WINTER OLYMPICS

Cold warrior: why Eileen Gu ditched Team USA to ski for China

At the Beijing Olympics the superpower rivalry will be played out on the slopes

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BY BROOK LARMER

Eileen Gu had one chance left. It was January 2019, and the newest and youngest member of the US freestyle ski team stared down the Italian mountain course that had foiled her on her first two runs in the World Cup final. In fourth place behind two American teammates, the 15-year-old California schoolgirl needed a dazzling finish to move closer to the goal she'd promised herself – and her mother – since she was a nine-year-old daredevil: competing in the 2022 Winter Olympics, now slated to take place in her mother's birthplace, Beijing.

In a blur of black and red, Gu sped down the slope. After her final jump – two and a half turns in mid-air to a perfect backward landing – the pixels on the leaderboard rearranged and Gu's name suddenly appeared in first place, next to the American flag. "It's unreal!" she screamed. On the podium, sporting her first World Cup gold medal, Gu placed her hand over her heart as the American national anthem began to play. And she sang: "O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave. O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave."

There was little time to celebrate. As most of her American teammates raced home for the World Championships in Utah, Gu and her mother, Gu Yan, flew off in the opposite direction – to China. Gu spends part of every summer in Beijing, but this detour was unusual. It was hardly the fastest route back to high school in San Francisco. Nor was it, as Gu wrote cryptically six days later on Instagram, "a quick #hongkong pit stop before going home (finally)". The newly crowned world number-one freestyle skier was going below the radar for a few days because she had a very special meeting to attend.

On February 1st 2019, less than a week after singing the "Star-Spangled Banner", Gu reappeared in Beijing at an audience with Xi Jinping, China's leader. The American teenager was now wearing a red-and-white Team China uniform, her bleached-blonde hair falling over the red five-star flag stitched on its front. Among the assembled athletes at the national winter-sports training centre, Gu stood in the front row, just a few feet from Xi, listening intently as he urged them to win honour for the motherland when it hosted its first Winter Olympics. "This is a once-in-a-century opportunity," Xi told them. Their success, he said, was vital to "the nation's great rejuvenation".

"When I'm in the US, I'm American. When I'm in China, I'm Chinese"

Gu has never mentioned this encounter. Nor does it appear in any of the detailed reports and documentaries that Chinese media and Western sponsors have made about her life. But there, among the dozens of state-media photographs of Xi's visit that day, Eileen Gu appeared, standing next to one of the most powerful men on Earth. After the speech, Xi posed with the athletes under a Chinese flag. It was a typical group photo except that front and centre, two over from Xi, was one of America's top skiers. Gu's hair made her stand out, as did her footwear. Whereas the Chinese athletes all wore trainers, Gu's heavy winter boots peeked out from under her uniform. It was almost as if she wasn't fully prepared for this invitation – or the decision she faced.

Over the next four months, as her classmates fretted over sophomore prom and physics tests, Gu agonised about which superpower to represent in the 2022 Olympics. It was, in part, a question of identity for the American girl raised in San Francisco by two strong Chinese women, her mother and grandmother, in the absence of her American father. Gu had always lived happily on the hyphen. "When I'm in the US, I'm American," she has said. "When I'm in China, I'm Chinese." But the 15-year-old now felt that she had to choose between her two identities, and between two countries locked in a trade war and an ideological struggle.

Finally, on June 6th 2019, Gu posted an announcement on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter. "I am proud to represent China in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics," she wrote. "I hope the pursuit of extreme sports can be a means through which people in China and the United States can enhance their communication, understanding and friendship…Beijing I am coming!" Less than an hour later, she wrote again, deploying a verb used for soldiers called up for duty. The post said simply: "Chinese freestyle skier Gu Ailing reporting."

Two and a half years on from that decision, Eileen Gu is the face of the Beijing Winter Olympics, a giant projection of Chinese soft power at a time when the government has been widely criticised for wielding far more of the harder type. Now 18 and three inches taller, Gu is dominating freestyle skiing, an acrobatic sport largely unknown in China which nonetheless offers a multitude of medals. China won only one Olympic gold in 2018, a humbling tally for a rising superpower. Gu by herself could win three in 2022.

Her influence extends far beyond the slopes. A fearless skier who moonlights as a fashion model, a top student who preaches female empowerment in both English and Mandarin, Gu has emerged as one of the world's hottest marketing

English and Mandarin, Gu has emerged as one of the world's hottest marketing phenomena. Over the past year, she has appeared on the cover of Chinese editions of *Vogue* and *GQ*, *Elle* and *Marie Claire*, and signed lucrative contracts with dozens of companies, including Adidas, Tiffany and Louis Vuitton. Gu's commercial success owes a lot to her talent, beauty and daring. Many brands also hope to exploit her newfound popularity to reach a market of 1.4bn people. Gu's mother may have been envisaging just such a windfall: weeks before her daughter's change in allegiance she set up a new company in America, DreamComeGu.

