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Sportswashing with Chinese Characteristics

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The use of sportswashing to enhance a country's international reputation is often described in academic discourse as a foreign relations strategy adopted primarily by Muslim governments in the Middle East and Eurasia. However, sportswashing actually has far broader applicability within business and society than previous researchers have recognized. Looking closely at the relationship between the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the hosting of international sports, this article shows that the PRC, beginning under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, has engaged in efforts to host global, commercial sporting events for purposes of detracting attention from the country's alleged human rights abuses and its perception of being weak during the Century of Humiliation.[1] This article is important to the broader study of business, law, and society because it helps us to better understand the intersection between the hosting of international sporting events, big business, government interests, and social outcomes. It also allows us to better understand how, if at all, public and private law could be applied to sportswashing behaviors.

Keywords: sportswashing, Olympics, China, international sports

Introduction

The use of sportswashing to enhance a country's international reputation is often described in academic discourse as a foreign relations strategy adopted primarily by Muslim governments in the Middle East and Eurasia (Skey, 2015). The term "sportswashing" first appeared in an article written by human rights campaigner

[1] This, of course, is not to suggest that China is the *only* other country in the world to engage in sportswashing. Rather, this is an attempt to provide one of many potential case studies of sportswashing related to a country that does not have a Muslim government nor is located in the Middle East or Eurasia.

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Gulnara Akhundova in 2015 to describe efforts by the Azerbaijan government to host the European Games to detract attention from the country's poor human rights record. It has since been used to refer to similar practices by the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, among others in the same region (Skey, 2015, p. 750). Researchers thus have occasionally called upon legal action from both public and private entities to deter sportswashing behaviors by state actors located within historically Muslim regions (Mohammadi, 2023; Pedone, 2023).

The practice of sportswashing, however, in truth, has broader applicability than previous researchers have recognized, and thus sportswashing cannot so easily be eradicated through simple legal mechanisms targeted at the limited number of Muslim countries. Extrapolating the definition of sportswashing onto a literature review of modern Chinese history, this article shows that the People's Republic of China, beginning under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, has similarly engaged in sportswashing through efforts to host global, commercial sporting events for purposes of detracting attention from the country's alleged human rights abuses and its perception of being weak during the Century of Humiliation. Part I of this article defines sportswashing by explaining what type of practices fall inside and outside of its scope. Part II provides a brief history of China's governance and its historic relationship with sports. Part III describes the emergence of sportswashing as a PRC strategy. Finally, Part IV provides key takeaways from this research, including with respect to the reasonable business and legal understanding of sportswashing.

I. What Is Sportswashing?

The term sportswashing is a neologism[2] to describe the not-so-new practice of national governments using organized sports to deflect international attention away from their perceived shortcomings (Skey, 2015, pp. 749-750). Not entirely different from what the Roman poet Juvenal once described as "bread and circus" (Brady, 2009, p. 6), sportswashing has been defined by at least one British academic, Simon Chadwick, to describe the means by which "a country can deflect audiences' attention away from less favorable perceptions of a country via … investment in sport" (Skey, 2015, p. 750). Similarly, American academic Jules Boykoff has defined sportswashing to mean "using … sports megaevents to try to launder [a nation's] reputation on the world stage" (Skey, 2015, p. 750).

While it is reasonably helpful to define sportswashing by what it is, it also may be useful to define sportswashing by what it is not. By way of example, a nation's strategic focus on sports for purposes of boosting military preparedness—a practice that goes back to ancient times (Guoxi, 2008)—would not constitute sportswashing because the goal of military preparedness is typically internal, and not external, in

[2] A "neologism" is a new word or expression to emerge within the vernacular.

nature. Similarly, a nation's effort to use sports to boost morale among its citizens would not constitute sportswashing because boosting national morale is a goal focused on internal results and not external ones.

It is also worth noting that although the term "sportswashing" has a strong nexus to the term "propaganda," not all propaganda constitutes sportswashing. For example, propaganda that is aimed at a nation's internal population rather than the outside world would not be considered sportswashing. Nor would propaganda unassociated or indirectly associated with organized sports constitute sportswashing.

II. Brief History of China's Governance and Relationship with Sports

To assess the PRC's historical engagement with sportswashing, one must first garner at least a perfunctory understanding of Chinese history including the region's relationship with sports. Section A of this part provides a very broad overview of key events in Chinese history that affect how the government and people of China perceive their country. Section B explores Chinese sports policies that emerged in the years leading up to, and in the immediate aftermath of, forming the People's Republic of China. Section C delves into the emergence of sports diplomacy in China, which emerged to a substantial extent during the second half of Mao Zedong's leadership.

