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Women's Tennis Diplomacy: Australia–China Cultural Relations and Li Na as a Sports Celebrity Diplomat of the Australian Open

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ABSTRACT

Mega sports events offer chances for hosting nations to build up their soft power by branding their countries as vibrant, confident and unique places, opening doors for strong cultural exchanges. This paper addresses key questions of cultural diplomacy in international sporting events contexts and furthers the analysis of the growing relevance of 'women's tennis diplomacy'. By examining Tennis Australia's diplomatic strategy to raise its profile in neighbouring countries with the Australian Open Asia-Pacific campaign, this study adopts the alternative perspective of non-state-based sports diplomacy. It particularly examines the diplomatic role of Li Na, the Chinese female tennis player who has become a global sports celebrity after being the first Asian player to win a Grand Slam women's singles title in 2011. It asks whether Li Na can be named as a sports celebrity diplomat of the Australian Open. By using a content analysis of significant Australian and Chinese newspapers between 2006 and 2019, this study examines Li Na's global celebrityhood's impact in the Australia–China binational connections. This analysis discusses the reasons for her success in this unofficial but relevant role for the cultural relations between Australia and China. The findings suggest that Li Na's gender image as an independent woman, her neoliberal citizenship and her remarkable engagement with Australian and Chinese tennis fans facilitate her unofficial ambassadorship on behalf of the Australian Open. As a remarkable example of women's tennis diplomacy, Li Na's cultural influence shapes the understanding between Australian and Chinese publics beyond their governments.

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Sports diplomacy; Australia–China cultural relations; sports diplomacy; celebrityhood; sport mega events; Asian-pacific diplomacy; gender

Introduction

The relationship between international sport and diplomacy is intimate and strong. Growing evidence has suggested that staging a sports mega-event provides opportunities for the national government to exert politics of attraction (Grix and Lee 2013). States seek to attract others through international sporting events that build up a favourable image and enhance understanding among foreign publics (Grix and Lee 2013). The ability to attract is largely drawn from the intangible power resources of a country such as culture, and it is becoming increasingly important as soft power assets for states in the field of international relations (Nye and Power 2004). In this sense, international sporting events as sources of soft power are more relevant to the diplomatic strategies of states, which are deployed to improve both their 'international brand' and also the cultural relations among others (Murray and Pigman 2014). On the one hand, sporting events are a major instrument of

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cultural diplomacy where national governments try to increase 'awareness of the cultural attributes of the home culture' to foreign publics with the 'identified projecting culture' (Hurn 2016, p. 81). However, within the ambit of cultural diplomacy, sports diplomacy provides public opportunities for governments in the service of diplomatic tasks, such as nation branding, a conscious and intended effort to clearly project an ideologically dominant national identity (Olins 2004). In this sense, sports diplomacy can create and disseminate a benignant image of a country among foreign publics (Murray 2012). International sporting events have claimed to have the capacity to 'increase understandings, bridge profound differences and break down stereotypes' (Merkel 2008, p. 290).

In the case of Australia's diplomatic sports strategy, its international sporting events have the capacity to be strong soft power assets in the service of branding Australia in the Asia-Pacific region. The 'Australian government sports diplomacy 2030' highlights the importance of Australian football diplomacy, emphasising the role of hosting international football competitions to forge sporting and cultural connections with Asia (Commonwealth of Australia 2019). In another instance, the Australia Government expected the 2015 Asian Football Confederation Asian Cup, an international event held in Australia, to promote Australia's international reputation and economic interests in the region (Australian Government 2012). Building on this international reputation, 'promoting Australia as a host of choice for major international sporting events' and 'building connections with Asian neighbours' became key slogans of Australia's diplomacy of international sport (Commonwealth of Australia 2019, p. 11).

However, if football has been central in the latest Australian Government sports diplomacy focus, another international sport has been featuring in Australia's diplomatic sporting arena. Since 2003, Tennis Australia, the governing body of tennis in the country, has been strategically raising its profile in neighbouring nations with the Asia-Pacific campaign of the Australian Open, which is one of the most important yearly international sporting events held in Australia. As the first Grand Slam tennis event in the annual international tennis calendar and the only grand slam held in the Asia-Pacific region, the significance of the Australian Open for Australia-Asia relations is considerable. Using tennis as a platform, further examination of Australian sports diplomacy can be conducted beyond just the narrow lenses of its 'branding the country's' official strategy to deepen our understanding of sport as a diplomatic tool. In order to achieve this, it is vital to examine how different major sport stakeholders employ international sport as a diplomatic tool. This paper adopts the alternative perspective of non-state-based diplomacy by looking at Tennis Australia's own conduct of diplomacy. More specifically, this paper examines the role of Li Na, the world-known Chinese female tennis player, as a sports diplomat of the Australian Open.

Li Na became a globally famous sports celebrity when she won the singles title at the 2011 French Open, becoming the first Asian woman to win a Grand Slam. During her professional career, she developed a decade-long relationship with the Australian Open. She was the runner-up of the 2011 and 2013 tournaments, and she finally won the women's singles competition in 2014. After her retirement in 2014, she was assigned a new ambassadorial role by the Australian Open as its friend (Pearce 2014). Considering Li Na's enduring sporting relationship with this tournament, we ask whether she can be named a sports celebrity diplomat. We investigate the reasons for her success in this unofficial but relevant role for the cultural relations between Australia and the global superpower of China. By using a content analysis of the most relevant news reports from Australian and Chinese mainstream media outlets during a period of 13 years (2006 to 2019), we aim to further the discussion of 'women's tennis diplomacy' and its relations to international sport as diplomacy.

We start by discussing sports diplomacy as a vehicle of cultural and public diplomacy. We examine the role of international sport in the construction of a nation's soft power (Murray 2012, Pigman 2014, Rofe 2016). This discussion is followed by brief notes on the connections between sports diplomacy and celebrityhood. Then, we point out specific gender issues in the Chinese society that will further our understanding of Li Na's rising profile as a cultural sports diplomat. After presenting the methodological design and procedures of this study, we explain the ways we have scrutinised mainstream media outlets both in China and in Australia to bring an in-depth

understanding of how Li Na's sports celebrityhood diplomat portrayal has been constructed in the media. As we present and discuss our findings, we examine the Australia–China diplomatic transnational connections, manifested by both the Australian Open and Li Na.