Nobody has pursued and promoted the young star more avidly than the Chinese government. Tasked with building an Olympic team worthy of a superpower, Chinese sports officials identified Gu as a possible centrepiece for a "naturalisation project" designed to recruit top athletes of Chinese heritage based overseas. China has no well-known winter athletes. So when the world champion freestyle skier Gu chose China over America, she became the darling of an increasingly nationalistic population, a symbol of the country's growing strength and the perceived decline of its arch-rival.

A recent documentary on her was entitled: "A Wonderful Life of Infinite Freedom"

The Chinese media have gushed over Gu in endless reports that highlight her free spirit and love of the motherland. (A recent documentary was entitled: "A Wonderful Life of Infinite Freedom".) In October she starred in a lavish short film celebrating the Olympic torch relay alongside China's top pop idol, Jackson Yee. The film's opening scenes unfold in the mountains of Xinjiang province, where China claims skiing was invented more than 10,000 years ago – and where the government has interned more than a million members of the local Muslim

population, the Uyghurs, in re-education camps. The film ignores the thorny setting to create, instead, a gauzy love story in which Gu seems to embody China itself.

Gu portrays her move to Team China as a kind of love story, too, an attempt to heal the rift between two countries by bringing her sport and her inspiring story to the Chinese masses, especially young girls. Switching the flag next to her name wasn't meant to be a political act; it was a personal choice. Gu's decision hasn't changed her identity or her peripatetic life. The bubbly teenager still lives in America, travels the world in a community of free-skiing nomads and, on visits to China, hangs out with friends who are as stylish, savvy and free-spirited as her buddies back home. "I feel that I am competing in skiing to unite two nations, both of which are my home," Gu told Inkstone, a website based in Hong Kong. "I hope to break the divide between nations with passion and love."

But here's the rub: China is a far darker place today – and its relations with the West far more contentious – than when Gu changed her affiliation in 2019. It's

west far more contentious – than when Gu changed her affiliation in 2019. It's not just the shadow of covid-19, which has led the Chinese government to ban Olympic spectators and keep athletes in sealed bubbles. In the two and half years since Gu made her decision, China has crushed civil liberties in Hong Kong, imprisoned journalists for reporting on covid-19 and expanded the systematic oppression of the Uyghurs. The American government says the brutal crackdown in Xinjiang amounts to genocide. When Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics in 2008, the Chinese Communist Party paid lip service to becoming more responsive to international norms. This time, all pretence has been dropped: China, ascendant and unapologetic, expects the world to bend to its rules.

Her grandmother taught her to fear nothing – except second place

For all the selfless motives that Gu says drove her decision to leave Team USA, China's dark turn has thrown the moral implications of her choice into relief. Gu is an individual going for gold. Yet she also, in some ways, embodies the Faustian bargain China has made with its people. Gu's decision to represent China has amplified her fame and wealth, but it has also made her a showpiece for an increasingly repressive government that requires one thing in return: silence.

Gu and her mother declined requests for an interview for this story. Through Gu's American agent, Tom Yaps, Gu Yan said the family would not take part unless they could review the entire article before publication – to guarantee that no criticism of China appeared in the text. "I understand how unconventional a request that is," Yaps said, but political sensitivities were making them "very cautious". Gu Yan, he told me, feared that "if [Eileen] participates in an article that has two paragraphs critical of China and human rights, that would put her in jeopardy over there. One thing and a career is ruined."

All it takes is one thing. Just four months after Gu switched her allegiance to Team China, the general manager of the Houston Rockets, a basketball team, retweeted a message supporting civil-rights protesters in Hong Kong: "Fight for Freedom, Stand with Hong Kong". China's furious reaction to a single retweet from a foreigner halfway round the world cost the National Basketball Association hundreds of millions of dollars: TV broadcasts in China were

cancelled; NBA stores removed all Rockets merchandise. Chinese censors even scrubbed the Rockets from daily sports reports. It was as if the team never existed.

Again and again, the Chinese government forces countries, companies and individuals to make a choice: you're either with us or against us. To preserve their access to the country, institutions from Apple and Hollywood to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) remain silent on all matters sensitive to the Communist Party. The Women's Tennis Association is a rare outlier: in December, it severed its long, lucrative relationship with China to protest against the government's silencing of the tennis star Peng Shuai after she made allegations of sexual abuse against a retired, high-ranking Communist Party official.

The pressure to stay quiet has only intensified ahead of the Beijing Olympics. Corporate sponsors banking on their business in China have gone out of their way to avoid answering questions about human rights. In January, the Chinese government even warned participating foreign athletes that "any behaviour or speech" that goes against Chinese laws and regulations would be "subject to certain punishment".

Chinese citizens can face far worse consequences for crossing the invisible lines. (Peng Shuai's fame and success could not protect her.) Gu seems acutely aware of the potential dangers. In America, she has made impassioned pleas about Black Lives Matter and anti-Asian violence, but she has avoided making any comments about social and political issues in China. That discrepancy is a reminder that the official narrative of Eileen Gu is not the whole story. On the surface, her life seems exhaustively documented on Facebook, Instagram and Weibo; Gu lets loose with edgier humour on TikTok. (She now has 1.4m Weibo followers, compared with 250,000 on Instagram.) Film crews from Chinese state television, corporate sponsors and fashion houses accompany Gu nearly everywhere. Yet these choreographed narratives can obscure as much as they reveal.