A. Brief and Oversimplified History of China

The region of the world that is known today as the People's Republic of China ("PRC," or literally translated to "Zhonghua" or "Middle Kingdom") has a long and complex history. The modern PRC is comprised of a wide range of territory that was acquired by conquest, much like most other empires of its era (Zhao, 2023). For many hundreds of years, China operated under dynastic rule, during which time the dynasties perceived themselves as the dominant regional power, which was surrounded by vassal states (Yaqing, 2010). China had long reflected this sense of power through its hierarchical tribute system, whereby China served as the central actor and set the rules dictating its relationship with other nation-states (Yaqing, 2010).

After China lost the Opium Wars to England in the 1840s, the way in which the people of China began to perceive their relationship with the rest of the world began to change. China was forced into signing unequal treaties with England, Russia, and the United States, among other countries. And, China's relationships with other nations became largely subordinated to the will of White, Anglo-Saxon nations (Yaqing, 2010). The fall of China's control over its own domestic trade marked the start of what has often been described as China's Century of Humiliation.

While China went through various changes to its governance, the Chinese Communist Party ("CCP") came to power in 1949. Since then, the CCP has faced global

criticism for practices ranging from their restraints on free speech to their perceived treatment of ethnic minorities. The underlying reasoning for these restrictive practices, in many cases, seems to be the simple interest in the party itself retaining control of the country. In this vein, modern China bears certain similarities with dynastic China.

Yet, even despite these ongoing efforts to avoid Western democratic style of governance, the CCP has still sought the integration of China into the leadership of the world. As such, China has sought to enhance its perception in the world, especially since the rise of Deng Xiaoping to power. According to David Shambaugh, the Director of the China Policy Program at George Washington University, China has attempted to do this through a broad agenda that includes not only diplomatic and development schemes but also "enhancing its soft power in media, publishing, education, the arts, [and] sports" (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 100). It is within this context of "enhancing soft power" that China and its practices of sportswashing come into play.

B. China's Historic Relationship with Sports

Sports has played an important role in Chinese society since at least the late 1890s when the Mandarin term '*tiyu*' (meaning "sport" or "physical education") first emerged in the Chinese vernacular (Guoxi, 2008, p. 1). While a focus on '*tiyu*' initially meant a focus of human hygiene and general health, by the turn of the 20th century, '*tiyu*' had come to include walking, running, and gymnastics—all with the goal of achieving military preparedness (Boucher, 2008, p. 48). The turning point in Chinese society that led to the focus on sports for military preparedness was imperial China's military defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95)—a defeat that forced China to recognize the importance of joining the emerging Western world order, including its participating in the Western emphasis on sports and physical strength (Guoxi, 2008).

The changing relationship between China and the West, including China's newfound recognition of the importance of physical health, brought new forms of Western sports to the Middle Kingdom, and it helped lead to the incorporation of '*shangwu*,' meaning "fighting spirit," into Chinese sports (Guoxi, 2008, p. 21). By the late 19th century, missionaries associated with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) had arrived in Tianjin and begun to introduce basketball and other ball-oriented games to Chinese children—a sign of the opening of China to Western means of physical education (Boucher, 2008). Even though the missionaries' real goal was to teach Chinese children about Christianity, the playing of ball games such as basketball remained an important part of Chinese culture even after the missionaries left. These ball games joined walking, running, and gymnastics as activities recognized as *tiyu*.

Then, in 1896, 14 Western countries (13 from Europe and the United States) met in Athens, Greece, for the hosting of the first modern Olympic Games. China was not included. However, Pierre de Coubertin, the second president of the International

Olympic Committee (IOC), expressed an interest in incorporating the "yellow man" based on their "young imperialism" (Guoxi, 2008, p.18).

At this time, however, China, was still very much dealing with an inferiority complex. Yan Fu, an influential Chinese scholar and translator of Western books into Chinese, published a paper in Tianjin's *Zhibao* one year prior to the 1896 Olympics that described China as a "sick man" that lacked physical strength (Guoxi, 2008, p. 6). That analogy stuck both with the Chinese population and with foreigners who were exposed to Yan's work. This imagery further led to the Chinese feeling of humiliation.