Sports diplomacy: out of the clutches of nation states

Culture has a relevant role in the relationships between different nations as it is through cultural expressions that people communicate their different identities (Anholt 2007). Cultural diplomacy is an exercise that affects international relations through cultural exchanges (Chey 2014) or governmental efforts by formal diplomats to channel the flow of culture (Isar 2017). It is often yoked to the notion of soft power and public diplomacy, raised as a 'citizen-oriented form of diplomacy' (Ang *et al.* 2015, p. 368) that concerns diplomatic engagements with global publics instead of with governmental counterparts, and persuades foreign audiences through culture, values and ideas (Cull 2009). Cultural diplomacy could be a subset of public diplomacy if culture is used to manipulate national images with an aim to influence foreign publics (Chey 2014).

Sport, as a vehicle for national images and the generation of soft power, falls in the space of cultural and public diplomacy (Deos 2014, Ang *et al.* 2015, Rowe 2018). It is beneficial to mix sport and diplomacy because sport could offer opportunities to win foreign public support (Cha 2009). As a diplomatic tool, sport helps different nations to mediate conflicts and enter into closer dialogue as well as spreading constructive values and compassion among diplomatic relations (Murray 2012). It uses sportspeople and sporting events to shape their perceptions in a way that is in line with the sending government's foreign policy (Murray 2012). Nevertheless, critical voices claim that sports diplomacy can be a 'political gimmick' (Murray 2012, p. 577). Mixed with diplomacy and politics, sport becomes a mere instrument for political leaders (Redeker 2008). From this perspective, when using sport as a diplomatic or political tool for the benefit of enforcing political strategy, governments see sport below them (Allison, 1993), remaining 'ignorant of the true nature of sport' (Redeker 2008, p. 499), which needs to be seen as a 'sacred' realm neither below nor beyond governments (Murray and Pigman 2014).

Moving from the traditional paradigm offered by Bull (1977), Kelley (2010, p. 288) sustains that 'the age of diplomacy as an institution is giving way to an age of diplomacy as a non-state behaviour'. Diplomacy is no longer an exercise exclusively between nation states, it is now ensnared within the public domain. Social and technological advances fragment the power once exclusively held by nation states, increasing diplomatic capabilities into the global public domain (Kelley 2010). In this sense, the state is decentralised from conducting diplomacy, and diplomacy is distinct from politics (Kelley 2010, Rofe 2016). This renewed concept of diplomacy also echoes Nicolson's view that the nature of diplomacy does not vary with its characters: representation, communication and negotiation (Nicolson 2001). If we look at sports diplomacy through the lens of diplomacy's three fundamental features, we can recast 'the centrality of state and the leakage of diplomatic practices to other polities', such as international sporting federations, international sporting events and athletes (Rofe 2016, p. 225).

Sport itself can offer opportunities to reap foreign public support (Cha 2009) with people-to-people contact between different nations (Chehabi 2001). This people-to-people diplomatic contact, features relations that 'go beyond the relations between states at the governmental level' and can be called 'intersocietal relations' (Chehabi 2001, p. 91). Sport contact between Iranian and American civil society strengthened these intersocietal relations and finally facilitated the normalisation of Iran–US official diplomatic relations (Chehabi 2001). This example highlights that individuals are always the starting point of true cultural diplomacy (Chey 2014). The focus on intersocietal relations contradicts the government's manipulation of sport through cultural diplomacy, in a way that regards cultural diplomacy as 'understanding and reconciliation' instead of as 'national strategic interests' (Chey 2014, p. 293). As sport belongs and reflects popular culture, 'sport diplomacy is well suited to the task of connecting the citizens of different countries on ostensibly neutral ground' (Rowe 2018, p. 153).

International sport as diplomacy and the sports celebrity diplomat

International sporting competitions contribute to grassroots forms of international community relationships that are far distinct from those between governments (Chehabi 2001). Information and technology transformation have made international sport a major communication platform where diplomacy concerns dialogue with the global public (Pigman 2014). International sport is important only because people care about it, therefore, competing in international sport itself is 'at its core about communicating with the public' (Pigman 2014, p. 96).

International sport, primarily organised by civil society organisations, is not originally intended to conduct any diplomatic actions (Murray and Pigman 2014). However, in order to be positively perceived by global fans, international sporting bodies must conduct public diplomacy on their own behalf: to communicate with the global public about their objectives (Pigman 2014). The necessity of interacting with the global public has propelled international sport to serve as a form of diplomacy in its own right (Murray and Pigman 2014). How effectively international sporting bodies communicate with global audiences determines the level of public support for the sport and for the event itself (Pigman 2014). Thus, it can be claimed that ultimately, international sport is only governed by the participants (Rofe 2016).

Sport produces a great number of non-state actors in public diplomacy which arguably has bigger impacts on international relations than governments' use of sport (Pigman 2014). Since sport and non-state diplomacy gain momentum in non-political environments, sportspeople can perform as celebrity diplomats, with their own capacity to put international issues under the global spotlight (Murray 2012). Their 'moralistic and heroic traits' and 'excellence and success' increase their capacity to produce social impacts outside of state borders (Pu *et al.* 2019, p. 27). The increasing visibility of international sport as a form of diplomacy highlights the importance of individuals, the athletes, who must consider their choices of communication and representation within the role of a sport diplomat (Pigman 2014). This is especially true in individual competition sports, such as tennis (Murray and Pigman 2014). Although sometimes these individuals compete in the international arena on behalf of national teams in events, such as the Davis Cup, tennis players, especially celebrity players like Roger Federer and Serena Williams, predominantly play as individuals at international sporting events (Murray and Pigman 2014). Yet how this is considered across different contexts remains a question of great importance. Tennis is increasingly popular as global elite sports in China's television programming (Horton 2010). As the Grand Slam of the Asia-Pacific (Schaller 2018), the Australian Open is the 'most watched tennis event in the Asia-Pacific region' (Australian Government 2012, p. 268) and is key to the promotion of the sport in the Asia-Pacific region (Tennis Australia 2018). Next, we discuss particular Chinese gender issues that have impacted the way Li Na built her public sporting diplomat persona.

Investigating Chinese sportswomen: gender and nation rebranding

The People's Republic of China, since its foundation in 1949, aims to build a new global identity underpinned by respect and esteem, as a means to overcome the century-long history of humiliation (Dong 2014). International sports offer a solid platform for the Chinese Communist Party to articulate the country's national identity (Dong 2014). In this sense, Chinese women athletes, who usually have better performances and results in international sports events than their male counterparts, serve as a source of national pride (Dong 2014). Their on-field accomplishments are believed by the Chinese Communist Party to be capable of demonstrating the new and confident China to the world (Dong 2014).

