Na... "I do not want to talk about changing. What I am talking about is helping her (Li Na) discover her potentiality. I try to show her how great she is, and to let her realize her excellence." ... During the training, Carlos gave Li Na a lot of autonomy. He only provided her technique guidance; as for the training time, it was completely up to Li Na. (Sina, 1/25/2014)

The change Carlos brought to Li Na was not only improving her ranking to the World Top 3. His greatest contribution was to understand Li Na, to dig out the root of Li Na's psychological issues, to help her overcome these problems. (Sina, 1/26/2014)

Examining the media representation of individualism, I found that Ding Ning—the specialized athlete—was portrayed as a quiet athlete overshadowed by her seniors and coaches. Instead of being a sports star, she was more like a marionette responding not to her own dreams or desires, but under the control of an authority. In contrast, highlighting her ambitions and determination, Li Na was represented in individualistic terms as a tenacious fighter who overcame a variety of obstacles on her journey to the Grand Slam Singles title.

“Money Matters!”

During the textual analysis, in addition to the three conceptual lenses used, I identified a new frame that emerged from the examined news stories—monetary value. In Li Na's media coverage, her monetary value, including her competitive awards and commercial endorsements, were widely discussed in media portrayals:

Before the 2014 Australian Open, Li Na has won the champion of the WTA Shenzhen Open, which brought her \$112,000. Competing in the final of the Australian Open means Li Na at least could earn the awards of the second place—\$1.325 million. That means, in the past 20 days, Li Na has already earned more than 1.4 millions dollars. If she could win the Singles tile tomorrow, she will take the huge check for the champion—\$2.65 million, which would be the highest award in her career. Until now, Li Na has earned

\$14.847 million. If she won the Grand Slam Singles title tomorrow, her competition award will reach \$16 million. (Sina, 1/24/2014)

Professional tennis is a world of money — “burning” money also “bringing” in money. After Li Na won the second place at the 2013 Australian Open, Jiang Shan (Li Na’s husband) said, “You guys only see how much she earns, and do not see how much she spends.” However, thanks to the huge market of China, Li Na is the current world No.2 highest-paid female athlete. Even during the two years she did not win any Grand Slam Singles title, her annual salary was around \$100 million. (Tencent, 1/27/2014)

As a professional athlete, Li Na earned her livelihood through competitive awards and commercial endorsements. She operated her athletic career in a market-oriented way. In media stories, Li Na’s monetary value became a measure of her success. She was in that sense, commodified. Li Na became a brand. By contrast, as a specialized athlete, Ding Ning is charged with winning and bringing glory to the state rather than earning money. Then too, the state regulates athletic and commercial activities of specialized athletes, and claims that their achievements are not individual entitlements but national success. Ding Ning’s financial situation was never mentioned.

CHAPTER 5.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I explored media portrayals of two Chinese female elite athletes—specialized table tennis player Ding Ning, and professionalized tennis player Li Na. More specifically, I used textual analysis to examine media representations of these two athletes taken from two Chinese web portals—QQ.com and Sina.com—to determine whether there were differences between the portrayals, and if so, what those differences were.

Framing theory provided the theoretical grounding for my study, and I used three conceptual lenses—gender, nationalism and collectivism-individualism—to guide my analysis. During close reading of the stories, a fourth conceptual theme, which I identified as “monetary value,” emerged and added yet another dimension through which to consider the media portrayals of Ding Ning and Li Na.

Are there differences in the media portrayals of these two Chinese female elite athletes? Yes. The “portraits” of these athletes were very distinctive; I found significant differences in each of the three conceptual areas. In the following sections, I briefly summarize those differences.

Gender

Looking at the media stories through the lens of gender, Ding Ning emerges primarily, and almost exclusively, as a table tennis player. She is skilled. She is a spirited competitor. Yet, beyond the use of terms more typically used in portrayals of male athletes—strong, tough,

determined, able to persevere in the face of injury—the “celebration” of Ding Ning and her victory is “quiet,” in some sense, “ordinary,” and relatively gender-neutral. By comparison, while Li Na also emerges as a skilled athlete, in her media narrative, that skill is tempered by an emphasis on stereotypical gendered roles. Li Na has athletic aspirations, but so too does she seek a more traditional role in the domestic sphere.

