



Statement before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China

“The Beijing Olympics and the Faces of Repression”

A Testimony by

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Chair Merkley, Co-Chair McGovern, Members of the Commission, thank you for holding this important hearing and for asking me to contribute my thoughts and analysis on the case of the Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai. I do not purport to have direct and inside knowledge of Peng Shuai’s situation; nobody does except for the Chinese government and its minders around her, and that’s precisely why we are here discussing her case and raise our concerns. However, two months ago on December 1, 2021, I wrote and published on China Change an article titled [What Awaits Peng Shuai](#) to lay out my thoughts on what was happening, and what will likely happen, to Peng Shuai, drawing from my intimate knowledge of what China typically does to suppress dissent and quell unwanted international attention. I appreciate the Commission’s interest in Peng Shuai and the letters you have written to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) seeking clarification about Peng Shuai’s situation and the role the IOC is playing in assisting the Chinese government’s cover up of her true circumstances. Indeed, Peng Shuai has become a special kind of political prisoner in China right now.

It’s been three months since the world-renowned 35-year-old Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai alleged that she was preyed upon and forced into a sexual relationship by now 75-year-old Zhang Gaoli, former vice-premier and member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee. Despite

repeated reassurances from the Chinese government and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), questions about her wellbeing remain.

Furthermore, the Women's Tennis Association's (WTA) decision to [suspend all tournaments in China](#) has raised a moral question that few have been willing to contend with.

My testimony today will address these two aspects of the Peng Shuai incident.

Last fall, on November 2, Peng Shuai, 35 years old, published on her verified Weibo account a 1,900-word post, revealing how Zhang Gaoli pressed her for sex more than 10 years ago when she was in her mid-twenties and a rising tennis star, but it wasn't clear from Peng Shuai's account whether he succeeded in having sex with her then. 7 years ago, he forced her to have sex with her, and again approached her 3 years ago, forcing her into a sexual relationship. She wrote about her refusal, her discomfort, her humiliation, her anxiety, her self-loathing, her fear, and her anger throughout the relationship. She was determined to bring the truth to light even if it meant her own self-destruction. And so she did.

To the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Peng Shuai speaking out against one of the highest ranking Party leaders and subsequently causing a massive international response was a political disaster at the worst possible time that further damages China's image in the run-up to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics.

What has unfolded so far is eerily familiar to those of us working in the field of human rights because it follows the same playbook that the Chinese government has used over and over again, such as in the cases of human rights lawyer Wang Yu, human rights lawyer Xie Yang, and Hong Kong book publisher Gui Minhai. The common practices of censorship, denial, a concerted propaganda campaign, and a staged TV confession has also run through the Peng Shuai case.

1. **Total censorship.** Peng Shuai's article was deleted within 30 minutes of her posting it, and sometime later, Peng Shuai's entire account evaporated. Searching Weibo users for "彭帅", you will see a blank page with a message saying "这里还没有内容" ("There is no content yet"). Not only has Peng Shuai's account been wiped out, but the WTA's Weibo account cannot be found either. A search for "WTA" on Weibo only yields a handful of mentions in a few other postings related to tournaments and players. Of course there has been no coverage of Peng Shuai's revelation whatsoever on Chinese media.



A screenshot of Weibo search for Peng Shuai's account.

On China's other very popular social media platform, WeChat, the WTA has an active public account owned by a company called “北京 WTA 赛事资讯有限公司” (“Beijing WTA Tournament Information Lt. Co.”), but it posts only news and photos of tournaments, and a search for “Peng Shuai” (“彭帅”) yielded no results. If you patiently go down its timeline, you will find articles on Peng Shuai from 2019 and before.

Users of Chinese social media said that when they commented on Peng Shuai or the WTA's decision to suspend tournaments in China, it would result in their postings being deleted, and, sometimes, their accounts being suspended.

In short, the Chinese government has completely erased any trace of the Peng Shuai incident.

From my knowledge of how censorship has been carried out in China against dissidents, activists, or anyone the government wants to monitor closely, I assume that Peng Shuai's communication, phone and email, would have been under total surveillance since November 2, 2021.