For China and Chinese women athletes, national image building and gender constructs have been closely connected in the past 40 years (Dong 2014). In the 1980s, the sport system in China was still state-sponsored. All athletes, including women, conformed to an equal military discipline (Chong 2013). This system was designed to build fearless competitors whose aim was to display a tough

national identity to the outside (Chong 2013). Being an individual was clearly not an option for Chinese sportswomen in China's collective sports system (*juguotizhi*) (Chong 2013). The rigorous training and the body controls imposed by the system were intentionally built to 'erase any gender differences' (Brownell 2008, p. 110). The state system would work hard to suppress any feature considered 'feminine' from the Chinese women athletes (Brownell 2008). The aim was to emphasise the traditional masculine toughness in the national sports system, strengthening the collective identity whose only concern was the national glory (Brownell 1995, Chong 2013). However, gender construction of Chinese women athletes began to change since the 1980s.

Since the 1980s, the implementation of economic reforms into a socialist market economy and opening-up policy has initiated substantial cultural changes in China, which in turn encouraged growing interest across Chinese citizens in the cultures and values of other countries (Horton 2008, Dong 2014). Since then, neoliberal ideologies of individualism and the 'self-made' person started to permeate Chinese society (Chong 2013). Individual enterprise and meritocracy became important values that have influenced gender constructs (Chong 2013). These changes were particularly evident within the sports field.

As opposed to the traditional expectation on Chinese women to be more obedient than their male counterparts, Chinese women athletes have become more assertive and individualistic (Dong 2014). The sexless female athlete whose success was amalgamated to the nation's glory was replaced by sportswomen, such as diving celebrity Guo Jingjing, who were keen to emphasise to the global audiences their Westernised femininity, individuality and physical beauty (Chong 2013). Within China's sport system, this renewed interest in new styles of femininity with an emphasis on gender differences is a strong reflection of the social changes that have taken place in China in the past 40 years, shaped by the 1980s economic reforms (Evans 2008). Nowadays, China not only asks its women athletes to bring national glory but also to represent the emerging China in the global arena by performing their expected and renewed femininity, which surely includes the skills of being pleasing and diplomatic (Chong 2013). The gendered ideals of Chinese sportswomen were primarily constructed in response to China's political pursuits, and to the articulation of China's image in particular (Chong 2013). Even though the gendered ideals of Chinese sportswomen changed over time, their gender identity is still outweighed by their Chinese identity (Riordan and Dong 1996). Later on, this paper will show how Li Na has not only navigated but also employed these conflicting gender ideals in order to establish a strong voice within the neoliberal context of international sport. Next, we present the methodological procedures we undertook to investigate how Li Na has been portrayed in both Chinese and Australian sports media on her path to sports celebrityhood.

Methodology

Background

We adopted a qualitative case study to investigate the importance of women's tennis diplomacy in Australian-Chinese cultural relations from the perspective of the media. Case studies aim to produce context-dependent knowledge where individual experience is 'at the very heart of expert activity' (Flyvbjerg 2006, p. 222). Thus, Li Na's case study aims to provide an in-depth understanding (Hancock and Algozzine 2016) of 'women's tennis diplomacy' and sport celebrity diplomats as cross-cultural mediators in international sport diplomacy. In order to gain in-depth understanding within this case, we have conducted a content analysis of mainstream media reports that have been continuously and consistently reporting the Australian Open events. Content analysis is a research tool that identifies meanings and provides a comprehensive summation of the data in a social phenomenon (Silverman 2016). In content analysis, the data set is systematically examined for 'recurrent instances' (Silverman 2016, p. 85). These identified recurrent cases are then grouped together by a coding system that informs the unit of analysis. Then, as part of textual analysis, content analysis further

examines 'how meaning is made by breaking down the texts where relevant terms appear' (Bainbridge *et al.* 2008, p. 236).

Data sources, sampling and coding

Off-field news reports were chosen from both Australian mainstream media – *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), and Chinese mainstream media – *People's Daily* (Chinese Edition) and *China Daily* (English edition). The *Sydney Morning Herald*, considered as a newspaper of record for Australia, has the reputation of being one of the oldest published newspaper in the country (Simon and Buller 2013). *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney) claims itself as specialised in sports coverage, supported by award-winning journalism that delivers the news, stories and interviews across all sports. According to the Australian Press Council (2008), both newspapers are major metropolitan dailies in Australia that ranked top four in terms of readership numbers. In addition, as consumption of capitalism expands and media sport markets saturate the West, Western media corporations increase their reach to unexploited areas, such as the inclusion of women in sport, as a way to appear more gender inclusive and to gain public and commercial benefits for the media corporations (Rowe and Gilmour 2010). These mainstream media outlets also turn to the emerging economies and countries of Asia to capitalise on their huge populations, which is important for the future of sports media (Rowe and Gilmour 2006). Their representations of issues like women in sport and Asia in global media sport are not based on the national boundaries but built on the internationalised media sports market (Rowe and Gilmour 2010).

Although *People's Daily* and *China Daily* are said to be the mouthpiece of the Chinese government in the global arena (Li 2017), they have turned out to be more diverse and flexible. Recent media studies have shown that these outlets have become increasingly reliant on materials from international news agencies in the globalised media environment (Rowe 2019). Furthermore, the market and commercialisation-led thinking among national media outlets has propelled them to step out of the clutches of national interests and to present more diverse voices (Stockman 2013). Therefore, these four mainstream media channels were found to have reliable, constant and relevant information about the Australian Open, covering its different branches of competition (men, women, doubles, wheelchair) during the period investigated (2006–2019).

Google advanced search was used in retrieving media press. The traditional digital research archives, such as LexisNexis, are blind to massive wire stories in broad searches of English-language news (Weaver and Bimber 2008). This means that 'news databases do not necessarily constitute archives of the whole content of news appearing in a particular news outlet or in a specific news market' (Weaver and Bimber 2008, p. 515). Google advanced search, however, employs more metadata functionality to increase search precision in an information discovery system, acting more like online library catalogues (Beall 2010). In Google advanced search, we entered the keywords 'Li Na' and 'Australian Open', and then the URL of each of the four media outlets' websites. The initial criteria for news articles' selection was the period, from 2006, the year of Li Na's debut at this event, to 2019, the year of her presenting the trophy as a special guest of the Australian Open. It is visible that the number of news articles related to Li Na and the Australian Open reached the apex in 2011 when Li Na became the first Asian women to fight into the women's singles final of the Australian Open, and also in 2014 when Li Na became the first Asian woman to win the women's singles championship of the Australian Open (see Figure 1).

