

## More Communicating, More Understanding

### --An Intercultural Study on Western News Media's Reports about Women Swimming

#### Champion Ye Shiwen in the 2012 London Olympic Games

Xiaochi ZHANG

School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University

No.1 Shi Da Road, Nanchong, 637009, Sichuan, P.R. China

E-mail: [Zhangxc66@126.com](mailto:Zhangxc66@126.com)

#### Abstract

*During the 2012 London Olympic Games, the Chinese athletes won the outstanding sport achievements as they got 39 gold medals. However, some Western news media have deliberately demonized Chinese athletes. Especially, Ye Shiwen separately won the women swimming 400m and 200m champions which also broke the Olympic world record in women swimming competition. At that time, some Western mass media lacked journalistic basic principles and philosophy, and reported some suspicious news or poured out some allegations against Ye Shiwen's new world women swimming records both on the newspapers and web pages. The author takes four Western new media reports for a case and tries to study on this case not only from an intercultural communication perspective but also from other fields of politics and social development, and hopes the Western journalists get more communicating with Chinese people and really understand more Chinese culture, so that the Western news media will really know the real reason why Chinese athletes could won so many gold medals. Therefore, the paper gives more details about Ye Shiwen's case and her personal growth information, meanwhile, analyzes the important roles which Chinese society, Chinese culture and athlete training system plays in Ye's development, and then discusses how to improve the intercultural communication between China and the West, so as to develop Olympic spirit, understand each other and enjoy Olympic games together.*

**Key words:** Intercultural communication, Chinese culture, Western culture, Western mass media, women swimming championship, Ye Shiwen, 2012 London Olympic Games, Olympic spirit

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Communicating is defined as the process by which meaning is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior. Communication is considered a process because it is an activity, and exchange, or a set of behaviors – not an unchanging product (Pearson and Nelson, 2003). As everybody has a slightly different background and has made different, unique experiences, no two people, even within the same culture, will ever have completely, one hundred percent identical systems concerning the exact meanings of signs and symbols when communicating. And in scientific communication, on the other hand, specifying the exact understanding and meaning of related words and symbols can be of great

importance (Thomas, 2010).

With the rapid expansion of mass media within national boundaries and across sovereign borders, mass communication has become a more and more important channel of interaction between different cultures ( Sun, 2009). Thus, the content of mass media is regarded by historians, anthropologists and sociologists as evidence of values and beliefs of a particular time and place or social group. The underlying assumption is that media content generally responds to the prevailing hopes, fears or beliefs of the people and reflects common values (McQuail, 2000 ). However, during the 2012 London Olympic Games, the different media in the world reported this event, and then some Western news media did not reflect real fact of some competitive programs, especially did not report the real fact about Ye Shiwen's victory in Women 400m Swimming Competition when she became the new women's 400 individual medley world record holder and champion.

At that time, some Western news media organizations have their own agendas, so they made their own choices as to what could be reported and what should be omitted according to their conventions rather than applying objective standards. And then, some were not objective in nature against Olympic spirit. Even more rumors came out after the competition, so that it is necessary for us to analyze this case from an intercultural communication and to avoid misunderstanding through communication.

## **2. A CASE**

Ye Shiwen, who is 16 years old and high school girl, is a Chinese swimmer. Fortunately, on July 28, at the 2012 London Olympic Games, Ye Shiwen won the women's 400m individual medley and set a world record with a time of 4 min 28.43 sec.

At a news conference, Ye Shiwen said to the reporters "I am not a robot, I am a lucky girl. I don't need to practice over and over every day." Although she's already broken the 400m world record, Ye Shiwen thought she could still do better. "I feel like I still have room to improve my stroke," Ye said, "I've strengthened my backstroke and butterfly, so I am getting better at the start. But I am still young and have some more potential in my body." ( Sun, 2012 )

However, some Western news media did not report the true story of this competition and added some unreal facts in their reports.