These considerable differences in the gender representations of Li Na and Ding Ning may, in part, be a product of their individual athletic status relative to the Chinese sports regime. Under that regime, specialized athletes like Ding Ning receive monthly stipends from the state; the state institutions guarantee that athletes are housed, well-nourished, and well-trained; and when they can no longer compete, the state finds employment for them. For all intents and purposes, specialized athletes are state employees, hired to win medals in international competitions, and bring national glory to the country. In return, the state “claims the ownership of the bodies of the athletes” (M. Lee, 2012, p. 76). Family, sexuality, and personal adventures must be delayed until the primary goal, competing and winning, has been achieved. Thus, the expectations of the state-run sports regime may explain why the media construction of Ding Ning was almost solely focused on: Ding Ning, the table tennis player.

As a professional athlete no longer constrained by the state-run sports system, Li Na claims much more autonomy of her athletic career and her personal life. The media had more freedom to represent Li Na multi-dimensionally. Li Na emerged as an athlete, but also as a good wife and future mother. The media situated Li Na in a stereotypical, gendered narrative, emphasizing her stereotypical feminine characteristics, and in doing so, somewhat diminished her identity as an athlete.

Ultimately, emphasis on Ding Ning's athleticism, to a large extent, reflects Chinese sports institutional power rather than a genuine sense of gender equality. Li Na operates outside of state control; yet, stereotyped gender ideologies leave little room for her to challenge a patriarchal gender order.

Nationalism

The findings related to the place of nationalism in the portrayals of these two athletes, in some ways, are counterintuitive. As noted, specialized athletes' sole purpose is to win glory for the nation, build national unity, and reinforce the nation's standing in the global community. By contrast, professional athletes earn their livelihood outside the state-run sports system. In this situation, one would expect to find nationalistic narratives to be much more evident in Ding Ning's stories. However, that was not the case. Media coverage openly diminished the importance of winning, focusing instead on the glamour of the game: "we have come here to enjoy a fantastic match...[W]ho wins or who loses is not the most important issue;" "the audience does not need to care too much about winning or losing." By contrast, Li Na was a national hero, a role model of the triumph of China and China's sports reform. The media stories were rich with nationalism: Li Na loved China and was loyal to her motherland; Li Na's victories were the country's victories; Li Na was embraced warmly as "one of us."

I attribute this apparent contradiction to my expectations largely to the difference in the status of tennis and table tennis in Chinese sports culture at this particular historical moment. While tennis has a long tradition and enjoys widespread popularity in the West, Chinese athletes have reached significant achievements in the sport only recently. Li Na's victory in the 2014 Australian Open was a surprising breakthrough to Chinese fans. Because an anti-Western

ideology is deeply rooted in China (G. Xu, 2001; 2012); the country seeks to be recognized not only in a global sports culture, but in the larger global landscape. Given these goals, Li Na's victories against the best tennis players in the world would certainly elevate China's status in the global sports culture, and perhaps equally important, in the global community. Li Na became a "national hero."

By contrast, as the national sport in China, table tennis is familiar terrain. Chinese players have dominated international table tennis events since the 1960s. In the 2015 World Table Tennis Championships, Chinese female players occupied all positions in the quarter- and semi-finals as well as the final. The competition, in some sense, then, was a *local* competition; no sense of international opposition was involved. No matter if Ding Ning won or lost, China would triumph. In sum, table tennis, despite being China's national sport, had little "recognition" on the global stage, and as such, victory did little to elevate China's global stature. Thus, it may have served little nationalistic purpose beyond creating unity within China.

Another explanation of findings related to nationalism may lie in China's emerging sports reform. As noted, sports reform has introduced a new type of athlete—the professional athlete—into Chinese sports system, in a sense, destabilizing the long-time dominance of specialized athletes. As a professional athlete, Li Na challenges the employer-employee relationship between the state and athletes in the Chinese sports system; she "seeks escape" from the control of the state regime. Then too, Li Na's open criticism of the state-run sports regime, refusal to be viewed as representative of China, turbulent relationship with Chinese media, and the label of "China's tennis rebel" bestowed upon her by Western media, have made her a controversial figure. Yet, considering the significant role Li Na plays in the national identity construction—the first and only Grand Slam singles tennis champion from Asia—China's strong nationalism tradition may

not allow Li Na to be a “rebel” in Chinese society. Enthusiastically emphasizing her loyalty to China and her love of the motherland in a rich nationalistic narrative, media stories in some sense “correct” Li Na’s controversial image, embracing her as “one of us,” claiming her as “China’s own.”