2. **Deny the sexual assault allegations, and demand that the WTA stop “hyping” the matter.** For two weeks after her posting, Peng Shuai disappeared from public view. The WTA, as well as world top tennis players, women and men, took to social media expressing their concern about her and seeking answers. Governments issued statements, parliamentarians spoke out, including [CECC chairs](#). Steve Simon, the CEO of the WTA, said he had tried to contact Peng Shuai through the number and email they have previously on file for her but was [unable to reach her](#).

China might have been caught by surprise by such an overwhelming global reaction, and starting Nov. 17, it made a series of moves to try to suppress and then erase the attention.

First of all, CGTN (the US arm of China's Central TV or CCTV) posted on Twitter an [email](#) purportedly from Peng Shuai to the WTA's Steve Simon, but Simon himself (and so many others) [cast doubt](#) on the authenticity of the email. In the email, “Peng Shuai” denied that she had made allegations of sexual assault, and asked that the WTA not talk anymore about her without her consent. (See below for a screenshot of the CGTN tweet.)



Over the next several days, China's overseas journalists as well as a man who claimed to be a friend of Peng Shuai posted photos of Peng Shuai at home, Peng Shuai eating out with friends, Peng Shuai meeting with young tennis players, and Peng Shuai's video call with Thomas Bach, president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

On December 1, the WTA [announced](#) it was immediately suspending all tournaments in China, including Hong Kong.

On December 2, within 24 hours of the WTA announcement, the IOC again issued a [statement](#), claiming that it had spoken to Peng Shuai again on video but released no footage nor a transcript. People cast doubt on whether this meeting actually occurred. But even more troubling than the timing is perhaps the odd language the IOC used in this second statement. It preached a "human and person-centred approach to her situation," preferring to address concerns over Peng Shuai "directly with Chinese sports organisations" using "quiet diplomacy."

As [Andréa Worden](#) who has written extensively about the CCP's warped language of "human rights" in the international arena, pointed out, IOC president "Thomas Bach is now expressly using CCP human rights discourse to defend the IOC's (non) action re Peng Shuai," and Bach's 'very human and person-centred approach to her situation' echoes "PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi's speech at the UN Human Rights Council in February: 'A People-centered Approach for Global Human Rights Progress.'" This unlikely unison raises strong suspicions that the IOC was working voluntarily and directly with the CCP to help suppress the concerns over Peng Shuai.

3. **A TV Confession in the form of an overseas media interview.** On December 19, Lianhe Zaobao, a pro-Beijing Chinese language newspaper in Singapore, suddenly posted a 6-minute video interview with Peng Shuai where she appeared with three other athletes, including the former NBA player Yao Ming, in Shanghai to watch a ski event. In the interview, Peng Shuai stated that she had never accused anyone of sexually assaulting her; that the earlier email to the WTA published by CGTN reflected her own intention; and that she had no reason to travel overseas for the time being.

Many on social media quickly questioned the identity and credentials of the [reporter](#) who interviewed Peng Shuai. This same "reporter" apparently has been working as a [propagandist](#) for the Chinese government. Indeed, few people took the interview at face value, and most agreed that it was staged.

So the question is: What's the purpose of this interview? Why did China stage an interview knowing that no one would believe it?

The most important takeaway from this interview may not be immediately obvious to everyone, and it is this: **the Chinese party-state doesn't really care whether you see through the falsehood of the Peng Shuai interview. By getting Peng Shuai, who has little choice but to obey, to say what she must say, China establishes "Peng Shuai**

says” as the new ground for going forward: Now that Peng Shuai has spoken, all of your concerns are answered and answered by herself, what can you say?

There is nothing new about this practice. Outside of the Peng Shuai incident, on a much larger scale in politics, business, finance, and international relations, the CCP regime in China routinely imposes on its own people and on the international community China’s own “facts,” China’s own “logic,” and China’s own “rules,” and gets away with little or no resistance, if not eager acceptance, because China under the CCP has skillfully weaponized its singular advantage: market.

What Peng Shuai’s situation is likely to be

In “[What Awaits Peng Shuai](#)” I made a few predictions about what would happen to Peng Shuai. I predicted that Peng Shuai would be surrounded by minders and surveilled closely so that she would have no opportunities to speak freely to the WTA or other concerned parties, and her access to communications and information would be restricted. I predicted that she would be made to disappear from public view. I predicted that she would not be allowed to travel overseas. I predicted that no Chinese tennis players or other athletes, or sports organizations, would voice support for her. I predicted nothing would happen to Zhang Gaoli. I predicted that, instead of China’s state-owned media outlets, which would not be effective in the propaganda campaign regarding Peng Shuai, the IOC would be used as the CCP’s mouthpiece to disarm and mislead the world.