On July 29, 2012, John Lohn, columnist of Swimming World Magazine, his article's title was "Doubts Surrounding Ye Shiwen a Sad State of Affairs. He wrote: "It was going to happen. It was only a matter of when, and with now much force. Not minutes after Chinese youngster Ye Shiwen captured the gold medal in the 400 individual medley on the opening night of Olympic competition, accusations started to fly. She must be doping....For others, and this realization can be found in our commentary section and in other public forums, there was immediate doubt. Some individuals insinuate there was no way that performance could have been the result of sheer skill. Others flat-out pointed a finger, seemingly stating as fact that Ye is on performance-enhancing drugs. It seemed like still more would have to get in Ye's face and yell at the top of their lungs, 'You're not clean!'"(Lohn, 2012)

Evan Osnos, reporter from The New Yorker, in his article's title "Pride and Shame: China, the Olympics, and Ye Shiwen", he wrote: Triggering the suspicion this time was the sheer scale of Ye's success, or improved in the event by seven seconds since last year; she swam her final fifty meters faster than Ryan

Lochte swam his on the way to winning the men's four-hundred-meter medley. And John Leonard, a top U.S. swimming official, said Ye "looks like Superwoman" and called her performance "impossible." (Osnos, 2012).

Andy Bull's article title was "Ye Shiwen's world record Olympic swim 'disturbing', says top US coach" on the Guardian, he wrote: China has become embroiled in the first doping controversy of the London Games after one of the world's most respected coaches described the swimming prodigy Ye Shiwen's gold medal performance as "unbelievable" and "disturbing". The American John Leonard, executive director of the World Swimming Coaches Association, said the 16-year-old's performance was "suspicious" and said it brought back "a lot of awful memories" of the Irish swimming Michelle Smith's race in the same event at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996. Smith, now Michelle de Bruin, was banned for four years in 1998 for tampering with a urine sample. (Bull, 2012).

Many questions came from the Western media like this "how is it possible Ye has already achieved so much? Is She another product of China's State-run factory? At the same time, some doubts cast upon Ye Shiwen's integrity by some Western media outlets, foreign coaches and the article on Nature's website is anything but reasonable. And Nature magazine went even further, describing Ye Shiwen's world record – breaking feat in the 400 meter individual medley as "anomalous" and gave the impression that testing negative for drugs did not rule out the possibility of Ye Shiwen taking performance – enhancing drugs" ( Editorials, 2012 ).

Meanwhile, John Leonard, executive director of World Swimming Coaches Association, described Ye Shiwen's feat as "disturbing". He said Ye's swim was either " the greatest swim in history" or " something that is not correct," implying she had taken performance – enhancing drugs."

Since shattering the world record for the 400m individual medley with an eye – catching last-leg freestyle sprint on Saturday ( on July 28 ). Ye Shiwen had been put under the microscope, with pundits alleging that her last 50 meters of 28.93 sec, faster than US swimmer Ryan Lochte's equivalent in the male event, could only be explained by drug use.

Instead, Ye Shiwen had to encounter snide comments and allegations in the wake of her success. "The allegation are a little bit unfair, but I am not affected by them at all." Ye Shiwen said, employing modest understatement, after breaking the Olympic record to win the women swimming 200m individual medley in 2 min and 7.57 sec on July 30, 2012.

At the same time, Colin Moynihan, Chairman of the British Olympic Association, told a news conference on July 30, that the World Anti Doping Agency (WADA) conducted a test on Ye and it was clean. "She's been through WADA's program and she's clean. That's the end of the story. Ye Shiwen deserves recognition for her talent," he said ( Sun, 2012 ).

Furthermore, not only Chinese double gold medal-winning swimmer Ye Shiwen, but also every sports fan who believes in the Olympic spirit that transcends nationality, race, color and politics deserves the apology rendered by Nature magazine on Aug. 6, 2012.