China won only one gold medal in 2018, a humbling tally for a rising superpower

China's state-run media trumpeted Gu's "conversion" from American to Chinese nationality. By choosing to represent China, she has taken the exceedingly rare step of naturalising as a Chinese citizen. (Consider: China had only 1,448 naturalised citizens in its entire 1.3bn population in 2010, the latest year for which there are figures. America naturalised an average of 720,000 citizens *each year* in the past decade.)

China, unlike America, does not recognise dual nationality after the age of 18. Under Chinese law, Gu would have had to give up her American passport by her 18th birthday, which fell last September 3rd. So far, Gu has avoided addressing questions about her citizenship. If she has not relinquished her American passport, is that a rare concession from the Chinese government or an act of passive resistance from Gu? We may never know.

Eileen Gu was 12 years old when she gave her first speech about female empowerment. Dressed in a blue skirt and white sailor's shirt – the uniform of her $41,000-a-year all-girls' school in San Francisco – she told the student assembly about her journey into the male-dominated world of freestyle skiing. As a seven-year-old, Gu bombed down ski runs with such reckless speed that her mother, looking for a safer alternative, enrolled her in a freestyle school. Only later did she realise that the sport's aerial stunts were even more dangerous than racing. For years, Gu was the only girl on the freestyle team (the only non-Caucasian, too); at first the boys wouldn't even share her ski lift. "Sexism still exists," she told her female classmates. "Life is going to be a bumpy road for all of us, and building resiliency early on is important."

As an only child raised primarily by her Chinese mother and grandmother, Gu grew up in a cocoon of strong women who encouraged her to break barriers and to battle through adversity. Their resolve was steeled by a tragedy that preceded Gu's birth: in November 2002, Gu Yan's sister, Ling, died from injuries sustained in a car crash while driving Gu Yan's BMW convertible. Less than ten months later, Eileen was born, and Gu Yan bequeathed her a name that seemed to honour her sister: Eileen in English, Ailing (爱凌) in Chinese, meaning "Love Ling".

The name of Gu's father doesn't seem to appear in any records: Gu never mentions him and Gu Yan has said only that he is an American graduate of Harvard University. Looming larger in Gu's childhood was her grandfather, Gu Zhenguang, a retired engineer who moved to San Francisco before Gu was born. A former football player who taught himself to ski at the age of 75, Grandpa Gu saw himself as "the big tree" protecting his family. Her grandmother, Feng Guozhen, a former university basketball player, taught Gu to fear nothing – except second place. At 86, Feng still runs a mile each day. "My grandma gave me that drive and desire to win," Gu said last year, "and my mom gave me the tools to

do so."

Her mother, Gu Yan, grew up during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in a sprawling Soviet-style housing compound west of Tiananmen Square. The family enjoyed relative privilege as part of the Communist Party elite and Gu Yan joined one of the early cohorts at Peking University, known as "the Harvard of China", after the Cultural Revolution.

It's not clear exactly when she arrived in America, but according to her CV on LinkedIn, she began a research fellowship in molecular genetics at Rockefeller University in New York in 1989, just as thousands of students and activists fleeing the Tiananmen Square crackdown were flooding into the US under newly relaxed visa rules. Gu Yan sought not political asylum but economic opportunity, however. She soon left the lab to pursue an MBA at Stanford, followed by derivatives trading on Wall Street, then venture capital in Silicon Valley and China.

Weeks before Gu's change in allegiance, Gu's mother set up a company: DreamComeGu

In the late 1990s, as China's economic expansion began to accelerate, Gu Yan returned to China to help finance a joint venture in the nascent high-tech sector. An article in 1998 in *Guangming Daily*, a Communist Party mouthpiece, praised Gu Yan for creating a "golden bridge" and giving up a high-flying Wall Street job "to serve the great cause of reform and opening up in the motherland". Building bridges to China would become the family business.

When Eileen was born, Gu Yan had a new mission. In China, many parents funnel their children into an activity and then force them to study or practice until they burn out. (The Chinese athletics system practises an even more extreme version, assigning children to sports based on bone measurements and muscle flexibility.) Gu Yan later told a Chinese documentary that she wanted to stoke Gu's passions. Schoolwork was important but Gu Yan also introduced her daughter to running and horseback riding, soccer and surfing, singing – and skiing. Along the way, Gu Yan tried to build up her daughter's toughness, discipline and self-confidence.

It was an all-American upbringing, but Gu Yan made sure Gu also appreciated her Chinese heritage. "No matter where we are in the world," she said, "we Chinese cannot forget our roots." Gu's grandmother, who speaks no English, taught her three-digit multiplication at age four; she mastered Chinese tongue-twisters and Tang Dynasty poetry. Each year, the family returned to Beijing, exploring hidden alleyways, eating candied haws and Peking duck, and playing hide-and-seek with neighbourhood kids. One summer they arrived in Beijing to find her friends had disappeared. "Where'd they all go?" she asked. The kids had enrolled in a cram school. Gu started taking maths and science classes too, helping her to speed ahead of American friends back home.

