

Representing Chinese Female Athletes: A Transitivity Analysis of *China Daily's Paris 2024 Olympic Coverage*

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Abstract

Media discourse does not simply report sports; it actively shapes gendered representation and influences how female athletes are perceived. While decades of research have shown that female athletes are routinely trivialized in Western sports media through emphasis on appearance, emotion, or domestic roles, far less is known about how Chinese media discursively represents women in sport. This gap is striking given China's global sporting prominence and the ideological role of state media in projecting national identity. This study addresses that gap by analyzing *China Daily's* coverage of Chinese female athletes during the Paris 2024 Olympics, drawing on 59 articles that constitute the female-athlete corpus. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the study combines quantitative analysis of coverage patterns with qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis, drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-based transitivity analysis within a hegemonic femininity framework. Quantitative findings show that female athletes received more coverage than male athletes across multiple sport types rather than being confined to gender-appropriate sports. Qualitative analysis reveals a predominance of material processes, positioning female athletes as active Actors, alongside mental and relational processes constructing them as confident and professionally competent. The findings point to a culturally specific form of hegemonic femininity in Chinese sports media, characterized by athletic agency and professional legitimacy. This presentation contrasts sharply with the appearance-centered femininity reported in Western contexts, offering new insight into gendered representation in a non-Western, state-mediated sporting context.

Keywords: transitivity, hegemonic femininity, female athletes, sports media, *China Daily*

1. Introduction

The Paris 2024 Olympic Games marked a historic milestone in the male-dominated modern sport by achieving equal participation rates for women and men athletes for the first time (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024a). This represents the progress achieved through continuous struggle for women's inclusion in the Olympics since the first modern Games in 1896. However, such numerical equality in participation does not ensure gender equality in sport. As a social institution, sport remains a crucial domain where gender hierarchies are constructed and reproduced (Campbell & Davis, 2024; Xu & Kreshel, 2021), with media coverage playing a vital role in their maintenance and dissemination. Sports media not only reports on sporting events but also actively constructs gendered representations of female athletes through selective coverage and framing, thereby shaping public perceptions of their identities (Smith & MacArthur, 2026).

Over decades, research on the gender representation of female athletes has attracted sustained scholarly attention, resulting in a substantial body of work examining how female athletes are portrayed in sports media, particularly during major sporting events like the Olympic Games (Minini & Hu, 2023; Smith & MacArthur, 2026). Despite some evidence of improvement over time across diverse media platforms, studies show that female athletes continue to receive less coverage and their portrayals often reproduce gender stereotypes emphasizing femininity, appearance, and domestic roles over athletic competence (Campbell & Davis, 2024; Romney & Johnson, 2020; Salido-Fernandez & Muñoz-Muñoz, 2023). Even at the Paris 2024 Olympics, where participation parity was achieved, these representational inequalities persisted. Frabotta and Fernández-Cruz (2025) found that Italian sports media continued to underrepresent female athletes, concentrating coverage on gender-appropriate sports and marking women's sports as "feminine" while treating men's sports as the unmarked norm. Similarly, Castro-Lemus, Ortiz-Romero, and Ramos Ruiz (2025) documented that Spanish media coverage reinforced traditional gender roles through more subtle forms of gender-bland sexism, repeatedly stressing femininity, aesthetics and emotions over athletic competence.

However, current studies have mainly focused on Western and European contexts, while the representation of Chinese female athletes remains relatively underexplored (Xu & Kreshel, 2021; Xue, Huang, Sun, & Tang, 2019). This geographical gap limits our understanding

of how female athletes are represented across diverse cultural and ideological contexts. Most existing studies on female athletes' media representations have relied on content analysis, textual analysis or thematic analysis, with quite limited application of critical discourse analysis (CDA), especially approaches grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Vai et al., 2025). Although transitivity analysis has been employed in examining masculinity construction in media discourse (Radzi, Bakar, & Abdul Hamid, 2021), its application to the representations of female athletes remains scarce, particularly in the Chinese context. Furthermore, many of the studies on this topic have adopted media frameworks such as framing theory, focusing on patterns of thematic emphasis rather than on how gendered meanings are embedded in power relations (Scott, Li, & Bingaman, 2023; Smith & MacArthur, 2026). Despite its relevance for understanding gender norms, hegemonic femininity has rarely been used to examine how representations of female athletes are constructed in Chinese sports media.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining Chinese female athletes' representation in *China Daily's* Paris 2024 Olympics coverage from a CDA approach grounded in SFL. Drawing on hegemonic femininity (Connell, 1987; Schippers, 2007) as a theoretical framework, it employs transitivity analysis to examine how linguistic choices construct female athletes' agency, actions and identities. Specifically, this study addresses two research questions: 1. How are Chinese female athletes represented through transitivity patterns in *China Daily's* Paris 2024 Olympics coverage? 2. How do these linguistic patterns construct hegemonic femininity in Chinese sports media discourse?

As one of the few studies to apply transitivity analysis to Chinese female athletes' Olympic representation, this study contributes to understanding how hegemonic femininity manifests in Chinese sports discourse. By systematically analyzing linguistic patterns in *China Daily's* coverage, the study examines how Chinese sports media construct female athletes. The findings offer insights into whether Chinese sports media challenge or reinforce traditional gender hierarchies through linguistic choices and how hegemonic femininity operates across different cultural contexts.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Gender Representation of Female Athletes in Western Sports Media

Previous research has consistently shown that, despite female athletes' expanding participation in competitive sport, they continue to receive less media coverage and visibility than their male counterparts (Frabotta & Fernández-Cruz, 2025). Longitudinal studies from 1989 to 2019 reveal that women's sports account for only around 6% of US television sports coverage, with minimal change over three decades (Cooky, Council, Mears, & Messner, 2021; Musto, Cooky, & Messner, 2017). This quantitative disparity persists on digital media platforms. Although social media was initially seen as a transformative tool with the potential to challenge gendered narratives (Castro-Lemus et al., 2025; Yang, Hayes, Chen, Riot, & Khoo-Lattimore, 2020), research found that female athletes received only 10.2% of Twitter coverage (Cooky et al., 2021). Similar patterns emerge in visual representation, with female athletes featured as primary subjects in only 52 of 1,587 Instagram images analyzed across major American sports networks (Romney & Johnson, 2020).