As can be seen in Figure 2, Figure 1, 123 news articles were found with these relevant keywords. From those, 1,078 articles were excluded because of repetition (e.g. different persons with the same name 'Li Na') or irrelevant information for this study (such as tournaments' timetables or game results).

Next, we employed the content analysis procedures explained above ('recurrent instances') to code the remaining 45 relevant items into four key topics for this case study (see Table 1): (1) gender (mainly focused on Li Na's gendered image in the context of her marriage and athletic life) (2) public

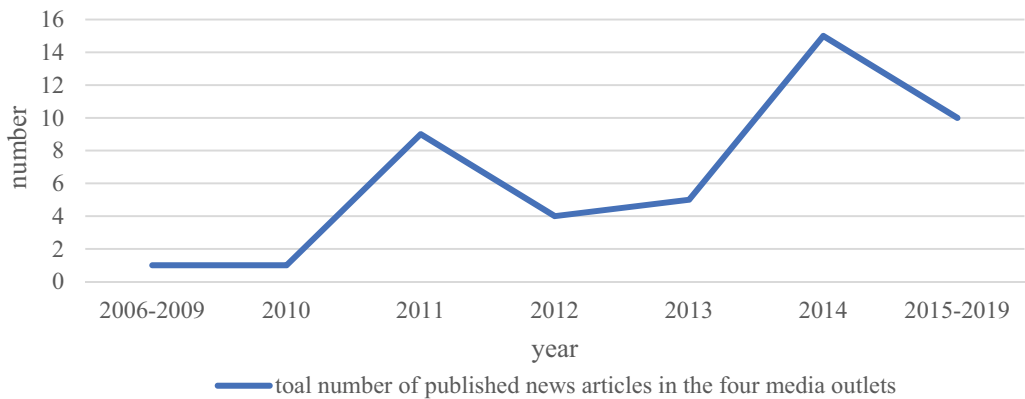


Figure 1. Counting results of all media articles according to the published year.

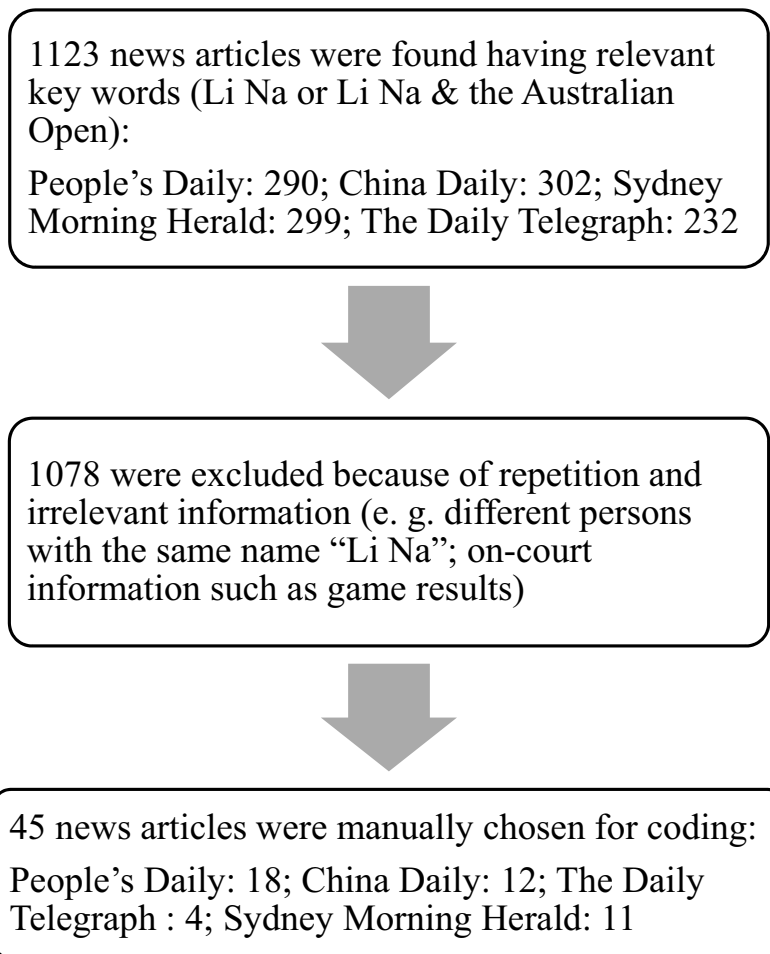


Figure 2. Selection process for the coding sources.

Table 1. Coding results of the media narratives from the four media outlets.

	gender	neoliberal traits	public persona	cultural diplomatic significance
<i>People's Daily</i>	4	8	2	7
<i>China Daily</i>	3	3	4	6
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	1	1	1	2
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	1	5	1	8
Total	9	17	8	23

Note: 44 articles out of 45 were coded. One article was not coded because its content did not fit any of the four key topics identified. Some articles were coded twice as they contained two or more topics of interest for this analysis. The aim of coding was to categorise media narratives into different frames to deliver better analysis.

persona (categorised by how the articles described Li Na's personality and personal characters on and off the court and how these have challenged the stereotype of conventional Chinese women athletes in transnational sporting contexts); (3) neoliberal traits (concerned with how the articles described Li Na's tennis career linked to the sports market, Li Na as a self-enterprising tennis player, and how the news described her mediated relationship with Chinese political authority); (4) cultural diplomatic significance (included comments on Li Na's role in shaping the cultural understanding between Australia and China in public spheres, and her impact on the Australian Open's expansion to Asian markets).

In the following sections, we discuss each of the four themes that have emerged from the coding process. We employ extracts of these items to analyse Li Na's trajectory from a state-sponsored woman to a sports celebrity diplomat of the Australian Open. We explore the relevance of each theme to Li Na's diplomatic representation on behalf of the Australian Open as a sports celebrity from China. In other words, we discuss the relevance of Li Na's celebrityhood, which was drawn from the four themes, to the representation of the Australian Open as a non-state actor in shaping cultural understanding between Australian and Chinese public. It is important to reinforce (as per Table 1) that all four topics (new gender constructs, public persona, neoliberal traits and cultural diplomatic significance) are amalgamated in her 'real life'; they all have contributed to Li Na's journey towards her sports celebrity diplomat status; as much as our analysis tries to separate them in order to organise and construct these narratives, these four themes come together in the making up of the neoliberal independent sports woman diplomat.

