

YAO MING, YI JIANLIAN, AND THE NEW CHINESE ATHLETE

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The entries of Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian into the NBA shed light on the development of the modern Chinese athlete. After Yao's success in America both on and off the court, Yi positioned himself prior to the 2007 draft to be selected by teams in large cities with equally large marketing potential. Yi initially refused to play for Milwaukee—the team that drafted him sixth overall—and threatened to remain in China, sparking criticism in both China and America. Although he ultimately signed with the team, Yi's actions hint at a new awareness among Chinese athletes of their power as marketing agents. No longer exclusively seen as tools of the state, Yao and Yi are aware of their selling power to their home country. For this reason, a close examination of Yao and Yi will provide insight into a transforming perception of sport in China. Transcending the historical perception of athletic achievement as a public tool of patriotism, Yao and Yi recognize and seek to exploit the commercial power of their physicality. In doing so, they reveal the twofold pressures on elite athletes in post-reform China: to simultaneously balance both commercial and nationalist impulses.

“I still think of myself as a blue-collar worker. I sweat for my paycheck. If that makes me the best-known capitalist in China today, I don't have a problem with that.”
—Yao Ming, *Yao: A Life in Two Worlds* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 214.

On June 28, 2007, the Milwaukee Bucks of the National Basketball Association (NBA) selected Chinese player Yi Jianlian as the sixth overall pick of the 2007 NBA Draft. Yi's selection in the draft's first round guaranteed him a multiyear and multimillion-dollar NBA contract. Moreover, it gave him the opportunity to compete at the “highest level of basketball in the world,” as Yi himself stated on his blog the day of the draft. As Yi wrote moments before his selection, “only about five hundred players have the chance to play in [the NBA]” so “hard work and perseverance [are] essential.” Yi's own “hard work and perseverance” had seemingly paid off.¹ There was just one problem: after Milwaukee drafted him, Yi decided he no longer wanted to play.

The circumstances surrounding Yi's seemingly sudden reversal require further explanation, as they shed light upon the market-driven and globalized sports world in which he operates. Before officially announcing his entry in the 2007 NBA

¹ Jianlian Yi, “The Draft, Dreams and Heroes,” http://www.nba.com/chat_and_mailboxes/NBAcom_Blog_Yi_Jianlian.html, *NBA Inc.*, (accessed December 1, 2007).

Draft, Yi assembled an international team of representatives led by American sports agent Dan Fegan and the owner of Yi's Chinese team Chen Haitao.² While Yi's three predecessors, Yao Ming, Wang Zhizhi, and Mengke Bateer, powerlessly watched their NBA selections from China, Yi traveled to Los Angeles weeks before the draft. In L.A., Yi and his team attempted to determine his draft destination by selectively allowing private workouts with teams from larger cities.³ Yi's handlers invited teams from Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia to see the Chinese "conundrum" in person, while conspicuously failing to invite representatives from Milwaukee and Minneapolis (whose teams held the sixth and seventh picks, respectively). Further fueling the frustration of shunned teams, Yi was the only potential top-fifteen pick who skipped the NBA Draft Combine, an annual event that allows prospects to work out and interview with their potential employers. Fegan claimed this pre-draft process was an effort to ease Yi's transition by placing him in a city with a large Asian population.⁴ Chen claimed that they were seeking "a team that is good for Yi's development" as a basketball player.⁵ Chen even hinted at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, arguing that Yi must maintain a high level of play for the Chinese national team.⁶ Journalists and NBA executives proposed more skeptical explanations, ranging from potential contract negotiations to commercial opportunities in America's largest markets. While the underlying motivations remain open to debate, Yi's handlers believed they had successfully controlled the process. No one, including Yi himself, expected the Milwaukee Bucks to call his name on draft night. As Yi knew, according to NBA Draft regulations, the team that selects a player gains exclusive negotiating rights. If Yi wanted to play in the NBA, rather than return to China, he would have no choice but to play for Milwaukee.

While Yi ultimately agreed to play for the Bucks, his handlers maintained and exploited the uneven power dynamic between player and team. The day after the draft, journalists speculated whether Yi would "ever wear a Bucks uniform," as he immediately joined the Chinese national team for exhibitions rather than traveling to Milwaukee to meet with his new team.⁷ Two months after the draft, Yi remained the only first-round pick yet to sign a contract. Although his handlers failed to force the Bucks into trading Yi, they successfully leveraged his holdout into guarantees both on and off the court. Moreover, in a fitting representation of the power dynamic, Yi's side controlled the negotiations geographically. Yi never traveled to Milwaukee to discuss contract terms; instead, Chen drew Bucks owner and team president (and United States Senator of Wisconsin) Herb Kohl to Hong Kong for negotiations in August 2007. After promising that Yi would see substantial playing time during his

2 "Milwaukee May Face Obstacles to Get Top Pick Yi on Team," *Associated Press* and *ESPN Inc.*, June 29, 2007, <http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/draft2007/news/story?id=2920483> (accessed December 1, 2007).