By as early as 1908, Xu Yibing, who was then the leader of the Chinese Gymnastic School, had begun to push the motto "Strengthen the Chinese national physique, wipe out 'the sick man of Asia!'" as a means to support growing his gymnastics education program (Hwang & Chang, 2008, p. 4). Xu's efforts to associate physical success with national strength thereafter gained broad attention within Chinese intellectual circles, including with a young Mao Zedong. In 1917, Mao published a paper on the importance of sports education as a way to build a strong nation and a ready military, a paper that when translated into English is titled "A Study of Physical Education" (Zedong, 1917). In this paper, Mao suggested that China's population should "exercise twice a day — on getting up and before going to bed," and that the Chinese population should exercise "in the nude" if possible, and, if not, while wearing light clothing.

In the years that followed the founding of the PRC, Mao made two notable speeches that highlighted his emerging philosophy on the role sports should play in China. In a June 1952 meeting at the All-China Sports Federation, Mao called to "[d]evelop physical culture and sports, and strengthen physique of the people" (Hwang & Chang, 2008, p. 6). Again, in a 1953 speech on behalf of the Presidium of the Second National Congress of the New Democratic Youth League of China, Mao stated that "young people should be enabled to keep fit, study well, and work well" (Hwang & Chang, 2008, pp. 6-7).

Meanwhile, it was Mao's speech in 1956, at the preparatory meeting for the Eighth National Congress, that truly tied together his support for physical education with the goal of changing global perceptions of China. There, Mao stated that "China used to be stigmatized as a decrepit empire, the sick man of East Asia, a country with a backward economy and a backward culture, with no hygiene, poor at ball games and swimming" and that "after six years of work, we have changed the face of China" (Hwang & Chang, 2008, pp. 10-11).

C. Chinese Sports Diplomacy Emerges Under Mao

Once Mao deemed China had recovered from being a "sick man," Mao turned China's use of sports toward a second, more external purpose: international diplomacy (Guoxi, 2008). In some cases, China's use of sports diplomacy under Mao was

systematic and carefully planned. For example, China's sports exchanges with North Korea during the period of the Korean War have been described by University of Hong Kong Department of History professor Xu Guoxi as clear evidence of planned "[f]riendship first, competition second" activities, where Chinese athletes, in concert with the CCP, were scripted to lose certain contests to ensure the leaders of the other country retained their dignity (Guoxi, 2008, pp. 38-39).

In contrast, China's engagement in sports diplomacy with the United States, by most accounts, emerged spontaneously and more unexpectedly, when, after the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan, U.S. table tennis player Glenn Cowan and PRC table tennis star Zhuang Zedong met and exchanged pleasantries (Edelman, 2022). A few days later, Mao, sensing the opportunity to use this moment to try to rebuild the PRC's relationship with the United States, invited the U.S. table tennis team to visit China. As the two nations began to build their relationship in part through ping-pong, U.S. President Richard Nixon, one year later, went to China to visit with Mao. In time, the meeting of table tennis players morphed into the ongoing meeting of diplomats and ambassadors (Edelman, 2022).

But, while it was clear that sports served these various, important purposes in China prior to Mao's death, there is scant evidence that during Mao's lifetime Chinese leadership ever considered hosting international sporting events as a means to change the international perception of China (Hwang & Chang, 2008). Indeed, Wu Tingfang, who served as an ambassador and minister in pre-1949 China, stated in the 1914 book *America through Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomatic* that "[t]he Chinese would never think of assembling in thousands just to see a game played" (Boucher, 2008, p. 48). By all available accounts, Mao and his supporters agreed with this view. Of course, after Mao's death, all of this would begin to change.

III. The Emergence of Chinese Sportswashing

While China certainly had an interest in sports during parts of Mao's reign, China did not begin to use the hosting of international sporting events to reshape the international opinion of China until after Mao died in 1976. At that time, Deng Xiaoping gained increased control over China, and China's relationship with the world began to shift in the direction of liberalized international policies and increasingly open markets for foreign investment (Boucher, 2008).

Under Deng, the PRC also introduced a different vision from Mao's in terms of how to use sports. To Deng, sports was about winning and showing the world China's strength and legitimacy (Guoxi, 2008). Although China first participated in the Olympic Games in 1932, Deng moved away from China's longstanding guarded view toward the West-created IOC and, rather than advocate for forming a rival body, he began to use the existing international sports structure, as it existed, to China's benefit (Guoxi, 2008).