### **3. YE SHIWEN'S PERSONAL GROWTH BACKGROUND**

Ye Shiwen was born on March 1, 1996 in an ordinary family in Hangzhou, a capital city of Zhejiang province in China. At that time, her father whose name is Ye Qingsong was a tour guider and her mother whose name is Ning Yiqing worked in a Japanese electronic company. Her parents were busy with their

work and had no time to take care of her. Ye Shiwen had to be sent her grandmother's home for care at Ninan, Zhejiang, because her father's parents passed away very early. At her mom's hometown, Ye Shiwen was just like a boy who was used to going everywhere with her bare feet, no matter she walked on the muddy ground or run in a nearly woods. In this way, Ye Shiwen had such an experience to make her a good health and a pair of large bare feet, so that her grandmother gave her nickname "Girl with a pair of large bare feet." Ye Shiwen came back at her parents' home and was sent to a Kindergarten in Hangzhou when she was four years old.

Ye Shiwen started swimming at age of six after her kindergarten teacher noticed she had much larger hands and feet than other children. Later, Ye Shiwen was encouraged to take part in the swimming training class of one Hangzhou Chen Jinglun Sport School, whose alumni include two-time Olympic gymnastics gold medalist Lou Yun and former Olympic gold medalist swimmer Luo Xuejuan, as a youngest member in the class. Very soon, Ye was interested in swimming. Later, Ye Shiwen's father wanted to spend much more time to take good care of her and to make her succeed in swimming, he quitted his tour guider as a house husband. Since then, Ye Shiwen's father sent her to the sport school, and then did house work at home. Under the good care and hard training of both her father and coach, Ye Shiwen made greater progress in her swimming.

Later, Ye Shiwen anticipated in the provincial swimming competition and won the first place in women swimming. And then, she was admitted into Zhejiang Women's Swimming Team as a professional team member (Liu, 2012).

By 2007 she had made it to the provincial team; a year later, she joined the national squad. But it was at the Asian Games in 2010 that she really started to attract attention. Her time in the 200m was the fastest in the world for the year, while her 400m was the second best.(Branigan,2012).

"Ye Shiwen's great talent was recognized at an early age and her performance indicates her." Xu Qi, head of the Chinese swimming team, told Xinhua New Agency. Ye attributed her rise to what every great athlete attributes their rise to, hard work. In 2010, Ye Shiwen was drafted into the national swimming team, and make her first splash at the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games by bagging 200m and 400m in individual medley before hitting international headlines at last year's where she won the 200m (Sun, 2012).

And then Ye Shiwen underwent grueling training in Beisbane, Australia with two renowned coaches Dennis Cotterell and Ken Wood after last year's Shanghai Worlds. At the world championship in Shanghai, she beat American world record holder Ariana Kukors and Australia's Olympic champion Stephanie Rice in the 200m individual medley.

Ye Shiwen normally spent five hours every day in the pool for nine years and in Australia she was able to fine-tune her stroke efficiency, starting and turning. It is just said that Cotterel, Australian distance swimmer Grant Hackett's mentor, said Ye had "unparalleled gifts." "She's a little girl with a lot of strength and power. She may even get better given that she's improved a lot in Australia," Cotterell told China Central Television on Aug. 1, 2012. ( Sun, 2012)

#### **4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Beyond the games and festivities, the Olympics are an opportunity to show spirit and share culture (Faye, 2012). Many Chinese still believe that the gold medal tally at the Olympic is proof of a country's strength in sports. Many may recall the humiliation in the 1936 Berlin Games when all but one Chinese athlete was eliminated in the preliminaries. It resulted in a Singapore-based newspaper mocking China as the "Sick Man of East Asia."

Chinese sharpshooter Xu Haifeng's gold medal in the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles is widely regarded as an achievement that finally washed that disgrace off the Chinese athletes. (Chen, 2012)

From then on, China has invested immensely in the Olympic for the sake of national pride, but it is public participation in sports that is worth more than all the gold medals. It is also a true reflection of a nation's strength. And Chinese have proved that they can win gold medals, and lots of them, as was seen at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, where China bagged 51 gold, more than any other countries. During the 2012 London Olympic, China has proved that again.

However, when Chinese swimmer Ye Shiwen set a record in the women's 400m individual medley, the suspicions from some Western media and persons had persisted nearly a week, until declaration for the test on Ye Shiwen of the World Anti Doping Agency. And pundits continue to question the current anti-doping system's competency.