As a specialized athlete and essentially, a state employee, Ding Ning operates within the familiar state-run sports regime. She neither challenges that institution, nor seeks to escape it. In this sense, the existence of Ding Ning has no threat to the Chinese sports system. As a result, the state needs not to put additional effort to claim “ownership” of Ding Ning; she is understood to be one of “China’s own.”

Collectivism-Individualism and Monetary Value

The differences between Li Na and Ding Ning’s media portrayals perhaps are most obvious when viewed through the lens of collectivist and individualist cultural values. Reading media stories through this lens revealed Li Na, the professional athlete, as a “tenacious fighter” who was passionate about tennis, and had overcome many obstacles on her way to achieving her *personal* dream. Unlike the independent Li Na, Ding Ning emerged in the media stories as something of a marionette, overshadowed and controlled by her seniors and coaches. Portrayed as a less-experienced “girl,” Ding Ning rarely voiced her own opinions or expressed self-confidence in her performance. Even as the media lauded her athletic performance, in the shadow of her seniors, she emerged as an almost childlike player: “The title seems too heavy for this young girl to carry.” (Tencent, 5/3/2015)

Unlike Li Na, Ding Ning has little control of her career or her life, reflecting the top-down, authoritarian, employer-employee relationship, which characterizes the Chinese state-run

sports regime. Ding Ning is portrayed as a passive, silent athlete, largely devoid of individuality or personal aspirations, lacking any sense of agency.

By contrast, Li Na took charge of her athletic career and her life. Her story was one of bravery, persistence, and independence on a long journey to the Grand Slam Singles title. In many ways, while Ding Ning's story was stuck in the structures of Communism, Li Na's story seemed to parallel something of an individualist capitalist narrative: the "American Dream." The "American Dream" suggests that "individuals that work hard enough, are committed as well as honest and independent decision makers will achieve success" (Dumitrescu, 2006, p.54). Li Na's story was rich with a sense of individualism.

It was in the American Dream narrative that the fourth theme—an emphasis on consumption and commodification—emerged. News stories emphasized Li Na's stereotypically feminine "obsession" with shopping, and detailed the high-end brands she wore. Li Na's "value," her monetary winnings, became an indicator of her success. In some sense, Li Na became a commodity with a "price tag." She was a brand. Ding Ning's financial status was never mentioned.

Implications

The core difference between the two athletes was one of agency. As a professionalized athlete, Li Na had agency; she was able to fashion her own athletic career. In her media portrayal, she had courage, voiced her own opinions, and made her own choices. On the way to the Grand Slam Singles title, she was represented as a passionate athlete motivated by her personal dreams. While Carlos, her coach, and Jiang Shan, her husband, were frequently a part of Li Na's

story, and were portrayed as her “network of support,” instrumental to her success, there was never any doubt that Li Na was the *star* of her own story.

By contrast, the media told of Ding Ning, the specialized athlete: a “silent” athlete, largely devoid of personal characteristics, lacking agency, making no independent decisions. Her athletic skill was never in doubt; however, that skill was overshadowed and controlled by her coaches and seniors. She was in some sense, simply a part of the “medal machine” assembled by the state-run sports regime. Ding Ning’s portrait is uni-dimensional: Ding Ning is a skilled table tennis athlete.

As I read the stories over and over, I was struck by the difference in their tone. Li Na’s stories seemed vibrant; I almost felt I *knew* Li Na. Ding Ning’s stories, by contrast, seemed ordinary; her media image was almost “boring.” There was no excitement. There were no enthusiastic celebrations of her victory. The monotony of her story, perhaps, mirrored her lack of agency in a sports culture, that even in the midst of efforts to reform, remained focused on the collective values of the nation, not the well-being of individuals. Ding Ning was unable to escape the structural oppression that *was* the state-run regime. In fact, the media made no suggestion that Ding Ning sought escape.

The wide disparity between the number of stories about the two athletes is noteworthy; of the 326 total stories, 86% (281) were about Li Na. This disparity is perhaps a reflection of public attitudes toward tennis and table tennis, and professional and specialized athletes in Chinese society. As I mentioned earlier, China has dominated international table tennis competitions since the 1960s. Although table tennis *is* China’s national sport, Chinese people have become accustomed to Chinese players’ dominance in the sport; winning in the World Table Tennis Championships no longer excites the Chinese public. Table tennis victories, in some sense, are

“old news.” By contrast, China has only recently reached significant levels of achievement in tennis, a sport widely popular in the West. Li Na’s triumph is a milestone in the history of Chinese, even Asian, tennis. For Chinese fans, Li Na’s victory brought far more surprise, excitement, and thrills than Ding Ning’s victory in table tennis.