3 Chad Ford, "Can Yi Play at the NBA Level? That's a Good Question," *ESPN Inc.*, June 21, 2007, http://insider.espn.go.com/nba/draft2007/insider/columns/story-columnist=ford_chad&page=Yi-Conundrum (accessed December 1, 2007).

4 *Ibid.*, 1.

5 "Report: Chinese Team Says Bucks Not Best for Yi," *Associated Press* and *ESPN Inc.*, July 18, 2007, <http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/news/story?id=2939260> (accessed December 1, 2007).

6 *Ibid.*, 1.

7 "Milwaukee May Face Obstacles to Get Top Pick Yi on Team."

rookie season, the two sides reached an agreement and announced on August 29th, 2007 that Yi would be in a Bucks uniform at the start of the 2007 NBA season.⁸

Yi's entry into the NBA is full of symbolic and social significance. On one level, the significance is obvious: an American senator flying around the world for a Chinese basketball player clearly reveals some type of paradigm shift. On another level, however, Yi's maneuvers are more nuanced. It is an oversimplification to portray Yi simply as a spoiled professional athlete, as many American newspapers tended to do during his two-month contract holdout with the Bucks. On the other hand, it would also be erroneous to absolve Yi of responsibility completely by portraying him as a tool of his handlers or a product of today's commercial environment. Rather the maneuvers surrounding Yi's draft hint at the unique development of the agency of the modern Chinese athlete. This agency stems from the simultaneous growth of both commercial and nationalist athletic pressures in the post-reform era. Yi is by no means the first athlete to be borne out of this twofold structure; Yao Ming remains the most famous example. This paper will place Yi's story in a larger historical context by examining Yao's rise. In short, both Yao and Yi transcend the historical perception in China of the body as a public tool of patriotism; instead, Yao and Yi recognize (and exploit) the commercial power of their physicality.

THE CHINESE SPORTS EMPIRE

In order to understand the uniqueness of Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian, one must first examine the history of athletics in modern China. China's ruling party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has used athletic achievement as a tool of the state since the beginning of the Socialist era in 1949. Chairman Mao successfully established a link "between the body and the nation," and elite athletes presented an exemplary manifestation of this relationship. Susan Brownell, author of "Training the Body for China," argues that Mao equated athletic success with his notion of continuous revolution, stating that athletes symbolized "an active body on behalf of a nation that was forever in motion."⁹ At the same time, the CCP instilled a notion of duty and responsibility within the country's best athletes, emphasizing that their bodies were created by the Chinese system of government-sponsored training. It was this emphasis that inspired one Western journalist's claim in 1988 that "unable to compete with the superpowers militarily or economically, China is determined to be a world power in sports."¹⁰ To accomplish this, athletes were instructed to seek collective success over individual achievement. As one athlete said, how "dare [one] suggest that his personal ambition was more important than the national cause?"¹¹ This question summarizes the prevailing attitude expressed among Chinese athletes, an attitude rooted in his-

8 Dan Makowski, "A Busy Four Months for Yi Jianlian," *NBA Inc.*, August 30, 2007, http://www.nba.com/bucks/news/DM_070830.html (Accessed December 1, 2007).

9 Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* (University of Chicago Press, Ltd.: Chicago, 1995), 57.

10 Trip Gabriel, "China Strains for Olympic Glory," *New York Times*, April 24, 1988.

11 Brook Larmer, *Operation Yao Ming: The Chinese Sports Empire, American Big Business, and the Making of an NBA Superstar* (Gotham Books: New York, 2005), 116.

tory as well as in political construction.

The basis of modern Chinese sport can be traced as far back as the late Qing dynasty and the Republican period. As Andrew Morris states, Chinese *tiyu* (literally, “body-cultivation”) and its “definite ideals of the relationships between the individual and the national body, and between the individual body and personal character” were institutionalized during this time.¹² Morris states that early twentieth-century sports “were designed by and for men [...] who were expected to pilot the nation-states of the modern era.”¹³ The new conception of sport thus molded China’s athletes.

