

# Gu Ailing: Chinese-American wins gold at Beijing Olympics, faces anti-China backlash at home

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Winning her second gold medal on February 18, 18-year-old Chinese-American Olympian Eileen Gu (also known by her Chinese name Gu Ailing) is the first “action-sports” athlete to win three medals at the same Olympics.

“My name is Eileen Gu,” she told journalists, “and I’m the best half-pipe skier in the world”.

Gu was born in San Francisco and recently graduated from a top San Francisco high school. She will be attending Stanford University in September.



*Gu Ailing at the 2020 Winter Youth Olympics in Lausanne, Switzerland. Photo: Martin Rulsch/Wikimedia Commons*

## Backlash

Gu’s success should have been front page news in the San Francisco Chronicle. It wasn’t.

The story was initially buried in the sports section. Instead of hailing her success, the paper sought to explain why Gu was competing for China and not the United States.

Corporate media and many others described Gu as a misguided youth at best, or even a “traitor” for carrying the flag of China in the Beijing Olympics. However, Gu made the decision to do so at the age of 15. China is her mother’s home country and she speaks fluent Mandarin.

Her decision went unnoticed until December, after President Joe Biden and congress stepped up its attacks on China's alleged human rights violations and threats to national security.

Sports Illustrated wrote after her first victory: "Gu got her gold medal and China got its pawn." A Fox News analyst denounced her as "ungrateful", and said her "reverse migration" was "shameful".

### **Open about her identity**

Gu is open about her national identity from two cultures: "When I'm in China, I'm Chinese and when I go to America, I'm American."

Gu switched her sport allegiance from the US to China in 2019. She said at the time: "The opportunity to help inspire millions of young people where my mum was born, during the 2022 Beijing Olympic Winter Games is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to help promote the sport I love."

Gu is the best athlete in her specialties and was expected to win up to three gold medals.

The intense reaction to Gu's decision to compete for China began as the US effort to delegitimise China accelerated in the lead up to the Winter Olympics.

Biden announced a "diplomatic boycott" — which fell flat. A non-stop propaganda blitz led Congress to pass the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in December. The Act effectively sanctions US corporations from doing business in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, by requiring proof that products imported from the region are not made from forced labor.

The anti-China decisions just skim the surface of the US-led New Cold War and its many forms of aggression in the military, diplomatic, economic and information realms.

The hypocrisy of the Beijing Olympic media coverage reflects the US hostility. Sporting commentators who were former athletes covered the events without political prejudice. Corporate commentators, however, gave the US State Department line about China before adding that Gu is a superb athlete.

US journalists repeatedly asked Gu: "Do you have Chinese citizenship, and have you renounced your US citizenship?"

Gu is a US citizen and has never renounced her citizenship.

The International Olympic Committee requires athletes to have a passport from the country they are competing for, and China does not typically allow dual citizenship. Although at this Olympics, there are many athletes with Chinese heritage — including Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians — competing. Those playing for China's ice hockey team take Chinese names and few speak Mandarin.

Gu has, nevertheless, become the biggest star of these Games. She is beloved by the few fans selected to attend and cheered by the Chinese press. She is ubiquitous in the media, appearing in seemingly most commercials airing during Olympic competition.

To the big business media and politicians in the US, the Beijing Olympics is primarily about the "crimes" of the Chinese government and ruling Communist Party. It is not about the athletes or sports.

The anti-China policies are bipartisan. Both the Democrats and Republicans seek to outdo each other

in denouncing China.

## **Olympics has 'three legs'**

The context is important. The Olympics has three legs: sports, politics — nationalism or national identity — and business.

Sports, politics and business are interconnected. Once an athlete arrives at the Olympics, flag-waving takes over. (Due to Russia's suspension, Russian athletes carry the flag of the Russian Olympic Committee.)

Business plays a significant role. Big Chinese companies sponsor Gu, who is the biggest and most visible Olympic star in China. She is also a fashion model with big corporate contracts. She has been photographed for Vogue magazine, Victoria's Secret, Louis Vuitton, Tiffany and more.

Business and nationalist politics is the key to understanding the Olympics. The athletes are caught in the middle. There are many athletes representing countries because of dual citizenship or family migration. Gu is not unique, except she is winning gold medals and exposing Washington's hypocrisy.

## **Rise of anti-Asian violence**

Meanwhile, anti-Asian violence in the US has not let up. An Asian-American woman was stabbed to death inside her New York City apartment on February 13, by a man who followed her into her building. This is the latest incident in a string of random attacks in the city against people of Asian descent.

Anti-Asian violence has risen steadily during the COVID-19 pandemic — former president Donald Trump blamed China for spreading the virus — and US policy attacks on China.

Gu is outspoken on anti-Asian racism and gender inequality. In her social media post announcing her decision to ski for China, Gu said she hopes to “unite people, promote common understanding, create communication, and forge friendship between nations”.

Gu's success in Beijing was no surprise. She won medals in all three events at the 2020 Youth Olympic Games as well as X Games and the world championships last year.

Gu, with her friendly smile and embrace of fellow competitors, showed a strength of character as she responded to journalists' attempts to attack her dual nationalities.

“I would be lying if I said I was 100% good at ignoring 100% of all the messages that I get,” Gu said.

“I'm just trying to listen to the positive, to feel the support, to take the pressure off of myself, and to ignore the hate, because they don't know what they're talking about.”

A second Chinese-American — Nathan Chen, the son of migrants — won gold in the men's figure skating competition. Chen carried the US flag.

Chen and Gu are “Americans” even if white nationalist/supremacist ideology sees them as the “other” and questions their loyalty, when convenient.

They are outstanding athletes. Their success, and those from every country, should be enough.

The Beijing Winter Olympics closed on February 20.

**Malik Miah**, San Francisco

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**P.S.**

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<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/chinese-american-wins-gold-beijing-olympics-faces-anti-china-backlash-home>