Findings and discussion

Gender

The state daughter

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Harris, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Harris 2014)), 'the Chinese system initially groomed Li for badminton, following in the footsteps of her father, who was a successful player. But she was switched to tennis, against her wishes, at the age of nine'. However, Li Na's father passed away before Li Na was admitted into China's national tennis team. In 2004, Jiang Shan, who became Li Na's husband in 2006, started to coach her within China's rigid *juguotizhi*. Jiang Shan played an important role at the beginning of her tennis career, providing a sense of protection for her, particularly in the national team (People's Daily 2014). 'She admires Jiangshan as he has the quality of being mature, tolerant and reliable, which for her are all related to the images of her dead father' (People's Daily 2014). Jiang Shan's identity as a father-like protector gave rise to Li Na as a daughter-like subject, a preliminary indicator into the limited autonomy she was able to experience which was mirrored by the collectivism of the state-run sports system.

'Chinese tennis is not a solo enterprise. There are no singles. Each player is always playing doubles – with the world's largest nation as a partner' (Silkstone 2010). The SMH journalist taps into the word 'collectivism' when he tries to depict what tennis looks like in China when stating that

'a communist dictatorship in which individualism is a growing trend but far from an established ideology'. (Silkstone 2010). Li Na found herself in the state-run sports system (*juguotizhi*) in the early period of her tennis career. 'The good thing about playing on this tour is you play for yourself'; the SMH journalist quotes Serena Williams to make his point that individualism was not 'a thing' for Li Na before 2010 (Silkstone 2010). As a member of China's national tennis team, Li Na, playing in transnational contexts, needed to give back 60% of her prize money and endorsement to the state, which were used to fund future Chinese players (Silkstone 2010, Pearce 2011). This can be witnessed during the 2010 Australian Open. Li Na became the first Chinese woman to reach the semi-finals of the Australian Open women's singles tournament. This victory is depicted by the media as being supported by 'a different kind of ambition: the greater good and the glory of the nation' (Silkstone 2010). In this sense, Li Na, in her early tennis career, was strongly affiliated with the country when she played in transnational contexts. She failed to have full rights to manage her financial situation, and her prize money was counted as an essential part of China's national sport system's collective budget.

It is clear that, in her early tennis career, Li Na was submitted to patriarchal kinship relations that deemed female athletes as non-adult subjects who cannot enter into social and labour relations of their own accord (Joo 2012). Since Li Na's financial gains and on-court victories were calculated as an essential part of the political plan of building China's sports power, Li Na presented a daughter-like image that served as the conduit 'through which their fathers' efforts and dreams are realised' (Joo 2012, p. 143). It is gender inequality that underpins patriarchal control of national authority over female athletes (Ong, 2006). The existing gender inequalities in those patriarchal relationships commonly prevent female athletes from representing themselves as individual competitors in transnational sporting contexts (Joo 2012). Here, Li Na as a national tennis player affiliated to the sports authority, was still a citizen-subject that spoke for the state-based diplomatic action when she played overseas.

The danfei and the construction of the independent woman

Li Na's daughter-like image started to vanish when she split from the collective sports system and began to play as a self-financing player in transnational sporting contexts. In December 2008, the Tennis Administration Centre of the General Administration of Sport of China initiated the *danfei* (*fly solo*) policy. According to this policy, the four top female tennis players in China, one of which was Li Na, were granted the freedom to organise their own professional teams and arrange their own schedules on a self-finance basis (Hucheng 2014). Li Na's split from China's collective national sports system since 2009 provided the foundation for her major breakthrough. In the 2011 Australian Open, at the age of 29, she entered the women's singles final becoming the first Asian woman to enter a Grand Slam singles final. Still in the same year, she made another historical step by winning the French Open women's singles title. Following these breakthroughs at the Australian and French Open in 2011, Li Na became a supreme target for international brands. In addition to apparel sponsors like Nike and racquet sponsors like Babolat, Li Na had a series of big brands on her list, such as Rolex, Haagen-Dazs and Spider Tech (Chi 2011). Her increasing commercial value made her one of the richest and most celebrated athletes in China and even in the world.

Since the announcement of the *Danfei* policy, the previous 60% of prize money and endorsements, which were previously given to the state, gradually decreased and in 2010, Li Na was only tasked with providing 12% of her earnings back to the state (Silkstone 2010). When asked about the motivation behind her on-court strive, Li Na directly pointed out that it was the prize money that inspired her late in her match against Wozniacki (Pearce 2011). The granted autonomy enabled Li Na to 'make her own travel and scheduling arrangements and do things her way', instead of being organised by 'the Soviet-style state sports system' (Pearce 2011). An additional outcome of this growing autonomy in the dissolution of the male dominance rooted in patriarchal father-daughter relations previously embedded in her tennis career (Brownell 1995) as Li Na was granted the permission to hire her own coaches and manage her prize money. In 2011, a report by *China Daily*

titled *'New breed: China's stylish new winners'* hailed Li Na as an out-spoken modern-day sports celebrity with on-court expressiveness towards her husband Jiang Shan and off-court humour and openness to the media (China Daily 2011a). Li Na would shout at her husband when she was dissatisfied with her on-court performance (People's Daily 2014), and she would also make jokes by imitating her husband's snoring in her post-match media conference (China Daily 2012). 'Li Na, once known as a maverick because of her outspoken ways and frequents bust-ups with the CTA, has effectively broken the stereotype of the strong but silent Chinese athletes, emphasizing a phenomenon she did not start but probably best represents' (China Daily 2011a).