During the Republican period in China (1912-1948), the two dominant political parties attempted to monopolize body culture and separate sport from “Western” influences. While the early Communist Party critiqued the inequality inherent in Chinese athletics at the time, they also used sport as a recruiting technique, and as a method of “improving soldiers’ fitness and morale.”¹⁴ During the same time, the Republican government organized national competitions following a Western-style model. The 1924 “National Games” was the first large-scale sporting competition organized by Chinese; it was attended by over 30,000 spectators. The Nationalists instituted a policy of physical education in schools, explicitly associating sport with state. Brownell writes, “Teachers addressed [the students] with speeches that promoted nationalism and encouraged them to become strong so that they could defend and avenge their nation.”¹⁵ Through these developments, the policies enacted in the Republican era established a strong connection between athletic achievement and nationalist sentiment.

In the Maoist era, the CCP strove to use sport as a state-building tool without providing celebrity or financial benefits to elite athletes. Mao’s 1952 slogan remains the most famous Communist era statement on sports: “Develop physical culture and sports, strengthen the people’s physiques.”¹⁶ This slogan was painted in gymnasiums and announced at sports meets across the country. At the same time, Mao also used his own physical strength as a representation of the country’s strength, a connection epitomized by his famous 1966 swim across the Yangtze River. In terms of the widespread practice of sport during this time, the goals were as follows: “to promote public health, increase productivity, and prepare the people for national defense.”¹⁷

The Communists argued that sport should be entirely egalitarian, practiced by men and women, peasants and leaders, and so forth. However, the CCP simultaneously established a hierarchical athletic infrastructure designed for the sporting elite. From the State Sports Commission System to the National Games, this infrastructure inextricably tied China’s athletes to the Communist state.

The State Sports Commission System, modeled after the Soviet sport sys-

12 Andrew Morris, “To Make the Four Hundred Million Move: The Late Qing Dynasty Origins of Chinese Sport and Physical Culture,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 4. (2000), 878.

13 *Ibid.*, 887.

14 Brownell, 48.

15 *Ibid.*, 51.

16 Brownell, 57. *Fazhan tiyu yundong, zengqiang renmin tizhi.*

17 Brownell, 58.

tem and established in 1955, created a series of sporting schools for top athletes. As Brownell observes, these chosen athletes “were to be the vanguards of the new culture of the body.”¹⁸ The State Sports Commission had a pyramid structure similar to comparable government ministries (such as the Education Commission and the Ministry of Culture), comprised of local sports commissions, provincial sports commissions, and finally a central commission. The Sports Commission often interfered with the existing education system, as Chinese children of athletic promise were enrolled in sports schools rather than traditional schools. The sports curriculum consisted almost entirely of physical training, preventing Chinese athletes from acquiring knowledge or skills in any other discipline. These specialized schools included all tiers of physical education, straight through college-level athletic institutions. As Brownell states: “this pyramidal system [was] designed to recruit promising athletes at the grassroots level and move the superior ones level-by-level up through the system until they arrive at the pinnacle, the national team” (*ibid.*, 59). During the Socialist era, the national team represented the singular goal of athletic achievement, since there were no sports leagues outside the bounds of the State Sports Commission. Thus, China’s national team and National Games presented the only chance for China’s best athletes to compete publicly.

The National Games embodied the relationship between sports and national service during the Socialist era. These Games were not held every four years like the Olympics. Instead, the Chinese government decided to host a National Games on an impromptu basis, only as political and social circumstances demanded. The First National Games were held in 1959 to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of the People’s Republic of China, with the theme “The Entire Nation Simultaneously Celebrates.”¹⁹ The timing of these Games—in the middle of the disastrous Great Leap Forward—reveals the CCP’s pragmatic use of sport to “motivate the people to continue to work for the future.”²⁰ In other words, the National Games served as a distraction, temporarily removing the focus from famine to exhibit the strength of China in a time of weakness. The theme of the Second National Games, “A Song of Praise for the Revolution,” similarly paralleled the political climate (*ibid.*, 61). This language, befitting the 1965 Cultural Revolution era Games, reflects the desire to make sport political. As Brownell argues, “to some degree [the Games] embody the nation, but at the same time they are a conscious attempt by the Party to alter the nation’s body” (*ibid.* 62). During the Socialist era, sport in China simultaneously served as a mirror and as a tool of government-led nationalist sentiment.

In the past three decades, Chinese sport has experienced rapid transformation alongside the country’s political and economic reforms. It is impossible to explain the multitudinous changes in sport comprehensively in this article, but the current system represents a unique fusion of China’s State Sports Commission and a market-driven sports model. Since the start of the reforms in 1978, semi-private leagues have been established for basketball, baseball, and soccer. These leagues pro-

18 *Ibid.*, 58.