With the introduction and development of the market-oriented economy in the past four decades, the individualistic consciousness has been increasing in Chinese society. In sport, the state-run sports regime, based on a collectivistic ideology, has gradually lost its authority; people have started to challenge the system’s dehumanization of Chinese athletes (Zhu, 2016). Li Na challenges the stereotype of the controlled Chinese specialized athlete. She is a “sports star” emerging in the context of sports reform, moving sport toward increased professionalism and commercialism. The overwhelming amount of media attention directed toward Li Na, then, may not only reflect the triumph of the “new and unexpected” over the “familiar and mundane,” but perhaps, also Chinese people’s hunger for sports reform and a different kind of athlete.

In the decades since 1978, an emerging capitalistic ideology has been fighting a close battle with the traditional Communist ideology. The considerable differences in the media portrayals of these two athletes discovered in the analysis here, mirror this complex, ideological struggle.

Contributions, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research

This study contributes to the sports media and sports sociology literature in a number of ways. It builds upon a literature dominated by Western scholars writing about Western athletes, and so, adds scope to our knowledge of *global* sports culture. While scholars have looked at the relationships between gender and sport, gender and nationalism, nationalism and sport,

individualism and sport, and any number of combinations of these concepts, this study adds depth by beginning at the intersection of all these concepts—gender, nationalism, and individualism-collectivism. Additionally, to my knowledge, this is the first research to undertake a comparison between Chinese traditional specialized athletes and professional athletes emerging in China’s transitional society.

The framing strategies used by Western media in the portrayals of female athletes identified by Bruce (2016) for the most part, *are* visible in the Chinese media texts examined here. This is especially true in the case of Li Na. Yet, there are some differences that invite further investigation. For example, *sexualization* and *questioning sportswomen’s sexuality* are common framing techniques in media constructions of female athletes in Western media. Highlighting female athletes’ sexual attractiveness, Western media often represent sportswomen’s bodies as sexualized objects of desire (Kane, LaVoi, & Fink, 2013). Commodifying female athletes’ bodies for the “male gaze” reinforces the patriarchal gender discourse, and serves to diminish the power of female athletes in sport as well as in society (Lynn, Hardin, & Walsdorf, 2004). Then too, in Western sport, female athletes with physical strength and competitiveness are often assumed to be lesbians (Messner, 2010). Linking female athletes with a supposition of lesbianism significantly devalues and stigmatizes sportswomen (Blinde & Taub, 1992). In this study, I found no evidence of either of those framing strategies.

The absence of *sexualization* may be explained by the Communist belief in gender equality and the significant role Chinese female athletes play in the national identity construction. The absence of the “female athlete as lesbian” frame may be the result of a “bureaucratic intolerance toward homosexuality” in the PRC (Kang & Yang, 2009). In China, homosexuality was officially defined as a “mental disorder” until 2001.²⁰ Although the public in

recent years has become aware that homosexuality exists, the topic of gays/lesbians rarely appears in Chinese mainstream media. In fact, in an official document—*The Regulation of Chinese Drama Production*²¹—issued in March 2016, homosexuality is still labeled as “abnormal,” and excluded from Chinese TV programming.

The absence of *sexualization* and *lesbianism* frames mirrors this particular historical moment in Chinese society. Gender norms remain relatively fixed, leaving little room to negotiate gender roles beyond heteronormativity. However, gender is a social construction. As such, the meaning attached to gender is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated in the context of social, political, and economic realities. It is quite possible that frames of *sexualization* and *questioning sportswomen’s sexuality* as well as other new framing strategies may emerge in Chinese media portrayals of female athletes as the economic and cultural transition continues.

Evidence of two new framing strategies emerged in media representations of Li Na—the *hero myth*, and *athlete as commodity*. In many ways, Li Na’s media portrayal parallels media scholar Joseph Campbell’s (1949) myth of the hero’s journey. Li Na had ventured forth from an “ordinary world,” had overcome a variety of obstacles—personal tragedies, athletic failures, and emotional fluctuations—had “returned” to win the Grand Slam Singles title in the Australian Open. The persistent repetition of the narrative of Li Na’s long journey made her victory seem somehow more spectacular. So too did Li Na’s journey parallel the individualist capitalist narrative of the “American Dream,” reflecting the transition toward capitalism in China. Possibly reflecting the consumerism that accompanies capitalism, Li Na’s monetary worth—her winnings and endorsement income—became a measure of her success, at times, almost as important as her athletic achievement. In this sense, Li Na was commodified; she became a brand.