The underrepresentation of female athletes is also reflected in the concentration of coverage on gender-appropriate sports, while women competing in traditionally masculine sports remain comparatively overlooked. Gender-appropriate or feminine sports stress values such as grace, aesthetics, elegance and flexibility, reflecting norms of hegemonic femininity (Alsamih, 2024). Research shows an overwhelming 98% of women's sports coverage focused on feminine sports, with gymnastics (26.61%) receiving the most airtime during the Rio Summer Olympics (Coche & Tuggle, 2018), and figure skating dominated winter sports coverage (Angelini & Arth, 2023). In contrast, despite American female athletes winning approximately one in five medals in power or contact sports, less than 15 minutes of prime-time coverage was dedicated to these events (Coche & Tuggle, 2018). Scholars argue that this selective coverage pattern reinforces hegemonic femininity by naturalizing certain sports as feminine while marginalizing female athletes in power-based sports (Frabotta & Fernández-Cruz, 2025).

Qualitative analyses consistently show that sports media reproduce gender stereotypes that systematically marginalize female athletic competence. Bruce (2016) identifies a set of recurring representational patterns, which have been elaborated across subsequent studies, showing how media discourse prioritizes female athletes' personal narratives and relational roles over athletic competence. Their athletic skill and achievement are frequently trivialized through an emphasis on personal stories, such as portraying athletes as cancer survivors rather than as skilled competitors (Fink & Kensicki, 2002) or in some cases, by attributing their success to external factors like good luck rather than individual ability (Billings et al., 2014). Both verbal and visual representations of female athletes are often related to the sexualization of their appearance and bodily aesthetics, with media focusing on attributes such as being sexy or attractive and photos emphasizing body parts like legs or hips (Kemble, 2020; Tiryaki, 2024). Such practices distance female athletes from the sports context and reinforce traditional gender norms. Another recurring pattern is infantilization, reflected in the use of childlike language such as referring to adult athletes as "girls" (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019), which constructs female athletes as immature and naturally reinforces assumptions of technical inferiority and weakness. Athletic competence is further marginalized through traditional gender roles, particularly familial responsibilities, with female athletes 2.71 times more likely to be referred to as mothers than male athletes as fathers (Yang et al., 2020). Media portrayals also emphasize female athletes' negative emotions, such as tears or irritation (Velloso, 2022), and gender marking that treats men's sport as the unmarked norm contributes to the construction of a "female first, athlete second" narrative that positions men's sports as the normative standard (Castro-Lemus et al., 2025; Frabotta & Fernández-Cruz, 2025; Velloso, 2022). Beyond these overtly gendered representational practices, some studies identify gender-bland sexism as a subtler discursive strategy that

avoids explicit stereotypes while depicting women's sports as less exciting and less technically complex, thereby normalizing men's sports as the benchmark of athletic value and sustaining hegemonic femininity (Castro-Lemus et al., 2025; Musto et al., 2017).

In recent years, some studies have noted a gradual increase in the visibility and legitimacy of women's sports, especially during mega events such as the Olympics and on social media platforms (Doehler, 2023; Johnson, Romney, Hull, & Pegoraro, 2022). For instance, Billings and Angelini (2019) found that female athletes received the majority of the broadcast airtime (52.2%) during the 2018 Winter Olympics. Research also points to more positive portrayals of female athletes, who are increasingly framed as serious, emotionally resilient professionals and legitimate competitors (Bell & Coche, 2018; Quayle et al., 2019). However, such progress appears largely event-specific and does not extend to daily sports reporting (Angelini & Arth, 2023; Dean & Somaini, 2024).

2.2 Gender Representation of Female Athletes in Chinese Sports Media

Research on gender representation in sports media has predominantly focused on Western contexts (Salido-Fernández & Muñoz-Muñoz, 2021; Xue et al., 2019), with relatively few studies examining Chinese media (Wu, 2026; Xu & Kreshel, 2021; Zhang & Caple, 2021).

Chinese sports media similarly allocate less coverage to female athletes, though the gender gap appears less pronounced than in Western contexts (Hao & Li, 2016; Xu, Billings, & Fan, 2018). For instance, Xu et al. (2020) found that female athletes received 42.68% of clock-time and 43.61% of name-mentions. Despite this near parity in quantitative coverage, female athletes remain underrepresented, and their media visibility is not proportional to their competitive achievements (Hao & Li, 2016).

However, Chinese sports media exhibit distinctive themes in the portrayal of female athletes compared to many studies from the United States and Europe (Xu, Fan, & Brown, 2021). Chinese media portrayals of female athletes tend to represent them as legitimate and serious athletes by emphasizing their athletic competence and embedding their success within nationalist narratives (Peng, Wu, & Chen, 2024; Xu et al., 2020). They are framed as national heroes and tenacious fighters, with coverage highlighting athletic prowess and ignoring physical appearance or sexuality (Billings, Xu, & Xu, 2019; Xu et al., 2021). For example, volleyball star Lang Ping was named the "Iron Hammer," which celebrates the power and force of her attacking play and challenges traditional gender representations by attributing masculine traits of strength to a female athlete (Yuan, 2023). Thus, Chinese female athletes' beauty is constructed through on-field performance and competitive achievement, rather than physical appearance.

However, recent studies document a regression toward more stereotypical representations, with growing emphasis on appearance, personality, and personal relationships (Li, 2023; Peng et al., 2024), echoing Western media's trivialization patterns (Billings et al., 2019; Watanabe, Nie, & Yan, 2013). For example, media coverage of tennis player Li Na highlighted her marriage and personal life rather than focusing exclusively on her athletic achievements, reflecting a shift that aligns with Western media practice (Xu & Kreshel, 2021). However, Billings et al. (2019) argued that such stereotypical representations are more evident on commercial media platforms than in state-owned media in China.