19 Brownell, 60.

20 *Ibid.*, 60.

vide an alternative vision for China's elite athletes. However, according to leagues and players alike, this alternative should not replace, but enhance, an athlete's commitment to the national team.

Li Yuanwei, current director of the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA), describes the persistence of commitment to the state over the individual:

“China is changing and very quickly. In America, individuals effect change. In China, the country effects change and individuals follow. So I can have ideas about how things should be or what is best, but I can't implement them on my own. Everything I do has to reflect the country's environment. I may think a certain way, but I also have to represent the CBA and the Chinese Sports Administration.”²¹

As the ensuing examples of Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian illustrate, Chinese athletes are increasingly driven by market forces. Li's comments speak to the delicate balance between the desires of the CBA's players and the continued pressures of the CCP's Chinese Sports Administration. His attitude is representative of the changing Chinese sports system, which simultaneously shapes and is shaped by athletes like Yao and Yi.

THE BASKETBALL BALANCING-ACT OF YAO MING AND YI JIANLIAN

In theory, Yao Ming is the ideal achievement of China's “sports empire.” His parents were both national-team players and, upon their marriage, were announced as the tallest couple in China. Bred to play basketball—he weighed 11.2 pounds and measured 23 inches at birth—Yao's birth was immediately relayed to the Shanghai Sports Commission in 1980. By the early 1980s, “two men in faded Mao suits made pilgrimages” to the small apartment of the Yao family, testing the boy's reflexes and hand-eye coordination.²² They meticulously monitored his height, predicting that Yao would grow to over seven-feet tall. This information ensured that Yao would have a place in the Chinese sports hierarchy. His selection by the Houston Rockets as the first pick in the 2002 NBA Draft seemingly validated the CCP's hands-on efforts at athletic success. However, while China had indeed cultivated a world-class basketball player, Yao's decision to join the team also reflected a changing set of priorities for the professional Chinese athlete.

Yao followed the path of his parents—a path outlined by the Chinese Sports Commission to maximize the potential of basketball players. His father, Yao Zhiyuan, had been recruited to play in a specialized sports school in Shanghai. As Yao Zhiyuan remarked, “I was tall, so I had to learn how to play basketball [...] I had no choice.”²³ The Shanghai Sports Commission similarly recruited Yao Ming's mother,

21 Ming Yao and Ric Bucher in *Yao: A Life in Two Worlds* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 257.

22 Brook Larmer, *Operation Yao Ming: The Chinese Sports Empire, American Big Business, and the Making of an NBA Superstar* (Gotham Books: New York, 2005), xi-xvi, 3-17.

23 Larmer, 17.

Fang Feng Di but known as “Da Fang” (his father was known as “Da Yao,” meaning Big Fang and Big Yao, respectively). As the representatives of the Sports Commission explained to Fang’s parents, “As one of the tallest girls in Shanghai, if not *the* tallest, Da Fang had the potential to bring glory to the city, and perhaps to the nation, through her efforts on the basketball court.”²⁴ Following their sports educations, both Da Fang and Da Yao accomplished a great deal on the court. More importantly, and in a relationship seemingly orchestrated by the Sports Commission, their marriage off the court would result in the birth of China’s preeminent twenty-first century sports star.

Yao Ming was treated as a product since early childhood, with the Sports Commission and the media monitoring his development. He reportedly ate twice as much as a normal child, and Da Fang patriotically attributed her and Da Yao’s ability to feed him to CCP policies: “It’s in his genes that he grew so tall,” she said, “[...] and because of China’s one-child policy, he has had better nutrition than we had during our era.”²⁵ By Yao’s fourth birthday, a reporter from the *Xinmin Evening Post* wrote a feature story about the growing child and his “love of basketball.”²⁶ By age eight, both the Luwan District Sports School and the Xuhui District Spare-Time Sports School were pursuing Yao.²⁷ While Da Fang ultimately agreed to send her child to the Xuhui school, she felt conflicted and retains a certain level of regret: “We didn’t choose this career for him [...] but we were basketball players. All of our old colleagues and coaches had their eyes on Yao Ming [...] the sports school wanted him so much.”²⁸ According to Yao, his “parents agreed only because playing basketball in a junior sports school can improve your chance of getting into college” since it awards extra points on China’s college entrance examination.²⁹ His parents’ own experiences as national team players thus made the decision more complex. Nevertheless, from the age of eight until his selection as the number one pick in the 2002 NBA Draft, Yao would know nothing but a life structured by the Chinese Sports Commission.