Why some Western news media didn't congratulate Ye Shiwen and cheer for her? But they would rather question her as they did Ye? Would she feel happy?

There is no doubt that some Western news media should know some things about Ye Shiwen's success to the quality of the training she has received since childhood and her weeks of hard work of Wood's academy in Queensland and with another well-known Australian coach, Denis Cotterell, were, "really harsh, but...really helpful." "She was strong in freestyle and backstroke but weak in the other two. The Australian training has helped her to improve on her weak side," explained her personal coach, Xu Guoyi, last year. Wood said the Chinese swimmers' success was down to hard work and keeping their weight down, with Ye boasting a particularly good power-to-weight ratio-helping to explain her speed in that last 100m. Despite the intensity of the training, he had also urged her to be confident, lighten up and enjoy her work. (Branigan, 2012).

From the above analysis, it has been found that Ye Shiwen's gold medals are her main reward for her years of dedication.

It is known that gold medals are meant only to stimulate athletes into striving for faster, higher, stronger goals. In the Olympic arena, the efforts of every athlete to test himself or herself to the limit deserve respect. Accusing any athletes who performs extraordinarily of wrongdoing without sound evidence is an affront to the fundamental spirit and principle of sports. There is no doubt that some Westerners and mass media didn't respect the athletes and did something wrong against the Olympic spirit. At the same time, it doesn't benefit intercultural communication. The author thinks that it's necessary for us to discuss this event from an intercultural mass communication perspective and other fields of politics and social development.

##### **4.1 Respect Chinese development and share Olympic spirit**

Since China carried out open-door and reform policy, every field has achieved a great progress. Globally, the debate on "China's rise" have never ceased to appear in the past century. In 1990s, the relevant debates,

positive as well as negative, among politicians and researchers internationally, reached a new peak as China's economy developed rapidly and its national strength increased steadily (Zhu, 2004).

China will establish friendly relations with other countries in its peaceful rise, it will create a great number of opportunities for others rather than bring about threat (potential or real) to them: we should not do anything harmful to others, whether or not it is for our own interest, as the Chinese saying goes: Don't do to others what you would not have them do to you... Whether it is called 'Chinese – style' or 'Chinese characteristics', it means to start from our own situation and go out own way, to rely mainly on ourselves, solve out own problems and difficulties and not create trouble for others. (Zhang, 2005)

China vigorously pushes forward reform and development, considerably bolstering the country's economic force and its overall national strength improving people's living conditions and displaying to the outside world a new outlook and image of the Chinese nation.

Yet, numerous studies have demonstrated that the new sources city in the China coverage in the Western news media are almost exclusive political dissidents. Some Western news media couldn't face the Chinese great achievements in all kinds of fields including sports in the past years and always thought about China including sports events in the old thinking pattern. Especially, some Western media sent a large amount of wrong messages to the Westerners, and let them misunderstand the Chinese and China. Maybe, it's why Ye Shiwen extraordinary feat was what the Westerners had based their arguments on then why they pointed a finger only at the Chinese swimmer and not at the other outstanding athletes. It was simply became Ye Shiwen is a Chinese? Does it have anything to do with the China phobia deeply rooted in the Western mindset.

Meanwhile, some Westerners think that they are physically superior to people from the East, Chinese in particular. That's why they refuse to accept a Chinese swimmer performing such a feat. As is pointed out by Samover et al., "The reason for the pervasive nature of stereotype is that human beings have a psychological need to categorize and classify" (2000:246). But such notions run contrary to the Olympic spirit and intercultural communication.

Moreover, some Westerners should keep in mind that many Chinese still suffer from inferiority syndrome and historical – victimization complex, which make them very sensitive to foreign pressure and heavy – handed Olympics. The Chinese are masters of the means, while some Westerners usually practice diametrically opposite Olympics, predictably causing friction with China. The Westerners and Chinese should respect each other, especially, their own different cultures and traditions.