In summary, studies on Chinese sports media remain limited and show contradictory findings. This geographical gap highlights the need for more systematic investigation of how female athletes are represented in Chinese media discourse within its unique cultural context.

2.3 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

2.3.1 Hegemonic Femininity in Sports Media

Gender is a socially constructed system of meanings rather than a biologically fixed attribute (Butler, 1999; Connell, 1987). Femininity refers to culturally recognized norms, behaviors, and expectations associated with women that are socially produced and negotiated through institutional practices and everyday discourse (Connell, 1987). Such gendered norms are not equally valued but are hierarchically organized, with certain forms of femininity receiving greater cultural recognition than others. Drawing on Connell's (1987) theory of gender order, hegemonic femininity is understood as a culturally idealized form of femininity that legitimizes gender hierarchies and complements hegemonic masculinity (Schippers, 2007). Unlike hegemonic masculinity, which secures men's dominance over women, hegemonic femininity does not imply women's dominance over men but refers to a culturally privileged form of femininity that is relationally constituted to accommodate and sustain male dominance within a patriarchal gender order. As a culturally and historically specific construct, hegemonic femininity is not a fixed trait but continuously produced and negotiated through discursive practices (Bakar, 2014; Schippers, 2007).

Sport constitutes a particularly revealing site for examining hegemonic femininity, as it is seen as a male-dominated social institution where masculine ideals of strength, aggression, and physical prowess are constructed as the norm (Dziubiński, Organista, & Mazur, 2019). Thus, female athletes' participation in sport is frequently discursively positioned as subordinate, making femininity subject to normative regulation (Domeneghetti, 2018). In Western sports media, hegemonic femininity typically manifests through representational hierarchies that privilege attributes such as appearance, sexual attractiveness, and emotional expressiveness, while constraining women's recognition as serious athletes (Castro-Lemus et al., 2025; Fink, 2015).

However, hegemonic femininity is not a universal construct but is culturally and institutionally specific. In contemporary Chinese society, hegemonic femininity is shaped by a complex negotiation between traditional Confucian values, which emphasize modesty, family duty, self-sacrifice and subordination of collective goals and modernization influences that promote women's autonomy, economic independence, and self-realization (Chen, 2016; Hu & Stahl, 2025). In Chinese sports media, hegemonic femininity may manifest through different modes of regulation, such as linking athletic success to patriotic sacrifice, discipline or national duty (Xue et al., 2019), thereby

maintaining gender hierarchies. Despite these cultural and institutional specificities, how hegemonic femininity is discursively constructed in Chinese sports media remains underexplored.

2.3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis and Transitivity System

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach that examines “theoretical concepts such as power, ideology and domination” from a critical perspective (Baker et al., 2008, p 273). It closely links discourse with social power, viewing discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes social structures, power relations, and inequalities, with the aim of exposing and eventually eliminating such social inequalities (Fairclough, 1995). CDA has been widely applied in examining gender, ideology, and discourse across different media and sociocultural contexts (Edam, Aladdin, & Shaari, 2024; Iqbal, Nor, Shaari, & Azhar, 2026; Radzi, Abdul Hamid, & Bakar, 2018). It is also particularly suited for analyzing gender representation in sports media, as media discourse is not a neutral site but actively reproduces and legitimizes dominant ideologies and social hierarchies through narrative structures (van Dijk, 2001). Previous research has shown that linguistic choices shape gendered representations of athletes, reinforcing gender stereotypes and hierarchies by positioning male athletes as normative subjects while marginalizing female athletes (Castro-Lemus et al., 2025; Kemble, 2020; Wu, 2026).

CDA provides a critical perspective for examining how discourse reproduces power relations and ideologies, yet it requires specific linguistic tools to systematically analyze textual features. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) regards language as a social semiotic resource where grammatical choices realize particular meanings and ideologies (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Thus, SFL provides systematic tools for analyzing how language constructs social reality through three metafunctions: ideational (representing experience), interpersonal (enacting social relationships), and textual (organizing information). SFL-based approaches have been widely applied in media discourse analysis, demonstrating their suitability for examining contemporary media texts (Abbas & Talaat, 2019; Kazemian & Hashemi, 2014; Tang, 2021; Wan Abdul Halim, Zainudin, & Mohd Nor, 2022). Therefore, this study focuses on the ideational metafunction, specifically the transitivity system, to analyze how female athletes are discursively constructed in terms of agency and action in Chinese sports media discourse.

Transitivity is “an essential tool in the analysis of representation” (Fowler, 1991, p. 70), which examines how reality is represented in language through processes (what kind of action), participants (who is involved), and circumstances (when, where, how, and why the process occurs). This analysis reveals whether female athletes are positioned as agents or affected participants, the types of processes they are associated with, and the power relations embedded in these representations. While the transitivity system comprises multiple process types, material, relational, and mental processes are particularly relevant for examining gendered representations, as they are directly implicated in the discursive construction of action, identity, and emotion (Alhumsy & Alsaedi, 2023; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Material processes position participants as active Actors performing actions, revealing types of actions attributed to them. Relational processes construct identities and attributes, while mental processes highlight internal states and emotions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). By analyzing how these process types are associated with female athletes, this study examines whether Chinese sports media highlights their athletic agency or reinforces traditional feminine stereotypes, thereby either challenging or naturalizing hegemonic femininity. Table 1 summarizes the transitivity process types most relevant to the analysis of gender representation, together with examples.