Yao’s initial training was grueling, as Chinese coaches attempted to instill an ethos of collective over individual. The ability to *chiku*, literally “eat bitterness,” is a prized trait in Chinese athletes.³⁰ The Xuhui Sports School’s practices reflected this sense of overcoming physical responses, as Larmer describes in his book. He writes, “Every young athlete trudged through practice bordering on exhaustion, keenly aware that they were being trained to become cogs in the machine.”³¹ These arduous routines have defined China’s sports schools since their establishment under Mao. Yao’s

24 *Ibid.*, 18.

25 Larmer, 58. The Shanghai Sports Commission later pressured the municipal government to create an exception for tall families. If the father stands over 1.93 meters (6 feet 4 inches) and the mother over 1.8 meters (5 feet 11 inches), Shanghai parents can now have more than one child and are even eligible for financial assistance

26 Larmer, 59; Yao and Bucher, 30. Yao’s own account differs starkly with the article published about him. As Yao states in his autobiography: “My dad gave me a toy basketball when I was four or five years old, but I didn’t think it was that exciting. I had other toys that I liked much better.”

27 Larmer, 60.

28 *Ibid.*, 61.

29 Yao and Bucher, 30.

30 Brownell, 326; Larmer, 88.

31 Larmer, 69.

own practices at Xuhui consisted of sprints, dribbling drills, and jumping. His coach, Li Zhangming, had the entire team repeat the same drills all day, neglecting to scrimmage or focus on the individual skills needed by position.³² After playing in the NBA for several years, Yao reflected upon these early practices: “Unlike American coaches, who encourage you to do things because you want to do them, Chinese coaches force you.”³³ As Yao’s language hints, the Chinese sports system is a hierarchical one based upon communal respect rather than individual attention. Still, by age thirteen, Yao was playing professionally as a member of the state-supported Shanghai Sharks. After joining the Sharks junior team, Yao began practicing daily for ten hours, and “there was little time for school after that.”³⁴ He remained in the Sharks system for the next eight years, playing his way through the Sharks junior team to the Sharks senior team. His improvement and experience with the Sharks also exposed him to his first experience as a national team player, with his participation in the junior national team as a seventeen-year old.

Yao’s interactions with Chinese “sports scientists” typify the CCP’s radical efforts to control the development of young athletes. For example, because the scientists believed that adolescents grow most quickly when asleep, the Shanghai Sports Commission built a special seven foot ten inch bed for Yao’s required daily naps. Yao also had frequent visits with Wei Guoping, a secretive researcher hired by the Shanghai Sports Commission “to stimulate the growth, stamina, and recovery of elite athletes.”³⁵ Wei used a fusion of modern hormone therapy and traditional Chinese medicine, and his goal for Yao was clear: “continue stimulating Yao’s growth while making the rest of his body—heart, lungs, kidneys, bones, circulatory system—strong enough to support his enormous size.”³⁶ He prescribed a mysterious treatment of pills and supplements for Yao, stating that while “Yao Ming was very curious to know what we were doing to him [...], he was very obedient. He was very good at accepting what we were doing” (*ibid.*, 101). This language reiterates Yao’s lack of control in every aspect of his development, down to his diet. Wei’s treatment also resulted in rampant speculation about the use of human growth hormone (HGH) in Yao’s development, a hormonal treatment explicitly outlawed by American sports leagues (*ibid.*, 102). While Wei refuses to discuss HGH, he openly takes credit for Yao’s physical development:

“By that time [1997, Yao’s first appearance on the senior national team], we had been able to establish Yao’s biological and chemical balance [...] we were surprised ourselves that it happened so quickly. But we knew then that Yao would succeed, and that it never would’ve happened without our work” (*ibid.*, 103).

32 *Ibid.*, 69.

33 Larmer, 69.

34 Yao and Bucher, 33.

35 Larmer, 99.

36 *Ibid.*, 99.

This language reflects the responsibility that the Shanghai Sports Commission, and the Chinese government more generally, continues to take for Yao Ming's success. Rather than awarding individual credit to Yao's determination to excel, his accomplishments both in China and the United States are depicted as the result of a group effort in which Yao was a minor player.