Although China has adopted the Western way of international politics, it has tried to move back to its traditional values after becoming stronger. For example, China has set up scores of Confucius Institutes abroad and pursues a harmonious society at home.

The key point is that Chinese and Westerners both have an important shared Olympic spirit, and that Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of modern Olympics, made "Faster, Higher, Stronger" the motto of the Games. But lest we forget his other motto is "The most important thing is not to win but to take part!"

The Olympics did give us a chance to meet many people from different countries and regions. Before, we obtained knowledge about those people only from indirect source. But when we actually meet them, we tend to connect the individuals' characteristics with their national character. (Liu, 2010).

It does not really matter whether Chinese or Western athletes triumph at the 2012 London Olympics games

will benefit intercultural communication through Chinese and Western athletes and realize the true spirit of the Olympic.

#### **4.2 Persist in principles of the news media and enhance intercultural communication**

We should know that the Eastern and Western cultures are not contradictory in essence, but are, instead, intensely complementary. The values, behaviors, and institutions of the West should not be substituted for their Eastern counterparts, and vice versa. Our task is not to trade one view for another but to integrate them. The purpose of evolution is not to create a homogeneous mass, but to gradually unfold a diverse get organic whole.” (Hu and Herd, 2006)

Thus, mass communication would play an important role in the above purpose. Especially, the advent of information age has put the mass media in a strategic position in the social structure of a nation,” constitute[ing] a primary source of definitions and images of social reality and the most ubiquitous expression of shared identity”, and serving as “the largest focus of leisure time interest, providing the shared ‘cultural environment’ for most people and more so than any other single institution” (McQuail, p.47).

There is no doubt that mass communications are particularly well suited to this exertion of power because they can broadcast or distribute information and opinions to great numbers of people from a central source. The media can exert power over their audiences. It is argued that the most important way in which they do this is in shaping people’s attitudes and beliefs. (Tou and Liang, 2011).

Therefore, mass media from different countries should seriously keep the media principles in mind, that is, “truth and objective”. Any journalists and new persons should not be subjective for news from the Games and judge whether news is truth or faultness according to their emotion or guess, especially in their own political or cultural views. If every person worked in media area like this, the author thinks that mass communication would really play an important role in all kinds of sports competitions including Olympics games. In this way, people from different cultural backgrounds and different countries with different social systems would believe that news is truth, news is objective, news is enjoyable. People really enjoy any news both from the Olympics and other fields. So that news would avoid making troubles and conflicts among different countries. People from different countries will really enjoy communicating with one another, so as to really understand one another.

Thus, it is necessary for anyone, especially Western journalists and news personals to overcome ethnocentrism. As Graham Sumner defines (see Levint & Campbell 1972, p.8) it, “Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of things in which one’s own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it. ... Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn. Opprobrious epithets are derived from these differences.”

Meanwhile, Western journalists and news media “need to change their mindset and begin to see China not as a ‘regime’ maintained through police force and ideological indoctrination, but as a developing country, a multicultural, multi-class and multi-interest-group society, where the government sometimes is in control, but other times either ‘changes with the time’ or reluctantly follows the tide, where people agree on some things and disagree on other things, but share the common value that China needs stability, reform and

opening up as well as the common belief that China is developing at an unprecedented pace and that every section of the population has generally benefited from the rapid development of the past three decades though problems and conflicts arise every day. To fulfill the challenging task of reporting such a complex country, Western journalists and news media are well advised to accept the counsel by Ginneken (1998, p.215): Let us go out of our way to bear different voices. Let us present opposite points of view completely and coherently, even if we disagree. Thus, Communicating with each other would let different people learn and know each other. Understanding would make different people close and friendship. The world will have a peaceful and bright future.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Olympic is not only big event, but also a great opportunity to communicate with different people including the different countries' athletes. At the same time, any countries' athletes who got gold medals or overcome odds and physical injuries to complete their events even in the last place deserve as much honor and respect as the gold medal winners. Also, any gold medal winners, no matter which country they come from, they should be respected by people and news media from different countries.