Table 1. Selected transitivity process types

Process type	Description	Examples
material	doing and happening	<i>I finally won the match.</i>
relational	being and having	<i>I'm 21 now, too.</i>
mental	sensing and thinking	<i>I hope both of us could show our best performance.</i>

3. Methodology

The study adopts a sequential mixed-methods design, combining quantitative analysis and qualitative discourse analysis. The quantitative component provides descriptive numerical evidence of gendered coverage patterns and sport-type distribution, which informs and supports the subsequent qualitative analysis. The qualitative analysis employs a CDA approach with a focus on transitivity analysis to examine how Chinese female athletes' agency, action, and identity are constructed in sports media.

3.1 Data Collection and Classification

The data for this study originated from China Daily, one of China's most authoritative English-language newspapers and a key outlet for communicating China's official perspectives to international audiences, with a vast domestic and international readership (Fang & Qian, 2023).

This study focuses on China Daily's coverage of Chinese female athletes during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games (July 26–August 11, 2024). Articles were extracted from a larger corpus compiled for a doctoral thesis on gender representation in Chinese sports media. The doctoral corpus was constructed using systematic keywords searches in the Sports section, including Olympic sport disciplines (e.g., “gymnastics,” “weightlifting”) and terms indicating Chinese athletes (e.g., “China”, “Chinese”). The Paris Olympic period was selected because the Olympics represent the world's largest international sporting event, attracting exceptionally high global attention, with 84% of the potential global audience following the Games (IOC, 2024b). Moreover, the Paris 2024 Olympics marked the first Games to achieve full gender parity in athlete participation (IOC, 2024a), making it a critical context for examining whether media coverage reflected a similar degree of gender equality.

A total of 143 sports news reports were collected. Articles were classified according to gender, with articles centering on Chinese female athletes categorized as *female*, while those focusing on Chinese male athletes were categorized as *male*. Articles featuring male and female athletes in roughly equal proportions were excluded to maintain analytical clarity. Coverage primarily concerned with event schedules, sports policy, infrastructure development, sports promotion, coaches, or foreign athletes were also excluded to ensure a clear focus on Chinese female athletes.

Following these criteria, all articles were manually categorized by two independent coders, with disagreements resolved through discussion. As a result, 59 articles focusing on Chinese female athletes were identified for subsequent quantitative analysis.

3.2 Qualitative Corpus Construction and Transitivity Coding

The qualitative corpus was constructed from the 59 articles identified in the quantitative dataset through a criteria-based selection process to support clause-level transitivity analysis. Based on the quantitative sport-type frequency analysis of Chinese female-athlete coverage, the most frequently reported sports were selected for qualitative analysis. Because the third- and fourth-ranked sports had the same reporting frequency, both were included in the qualitative corpus to avoid arbitrary exclusion. These top four sports yielded a total of 24 of the 59 articles (40.7%) identified in the quantitative dataset and formed the initial corpus for qualitative analysis. Two filtering criteria were then applied to assess the analytical suitability of these 24 articles, resulting in a final qualitative corpus of 15 articles (see Table 2). This procedure ensured that the qualitative corpus was grounded in dominant coverage contexts in Chinese sports media while providing sufficient linguistic material for detailed clause-level transitivity analysis.

Table 2. Criteria for selecting texts for qualitative analysis

Criteria for qualitative corpus construction	Justification
1. Articles from the four most frequently covered sports in the dataset	To ensure that the analysis reflects dominant patterns in sports media coverage rather than exceptional cases.
2. Articles containing athlete-centered discourse on athletes' actions, attributes, emotions, or experiences, rather than brief results-based reports or score summaries	To enable systematic analysis of how athletes are constructed through process types, participant roles, and representational patterns in athlete-focused reporting.

The 15 selected news articles' texts were coded using UAM Corpus Tool 6.2 (O'Donnell, 2008), which provides systematic SFL-based coding. All texts were segmented into clauses, with each ranking clause treated as a unit of analysis.

Given the international nature of Olympic coverage, articles on Chinese female athletes also included clauses referring to other athletes or background information. Clauses exclusively concerning foreign athletes, male Chinese athletes, coaches, or general background information without reference to Chinese female athletes were tagged as excluded (e.g., excluded-foreign-athletes, excluded-background-information). All clauses involving Chinese female athletes, regardless of their grammatical role or the presence of other participants, were coded for transitivity analysis (process types, participants, circumstances) based on Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) system network. These coding criteria ensured comprehensive capture of all representations of Chinese female athletes while filtering analytically irrelevant content. Figure 1 presents an example of transitivity annotation conducted using UAM CorpusTool.

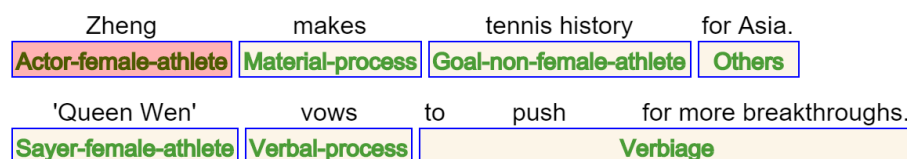


Figure 1. Example of clause-level transitivity annotation in UAM CorpusTool

To assess inter-coder reliability, a second independent coder coded all process type instances, covering approximately 31% of all coded instances in the corpus. Agreement on process types classification reached Cohen's $\kappa = 0.94$, indicating almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Given the explicit classification criteria in SFL-based transitivity analysis, a high level of agreement was expected. Disagreements mainly involved borderline distinctions between process types and were resolved through discussion to ensure analytical consistency.

4. Results & Discussion

This section presents the distribution of media coverage by gender and identifies sport-type patterns in the coverage of Chinese female athletes, followed by a transitivity analysis of how Chinese female athletes are represented in sports media. These findings are interpreted using the concept of hegemonic femininity.

4.1 Coverage Distribution & Sport-type Preference

A total of 143 news reports were identified during the Paris Olympics period. Among these, 59 reports focused on Chinese female athletes and 33 on Chinese male athletes. As shown in Figure 2, coverage of Chinese female athletes was almost twice that of male athletes in China Daily during the Paris Olympics. This pattern contrasts with the broader tendency in sports media which traditionally tends to give female athletes less coverage, but is consistent with some of the recent studies on Olympic coverage reporting increased visibility of

women's sport during the major sports events (Angelini & Arth, 2023; Dean & Somaini, 2024). The relatively higher coverage of female athletes highlights a distinctive media practice of providing greater visibility and voice to female athletes in Chinese sports media.