But nothing fired Gu's imagination more than freestyle skiing, a sport for acrobatic outlaws – essentially skateboarding on skis – that got its start in the 1970s on the hippie fringes of North American winter sports (back then it was known as "hot-dogging"). "It feels just like flying," she said. The Chinese sports system is geared to produce technical mastery and repetition, but Gu relished the creative element in freestyle. "This is a sport where you can express your

personality, you can have your own style," she told a Chinese reporter in 2015.

"You don't necessarily have to do what everybody else does. You can invent it yourself."

It was on a summer trip to Beijing that Gu, aged nine, met the man who would shape her future – the godfather of Chinese skiing. Lu Jian was an Oxford-educated economist who once served as an adviser to the State Council, China's cabinet. He left China in 1992 to make his fortune trading futures in Chicago. Inspired by a ski trip to Canada, he returned to China a few years later, pockets full, and built the country's first ski resort in northern Heilongjiang province. "At that time, there were probably no more than 500 skiers in all of China," Lu told a Chinese interviewer, "so it was like trying to boil water from zero degrees."

Lu himself became one of China's first aficionados of freestyle skiing, introducing the sport at the next resort he developed near Beijing. In the summer of 2013, Lu heard that a young American freestyle champion was visiting and invited her to a "ski-off" at an indoor ski dome. A grainy video captures the first encounter between the two, half a century apart in age. Eileen Gu, in baggy yellow trousers and a red hat, takes off over a small jump, grabbing the edge of her skis in mid-air. Lu follows behind, mimicking her action. A week later, they had another ski session: the girl he called "Captain America" led the way.

Lu became her mentor and sponsor. The financial deal he made with her and her mother was modest, but Lu was also offering guidance and *guanxi* – the

relationships that would bind Gu to China. Soon, the nine-year-old and her mother were signing contracts with several of Lu's friends: a ski manufacturer, a clothing company, his ski resort. Since that first encounter, Lu has appeared at nearly every step in Gu's evolution from America's rising star to China's Olympic hope. He even helped her set up a Weibo account using a nickname, "Frog Princess Ailing", inspired by a green frog helmet she wore. (Lu's own handle is "Drunken Snow".) In the videos she posted on Weibo, Gu never failed to thank her Chinese sponsors, singling out one man with an honorific: "Sir Lu".

China is a far darker place today than when Gu changed her affiliation in 2019

In the summer of 2015, Gu and her mother gathered with friends in Beijing to watch a live broadcast of the IOC vote for the host of the 2022 Winter Olympics. (Almaty in Kazakhstan was Beijing's lone competition.) Even before IOC chairman Thomas Bach finished the word "Bei…," the group erupted in cheers. "I was super excited," said Gu, "but my mom was even more excited. She even cried." Gu was only 11. Yet even then, the hope in the room was that Captain America would compete in Beijing seven years later – wearing a Chinese uniform. As a Chinese sponsor wrote on Weibo: "Come on, Eileen! The future of the motherland depends on you!"

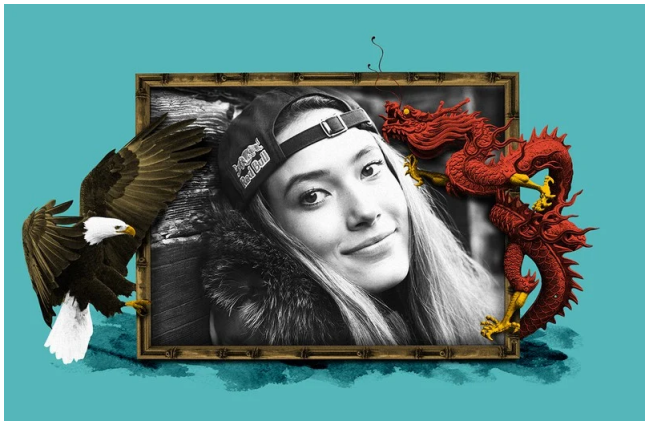
In all its history, China has won only 13 Winter Olympics gold medals, compared with the 262 golds it has amassed in the summer games. Its gold-medal count has actually declined in each of the past three winter games. National pride was on the line. Xi Jinping spoke of this at the meeting of winter athletes in 2015: "If sports are strong, a nation is strong. If a nation is strong, it is strong in sports." The party produced a blueprint for getting 300m people on the ice and snow, turning winter sports into a $155bn industry and developing a gold-medal-winning corps of winter athletes.

In 2018, around 80 Chinese athletes participated in only half of the Olympic events; this time, the mandate was to build a team more than twice that size to compete in nearly all of the 109 events. The problem: China had no experience in many of them. Chinese sports officials took the unusual step of bringing in more than 170 foreign coaches and also scoured the country for girls and boys who might be turned into curlers and bobsledders, snowboarders and skiers. Many freestyle skiers came from other sports; 16-year-old He Jinbo was a kung-fu student at a Shaolin academy before trading in his flying kicks for aerial spins with planks strapped to his feet.

