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Since the introduction of international sporting competitions in the late 19th century, sport has been a source of value and pride, ultimately serving as an expression of national identity (Allison, 2004; Cronin, 1999; Hunter, 2003; Maguire & Tuck, 2005). Collective identity has been represented by athletes and teams (Crolley & Hand, 2006; Hill, 1996). International sporting events such as the Olympic Games not only provide international societies with opportunities to increase mutual understanding, but also enable nations to demonstrate their athletic achievement and development (Vincent & Hill, 2013). Given the popularity of sport in society, the “sport-nationalism-media troika” appeared with the trend of the globalization of media (Rowe, McKay & Miller, 1998). Agenda setting and framing are two tools that the media uses to associate sport with national identity; in turn, influencing consumer perspectives of sports coverage.

Within the last decade, several studies have explored the connection between sport and national identity through media coverage of major sporting events (Alabarces et al., 2001; Bishop & Jaworski, 2003; Buffington, 2012; Lee & Maguire, 2011; Tuck, 2003; Vincent. et al, 2010; Vincent & Hill, 2011). Although previous literature addresses the relationship between sport and national identity in western culture, few studies have focused on the Asian media, which has the potential to reach 60% of the world’s population (Crossette et al., 2011).

Informed by framing theory (Goffman, 1975), this study aims at investigating how mediated sporting events constitute nationalism in China; specifically, how Chinese newspapers covered the 2014 Incheon Asian Games. As one of the biggest international multi-sporting events, the Incheon Asian Games attracted more than 9,700 athletes from 45 countries competing in 36 sports (Clarey, 2014). However, due to the traditional domination of the Chinese at this event, the country has topped the gold medal table since 1982, Chinese audiences pay less attention to this event. The TV viewing rate was 4.07% at the 2010 Asian Games compared with 7.6% at the 2012 Olympics (CSM, 2011, 2013). Therefore, this research examines how Chinese newspapers cover the Incheon Asian Games regarding national identity. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following: RQ1: Do Chinese newspapers provide increased coverage to Chinese athletes rather than competitors from other countries? RQ2: How have Chinese newspapers framed national identity at the Incheon Asian Games? RQ3: How do Chinese newspapers increase awareness and readership despite the lack of interest?

Content analysis was the primary methodology used to gain insight to Chinese mainstream newspapers’ coverage at the 2014 Incheon Asian Games. An unobtrusive method, content analysis draws conclusion from text and pictures by applying a systematic rule (Krippendorff & Bock, 2009). Five Chinese newspapers the People’s Daily, the China Youth Daily, The Beijing News, the Xinhmin Evening News and the Southern Metropolis Daily, were selected due to national prominence, circulations, and target markets. It should be noted that articles and photographs were collected from the newspapers throughout the duration of the 2014 Incheon Asian Games (September 19 to October 5). In order to analyze pre- and post-event coverage, data was collected one day prior to the beginning of the event and one day after the conclusion of the event. Duncan’s (1990) theoretical framework was used to examine sport photographs and texts. The coding protocol was divided into four parts: genres, issues, themes of photos and headlines. In order to reduce bias, member-checking was employed (Creswell, 2003). Two native Chinese researchers coded articles separately and reached an agreement of categories after the discussion. To minimize discrepancies between Chinese news articles and their translations in English, back translation was conducted. After drawing the themes from the content analysis, a Chinese researcher translated contents into English first, and the other native
Chinese researcher translated them back into Chinese to test the equivalence between two contents. The comparison of contents in both Chinese and English was conceptually equivalent.

A total of 324 articles and 246 photos from five newspapers were examined in this study. Results indicated that the three main genres of newspaper coverage were: news article (46.6%), features (37.6%) and commentary (7.7%). The three main issues newspapers focused on were: national winning/success (26.2%), national failure (13.8%) and sport stars coverage (13.7%). There was a clear distinction between the number of photographs devoted to Chinese athletes/teams and other Asian countries’ athletes/teams, with 145 of the 246 photos (58.94%) being dedicated to Chinese athletes and 34 (13.82%) of the photographs depicted foreign athletes, $\chi^2 (20) = 15.047$, $p = .774$. The result also indicated that 158 article headlines (50.4%) included Chinese athletes alone, while 36 headlines (11.5%) included teams/athletes from other countries, $\chi^2 (18) = 33.363$, $p = .015$.

The content analysis revealed that Chinese newspapers portrayed Chinese athletes “dominating the competition” and lacking worthy “opponents in Asia,” while portraying other countries’ athletes as “less competitive,” and “distance with the level of Chinese athletes.” Since the host country, Korea, was the major competitive opponent for China, newspapers always emphasized that “competing in Korea has never been an easy thing” (The South Metropolis Daily, 23 September 2014, p. 16). For instance, The South Metropolis Daily described the host country as “racking their brains to win the first gold” (21 September 2014, p. 16) in emphasizing the changing of the Games schedule.

When reporting the failure of Chinese athletes at the Asian Games, some articles tried to positively spin the story. Chinese runner Peimeng Zhang had high expectations when competing in the men’s 100-meter final at the Asian Games. However, when Zhang lost to Femi Ogunode of Qatar, Chinese newspapers focused more on Ogunode’s original nationality (he was exported from Nigeria) rather than his victory. The news article was titled “An African breaks the Asian Record” (Xinmin Evening News, 29 September 2014, p. A19) to imply that Chinese athletes were still the best in Asia since they did not lose to other Asian athletes. In order to increase readership and public interest of the games, Chinese newspapers created rivalries between Chinese athletes and competing nations, and at times emphasized national failures. The South Metropolis Daily used “enmity” and “revenge” to describe a Chinese women’s volleyball victory over Thailand after the Chinese men’s football team lost to Thailand (1 October 2014, p. 22).

Newspapers also increased their coverage of Chinese sports’ failure at the Asian Games due to Chinese tradition of athletic domination. As the People’s Daily (2 October 2014) mentioned, “Honestly, how many medals Chinese athletes could win at the Asian Games is no longer a major focus of the general public” (p. 6). All newspapers had heavy coverage of the failure of “three big team sport” at the Asian Games, emphasizing “it was the worse result at the Asian Games since 1974” (Xinmin Evening News, 2 October 2014, p. A8).

This study was one of the first attempts to examine how Chinese newspapers constitute nationalism through the use of framing. The results revealed Chinese newspapers used similar approaches to Western newspapers, using rhetoric such as “us” and “them,” in their sport coverage (Vincent et al., 2010). However, the results indicated increased coverage in national failure was also an approach to constitute nationalism in sport coverage. Future studies should examine other approaches newspaper outlets in different parts of the world utilize when covering sporting events both at the national, continental, and international level.