In their drive to develop Yao as a national asset, the Shanghai Sharks, CBA, and Shanghai Sports Commission interfered with Yao's initial attempts to join the NBA. As early as 1999, the *Washington Post* and other American media outlets reported that the "Chinese giant" would participate in the Draft and had even hired an agent.³⁷ NBA executives were first introduced to the twenty year-old Shanghai phenomenon during the 2000 Sydney Olympics:

The unmistakable evidence that the basketball world had forever changed was the vertically breathtaking vision of Yao bracing himself for Vince Carter's aerial assault and turning the lane into a Chinese no-fly zone. The moment he summarily rejected Carter's attempt to launch the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney with a signature slam, the alarm rang for American basketball aficionados to pay more attention to global changes, to rise above our cultural ignorance and find out which was the surname and which the given name.³⁸

Although the NBA scouts were enamored, the Sharks pressured Yao to remain in China. Bai Li, general manager of the Sharks, presented five explicit reasons for preventing Yao from participating in the 2001 NBA Draft. These reasons were (in paraphrase unless otherwise noted): (1) Chinese basketball, and the CBA in particular, needs stars like Yao Ming; (2) the NBA would distract Yao from his duties to the national team; (3) Yao Ming needs to participate in the Ninth National Games "to win glory for Shanghai"; (4) Yao must be fully prepared physically and mentally to receive the club's support; and (5) "Yao Ming should join the NBA as a world-class basketball star symbolically representing the Chinese people, and there was no need to be impatient or agitated about it."³⁹ Bai's explanations demonstrate the extent of the CBA's control over Yao, as well as the emphasis upon "winning glory" for city and nation that stemmed from Maoist era sport.

Although Yao remained subject to nationalist pressures, he was also exposed to lucrative marketing opportunities from American companies during his time with the Sharks. He signed several marketing deals with both American and Chinese companies even before his departure for the NBA. Terry Rhoads, the former head of marketing for Nike in China, signed Yao to a four-year contract worth up to 50,000 USD a year. As Rhoads himself states: "Since Yao's salary with the Sharks was around 20,000 USD a year, the Nike China staff liked to joke that Yao was a full-time Nike employee and part-time basketball player, since we paid him double what the Sharks did."⁴⁰ Rhoads' phrasing is interesting, as it portrays Yao as an advertiser first and an

37 C.F. Xiao, *Yao Ming: The Road to the NBA*, trans. Philip Robyn, (Long River Press: San Francisco, 2004), 124.

38 Harvey Araton, *Crashing the Borders: How Basketball Won the World and Lost its Soul at Home* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2005), 131.

39 Xiao, 131.

40 Yao and Bucher, 56.

athlete second. While Yao might challenge that description, his own language reflects an acute awareness of financial considerations. A section from his autobiography, entitled *The Chinese Capitalist*, merits quotation in full:

“There’s an expression in Chinese that says when you go somewhere you must adopt the customs. If you have money, you’re a capitalist—that’s the way some people think. So, OK, I’m a capitalist. But I still feel as though whatever money I have in my pocket—the money I can see and use—is what I have. And it’s definitely all I need. The money I can’t see, the money in the bank or the numbers on a check, just gives me a feeling of success. I think most people with a lot of money are like that. No one making millions can say he really needs that money to live. That’s not what it means. It is a way to measure your worth in your job. If my next contract with the Rockets is for more money than what I’m making now, it’s because I’m worth more than to them.”⁴¹

Thus, Yao explicitly addresses the issue of worth in terms of his salary with the Rockets. His shrewdness, though, lies in his ability to adopt these individualistic and capitalist ideas while remaining respectful of the social and economic heritage of China. He repeatedly states that there is “no bigger honor [he] can think of than playing for [his] country.”⁴² Yao thus strikes a careful balance between his commercial and patriotic pressures, showcasing his unique status as a Chinese star in an American system.

Finally, any discussion of Yao Ming would be incomplete without contrasting Yao against his peer Wang Zhi Zhi. Wang was the first Chinese athlete to play in an NBA game, but he failed to successfully consider his Chinese obligations. He was a member of the Bayi Rockets, a professional team owned by the CCP army, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Rather than waiting for full approval from the PLA team and its CCP owners, Wang fled for the NBA after his selection by the Dallas Mavericks in the 1999 NBA Draft. Afterwards, the Bayi Rockets and the Chinese national team essentially cut him off. This isolation not only hurt him as a Chinese citizen but also as a potential marketing agent. American companies are acutely aware of the power of the Chinese government, and they do not want to jeopardize their interests in China by associating with a “pariah.”⁴³ Nike, which had a contract with Wang, let it expire in 2002. The CCP tried to erase Wang from the world of Chinese basketball, even issuing a “special directive” in 2002 that “forbade the nation’s broadcasters from airing any of Wang’s NBA Games.”⁵⁰ Wang represents the potentially disastrous effects of disobeying China’s “sports empire,” since his premature departure resulted in the loss of both patriotic and commercial opportunities.

