

# EILEEN GU AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN CHINA

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Eileen Gu at the 2022 Time 100 Gala in New York

**On the eve of** the 2022 Winter Games, The New York Times writer [John Branch declared](#) freestyle skier Eileen Gu to be “the most interesting athlete at the Olympics. She’s 18, a dominant skier and budding super model, an American competing for China, with a reasonable chance at three gold medals.” A California native, Gu competed for her mother’s native country [in order to](#) “globally spread the sport I love to kids, especially girls.” She went on to win two gold medals and a silver, was featured prominently by NBC, and became the subject of social media commentary in both the United States and China.

Although [NPR hailed her](#) as “the breakout star of these Winter Olympics,” not everyone was enamored with Gu. She was [far from the first athlete](#) to compete under another nation’s flag, yet her decision to honor her Chinese heritage clearly rankled observers suspicious of China’s politics. Such concerns reflected historical patterns of Sinophobia in the United States as well as a contemporary [surge in](#)

[anti-Chinese sentiments](#) in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, especially as they were articulated by President Donald Trump. In addition, criticism of Gu relied on the [hyper-nationalism commonly associated with the Olympic Games](#) and a sense that Gu’s embrace of global citizenship was appropriate only to the extent that it could confirm the United States’ global dominance.

The negative reactions came from varied sources. Sports Illustrated’s [Michael Rosenberg declared](#), “Gu got her gold medal and China got its pawn.” HBO’s [Bill Maher queried](#), “Is that cool now, to choose to represent a totalitarian police state over America?” And former Democratic Senator [Claire McCaskill tweeted](#), “I don’t get it... I think it is wrong for an American to compete for China.”

Much of the strongest criticism came from political conservatives. After admonishing Gu to “pick a side,” former United Nations Ambassador [Nikki Haley insisted](#), “China is the one that gave us COVID... China is the one committing human rights abuses.” Republican Representative [Madison Cawthorn claimed](#) an athlete’s “citizenship should be revoked” for competing for another nation. Fox host [Tucker Carlson called her decision](#) “dumb” and worthy of “collective revulsion.” Fellow Fox commentator [Will Cain used Gu](#) as a representative of a larger problem, suggesting American companies “already turned their back on the United States of America in exchange for Chinese riches, and that’s why she’s a symbol. You want to look at something to be really upset about—it’s not the ungrateful child of America. It’s the corrupt and weak corporations of America.”

The responses to Eileen Gu can be understood in terms of [“American exceptionalism,”](#) a myth that upholds the idea that the United States has been chosen by God to be the world’s model of freedom and peace. On the one hand, Gu embodies the best of the myth—i.e., she is the daughter of a single mother who immigrated from China, a symbol of global multiculturalism, and an [inspiration to young girls](#) on at least two continents. On the other hand, the wave of critical comments made



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Eileen Gu at the 2022 Winter Olympics

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In many ways, U.S. media coverage of the Olympics bears the traces of the Cold War, as it remains reliant on simplified [geopolitical narratives of "good" vs. "evil"](#) that align athletic success with national virtue. Such framing situates Olympic triumphs for the United States as evidence of American exceptionalism, thus equating national supremacy with athletic victories. Gu's performance in Beijing was indeed dominant, but the glory assigned to her three medals went to China. As if anticipating such an outcome, fellow freestyle skier [Jen Hudak lamented](#) of Gu's decision not to compete for the United States, "It would be nice to see the medals going to America." If one were to wonder how Gu's decision would have been received had she not been an elite competitor, the example of Zhu Li provides clarification. Li also was born in California and chose to compete in 2022 for China in Ladies Figure Skating. Her 27th-place finish was anticipated, and the lack of medal expectations was accompanied by little attention to her national status. Thus, Gu's greatest offense

was not the choice to compete for China in and of itself, but that she denied her native country the ["symbolic boasting"](#) attributed to U.S. Olympic heroes.

In some ways, the hostility directed toward Gu is consistent with the symbolic uses of the Olympic Games in the post-war era. Yet, given the anti-China rhetoric commonplace in the United States since 2020 and the recent destabilization of American political culture, it is important to understand these responses in the context of contemporary politics. Conservative politicians and commentators, in particular, appear invested in using athletes to serve ideological purposes and are quick to demonize them when those athletes fail to uphold an arbitrary vision of American exceptionalism. Rather than seeing Gu as a model of global citizenship facilitated by the nation's democratic values, her refusal to perform as an "American" is viewed as selfish, immature, and/or unpatriotic. In the middle of an Olympic Games widely criticized for providing China with a global platform, Gu's critics remind us that American nationalism is no less political and, potentially, problematic. ■

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