Li Na's charming personality came to symbolise her boldness to show off 'her individuality compared to her determinedly anonymous predecessors of a couple of decades ago' (China Daily 2011a). Since splitting from the collectivism-based national team, Li Na's expressiveness and humorous spirits have been increasingly noticeable in the media discourse, and is depicted as a sign of her individualism. The media narratives frame these images of Li Na as shattering the conventional representations of previous Chinese women athletes from the national sports system, who are reticent in front of the media and audience (China Daily 2011a, 2011b, 2012). Therefore, Li Na has successfully challenged the orientalist stereotype of the Asian female – unemotional, detached and single-minded (Joo 2012). Li Na's outspoken persona and feminised body challenged the system of gender inequality embedded in China's male-headed *juguotizhi* (Chong 2013). She rejected the stereotype of conventional Chinese women athletes and produced a new gendered image of Chinese professional tennis players as independent women (Brownell 2008). Li Na's strong personality and her autonomous relationship with the media turned her into a threat to the masculine ego (Joo 2012). Thus, the Chinese media intensely followed and portrayed the new woman in the making (Rowe and Gilmour 2010).

Here, we start seeing how this gender transformation develops the basis for both the neoliberal individual (Ong, 2006) and the cultural sports diplomat that transcends the traditional state-based diplomatic action (Kelley 2010, Rofe 2016). Whilst Li Na still professes Asian and Chinese traditional values, she also constructs new gender parameters for Chinese women, which will be further enhanced as she deepens her connections to the Australian Open and the Australian tennis fans.

Public persona: from on-court maverick to post-athletics motherhood

During her tennis career in the WTA (Women's Tennis Association), Li Na was seen as a dissident that defied Chinese convention. The symbolised tattoos on her chest – a red rose and a heart offer one example (Harris 2014). Having a tattoo is rarely seen among Chinese athletes, thus indicating how Li Na is different from the majority of national sports system players (Chi 2011). Others noted that she was 'often seen as a maverick, . . . she was prepared to ditch her husband, Jiangshan, as coach in favour of Rodriguez' (Harris 2014). This spirit is captured in Li Na's ruthless mindset across her tennis career (China Daily 2011c). One a more structural level, the unconventionality of Li Na's public persona also lies in her unwillingness to be restrained by the Chinese sports system (officialdom) and her reluctance to face Chinese domestic media, which is framed by *China Daily* as 'a reputation for being difficult' (China Daily 2011c). It is clear that Li Na's public persona as 'being difficult' to officialdom has a negative relation to the collectivism embedded in the images of traditional Chinese athletes (Chong 2013). Yet, such spirit appeared to have a different reputation, charming the tennis audiences in Melbourne in 2011 (China Daily 2011c). Even though she lost to Kim Clijsters in the women's singles final of the 2011 Australian Open, Li Na could still joke about her performance, and was said to be 'humble and happy' (Shanghai 2011). In other instances, Li Na has presented a humorous nature by 'joking about the financial rewards on offer in tennis, castigating her husband, who married her in January 2006, for spoiling her sleep by snoring, and ribbing journalists for suggesting that at 29 she is old for a tennis player' (China Daily 2011c). What can be further witnessed in media discourses, is a reflection on Li Na's post-athletic public person as a representation of womanhood, potentially grounded in the spirit she portrayed in her tennis

career: 'The transformation of Li Na's public persona from an expressively tough player to a gentle and beautiful businesswoman with makeup manifests the change of her life from on-court competitiveness to post-athletics successful business career' (People's Daily, 2017). In Li Na's own words, 'sport enables females to gain confidence and to find happiness in your life' and 'I hope my sporting experiences could motivate more females to fall in love with sport' (People's Daily, 2017).

It is evident throughout the media discourses that Li Na's post-athletic persona presents a different ideal that few Chinese women athletes could achieve, one unrestrained by the Chinese sports system, and perhaps one that is closer to the Western ideals of femininity and modernity (Chong 2013). Here we see how the new gender ideas that permeate Chinese society since the early 1980s (Dong 2014) have influenced Li Na's public persona's change across her athletic and post-athletic life. Her reputation of 'being difficult' and 'unconventional' – breaking the strict rules about Chinese sportswomen gender performances for instance – are relevant in the diplomatic representation of Li Na in the global arena.

Neoliberal Li Na: I do not play for my country!

Since the national sports system was not financially responsible for Li Na's career anymore, the role of her husband Jiang Shan in Li Na's professional life began to change. In recounting Li Na's spectacular win at the 2011 French Open, *China Daily* portrayed Jiang Shan as 'the man behind her' (Chi 2011). Jiang Shan was emotionally important for Li Na's on-court performance because of the high level of trust between the couple that had accumulated since the start of their romance (People's Daily 2014). In media narratives, this sense of tacit understanding is perceived as an essential part of team positivity, which means Jiang Shan is deemed as a member of Li Na's professional team where Li Na is his absolute boss (Li 2011). In 2013, an SMH report titled 'Li Na winning the battle of hearts & minds', referred to Jiang Shan's humorous attitude towards this position: 'Who is the boss? Her, her – no question about it!' (Pearce 2013). In other words, Jiang Shan's support role was firstly in the interests of his wife's professional advancement. His subordinate position in Li Na's team was ascertained by Li Na's post-match interview: 'I actually do not watch potential opponents playing on television. I leave that for my husband. This is the job of the coach not for the player', and 'Life is life, but tennis is a job' (Li 2011). These media extracts highlight how Li Na's tennis career had completely shifted to a market-oriented enterprise. By self-managing their sports business in such a traditional neoliberal fashion, Li Na and her husband became 'self-enterprising individuals in different spheres of everyday life' (Ong, 2006, p. 14).

A media narrative by the *People's Daily* contrasts Li Na with her predecessors from the national sports system, questioning whether Li Na's neoliberal professionalism opposed Chinese nationalism (Hucheng 2014). In the media discourse, Li Na herself downplayed her pioneering role in Chinese tennis history by saying she hoped to reflect on her breakthrough in some privacy, instead of returning home to national fanfare (Shanghai 2011). *People's Daily* also undermined the nationalist sentiment of Li Na's Grand-Slam championship, saying that Li Na's success was due to the *Danfei* policy, and she would still proceed in her way with or without the title of national hero (Hucheng 2014). Yet this path was not without critique. After winning the 2011 French Open women's singles title, Li Na was accused of not expressing her gratitude to the Chinese people and authorities in the first place (China Daily 2011a). In this sense, professional interests triumphed over national ones in Li Na's victory speech at both the Australian and French Open. Li Na even showed her nonchalance towards the Chinese Tennis Association and Chinese authority by saying that she did not play for her country (Minfei, in People's Daily 2014). This act was captured by *China Daily* as a departure from national collective solidarity and as a celebration of Li Na's individuality (China Daily 2011a).