To provide a understanding of sportswashing in China, Section A of this Part discusses the emergence of a new Chinese strategy of sportswashing that focused on hosting international sporting events for purposes of changing the international reputation of China. Section B provides examples of how the PRC carried out these efforts at sportswashing upon securing the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. Section C then explores examples of the Chinese government's efforts to continue to engage in sportswashing in the aftermath of the 2008 Summer Olympics.

A. The Chinese Sportswashing Strategy Develops

Although it is difficult to point to a precise date when China's efforts to engage in sportswashing began, there are a number of statements made by Chinese leaders in 1983 and 1984 that provide evidence of a meaningful inflection point. Among the earliest statements that indicate a potential PRC sportswashing strategy, Deng, in a September 15, 1983, newspaper article, is quoted as explaining the importance of promoting sport in China for the nation's pride—a quote that one can argue marks Deng's early efforts to use sports to influence China's perception by the outside world (Hwang & Chang, 2008).

In 1984, Deng then sent a delegation to the United States headed by Wei Zhenlan that, according to an article published by Dong Ihy Hwang and Lik-Ke Chang in *China Perspectives,* served to allow the Chinese government to "learn from the Los Angeles Organizing Committee about how to profit from major sporting events such as the Olympic Games" (Hwang & Chang, 2008, p. 15). According to the Dong and Lik-Ke article, after Wei's visit, "China noted that sports could be profitable, and could also inspire Chinese nationalism" and that "the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games aroused patriotism and nationalism" (Hwang & Chang, 2008, p. 15). The article also described a 1984 CCP central committee dispatch noting China's success in the 1984 Olympics "had the potential to further promote Chinese national pride and self-confidence, as well as patriotism and support outside of China" (Hwang & Chang, 2008, p. 15). The final clause here fits squarely within the contemporary definition of sportswashing.

By 1990, the Chinese government had begun putting their plans into practice to host large, international sporting events (Brady, 2008). In 1990, just one year after the PRC came under criticism from much of the world for the events that transpired in Tiananmen Square, China hosted the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing (Hwang & Chang, 2008). The hosting of the Asian Games was so successful for China that the Chinese government thereafter moved forward to hosting bigger and broader events.

By 1992, the Central Propaganda Department of China had begun to incorporate what University of Canterbury political science professor Anne-Marie Brady has described as "modern forms of mass persuasion utilized in Western democratic societies," including persuasion techniques related to "political public relations

campaigns, advertising and mass communications" (Brady, 2008, p. 4). In 1992, CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin stated that "propaganda should be an 'extremely important department' with increased powers"—a statement that coincided with the further emergence of China's sportswashing strategy, or, as the strategy of external propaganda was termed by the CCP in China, *gong guan huodong* (Brady, 2008, p. 5).

It was in this context that the City of Beijing in 1993 filed its bid to host the 2000 Summer Olympics. Hosting the 2000 Olympics was very important to CCP leaders in Beijing, who believed it would provide a forum to showcase China as an emerging global leader in the new millennium (Guoxi, 2008). Ultimately, however, Beijing lost its bid by two votes in what the New York Times described as a "cruel misunderstanding" (Kattoulas, 2020, para. 3). Years later, the president of the Australian Olympic Committee admitted that he had offered money to delegates from Kenya and Uganda to deny China of the bid ("Olympic Scandal Spreads to Syndney," 1999).

Seven years later, China filed another bid to host the Summer Olympic Games—this time retaining both an American and British public relations firm to help improve their reputation with the IOC (Brady, 2008). In August 2000, upon China learning that it was placed by the IOC on a shortlist to host the 2008 Summer Olympics, Liu described the importance of China being selected to host as being a "great opportunity for the world to get to know China better, and for China to get to know the world better" (Kattoulas, 2008, para. 6). When it was ultimately announced that the IOC selected Beijing to host the 2008 Summer Olympics, China began investing money toward developing ways to use the Olympic Games to change the global perception of their country. An October 2004 article in the *China Daily* quotes Lord Saatchi, one of the two founders of the British advertising company Saatchi and Saatchi, as stating that "the Chinese Government is very aware of the central input of brand development in developing a dynamic economy," and positing that the Beijing Olympics would serve as a means to promote the nation overall ("Saatchi Eyes Branding in China Inc.," 2004, para. 6).