"Two paragraphs critical of China would put Eileen in jeopardy. One thing and a career is ruined"

To speed things up, China added a "naturalisation project" to recruit overseas athletes. Many countries give out citizenship to improve their medal chances, but Olympic officials in Beijing looked mainly to the children of Chinese immigrants. China's hockey team broke the ice with a slew of naturalised players, including its top scorer, Canadian-American Spencer Foo (though even with 15 foreign-born players the team is still terrible). Figure skating proved more fertile ground. The best female prospect was Alysa Liu, a 16-year-old, two-time American national champion who grew up across the bay from Eileen Gu. Her father, however, was a former dissident who fled persecution in 1989: he was not open to persuasion. (Two less talented but less political candidates were eventually enticed.)

No overseas athlete offered more potential glory than Eileen Gu. And though she spent only one month each year in China, after 2015 she seemed to be shadowed by the motherland wherever she went. In mid-2016, when Gu was 12, her mother gave China Central Television (CCTV), the state broadcaster, full access to their lives; a few months later, a CCTV film crew began following Gu around for almost a year from China and America to New Zealand and Europe. That year, Lu Jian even lived with Gu's family in California for three months.



CCTV's first long documentary about Gu aired in China during the 2018 Winter Olympics – and served as Gu's coming-out party in China. The documentary's main purpose, it seemed, was to present Gu as an authentic Chinese patriot. In the opening scene, the 13-year-old and her mother are driven through Tiananmen Square, the historic plaza where Mao once revved up the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution – and where pro-democracy protests were crushed in 1989. As they ride through the square, Gu Yan urges her daughter to read the characters on the wall. "Long live the People's Republic of China," Gu recites in Chinese. Her mother then asks her to identify the man in the giant portrait above the gate. Gu turns to her and beams: "Mao Zedong!" They laugh together. Then, on cue, they gaze out with radiant smiles across the vast expanse of Tiananmen Square. "So beautiful," says Gu Yan.

The late-afternoon sun dropped below the mountain ridge in Chongli in

The late afternoon sun dropped below the mountain ridge in Shougang in northern China, making the snow icy and treacherous. It was December 2018 and on Gu's first day on the future Olympic course, CCTV cameramen followed her as she sped through a practice run. Jumping off the final rail, Gu lost her balance and crashed backwards, hitting her head on the ground. Sliding to a stop, she lay still, legs akimbo. When her mother reached her, Gu looked up in confusion. "I'm having a hard time remembering things," she said, starting to cry. "Why are we in China? Why are we in China?"

The apparent concussion forced Gu to pull out of a World Cup event two days later. Still, her question echoes. Less than a month before, in Austria, Gu had shared a Thanksgiving dinner with her new teammates on the American freestyle ski team. A month later, she would sing the American national anthem in Italy after winning her first World Cup gold medal – before reappearing days later in a Chinese uniform with Xi Jinping. Toggling back and forth between China and America had always been fun for Gu. Now she faced an uncomfortable choice.

We don't know what swayed her decision. Whose idea was it to suddenly fly off to Beijing after her World Cup victory? What deals were cut or pressures brought to bear behind closed doors? What was the emotional landscape of a teenager facing fundamental questions of love and loyalty – to the coaches who had trained her, the mentors who had believed in her, to a mother as well as two motherlands? It's still not clear how much power the 15-year-old had over the decision that would shape her future. "Gu Yan didn't push," insists a family acquaintance. "She wanted Eileen to make the decision for herself."

Building bridges to China would become the family business

As Gu went silent on social media in the spring of 2019, US-China relations worsened. China's government threatened retaliation for American tariffs on Chinese goods. On June 2nd, which happened to be two days before the 30th anniversary of the massacre near Tiananmen Square, Gu posed for a photo in San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art. Dressed in a grey "USA" hoodie, she stood in front of Andy Warhol's brightly hued series of portraits of Chairman Mao. She is smiling, with both thumbs up – poised, as always, between America and China.

When Gu announced her decision on June 6th, the Chinese internet reacted with excitement. "Welcome home to win glory for China!" one commenter wrote. "So many excellent people have left for the United States," wrote another. "To have one finally come back makes me cry!" (In 2019 alone, nearly 40,000 Chinese became naturalised American citizens.) On Weibo, Gu thanked her Chinese sponsors, starting with "Boss Lu". Lu repaid the compliment: "Like the wind, the beautiful girl Ailing returns across the waves from the other side of the Pacific Ocean."

Gu's English-language announcement on Instagram was more calibrated. "This was an incredibly tough decision for me to make," she wrote. "I am proud of my heritage, and equally proud of my American upbringings." The Beijing Olympics offered "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to promote the sport I love", she explained, "to help inspire millions of young people where my mom was born." Her decision, she suggested, went beyond sports or business; it was an act of diplomacy in a troubled world. Her message ended with three emojis: the

American and Chinese flags, and a red heart.