These two frames may very well be products of this particular historical moment in which China is moving toward capitalism, consumerism, and individualism. They may become more apparent in the media coverage of Chinese athletes (both female and male) as the market-oriented economic reform deepens.

As with all research, this study has limitations. Only two athletes were compared; Li Na was the only professional athlete who met the criteria necessary. Then too, in a vibrant media culture with an abundance of media platforms, this study focused on a single platform, Chinese web portals. The representations analyzed here were constructed within the constraints of that media platform. It is likely that the portrayals of these athletes would become more nuanced if other media platforms, some of which would likely involve much greater government oversight, were included in the study. This became apparent in light of the findings of a pilot study, in which I explored the media representation of Li Na in four Chinese print newspapers during the 2014 Australian Open. There I discovered that rather than overlooking the many incidents that surrounded Li Na with controversy, stories in print newspapers *highlighted* those incidents and controversies. The Li Na that emerged from those newspaper stories was very different from the Li Na that emerged here. The contradiction in these images suggests the value of analyzing a variety of media platforms.

Finally, the construction of meaning in culture and through media representation is an ongoing process. Here, I have looked into that process at one particular historical moment, a moment of ideological struggle in China.

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Figure 1.1: Li Na won the Grand Slam Singles title in the 2014 Australian Open



Figure 1.2: Li Na went back China with her husband, wearing high-end brands



Figure 2.1: Ding Ning was competing in the 2015 World Table Tennis Championships



Figure 2.2: Ding Ning injured during the final

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- ¹ Jarvie, G. (2013). *Sport, culture and society: an introduction*. Routledge.
- ² "World Economic Outlook Database". International Monetary Fund. April 2016.
- ³ In this study, I use the term elite athletes to refer to those athletes who are currently or have previously competed as varsity players, professional players, or played at the national/international level.
- ⁴ Yang Xiaodong & Zhang Xuemei (2015), *An Essay on Zhou Enlai's Sports Thoughts and Practice*. Conference Collection on Zhou Enlai and 20th Century of the World.
<http://news.nankai.edu.cn/xs/system/2016/05/11/000280674.shtml>.
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China_at_the_Olympics
- ⁶ <http://lanxionsports.com/?c=posts&a=view&id=681>
- ⁷ In the 1970s, the relations between China and the U.S. were strained. In 1971, the U.S. Table Tennis Federation accepted the invitation from its Chinese counterparts to play a series of exhibition matches in China. This became the first official visit from the United States since the Communist takeover. The so-called "Ping-Pong diplomacy" helped "broker rapprochement between the United States and China" and is viewed as a watershed in Sino-US relations (Carter & Sugden, 2011, p.101).
- ⁸ Kendall, D. E. (2011). *Framing class: Media representations of wealth and poverty in America*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- ⁹ Broch, T. B. (2016). Intersections of Gender and National Identity in Sport: A Cultural Sociological Overview. *Sociology Compass*, 10(7), 567-579.
- ¹⁰ Bale, J. (1986). *Sport and national identity: A geographical view*. The British Journal of Sports History, 3(1), 18-41.
- ¹¹ A corpus is a large collection of written or spoken texts that is used for language research.
- ¹² <http://www.minyanville.com/sectors/media/articles/Tencent-Tencent-QQ-microsoft-apple-activision/8/6/2012/id/42988>
- ¹³ <http://sports.sina.com.cn/s/2004-01-03/0929138591s.shtml>
- ¹⁴ <http://sports.sina.com.cn/o/2015-03-30/06477559101.shtml>
- ¹⁵ Li Na was defeated in the first round match. She was down at that periods.
- ¹⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/25/magazine/li-na-chinas-tennis-rebel.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
- ¹⁷ Dumitrescu, A. (2006). Representation of female athletes in Western and Romanian Media.
- ¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhang_Yining
- ¹⁹ <http://sports.sina.com.cn/o/2015-04-26/16097588288.shtml>
- ²⁰ <http://www.people.com.cn/BIG5/shehui/47/20010312/414361.html>
- ²¹ <http://www.ctpia.com.cn/exchange/zcxx/2015-12-31/1451534140473.shtml>