Less than two years later, the Chinese government began to invest funds into learning how to use the Olympic Games to enhance China's international reputation. Specifically, in 2006, China's National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science commissioned a two-year academic research project to assess how China might be able to use the Olympics to improve its national image. A 2007 classified bulletin issued by the News Department of the Central Propaganda department thereafter emphasized that Olympics propaganda would benefit not only China's domestic environment, but also its international environment (Brady, 2008).

Meanwhile, LaTrobe University politics professor James Leibold (2010) described a 2007 paper published by China's Vice President of the Central Nationalities University and President of the Institute of Tibetan Studies, Sherab Nymia, which suggested that the Olympics could be used as an "unprecedented opportunity for

China to improve its image abroad while strengthening its domestic propaganda on the [question of various Chinese nationalities]" (Leibold, 2010, p. 3). The first clause, related to "improv[ing] [China's] image abroad," represents a quintessential goal of what modern academics describe as sportswashing (Leibold, 2010, p. 3).

B. Chinese Sportswashing Behaviors During the 2008 Summer Olympics

Consistent with the stated goals of using big-time sporting events to reshape the image of China beyond the nation's own borders, the Chinese government, in advance of hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics, instituted practices narrowly tailored to use the Olympic Games to reshape perceptions abroad. For foreign attendees at the 2008 Summer Olympics, many of the volunteer workers who they met were carefully selected to present the kind of positive associations that the CCP wanted the world to conjure when thinking about China. In a July 2008 newspaper article in the *Christian Science Monitor,* Liu Qi, the president of the organizing committee for the Beijing Olympics, acknowledged that volunteers were selected based on their ability to serve as "representatives of China's peaceful development image" (Huang, 2008, para. 12).

In the months leading up to the 2008 Summer Olympics, the CCP also led a public campaign against spitting, littering, and bad sportsmanship with the goal of presenting China to the Western world as an orderly and civilized nation. Local television stations and newspapers, presumably owned by the CCP, meanwhile, led what literally was described as a "smile campaign" (Guoxi, 2008, p. 239).

The Olympic torch relay was similarly arranged to shift the outside world's perception of China. To counter the longstanding Western narrative that the largely Han-led Chinese government had ethnic strife with Tibetans among other minority ethnicities, Chinese president Hu Jintao lit a special torch with 56 "lucky clouds" to represent the 56 nationalities of China (Leibold, 2010, p. 7). In addition, 38% of the Chinese torchbearers came from minority ethnicities to portray an image of multiculturalism. While this vision of a united China plays favorably to global values of inclusion, some scholars, including Leibold, wrote more skeptically about the realities in China. In a 2010 article appearing in the *China Journal*, Leibold suggests that all of this planned positive portrayal of China's ethnic minorities contrasts with the reality of "the tightly controlled nature of minority participation in the lead up to the Games" (Leibold, 2010, p. 7). Leibold further describes the Olympic torch display as "fakery" and "staged performance of minority culture" (Leibold, 2010, p. 9).

Much like the torch relay ceremony, the Opening Ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which were broadcast globally, were carefully crafted to present to the outside world a specific image of China. The Chinese flag was introduced by 56 Chinese children, one representing each of China's 56 ethnic groups—again for reasons of combatting the perception of ethnic strife among minorities in China. At the

same time, a hand-selected number of Chinese philosophers chronicled the historic progress of Chinese culture over generations, including a showing of China's most significant contributions to science and technology. Meanwhile, Chinese volunteers made a human depiction of Chinese dynasties and the Silk Road, followed by the human depiction of a dove to represent peace (International Olympic Committee, n.d.).

C. Chinese Sportswashing Behaviors Since the 2008 Summer Olympics

While the PRC's engagement in sportswashing is well documented during the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, the PRC has continued to engage in sportswashing. After hosting the Summer Olympic Games in 2008, China hosted the Asia Games on two more occasions (2010 in Guangzhou and 2022 in Hangzhou) and it hosted the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing in 2022. China has also expressed interest in submitting a bid to host a future FIFA World Cup ("Xi Tells Infantino China Wants to Host World Cup," 2017).

Although there is less public documentation about these more recent sporting events, newspaper and other online accounts overall show a similar effort by the Chinese government to use these events as a way to help reshape their international image. For example, China adopted a slogan for the 2022 Winter Olympics of "Together for a Shared Future" in the face of mounting calls for separatism by political dissidents in Hong Kong, and the growing opposition from protesters in Xinjiang and Tibet—both regions with large ethnic and religious minority populations ("Opening Ceremony Showcases 'Subtle Propaganda,'" 2022).