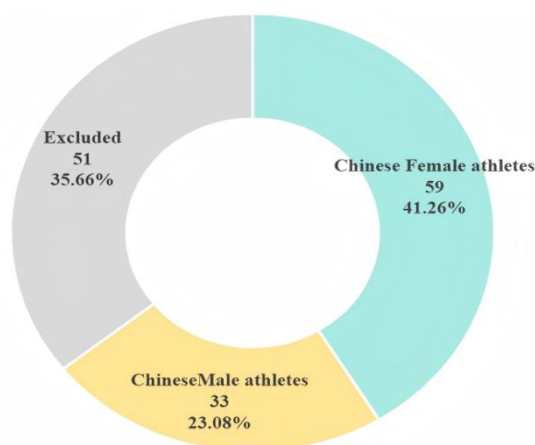


Figure 2. Coverage distribution of news reports in *China Daily* during the Paris Olympics

Figure 3 presents the distribution of different sport types covered in *China Daily*'s reports on Chinese female athletes during the Paris Olympics. It shows that coverage of Chinese female athletes was distributed across multiple sport types, with tennis receiving the most coverage ($n = 8$). The six most frequently reported sports accounted for 32 of the 59 reports (54.2%) and represented the main focus of coverage in *China Daily*'s reporting on Chinese female athletes during the Paris Olympics. These six sports were further categorized according to Koivula's (2001) classification framework into masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral sport categories (see Table 3). Gender-neutral sports were the most common category ($n = 13$), followed by feminine sports ($n = 11$), while masculine sports accounted for 8 reports.

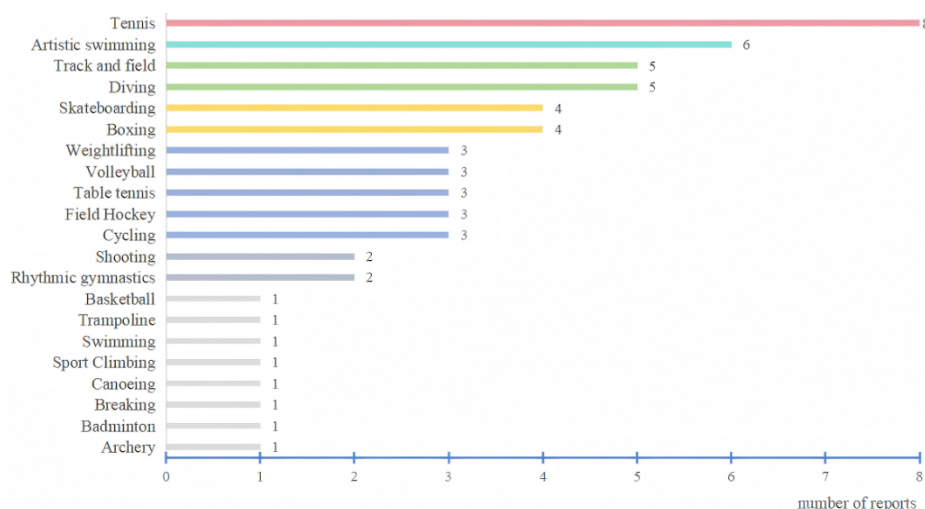


Figure 3. Sports type distribution of Chinese female athletes in *China Daily* during the Paris Olympic

Table 3. Classification of sport types based on Koivula (2001)

Category	Justification	Sports types
Masculine	Associated with strength, aggression, and power (Koivula, 2001)	skateboarding, boxing
Feminine	Associated with aesthetics and expectations of femininity (Koivula, 2001)	artistic swimming, diving
Gender-neutral	Not strongly associated with either masculinity or femininity (Koivula, 2001)	tennis, track and field

This sports-type distribution suggests that Chinese media coverage of female athletes was not disproportionately concentrated in feminine sports, suggesting a more diversified pattern of representation. This pattern contrasts with findings commonly observed in Western sports media, where coverage of female athletes tends to focus more heavily on gender-appropriate sports (Frabotta & Fernández-Cruz, 2025; Romney & Johnson, 2020).

4.2 Linguistic Representation: Transitivity Analysis

Based on the quantitative sport-type analysis, this section conducts a clause-level transitivity analysis of 15 news reports selected from the four sports with the highest coverage (tennis, $n = 7$; track and field, $n = 3$; diving, $n = 3$; artistic swimming, $n = 2$). The transitivity analysis investigates how female athletes are linguistically constructed in terms of participant roles and actions in *China Daily*'s Olympic

reporting.

The analysis yielded 2853 coded instances, distributed across tennis ($n = 1,758$), track and field ($n = 426$), diving ($n = 320$), and artistic swimming ($n = 349$), encompassing process types, participant roles, and circumstances. The relatively higher number of coded instances in tennis-related reports reflects the larger number of tennis articles included in the qualitative corpus. Initial coding identified Material ($N=512$, 57.3%), Relational ($N=167$, 18.7%), and Mental processes ($N=121$, 13.5%) as the three dominant types, while Verbal (9.1%), Existential (1.1%) and Behavioral (0.3%) processes were relatively limited. This study therefore focuses on these three primary process types and their corresponding participants.

4.2.1 Material Process: Performance and Achievement

Material processes constitute the dominant process type in the corpus (57.3%), indicating that Chinese sports media representation is primarily organized around actions rather than attributes or internal experiences.

Within material processes, the assignment of Actor and Goal roles is central to constructing agency. Actors are positioned as initiators of action, while Goals are positioned as entities affected by others' actions. As shown in Table 4, female athletes dominate Actor roles (68.9%) while appearing as Goals in only 7.3% of instances. This dramatic gap indicates that female athletes are grammatically constructed as action initiators rather than as passive recipients in Chinese sports discourse.