Sadly, all my predictions have transpired, simply because China’s playbook is very predictable.

Where the Peng Shuai incident stands now

The WTA’s decision to pull out of China was a game changer. To be sure, China wants the WTA back in China, because it’s a matter of national pride. The national pride I’m speaking of has two aspects. First, since Chinese player Li Na won the French Open in 2011, interest in women’s tennis skyrocketed in China. So did viewership and the advertising market. By 2019, before the pandemic, the WTA was holding over 20 tournaments a year in China. In 2018, the WTA signed a [10-year contract with China](#) to hold its season finals every October in Shenzhen where a new stadium was built. China had big plans for women’s tennis and they can’t be achieved without the WTA, and the WTA was poised to expand into the Chinese market and profit big. Both sides were committed. Against this backdrop, the WTA’s December 1st announcement is nothing short of extraordinary.

Second, China has gotten used to foreign businesses, including sports leagues and universities, bowing to its demands, as best demonstrated by the NBA controversy in 2019. In the eyes of the CCP tyrants, the WTA’s decision is an unacceptable offense and must be defeated.

The WTA is not backing down. WTA CEO [Steve Simon](#) told the New York Times recently that the WTA continues “with our unwavering call for confirmation of Peng’s safety along with a

full, fair and transparent investigation, without censorship, into her allegation of sexual assault. This is an issue that can never fade away.”

The WTA also [confirmed](#) that Peng Shuai has so far refused to see WTA personnel “in an environment where we know she is not being really controlled.”

So here is where things stand now: China will not let Peng Shuai free, and will definitely not provide “a full, fair and transparent investigation into her allegation of sexual assault” as the WTA has demanded; the WTA will not back down from the line it has drawn.

After the Winter Olympics, we will see more maneuvers, openly as well as behind the scenes, by the CCP to try to bring the WTA to its knees. I hope that the WTA will stand up for Peng Shuai, and for women.

The Peng Shuai incident has brought to head a long dilemma in the democracies’ relations with China: profit vs. values. The WTA was founded in 1973 with the [vision](#) of “a better future for women’s tennis.” That future will be severely compromised, and mocked, if the WTA, in the end, sacrifices principles for profits. Too many businesses have succumbed, and continue to succumb, to this unfortunate choice.

Nobody is against money, but making money in China is a different story. One thing our businesses, universities, and sports leagues don’t seem to fully understand is that, to eat at the CCP’s trough, you will have to turn into a pig. The CCP regime traps you, corrupts you, and takes away your principles and your dignity. That’s the deal you strike with the Chinese Communist Party. It’s long past due that we have a hard look at our dealings with the CCP regime, and if we don’t, we stand to lose ourselves in the process. It’s happening already.

Recommendations

In What Awaits Peng Shuai, I wrote, “When dealing with China, we are not doing anything if all we do is appeal to the communist regime to do the right thing and move on to the next day; we are only beginning to do something when we start setting benchmarks, exploring the leverage we have and applying it to confront China.”

- 1) I wish I have the space to tell more about Peng Shuai’s career as a professional tennis player. We all know her world championship titles, but she was the first woman player in China who, at the end of 2006, expressed her desire to free herself from the Soviet-style, state-managed sport system to become an independent professional player. For this simple desire, she was punished for two years. She was expelled from the national team for a period, and had to “apologize for her wrongs” to be taken back and given the opportunity to take part in the 2008 Olympics. ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) Does IOC President Thomas Bach know anything about this? Peng Shuai is a fighter and a survivor. Now she is in a situation where she has little control over her fate. CECC, Congress, the U.S. government must not lose sight of her, and must continuously seek *substantive* ways to speak up for her and help free her.

- 2) Congress and the U.S. government should investigate the IOC for its role in working hand in hand with the Chinese government to cover up the Peng Shuai incident.
- 3) As far as I'm concerned, the Peng Shuai incident has become a test on *our* principles. CECC and Congress should think ahead of the curve, providing necessary support for the WTA.