As the United States television network National Broadcasting Company (NBC) showed the Opening Ceremonies from the 2022 Winter Olympics, broadcaster Ari Browne told viewers there would be "subtle propaganda and not-so-subtle power politics" ("Opening Ceremony Showcases 'Subtle Propaganda,'" 2022). Other commentators about the 2022 Winter Olympic Games went even further. In a March 2022 commentary, Angeli Datt, a senior research analyst for the non-profit organization Freedom House, describes the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing as being a showcase of "propaganda" targeted at a global audience (Datt, 2022). In particular, Datt pointed to the selection a Chinese skier of Uygur descent to help light the Olympic cauldron, which she purported was a means to deflect attention away from what Datt describes as China "committing atrocity crimes against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities" (Datt, 2022, para. 3).

IV. Key Takeaways and Conclusions

The aforementioned examples of the PRC using the hosting of international sporting events for the purpose of attempting to change the international perception of China

provides a meaningful contribution to existing literature related to sportswashing, its governance, and Chinese history in five ways:

First, this article's findings firmly rebut the notion that sportswashing emerged as a practice in the Muslim world in 2015. When adopting the traditional definition of sportswashing, it becomes clear that the government of the People's Republic of China has been engaging in sportswashing at least as early as the 1980s. For example, a 1984 CCP Central Committee dispatch explicitly references the PRC's desired use of hosting international sporting events to "[enhance] support outside of China." (Hwang & Chang, 2008, p. 15). This finding shows that, as much as sportswashing was once presumed to be a behavior limited in scope to Muslim governments in the Middle East and Eurasia, sportswashing has a far broader impact on international relations, sports governance, and society.

Second, this article shows that the PRC's engagement in sportswashing did not emerge in the early years of the PRC, but rather emerged approximately 35 years later under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. PRC efforts to engage in sportswashing became even more substantial in 1992 when CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin began to increase efforts to use propaganda more generally to change the international perception in China. Thus, the practice of sportswashing is one that, even within a nation, one should recognize as changing with time.

Third, this article expands upon previous literature describing the substantial change in Chinese ideology that followed Mao's death in 1976. While China's transition under Deng is most often described in terms of the opening up of the Chinese economy to foreign investment, changes during this time period may also include adopting an increased interest in sports as a means to influence the Western world. Thus, sportswashing may be seen as not only a foreign relations strategy but also an economic strategy with broad effect on both business and society.

Fourth, this article may help to shape future legal relationships in terms of governing sportswashing between countries and private sports governing bodies, as well as countries and each other. One recent law journal article suggests that the human rights standards recently adopted by the IOC and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association ("FIFA") implicitly disallow sportswashing (Pedone, 2023); if that author is correct in his assertion, it would suggest the PRC may face additional challenges in the future when bidding to host IOC and FIFA events. Meanwhile, another recent law journal article suggests that the United States could, and perhaps should, impose sanctions against countries that engage in sportswashing (Mohammadi, 2023). Adopting a broader definition of sportswashing that brings more countries' conduct under its scope would makes the suggestion of the United States sanctioning countries that engage in sportswashing seem far less practical.

Finally, a proper understanding of the scope of sportswashing may even implicate private lawsuits in the United States and beyond. For instance, in 2023, a

professional golfer in the United States filed a lawsuit against sports reporters and publishers that he alleged defamed him by making claims that he was aiding and abetting "sportswashing" (*Reed v. Chamblee*, 2023, pp. 10, 25, n. 5). The court dismissed claims against at least one of the defendants, finding the allegation of sportswashing to be one of opinion, rather than fact.[3] As a clearer and more specific definition of sportswashing emerges, however, it may become more difficult to argue that what constitutes sportswashing is merely opinion.

This article, of course, does not answer every potential question pertaining to the Chinese government's engagement in sportswashing. Reasonable topics for further research may include a comparison between the messages that the PRC and other nations have used in an attempt at sportswashing. Researchers also may seek to examine the histories of other traditionally overlooked countries with respect to sportswashing, as well as conduct an analysis about the actual effectiveness of sportswashing in terms of changing foreign nations' perceptions of a country that hosts big-time commercial sporting events.

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[3] Specifically, in *Reed v. Chamblee* (2023), the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida dismissed a claim of defamation filed by golfer Patrick Reed against *The New Yorker*, finding that an allegation of "sportswashing," albeit harsh, was merely opinion, (*Reed v. Chamblee*, 2023, p. 25, n. 5).

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