Table 4. Distribution of Actor and Goal roles in material processes

Participant Role	Total N	Female Athlete	Other Participants
Actor	306	211 (68.9%)	95 (31.1%)
Goal	397	29 (7.3%)	368 (92.7%)

Note. "Other participants" include opponents, coaches, institutions, events, nations, and other entities not referring to Chinese female athletes.

However, the numerical dominance of female athletes as Actors doesn't necessarily lead to a complete interpretation of how they are represented in Chinese sports media discourse. The study further examines the types of actions performed by female athlete actors. Drawing on van Leeuwen's (2008) social action framework, which conceptualizes social actions in terms of their social functions and meanings, the 211 instances in which female athletes appear as Actors are analyzed in terms of the actions they perform. These actions are categorized as material or semiotic actions, distinguishing between actions of physical doing and those enacted through meaning-making and identity-oriented symbolic positioning. Semiotic actions here refer to actions whose Goals or accompanying Circumstances are associated with symbolic, identity-related, or representational meanings rather than concrete physical outcomes alone. Material actions are further sub-coded to reflect different orientations of athletic agency, as summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Distribution of action types in material process performed by female-athlete Actors

Social Action categories	Action type	N (%)	Description	Examples
Material social action	Performance-oriented actions	131 (62.1%)	Actions related to technical execution, physical performance, competition outcomes, and achievements	<i>competed (at the Olympic), delivered (six consistent throws), win (a medal), secured (this victory)</i>
	Struggle/ effort actions	48 (22.7%)	Actions highlighting effort, commitment, challenge, perseverance, and the overcoming of struggles, setbacks or difficulties	<i>conquered (the pressure), overcame (deficits), drew (extra strength),</i>
Semiotic social action	Identity-oriented actions	20 (9.5%)	Actions enacting personal stance, social positioning, or national identity	<i>fight (for our country), hold (court), represent (the confident and vibrant image of Chinese youth)</i>
Others		12 (5.7%)	Actions not fitting any of the above categories	<i>moved to (Beijing), lost (a bit of sleep)</i>

As shown in Table 5, performance-oriented material actions constitute the largest proportion (62.1%) of the material processes performed by female athletes as Actors. Struggle and effort actions account for a further 22.7%, while identity-oriented semiotic actions represent a comparatively smaller proportion (9.5%). The predominance of performance-oriented material actions indicates that female athletic agency is primarily constructed through competence, competitive execution, and measurable achievement. The presence of struggle and effort actions highlights Chinese female athletes' resilience, perseverance, and the capacity to overcome challenges as another important dimension of female athletic agency. By contrast, identity-oriented semiotic actions appear less frequently, pointing to a relative marginalization of personal stance, emotional positioning, and symbolic identity within the overall representation.

(1) Performance-oriented Actions

Performance-oriented material actions refer to material processes in which female athletes are represented through physical capability, technical control, and measurable outcomes. These actions foreground Chinese female athletes' athletic performance, competition results, and sporting achievements, reflecting how competitive action is discursively organized in Chinese sports media (Table 6).

Table 6. Subtypes of performance-oriented actions performed by Chinese female-athlete Actors

Social action category	Subtype within performance-oriented actions	N (%)	Description
Material social action	Competition result	50 (38.2%)	Actions foregrounding competitive outcomes such as winning, placing, or securing results
	Achievement	44 (33.6%)	Actions marking accomplishments, including medals, records, and titles
	Athletic performance	32 (24.4%)	Actions highlighting technical execution, physical control, and on-field performance
	Others	5 (3.8%)	Projected competitions, post-victory bodily actions, or other performance-related but non-core actions

These actions position female athletes as agentive Actors who initiate and control competitive action, as shown in the following examples:

- *Yang set [achievement] a new world record.*
- *Quan Hongchan of China not only won [competition result] her second gold medal in diving at the Paris Olympics on Tuesday...*
- *She delivered [athletic performance] six consistent throws, without any failed attempts, ...*

By emphasizing performance-oriented actions, Chinese sports media discourse normalizes female athletes' participation in competitive sports and highlights their professionalism through consistent representations of them as agentive professional competitors. As shown in Table 6, competition results and achievements together account for over two-thirds of all performance-oriented material processes. This distribution suggests that within performance-oriented representations, female athletic agency is primarily constructed through result-driven actions, such as *claiming silver* and *establishing a career milestone*, rather than through detailed process-oriented descriptions of technique or execution. Notably, the majority of competition result and achievement actions focus on competitive success. These processes highlight medal wins, record-breaking performances, and tournament victories, while coverage of defeats or unsuccessful performances remains comparatively limited in the corpus. This pattern suggests a success-oriented framework in Chinese sports media's representation of female athletes, where achievement and excellence are privileged in the construction of female athletes' professional identity.

Through repeated Actor roles in performance-oriented actions, Chinese female athletes are discursively constructed as technically competent professionals whose bodies are sites of athletic mastery rather than aesthetic objects. The findings are consistent with previous research on Chinese sports media, which highlights elite female athletes' competitive excellence and sporting achievement (Xu et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2019). This pattern differs from dominant Western sports media research, where coverage frequently marginalizes female athletes' accomplishments through appearance-focused framing, sexualization, and trivialization (Castro-Lemus et al., 2025; Cooky et al., 2021; Sharifzadeh & Brison, 2024).

Although this performance-oriented discourse departs from conventional Western understandings of hegemonic femininity that center on women's sexuality, emotional sensitivity, or family roles (Fink, 2015; Mack & English, 2023; Paechter, 2018), it still should not be interpreted as a signal of gender equality. Instead, it reflects a context-specific form of hegemonic femininity within the Chinese sports media landscape, in which femininity is legitimized through competitive success, achievement, and the demonstration of excellence. The relative absence of coverage devoted to athletic failures or unsuccessful performances further suggests that this achievement-oriented femininity operates as a conditional norm, where female athletes are granted visibility and legitimacy primarily through success and achievement. This conditional recognition implies that female athletic worth is measured against performance outcomes rather than being valued inherently. Although they are celebrated as exemplars of feminine strength, such recognition is closely linked to their capacity to deliver victories and medals for the nation.