Since neoliberalism is articulated as a negative relation to state power (Ong, 2006), 'including changing gender roles and increasing ideological emphasis on self-reliance and individual competition' (Joo 2012, p. 133), Li Na's individuality gave rise to her neoliberal standing in the disarticulation of collective nationalism and state control over her professional career. This, on the one hand,

manifests the transition of Li Na to a neoliberal subject with 'disentangled citizenship claims once knotted in a single territorialized mass' (Ong, 2006, p.15). This neoliberal profile, on the other hand, offers her the individuality that rejects the possibility of representing the Chinese government as a national athlete. Here, we start to see the potential of Li Na as a sports celebrity diplomat that transcends the boundaries of nation states. The Chinese media noticed her status change, reporting on her 'new citizenship' as a symbol of the neoliberal independent woman: '*Australian media consider Li Na as half-Australian*'. They expect their 'Australian Li' to win the Australian Open at her Australian 'home' (People's Daily 2014). The news article also recounts an Australian sports commentator who said that 'when Australian Li is on the semi-final, I think channel 7 should put an Australian flag besides her name' (People's Daily 2014). Her neoliberal citizenship as 'Australian Li' is likely to enhance her relations to the Australian Open and Australian tennis fans in non-political environments.

Cultural significance: the sports celebrity diplomat

Women's tennis diplomacy: Li Na and the Australian Open

The two Australian media in this research, *The Daily Telegraph* and *SMH*, are often found claiming Li Na as an essential part of the Australian Open marketing strategy. In media discourse, Li Na was a great testament of the Australian Open's international growth strategy. As chief executive of WTA, Stacey Allaster stated about the Australian Open, 'Asia-Pacific is the priority, and specifically China' (Pearce 2011). The 2011 women's singles final between Li Na and Kim Clijsters was one of the most-watched matches in the history of the Australian Open, with 18 million tuning in for this clash (Smith and Cook 2013). In 2012, more than half of the Australian Open's television audience were based in Asia, and a third came from China (Smith and Cook 2013). 'Australian Open is a blessed place for me!' as Li Na herself said, 'Australian Open is the grand slam closest to us, the one that is easiest for fans to follow and get excited about. I am so happy that by winning the Australian Open, it was like I could share my enjoyment of the tournament with the whole of China' (Pearce 2014). In this sense, global audiences especially Asian tennis fans, 'are connected in a shared experience of sporting contest' (Rofe 2016, p. 217), which is Li Na's tennis game at the Australian Open provided by media outlets. Here, we began to see the formation of Li Na as a sports celebrity diplomat that has the potential to engage into dialogues with the global public, especially with Asian tennis audiences (Pigman 2014).

In *SMH*'s article titled '*Champion effort has made Australian Open the success it is*', Li Na's significance to the Australian Open was admired. The article moves to suggest that when she became the first Asian woman to win the women's singles title of this 'Asia-Pacific Grand-Slam tennis event', she helped to consolidate the Open's status in the Asian region (Mitchell 2015). One of Li Na's most important contributions to the marketing of the Australian Open, as per '*Changing face of the game*', was that she generated huge media attention from China (Pearce 2011). Li Na has been said to triple the Chinese media at the Australian Open in just 4 years (Pearce 2011). However, rating statistics mentioned above were only part of the story as her success had resounding impact on China's engagement in the Open outside of their sportspersons. In '*The Australian Open is cashing on the success of Chinese star Li Na*', China's biggest social media Sina Weibo – the Chinese equivalent of Twitter – and Tencent, one of the most popular portals in China, are reported to be part of the promotion platforms of the Australian Open (Balym 2013). The media also reports that Li Na generated massive tourist demands from China to Melbourne Park, where the Australian Open is held annually: 'as the first player from China and Asia to win a grand slam, Li Na has apparently done wonders for Victoria's tourism industry' (Smith and Cook 2013). China became the key to the proliferation of local tourism (Balym 2013). In 2013, there was an increase of 82% in the tickets sold to Chinese tourists, and the number of contracts between Chinese travel agencies and the Australian Open jumped from one to seven (Balym 2013). 'They are not coming because of Federer, Djokovic or even Sharapova, it is patriotic support towards China's own emerging players' (Balym 2013).

Finally, Li Na played a central role in globalising the Chinese tennis market by generating tennis interest across China, where tennis was a newly popular sport with almost 12 million people engaged in regular play, particularly within the Chinese middle class (Horton 2010, 2012). Once the Australian Open created its own Chinese website and social media account, the tournament garnered the interest of 300 million registered users (Balym 2013). In two SMH reports, respectively, named *'China courted for new boom'* and *'Melbourne's Open door to China as tennis becomes an Asian hit'*, Australian media highlighted the role of China's middle class in the consumption of Australian-Open-related commodities, such as Mandarin apps of online live scoring at the Australian Open and the previously mentioned Australian Open website in Mandarin dedicated to its registered 300 million users (Smith and Cook 2013, Cooper 2013).

Li Na announced her retirement in the September of 2014, 8 months after her ground-breaking championship at the Australian Open. *'Li Na to spin interest at Melbourne Park as Chinese take-away hits new highs'* portrayed Li Na as assuming an 'ambassadorial role' at Melbourne Park after her retirement (Pearce 2014). There, she is referred as 'Friend of the Australian Open'. *'Hot property Li has a fan club in the billions'* directly pointed out that Li Na 'has opened the door to the sport's future' by 'raising the sport's profile in the eyes of the massive Asian audience' (Harris 2014). As Li Na said after the announcement of her retirement: 'I will still choose tennis, and I would still choose being a famous Asian as well' (China Daily 2015). It is clear that Li Na's unusual identity as the first Asian player to win the women's singles championship of the Australian Open enables her to amass diplomat-like powers from the networks of the global public domain (Kelley 2010). Li Na's excellence and success enabled her to produce social and cultural impacts that were well situated in the realignment of the Australian Open in the Asia-Pacific region – diplomatic conduct in its own right (Pigman 2014). Her role as a sports celebrity diplomat stands in a non-political environment and could be partly perceived with strong relations to international sports diplomacy.