41 Ibid., 218-219.

42 Yao and Bucher, 235.

43 Larmer, 298.

In comparison, the Chinese response to Yao's NBA career has been largely positive. In fact, Yao's handlers have made extensive efforts to distinguish Yao from his isolated comrade. As one advisor explained, after separating Yao and Wang before a game in Houston: "The Chinese government would freak out if it saw Yao and Wang together [...] Wang already made it much more complicated for Yao to get out of China. So we have to be careful. We can't afford to tarnish Yao's image now."⁴⁴ Such strict management of Yao's image in China has been a success. On January 5, 2003, Yao's Shanghai Sharks jersey was retired, making Yao the first athlete in any Chinese professional sport to have his number retired. His ability to retain respect in China stems from his repeated claim that "It would be a very difficult decision, and luckily I don't have to make it, but if I could only play for either the Rockets or China, I would have to choose the national team."⁴⁵ Yao has successfully navigated the dangerous line between American capitalist and Chinese patriot. Rather than going too far too soon, Yao "is the perfect example of individual achievement in an increasingly individualistic Chinese society."⁴⁶ He represents the new ideal in Chinese athletics, simultaneously achieving individual goals while fulfilling national responsibilities.

In contrast to both Yao Ming and Wang Zhi Zhi, Yi Jianlian's rise to the NBA took place largely without state support. A native of Guangdong, Yi Jianlian is the son of two former professional handball players. The Chinese Sports Commission discovered Yi while he was playing basketball on the streets of Shenzhen in 1999. Since representatives from sports schools made Yi's parents "feel as though they had little choice," they ultimately agreed to enroll him in the Guangdong sports system.⁴⁷ During the next three years, the hype about Yi outpaced his improvement. As a clear consequence of Yao Ming's success, Adidas and Nike both pursued nineteen-year old Yi, as did various marketing and sports agents seeking to represent the next Chinese basketball star. Yet, before the 2004-2005 CBA season, Yi had played only two seasons at the highest level of Chinese basketball and had never even started for the Guangzhou team.

Regardless of his age, Yi capitalized upon the market standards set by Yao. Just as Yao recognized his own worth according to his contract with the Rockets, so Yi recognized his potential worth according to Yao's. In 2003, he signed a lucrative endorsement deal with Nike as a sixteen-year old with no CBA or NBA experience.⁴⁸

Nike's early focus on Yi may explain his entitled attitude upon entering the NBA. Even the CBA dealt with Yi on market-driven terms. Whereas the CBA originally portrayed itself as a patriotic exhibition and an arm of the national team, the CBA's administrators have increasingly become concerned with the league's profitability. In other words, the "CBA's reluctance to relinquish its best players has as much to do with capitalist markets as socialist control [...] the CBA wants to build

44 *Ibid.*, 296. As Larmer states, "the NBA usually insisted that foreign broadcasters air a full package of games to ensure parity among its twenty-nine teams—but in the case of China, the league was apparently willing to make an exception."

45 Larmer, 297.

46 Yao and Bucher, 235.

47 *Ibid.*, 249.

48 Larmer, 301.

its brand around future stars like Yi Jianlian” (ibid., 307). Unquestionably, the CBA’s vested interest fueled Yi’s initial hesitation to sign with the Milwaukee Bucks. As with Yao before him, CBA officials played a pivotal role in Yi’s NBA Draft.

Yao and Yi’s popularity in China since their entrance into the NBA illustrates an increased willingness on the part of Chinese fans and government officials to embrace both commercial and nationalist models of sport. When *Sohu.com*, one of China’s largest sports websites, hosted a 90-minute online chat with Yao in December 2002, over nine million Chinese fans logged on (The influx of visitors actually crashed *Sohu.com* in six of China’s largest cities). The NBA’s contract with CCTV has never been more fruitful, as Yao’s regular season games average 30 million viewers, whereas regular season games struggle to draw one million viewers in the U.S. However, no statistic more clearly reveals Yao’s astounding popularity than his annual selection to the NBA All-Star Game. The selection of the starting NBA All-Stars at each position is determined by online fans voting. Yao holds the four highest totals for fan votes in the history of the NBA All-Star Game, averaging 2.5 million votes per season since his 2002 entry into the NBA.⁴⁹ Even Yi, who is not listed on the 2007 All-Star ballot due to his unimpressive rookie statistics, has almost reached one million votes as a write-in option.⁵⁰ Chinese newspapers, controlled by the CCP, are fueling the Yao and Yi NBA frenzy. Although Yao received minimal attention in the *People’s Daily* as a member of the Sharks, coverage of his play intensified after joining the Rockets. In certain periods, Yao appeared in the newspaper almost daily, and Yi’s coverage has also increased since the draft.⁵¹ Finally, the first NBA game played between Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian—a meaningless regular season match up—was watched by over 300 million Chinese.⁵² This figure signals success for all parties—from Yao Ming to Li Yuanwei—as hundreds of millions of fans tune into America’s league to watch Chinese stars play ball.