Nowadays, international opinions are still mostly led by Western media. Voices coming from developing countries are relatively weak and not heard as much. Especially, the above case clearly unfolded that stereotyping and ethnocentrism of some Western news media and journalists could either hamper intercultural communication, or prevent positive changes of Olympics spirit even when one athlete from another country got gold medal and the Olympics competition was processing. The Western journalists are well advised to accept the counsel by Ginneken (1998,p.215), a Western journalists and media: Let us present opposite points of view completely and coherently, even if we disagree. Chinese and Western media organization can help countries communicate with each other more effectively, build mutual trust and eliminate misunderstanding, so that the news media will really realize their social responsibilities – to present the country in its true perspective and promote mutual understanding and stability in the world.

## REFERENCES

- Branigan, Tania. (July 31, 2012). Ye Shiwen: the shy youngster who became a controversial record holder. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2012/jul/31/ye-shiwen-record>.
- Bull, Andy. (July 30, 2012). Ye Shiwen's world record Olympic swim 'disturbing', says top US coach. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2012/jul/30/ye-shiwen-world-record-olympics-2012>.
- Chen, Weihua. (2012). Gold medal for public participation. China Daily, Aug. 4-5, 2012.
- Editorials. (2012). Against the Olympic spirit. China Daily, Aug 8, 2012.
- Evan Osnos. (July 31, 2012). Pride and Shame: China, the Olympics, and Ye Shiwen. The New Yorker. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evanosnos/2012/07/>
- Faye, Editor. (2012). Olympic – inspired looks. Morning Post (English). July 27, 2012.
- Ginneken, J. van (1998). Understanding Global News: A Critical Introduction (1<sup>st</sup> Ed ). London: Sage Publications.
- Hu, Chao and Herd, Brad J. (2006). Intercultural Communication: A Practical Course Book. Beijing: 200

- Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, p.195.
- Levint, Robert A. & Campbell, Donald T. (1972). *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior*. New York: John Wiley and Sons. p.8.
- Liu, Caihua. (2012). Ye Shiwen and her Parents. *Zhi Yin* (In Chinese). Sept. Ed. No. 27. p.56 –58.
- Liu, Mengxi. (2010). “Pride and Prejudice” Towards World Englishes: A Qualitative Investigation on Student Volunteers’ Language Attitudes During the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. *Intercultural Studies: New Frontiers*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. p. 101.
- Lohn, John. (July 29, 2012). Doubts Surrounding Ye Shiwen a Sad State of Affairs. *Swimming World Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.swimmingworldmagazine.com/lane9/news/USA/31424.asp>
- McQuail, Denis. (2000). *McQuail’s communication theory*. London: Thousand Oak, New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 305.
- Pearson, Judy C., & Nelson, Paul E. (2003). *Human Communication*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, p.10.
- Sun, Youzhong. (2009). Intercultural Mass Communication: A new frontier for intercultural communication research. *Intercultural Communication Research*. Vol. 1. p.247. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- Sun, Youzhong. (2010). *The Road Not Taken: Covering China from the Angle of Development Journalism in the U.S. News Media*. *Intercultural Studies: New Frontiers*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. p.263.
- Sun, Xiaochen. (2012). Robots? Nope – just really good athletes. *China Daily*, July 30, 2012.
- Sun, Xiaochen. (2012). Yeah! She won. *China Daily*. Aug. 2, 2012.
- Thomas, Alexander. (2010). Research into the Influence of Culture Standards on Behavior. *Intercultural Communication Research*, Vol. 2. p.18. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- Tuo, Weilin and Liang, Jonathan. (2011). *Intercultural Business Communication*. (Sec. Ed.). Beijing: Higher Education Press, p.3.
- Zheng, Bijian. (2005). *Peaceful Rise – China’s New Road to Development*. Beijing: Central Party School Publishing House, CPC.
- Zhu, Yibing. 2004. Studies on issues of “China’s rise” in the West. *Journal of Mao – Deng Theory Studies*, (8): p.76 – 81. (In Chinese).