In America, some applauded her “brave decision”. The US Ski & Snowboard Association graciously wished her “the best of luck in all her endeavours”. Other online commentators couldn’t contain their contempt. “Traitor!” yelled one. “Don’t you know there are concentration camps in China?” asked another. Martin Wiesiolek, a cross-country ski coach in Colorado who fled Communist Poland in 1984, minced no words: “You will end up serving as a political tool of the Chinese totalitarian regime.” The vitriol left the high-school sophomore shaken. “The thing that really caught me off guard was the amount of hate I had,” she told the *South China Morning Post* last year. “I was 15 years old and had death threats.”

After becoming a Chinese citizen, Gu didn’t move to China or start bunking down with her new teammates at their training camp in China’s mountainous north-east. She still lived with her mother and grandmother in their multi-million-dollar home in San Francisco’s swanky Sea Cliff neighbourhood, a world away from her Chinese teammates: classes at an exclusive high school, courtside seats at an NBA game, a bedroom nook overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge. China’s sports officials are known for ruling their domains with military-style control, and Chinese athletes have long been required to give the bulk of their earnings to the sports system. But Gu freely followed her own training regimen and pursued every commercial opportunity.

Interest in Gu intensified after her announcement. The owner of a Chinese sports brand flew her to Paris Fashion Week. Chinese photographers swarmed her when she visited a Beijing mall, and a new commercial sponsor, Kiehl’s, whisked her off to Alaska for a photo shoot. On her 16th birthday, Gu received a video message from David Beckham welcoming her to the Adidas family

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Her skiing, meanwhile, only became more sublime. In the first year after changing affiliation, Gu earned seven gold medals in international competitions. Gu began to dominate two of freestyle skiing's three Olympic events, slopestyle (a sloping course of rails, jumps and other obstacles) and halfpipe (tricks and flips going down on a 22-foot-high U-shaped ramp). It was a rare combination, akin to a footballer being equally adept as a striker and in goal. In February 2020, Gu became the first freestyle skier to win both events in the same World Cup competition. The one discipline left for her to conquer was big air (a single acrobatic jump off a 45-foot tall ramp), which debuts as an Olympic discipline this year.

"Come on, Eileen! The future of the motherland depends on you!"

Gu was one of the few professional skiers who followed a long day on the mountain with hours of homework. She was racing to finish her final two years of high school in a single year so she could train full-time for the Olympics. Covid-19 halted the ski season in the spring of 2020, but Gu kept to her school schedule and graduated early in June 2020. Going to Stanford University, her mother's alma mater, was "the only dream I've held even longer than becoming a professional skier", she said. That autumn she took a day off from training in Switzerland to take her college aptitude tests: she scored an almost perfect 1580 out of 1600. In December 2020, she posted on Instagram a video of herself sitting on her bed clicking the link that would reveal if Stanford had accepted her. The answer, of course, was yes. Gu raised her arms and screamed.

Like any engaged American teenager, Gu also began speaking out on social issues. Her political awakening seemed to come during the Black Lives Matter protests that followed George Floyd's death in May 2020 at the hands of a white police officer. That summer, the 16-year-old blacked out her Instagram screen in solidarity with the movement. Raising awareness is "not enough", she wrote. "To make a greater impact, I encourage everyone to...write to your local leaders or senators, join a peaceful protest." Neither peaceful protests nor pressuring political leaders into action is encouraged in China, to put it mildly. (Chinese officials called racism "a chronic disease of American society", but they did not allow their own citizens to show solidarity with a rights movement that aimed at police accountability.)

The rise in anti-Asian bigotry hit closer to home. Last year, after an elderly Asian man in San Francisco died following a racist attack, Gu and her grandmother were in a shop when a man started screaming obscenities about Asians infecting America with covid-19. Gu hurried her granny out of the store. "The fact that my very own Chinese grandmother could have been a victim of a hate crime...

genuinely terrifies me," she wrote on Instagram. San Francisco "is widely regarded as a liberal haven, and yet violence and hatred are on our doorsteps". Gu has said nothing about the persecution of minority groups in China.

Gu and her mother have been tight-lipped about her commercial windfall, too. A year after setting up DreamComeGu Inc, with headquarters in the family home, her mother – who was chief executive of the company – also set up a limited-liability company, DreamComeGu LLC, in Nevada, a low-tax haven where the family has established a second home. As endorsements poured in, Gu's fast-expanding Weibo account turned into a procession of commercial ads, from local Olympic sponsors like Mengniu Dairy and Three Trees Paints to top names in global luxury: IWC, Cadillac, Estée Lauder.

One of Gu's main Chinese sponsors is Anta, the world's third-largest sportswear company after Nike and Adidas. Last year, Anta set up an interactive Eileen Gu theme park in a Shanghai mall, with giant screens and a larger-than-life plastic cartoon figure of a wide-eyed Gu in Anta ski gear. (Anta also supplies the IOC and the Chinese Olympic team.) Just as the park was opening last March, Anta was defiantly pulling out of the Better Cotton Initiative, a global watchdog that stopped licensing companies using materials from Xinjiang province because of worries about forced labour.