(2) Struggle & Effort Actions

Struggle and effort-related actions (22.7%) emphasize Chinese female athletes' dedication, perseverance, commitment, and ability to overcome obstacles. For example,

- *She persevered [Effort/ Persistence] through a gruelling schedule...*
- *They fought [struggle / perseverance] hard and never gave up.*

These struggle and effort related actions carry a double-edged discursive implication. While they grant female athletes' agency by attributing success to their dedication and resilience, portraying them as committed fighters capable of overcoming challenges, they also subtly frame female athletic achievement as inherently more difficult and earned rather than routinely expected. This construction implicitly performs female athletes as naturally less suited to sport. Athletic competence is not represented as a normalized expectation but as the outcome of perseverance and endurance, which risks reinforcing the assumption that sport is inherently a male-dominated domain. Therefore, the struggle and effort actions reproduce hegemonic femininity in Chinese sports media by rendering Chinese female athletes' athletic legitimacy conditional upon extraordinary effort.

(3) Identity-oriented Actions

In stark contrast to the dominant material social actions, identity-oriented semiotic social actions constitute only 9.5% of instances in which female athletes function as Actors, indicating their marginal yet ideologically significant role in the construction of female athletic agency. These identity-oriented actions primarily function to symbolically enact social positioning, personal stance, and national identity.

Identity-oriented actions in the corpus mainly involve acts of representation, stance-taking, and public self-positioning. Female athletes are frequently constructed as symbolic representatives of collective identities. For example, they are described as "*representing all of Chinese tennis*," or metaphorically "*anointed*" as national heroines. National stance is further enacted through metaphorical semiotic actions such as "*fight for our country*" or "*don't fight for myself*," which do not describe physical combat or competition but construct a nationalist positioning that prioritizes national dedication over individual ambition. The restricted distribution of identity-oriented semiotic actions suggests that Chinese sports media selectively frame how female athletes' identities are made visible. When identity is foregrounded, it is primarily constructed through national responsibility and exemplary social roles over personal self-expression.

Together with the overwhelming dominance of performance-oriented material actions, this pattern contributes to the construction of a form of hegemonic femininity in Chinese sport media that privileges discipline, competitiveness, professionalism, and national service, while minimizing expressive emotionality traditionally associated with femininity. It is also important to note that while female athletes dominate Actor roles, a proportion of material processes assign agency to other Actors, including national entities, institutional actors, competition related elements, and achievements or events. The framing of female athletes' actions through these Actors further reinforces the findings that female athletes' identities and agency are celebrated and made visible primarily when aligned with national duty, discipline, and collective achievement. Therefore, individual performance and personal achievement are partially overshadowed by a masculinized nationalist hegemonic framework.

4.2.2 Relational Process: Professional Attribute and Identity

Relational processes, though less frequent (18.7%), play a strategic role in attributing legitimate qualities and defining roles of female athletes in Chinese sports media. Most relational clauses assign Carrier or Token roles to entities other than Chinese female athletes (64.8%), including performance related entities (e.g., *preparation*, *scoring*), abstract states or goals (e.g., *dream*, *my strategy*), and other social actors (e.g., *coaches*, *Chinese fans*), indicating that relational processes are primarily used to frame competitive contexts and symbolic meanings rather than to define female athletes themselves. Only when female athletes are positioned as Carrier or Token (35.2%) are evaluative qualities-assigned, shaping how they are discursively represented within Chinese sports discourse.

Within these relational processes, the majority of attributes assigned to Chinese female athletes are performance-related (60%), foregrounding competitive achievement, ranking, and sporting competence. Female athletes are evaluated as "*winners*," "*ready to make a historic breakthrough*," or as holding "*big leads over the field*," constructing identities grounded in athletic performance and competitive outcomes. Such descriptions legitimize female athletes as professional competitors. This pattern aligns with the dominance of performance-oriented material processes identified earlier and reinforces a representational pattern that privileges competitiveness and achievement. Such a representational pattern positions Chinese sports media as a site for the construction of a culturally specific Chinese form of hegemonic femininity centered on sporting values rather than traditional feminine attributes such as beauty and emotional expressiveness, in contrast to Western media contexts where female athletes are more frequently attributed with appearance related or sexualized qualities (Sharifzadeh & Brison, 2024).

In contrast to performance-related attributes, personal attributes appear less frequently in relational processes (40%) and concern emotional and psychological traits as well as age-related attributes. Female athletes are described as "*excited*," "*confident*," with such descriptions reflecting positive affect and emotional regulation rather than vulnerability or fragility. This selective emotional representation frames female athletes' personal traits in ways that remain compatible with a

professional sporting identity. Personal attributes also include reference to age, which functions to highlight early ambition and maturity rather than innocence. For example, when tennis player Zheng Qinwen recalls, “*when I was 12, he (her father) said that one day I’ll become a Grand Slam champion*”, the young age reference shows her early ambition and a clear goal for her future sporting career, pointing to emerging professionalism rather than childishness. This contrasts with Western sports media tendencies to infantilize female athletes through age-marking phrases such as “girls” or “young ladies”, which often position youth as a marker of vulnerability or dependence rather than capability (Martínez-Corcuera, Ginesta, & Frigola-Reig, 2023; Yang et al., 2020).