NAustralia: Li Na and Australian tennis fandom

When Li Na won the women's singles title of the 2014 Australian Open, her autobiography *Duzishangchang* ('fighting by myself', or *My Life* in its English version) achieved great popularity in Australia's Apple e-book store. Australia was the only place, in addition to Asia, where the paperback version of this English book could be found (People's Daily 2014c). During the book launch, Li Na encouraged young people to strive for their dreams by staying true to themselves and always keeping their passion in mind (People's Daily 2014c). The significance of this English version and her encouraging words is that Li Na's symbolic image as a self-enterprising woman was gaining momentum in the West, especially in her second home – Australia (People's Daily 2014). The visibility of Li Na's autobiography in Australia shows the Australian people's eagerness to consume Li Na-related commodities as well as the overall embedded image of this Chinese tennis player in the Australian consumer market. Given the Australian's eagerness to consume Li Na as a significant public figure, she was also able to be entrenched in their culture, while sharing her own. The *China Daily* reported that Li Na's fandom groups within the Australian-Chinese community as they made the Australian Open a home-like, comfortable place for her (*'Most of the winning is happening off the court'*; Xiaochen, China Daily 2012). Overall, Li Na's popularity with the Australian-Chinese community lies in the national sentiments and sense of being Chinese that she successfully evoked. In *'Basis lies in the public and source comes from communication'*, Yuming (2013) writes that Li Na delivered a lesson evidencing that cultural exchanges in public spheres provided the enduring sources for the development of Australia–China relations (in People's Daily 2013). This echoes what Chey (2014) claims regarding cultural diplomacy: individuals are always the starting point of true cultural diplomacy.

In her home market, Li Na is reported by the Chinese media as the representative of a new generation of Chinese athletes who are different from their obedient and isolated predecessors: *'Sports stars become best cultural ambassadors'* (China Daily 2011a); *'New breed: China's stylish new winners'* (China Daily 2011b). This constitutes part of the new China where individualism is a growing

trend, and Li Na is a platform for understanding this (Jingjin 2011). Here we argue that practices of consuming Li Na-related commodities by Australian people provides a significant means to enrich their understandings about China, and Li Na's vision helps them shape their cultural understandings about this emerging country (Joo 2012).

Finally, Li Na's love affair with Australia, and Australia's for her, is evident in the way tennis fans crafted the word *Naustralia* – by merging her first name 'Na' with 'Australia' (Peoples' Daily 2014d). In this sense, Li Na is considered by tennis fans as an important part of Australian tennis (Peoples' Daily 2014d). Similar terms are also found related to other sports celebrities, for example, 'Durantula' for NBA basketball player Durant and 'Inmessionante' for the football super star Messi. Through the term 'Naustralia', Li Na is not only manifested as an essential component of Australian tennis culture, but it also shows the marvellous ability of her neoliberal capital to touch the massive Australian tennis fanbase and broader public. Therefore, Li Na's cultural ambassadorship, which deviated from a government-to-public route to become a true kind of public-to-public communication. Her role as a sports celebrity diplomat was well situated in the diplomatic representation and communication outside national boundaries that concerns the intersocietal relations between Australian and Chinese publics (Pigman 2014).

Li Na: the gendered journey of the neoliberal sports diplomat

In the early period of Li Na's tennis career, she trained and played within China's national sports system. In this role, her on-court victory in transnational sporting contexts served as conduits through which national interests such as China's global profile and reputation could be bolstered. Li Na was treated as a citizen-subject in service of her already-defined role as a national player and was instrumental in presenting the global China in the worldwide arena. Li Na's citizenship rooted in China's territory began to dissolve as she earned the freedom to play in her own right as a professional tennis player. During this process, Li Na articulated a self-enterprising neoliberal standing that centres on her professionalism and individuality as a deviation from Chinese political authority, while challenging the Chinese patriarchal gender order. Therefore, Li Na's individuality is in strong contrast with the conventional, obedient and silent Chinese women players in the national sports system. Her denial of representing the nation strengthened her neoliberal individuality by articulating her negative relation to state power. Furthermore, her emphasised western femininity did not erase the gender differences between the sexes anymore. On the contrary, Li Na was highlighting those contrasts through her physical beauty and charming persona. This new gender performance was a key element of her journey to build up the self-made woman who did not represent a nation anymore. As this individual attractive woman, she would take ownership over her career and her business. Since it is gender inequality that underpins Chinese patriarchal control of national authority over women athletes, her defiance of traditional gender roles is part of her neoliberal celebrityhood and supports her journey to her cultural ambassadorship.

The background of Li Na's cultural ambassadorship is that she first speaks for herself in the interests of professionalism without political interests taking the lead. Although Li Na presented as a representation of China's diplomatic strategy to western audiences, particularly branding the country as a peacefully rising power in the world, Li Na's cultural ambassadorship was advanced by her own public persona as an individual, charismatic woman. This is part of the neoliberal professionalism for a tennis player where political interests are kept out of sight. Therefore, Li Na is not well situated into the space of traditional sports diplomacy where national interests with governments' foreign policies are the priorities. Indeed, Li Na is a sports celebrity diplomat in the context of international sports who can shape intersocietal relations in the public sphere; she is a cultural entrepreneur able to share her own vision of the Chinese nation.

In the context of Australia–China cultural relations, Li Na did provide the possibility of shaping mutual cultural understandings between the Australian and Chinese public, particularly evidenced by consumption of her image in the target consumer society. For Australian tennis

fans, Li Na's neoliberal image embodies a version of China where individualism is a growing trend and where women have more voice. Li Na also brought a sense of Chineseness to the Australian-Chinese diaspora. Furthermore, she has the capacity to touch the Chinese tennis fandom and broader public, especially the growing middle class in China through her distinct Asian image, which was capitalised by the Australian Open in its Asian campaign. On behalf of the Australian Open, Li Na generated massive media attention from China and enormous tourist demands from Chinese people, which further cultivated the Chinese tennis fanbase for the Australian Open.

Li Na also brought to the Chinese public a national reflection on sports culture. Li Na's triumphs at the Australian Open proved that there are diversified ways for players to achieve their personal values. Being connected with the national sports system is one way, while being a self-enterprising player in the corporate structure of the tennis world is another. However, by adopting the latter scheme, the athlete plays for their professional interests instead of others' political interests. In other words, the Australian Open, as an international sporting event with its own diplomacy conduct, provided non-political terrains for Li Na to revitalise her career and bring new values to tennis on Chinese soil. It was the sense of self-worth that inspired her to proceed in this field and, as she envisaged, this could inspire young Chinese people in the same way. In this sense, Li Na is the sports celebrity diplomat whose influence goes far beyond sport.

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