As Chinese consumers angrily revolted against Western brands, including Nike

and Adidas, which joined the Xinjiang cotton boycott, Anta doubled down on its pledge to use Xinjiang cotton. Investors sent Anta stock soaring. The IOC has refused to answer questions about its relationship with Anta. Gu, for her part, has stayed as quiet as the wide-eyed cartoon figure in her theme park.

Eileen Gu is now everywhere. There she is at a Beijing bus stop, wearing a snow-white ski outfit on a billboard for China Mobile. Down the road, she appears in red lipstick and a traditional Chinese dress in a display for tech giant JD.com. In the mall, she's carrying skis and a cup of coffee on posters for Luckin Coffee. At the newsstands, her face peers out from almost every fashion magazine, including the latest edition of *Vogue China*, which she guest-edited. At night Gu's image looms even larger – lit up on a massive screen above a city plaza, working out in her Anta gear.

It would have been hard to imagine three years ago, when 15-year-old Gu stood next to Xi Jinping on that secretive visit to Beijing, that she would share top billing at these Olympics with him. These are Xi's games, after all. And, as Xi looks to become China's strongest leader since Mao by securing a third term as president later this year, he dominates the nation's media. Still, Gu has become what the Chinese media call a "marketing supernova". Her two dozen corporate sponsorships dwarf the total number held by all other Chinese winter-sports athletes, according to *Beijing News*, and each skiing victory pushes her endorsement fee higher, to more than $2m today. According to the newspaper, she probably earned more than $15m in 2021, which would make her the world's third-highest-earning female athlete behind Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams. It's a stunning outcome for someone in a niche sport where the prize money for winning a world championship event is just $12,000.

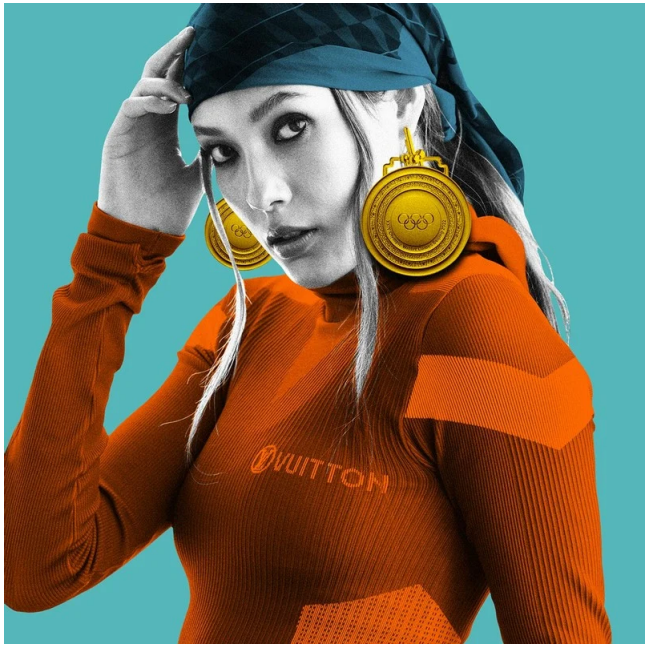
"I was 15 years old and had death threats"

It has been far from a normal childhood. In September, she celebrated her 18th birthday week on three continents: at a photo shoot in Beijing, on a billionaire's mega-yacht in Dubai and on the glacier where she trains in the Austrian Alps. A few days later, she broke off her training to fly to the Met Gala in New York as one of the new faces of Victoria's Secret. Wearing a polka-dotted Carolina Herrera dress and a necklace with 39 carats of Tiffany diamonds, Gu wobbled down the red carpet in five-inch red stilettos – looking like a novice skier on the bunny slope. By the time the evening was over, Gu was on more solid footing, posing for a selfie with Rihanna at the after-party.

Even with the whirlwind of commercial distractions, Gu was focused on the Olympics. In early November, she posted a sultry photo of herself with two Tiffany necklaces, noting cheekily: "guess u could say I like gold hard(wear) around my neck". A few days later she put up a video of herself in Austria becoming the first woman in history to pull off a jaw-dropping jump called the double cork 1440 (four spins, two off-axis flips, more than 70 feet in the air). "lil #worldsfirst today," Gu wrote on Instagram. (Three weeks later, Gu unleashed the double cork 1440 to win her first World Cup big-air gold.) Gu's video got rave reviews from skiers and fans – and from China's diplomatic corps. "It's whole another level," wrote foreign-affairs spokeswoman Hua Chunying, a phrase other diplomats tweeted in unison. "Looking forward to her performance in #Beijing2022 Olympics!"