CONCLUSION: YAO’S LEFT FOOT

Yao Ming’s recent injury, with its potential ramifications for both the Houston Rockets and Chinese national team, provides a fitting example of the twofold pressure structure examined in this paper. In February 2008, less than six months before the Opening Ceremonies at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, Yao was diagnosed with a stress fracture in his left foot that required season-ending surgery.⁵³ The injury immediately decreased the Rockets’ playoff chances in the NBA’s competitive Western Conference. As commentator Doug Collins remarked, “[Yao’s injury] takes away

49 Ibid., 306-307.

50 “Cleveland’s Lebron James and Houston’s Yao Ming Top Vote Getters as NBA All-Star Starters are Announced,” *NBA Inc.*, January 25, 2007, http://www.nba.com/-/news/allstar_starters_070125.html (accessed December 16, 2007).

51 “China Media Unhappy Yi Off Ballot,” *Yahoo! Sports*, November 16, 2007, <http://sports.yahoo.com/nba/news?slug=afpbasketnbachnallstaryi&prov=afp&type=lg> (accessed December 16, 2007).

52 For example, Yi’s name appeared 53 times from January to March in 2003, during the middle of his first NBA season.

53 “Chinese TV Audience for First Yao vs. Yi Game May Far Exceed Super Bowl,” *Associated Press and ESPN, Inc.*, November 8, 2007, <http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/-news/story?id=3101114> (accessed November 15, 2007).

their title hopes [...] a horrible blow for the Rockets.”⁵⁴ While Yao’s foot fracture changed the playoff hopes for his American team, concerns in China were even more dramatic. Shanghai’s largest newspaper ran the headline “National Treasure Injured,” employing a phrase typically used only in reference to Giant Pandas.⁵⁵ The injury provoked concern among fans and CCP officials that Yao would be unable to perform in the Olympics. After his surgery, Yao responded to such concerns in an open letter published in Chinese newspapers across the country. Yao vowed to return for the Olympics, and he apologized to CBA officials, family members, and teammates—in that order.⁵⁶

The weeks following Yao’s foot injury were full of anxiety for CCP officials and American marketers alike. According to Geoffrey Fowler of the *Wall Street Journal*, Yao’s corporate sponsors, such as Coca-Cola and Adidas, pay up to ten million USD per year for his marketing services.⁵⁷ Many of these corporations counted on Yao’s presence at the Olympics both on and off the court, and his injury places their investments in jeopardy. Meanwhile, Houston Rockets and Chinese National Team officials have been quietly debating responsibility for Yao’s injury. After several American media outlets placed the blame on Yao’s national team commitment, team manager Hu Jiashi responded harshly: “These injuries are not because he is playing on the national team. Last year Yao Ming played nearly 100 games for the Rockets and only eight games for the national team, so the view of the foreign media is too one-sided.”⁵⁸ Hu’s language speaks to the defensive tone of both parties, as the Rockets and the national team attempt to absolve themselves of responsibility for Yao’s injury.

Ultimately, it is impossible to place blame solely upon the Houston Rockets or the Chinese national team. Instead, Yao remains under pressure—figuratively and physically—from both his market-driven NBA squad and his patriotism-driven Chinese team. The injury, a stress fracture accumulated over time, more than likely stems from the combined pressure of both responsibilities. Yao and Yi’s ability to withstand such pressures, and overcome such injuries, will define the ability of post-reform Chinese athletes to perform in this unique environment. As Yao himself has repeatedly stated, he will be ready for the Olympic Games in Beijing; his country demands it of him. For Yao to neglect this nationalist duty, despite his commercial stardom, remains an unthinkable and undesirable rebellion.

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⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Geoffrey Fowler, “With Games Near, Yao’s Injury Pains Sponsors and Fans,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2008, http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print-SB120412794355896947.html (accessed March 8, 2008).

⁵⁷ “Yao Ming Tells Fans he is Targeting Olympic Return,” *ESPN, Inc.*, March 7, 2008, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/wire?section=oly&id=3281019> (accessed March 8, 2008).

⁵⁸ Fowler, 1.

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