4.2.3 Mental Process: Determination and Inner Strength

Mental processes (13.5%) construct internal perspectives (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Female athletes constitute 85.7% of Sensors in mental clauses, presenting them as the primary cognitive subjects in Chinese sports media discourse. As Sensors, female athletes are presented as expressing goal-oriented thoughts, self-belief, and emotions. For example:

- *I believe scoring 10 is unbelievable.*
- *I think I have the ability, I have the confidence.*

These mental processes predominantly emphasize confidence, enjoyment, self-belief and positive affect (e.g., *believe, think, enjoy*), rather than doubt, fear, or emotional vulnerability. Even when acknowledging challenges (e.g., “*my hands trembling*”), such experiences are framed within narratives of focus and perseverance. This selective representation aligns with patterns identified in material and relational processes, where emotional vulnerability is systematically filtered while resilience and positive affect are stressed.

Mental processes give female athletes substantial subjectivity, constructing them as confident, self-believing and positively engaged subjects. This pattern reinforces the culturally specific hegemonic femininity identified in Chinese sports media, in which emotional expressions are selectively filtered to privilege inner strength and determination over traditional feminine vulnerability in ways that align with normative gender expectations in elite sport.

In addition, although verbal processes are not examined in detail, the presence of female athletes as Sayer merits brief attention. All 15 sampled articles include direct quotations from Chinese female athletes, allowing them to articulate technical assessments, emotional expression or gratitude in their own words. This further suggests that Chinese sports media positions female athletes as legitimate speakers within sports discourse and challenges Western patterns of female silence and subordination in sports media (Bruce, 2016). However, this voice is conditional. It contributes to the construction of a hegemonic femininity in which female athletes are authorized to speak primarily as competent, disciplined, and resilient subjects.

4.2.4 Circumstance (spatial) Context

Given that material, relational, and mental processes consistently foreground performance, achievement, and professional competence, analysis of place circumstances reveals a clear spatial focus on professional athletic contexts. The vast majority of place references (83.6%) are centered on athletic venues and competition spaces (e.g., “*at the Olympic,*” “*on the court*”), with limited references to non-competitive locations. The spatial distribution further supports that Chinese media prioritize female athletes’ professional athletic performance, with minimal coverage of their off-field personal lives. This spatial pattern suggests that hegemonic femininity in Chinese sports media operates by constructing female athletes primarily in professional athletic spaces, where their identities are grounded in athletic competence rather than in personal or domestic life.

5. Conclusion

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to examine how Chinese sports media construct Chinese female athletes within a hegemonic femininity framework.

Quantitative results show key distributional patterns in gendered sports coverage, with Chinese female athletes receiving greater coverage in Chinese sports media during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Meanwhile, this coverage is not confined to traditionally feminized sports but is distributed across a diverse range of sporting disciplines, including both gender-neutral and traditionally male-dominated sports. This pattern diverges from previous research that has emphasized the marginalization of women’s sports through limited coverage or a primary focus on gender-appropriate sports (Frabotta & Fernández-Cruz, 2025).

Building on the distributional findings, the qualitative analysis draws on transitivity analysis to examine how female athletes’ agency and actions are discursively represented in sports news, an analytical approach that has been rarely applied in existing sports media research. The analysis shows female athletes are predominantly represented through material processes, representing them as active Actors engaged in concrete athletic actions. Mental and relational processes further

reinforce this representation by emphasizing psychological resilience, determination, and professional attributes, rather than emotional vulnerability or infantilizing characteristics that have been commonly identified in Western sports media (Frabotta & Fernández-Cruz, 2025). However, these representations of Chinese female athletes remain conditional, as such positive portrayals are largely granted only when athletes meet standards of competitive excellence, perseverance, professional discipline, and patriotic commitment. Such a framing aligns with broader narratives through which China's positive national image is projected in international sporting contexts, contributing to the discursive construction of the nation's soft power (Lyu, Zhang, Mañas Viniegra, & Leite Junior., 2026; Zhang & Caple, 2021).

These findings contribute to the understanding of how transitivity analysis can uncover patterns of participants' agency and actions in gendered discourse. The analysis suggests that Chinese sports media construct a culturally specific form of hegemonic femininity, extending existing scholarship by showing that hegemonic femininity can operate through athletic agency and professional competence rather than through appearance-oriented or sexualized framings commonly identified in Western sports media research (Castro-Lemus et al., 2025). Such a manifestation of hegemonic femininity can be explained by the fact that *China Daily* is a state-owned English-language outlet targeting international audiences, where female athletes' sporting success becomes associated with narratives of national achievement and international competitiveness, with sporting results functioning as evidence of national strength (Lyu et al., 2026; Ma & Zhang, 2025; Zhang & Caple, 2021). This highlights the strategic role of official media in constructing nationally desirable forms of femininity for international audiences (Ma & Zhang, 2025). At the same time, international sporting mega-events such as the Olympic Games provide strategic platforms for China's nation branding through state-mediated sports discourse (Lyu et al., 2026). In such international sporting contexts, hegemonic femininity becomes increasingly associated with athletic competence and sporting success, serving the construction of China as a strong and internationally competitive nation. This demonstrates that hegemonic femininity is culturally specific, rather than universally applicable. Practically, the study shows that while the absence of sexualized framings and the increased visibility of female athletes represent a meaningful form of progress, Chinese female athletes' representation remains constrained in culturally specific ways. This distinction helps prevent the assumption that such progress signals the achievement of gender equality in sports coverage.

This study focuses on Olympic coverage in an official Chinese media outlet, a context that may foreground competitive and nationalist discourses surrounding Chinese female athletes, and relies on textual data. Future research could extend the scope to non-Olympic contexts, multimodal analysis, and athletes' self-representation to examine how hegemonic femininity operates across different media forms.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this manuscript, AI-assisted tools were used solely for grammar correction and language polishing to improve clarity and readability. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and edited by the authors. The ideas, analyses, and arguments presented in this manuscript are those of the authors.

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Author contributions

Zhang Jingjie was responsible for drafting and revising the manuscript. Dr. Wan Fatimah Solihah Wan Abdul Halim, Dr. Anis Nadiyah Che Abdul Rahman, and Dr. Kesumawati A. Bakar were responsible for supervision, reviewing, and editing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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