The video of Gu went viral only days after another Chinese Olympian, tennis star Peng Shuai, posted on Weibo shocking allegations of sexual assault and coercion by a former top Communist Party official. "Even if I court disaster like an egg

against stone or a moth to a flame, I will tell the truth about you and me," she wrote. The post vanished in less than an hour, and censors scrubbed the Chinese internet of all references to the allegations, blocking hundreds of search terms, even the word "tennis". Peng was not seen for more than two weeks, reappearing in staged meetings that only deepened the alarm among women's rights activists and tennis authorities. Serena Williams and dozens of top tennis players added their voices of concern. Gu remained silent. She promotes female empowerment, yet she seemed powerless to speak up for her fellow Chinese Olympian. "Where is Eileen Gu?" one Twitter commenter asked. "Want to inspire Chinese girls?!? Here's your chance."



Peng's case reinvigorated calls for a boycott of the games from human-rights organisations. When one of Gu Yan's Facebook friends warned of a boycott, she responded: "Won't happen. The president of IOC said that Olympics should not be political." In December, America and three other countries announced a "diplomatic boycott" – they would send athletes, but no top officials – citing the continuing crimes against humanity in Xinjiang. (At least six other countries

continuing crimes against humanity in Xinjiang. (At least six other countries followed suit.) China's foreign-ministry spokesman swatted away the symbolic gesture with a gibe: "US politicians keep hyping a 'diplomatic boycott' without even being invited to the games."

When Eileen Gu arrived in Beijing for the Olympics in January, one of her first acts was to post a photo of herself on Weibo polishing off a plate of pork-and-leek dumplings. Her Chinese fans loved it. But they will have little chance to see her in person. China's "closed-loop" anti-covid restrictions seal off all Olympic athletes and venues from the outside world. The extreme measures may make for a ghostly games, but they could help Gu avoid questions from fans and reporters, especially about her legal status. When she turned 18 in September, under Chinese law Gu was required to renounce her American citizenship. One of Gu's big sponsors, Red Bull, noted on its website: "Gu decided to give up her American passport and naturalise as a Chinese citizen in order to compete for China." Yet when a *Wall Street Journal* reporter called Red Bull to confirm, the passage was removed.

"US politicians keep hyping a 'diplomatic boycott' without even being invited to the games"

Did Gu really relinquish her passport? Her name has never appeared on the US Treasury Department's list of expatriated individuals. In January 2021, she became a candidate for a US Presidential Scholars Programme that is open only to US citizens or permanent residents. Gu still spends far more time in America than in China, and will return to attend Stanford in the autumn. Yet she has never commented on her citizenship status. In late December, Gu won the World Cup halfpipe in Calgary, a victory that was particularly gratifying, she said, because a "lost passport" had caused her to arrive at the competition late. Gu did not clarify whether the missing document was American or Chinese.

With her carefully chosen words and silences, Gu shows a diplomat's gift for dancing on a tightrope. She never criticises China – "one thing" would risk it all – but she also doesn't offer patriotic soundbites about winning honour for the motherland (as Chinese athletes often do). The government still uses her as a showpiece, but Gu is focused on promoting her sport – and herself. At age 18, she is no longer a simple vessel for other people's dreams. "My vision", as she often labels it, is based not on patriotism but a boundless individualism. "We're all in this together, pushing human limits," she said last year, "and that is really something that transcends nationality." In Gu, China may have found an answer to its gold-medal dreams. But her brand of success – freely pursuing her passions, revelling in her individual feats – doesn't reflect China's nationalist goals so much as the free-flowing, hot-dogging American sport Gu fell in love with as a little girl.

When Gu competes, she rarely mentions China or gives a shout-out to her Chinese teammates. She talks more about the need "to prove myself to myself". Recently, Gu recalled crashing badly on her first big-air jump in one of her first competitions as a Chinese athlete in 2020, when she succumbed to the pressure of the crowds, the media, the sponsors. Narrowing her focus to the smallest of details – a lucky cat she had drawn with eyeliner on her hand – she then pulled off two almost perfect jumps to win the gold. "That actually taught me that I didn't want to win for other people," she said. "I wanted to win for myself."

Gu has stayed as quiet as the wide-eyed cartoon figure in her theme park

From the time Gu began freestyle skiing, her mother couldn't bear to watch her perform the riskiest tricks. "During a competition, I would only ask the coach 'Has she landed safely?'" she told a Chinese newspaper. The Beijing games represent a far more perilous jump. Gu has been preparing to compete in the Olympics for half her life, and now all of China – and much of the world – will be watching.

On February 7th, finally, Gu will be perched in full ski gear at the top of an undulating tower in west Beijing, 200 feet above the ground. The Winter Olympics' big-air ramp, built on top of an old steel mill, stands next to the very training centre where Gu met China's leader exactly three years ago. Pushing her skis over the edge, Gu will be poised to careen down the ramp and launch herself into a soaring corkscrew.

Gu is more than just an athlete now. Ever since she made her choice, she has tried to keep a balance between China and America, between corporate advertisers and human-rights activists, between her dreams of a borderless world and the hard nationalism of the country she has chosen to represent. There is no perfect equilibrium. But riding along the razor's edge, Eileen Gu has managed to make it to the precipice. Now it's time to leap. ●

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