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## From "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" to "Hoop Diplomacy": Yao Ming, Globalization, and the Cultural Politics of U.S.-China Relations

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

FROM “PING-PONG DIPLOMACY” TO “HOOP DIPLOMACY”: YAO MING,  
GLOBALIZATION, AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

By

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	vi
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Focus and Purpose .....	4
Potential Significance .....	4
2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	5
Introduction .....	5
Theories of Globalization .....	5
Defining Globalization .....	5
Economy .....	6
Neoliberalism .....	6
Politics .....	7
Nationalism .....	7
Culture .....	8
Americanization/Anti-Americanism .....	9
Globalization and Sports .....	11
Sports-media Context .....	11
Sport and International Relations .....	12
Sports and Celebrity .....	14
The Context .....	14
The Migration of Elite Athletes .....	17
“Local” and “Global” Celebrities .....	18
Conclusion .....	19
3. METHODS .....	21
Introduction .....	21
Data Source .....	21
Sampling .....	22
Coding Procedure .....	24
Physicality .....	26
Personality .....	27
Commercial Value .....	29
Cultural Influence .....	30
Conclusion .....	31
4. BODY CULTURE, POLITICS IN CHINA, AND INTERNATIONAL YAO MING .....	33
From Mao to Yao .....	33
Training the Body for the Nation .....	34
“Big game” in China .....	37
Transnational Yao Ming .....	40
Asia’s Son .....	40
Model Minority Myth .....	43
The Great China Hope .....	45
Giant “Soft Power” .....	48
American Idol .....	49

Transnational Pitchman .....	53
5. LOVE AND HATE: U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS IN THE 21 <sup>ST</sup> CENTURY .....	64
One World, Shared Dream.....	64
From Ping-Pong Diplomacy to Hoop Diplomacy .....	68
Red Capitalist.....	72
Forbidden City, the Olympics and Golden Arches.....	75
6. CONCLUSION.....	80
REFERENCES .....	83
FOOTNOTES .....	99
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	104

## ABSTRACT

The early retirement of iconic Chinese basketball player Yao Ming came as a shock to fans in both China and United States. The end of the “Ming Dynasty” in the NBA brought about a number of discussions on his contribution and impact to the two countries with his dramatic, if not groundbreaking, nine-year NBA career. His high-profile migration to the United States, under the banner of being selected the No. 1 draft pick, quickly made him perhaps the most recognizable Chinese face to the world. More importantly, he opened a door to bring the NBA to the world’s most populous market with more than 1.3 billion people. The impact brought by Yao Ming however goes far beyond the basketball court.

Yao was born in a very unique historical period, in the age of globalization when free-market policies and economics have come to organize the international distribution of capital and culture. In China, the communist government has greatly benefited from free-market capitalism reforming and opening-up economic policy, and energetically disseminating its power and influence to the world (e.g. Beijing 2008 Olympics). The rise of China simultaneously confronts the interest of U.S. political and economic hegemony while the mutual economic desire consequently leads to a relationship of both competitor and partner between these two giants. Considering the flexible and transnational image of Yao Ming and his symbolic status in the two societies, through this thesis Yao Ming is taken as an epitome of the U.S.-China relations—culturally, economically and politically—to analyze the bridge-building role he has created between the West and the East, the celebrity economic effects he has generated as a global sports icon, and the far-reaching influence in a historical period he has brought to the development of Sino-American relations.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The rapid growth of sports media has led to an explosive increase in coverage of sports celebrities. Simultaneously, the study of celebrity has “developed and cohered into a flourishing field of social and cultural analysis” (Rojek, 2009, p. ii). In an effort to understand how these most public of individuals inform and influence private experience, research on the complex features of sports celebrities in economic, political, cultural and technological forces has been widely conducted (Andrews & Jackson, 2001).

The inevitable tide of globalization has not only changed the structure and relationship of our society, but also deeply shaped the current world of sports. Maguire, Barnard, Butler, and Golding (2008) claim, for example, that “The West dominates the economic, technological, political and knowledge resources and controls the levers of power of global sport” (p. 5). And, Western countries also play key roles in the globalization process as related to the pursuit of broader capital accumulation. Global sport is thus tied to the opening up of new markets, including that of labor, and the commoditization of cultures. As increasing transnational flows of athletes and coaches whose country of birth and origin are no longer a limitation on where an athlete plays or where an individual coaches (see Giardina, 2001), the increasing flows of athletes worldwide also boosts the number of “global” sports celebrities, as a new form of labor force, and expands the influence of these individuals over the boundaries of culture and nation-states. This is not only limited to private experience but to a broader scope of social consensus, resulting from their significant transnational characteristics that are highly related to their respective race, religion and nationality. These new “migrants”, whether consciously or unconsciously, promote and exchange the different political or cultural values via “the complex nexus of modern-day media networks” (Nalapat & Parker, 2005).

The mutual interaction further carries forward the impact of international sports celebrities to a new level of the “inter-civilization” relationship (Cox & Schechter, 2002, p. xxi), which stands for the deep-rooted cultural and political discrepancy between countries or civilizations while reflected on overt sports individuals. Among all of the professional sports, the National Basketball Association [NBA] is arguably the pioneer and model of sports globalization. In the 2010-2011 season, the NBA featured a record 84 international players from

38 countries and territories, and was broadcast to nearly 200 countries (Stein, 2010). NBA stars like Kobe Bryant and LeBron James, as well as the retired Michael Jordan, are widely recognized throughout the world. As a symbol of the United States, the NBA is vigorously acting as the vehicle of transferring “American Culture” to the world; its highly designed and consistent form of game is mixed with characters of American culture while its impact to the host country is still largely unexplored. That is, although some research has been conducted on the NBA and its consumption in non-North American countries (e.g., Falcous & Maguire, 2006; Jackson & Andrews, 1996), the view of the NBA in currently developing markets remains underdeveloped, especially with respect to India and China.

Among all of its globalizing efforts in recent decades, the NBA’s entry into and popularity in China is considered as a momentous achievement. Although we can note previous engagements with respect to China and the NBA (e.g., Wang Zhizhi’s NBA debut in 2001; NBA carried on satellite television in China), the major breakthrough is found in a 7-foot-6 Shanghai boy, Yao Ming. Yao Ming claimed his retirement in July 2011 at the age of 30, which is usually the peak of many basketball players’ careers. The early retirement of Yao Ming was not a surprise to many people. In his later NBA career, Yao’s fragile left foot was jokingly described as his Achilles’ heel in the real world.

Like all the giants in myth, Yao began his NBA career with limitless promises of dominance, while ultimately being cut short due to endless injuries. In his nine-year career for the Houston Rockets, Yao shot 52.4 percent from the field and averaged 19 points and 9.2 rebounds per game. He was also the first international player to be a No. 1 overall NBA draft pick, eight-time all-star and one of the most dominant centers in decades. His flexible and transnational identity (Giardina, 2001) grants him multiple images as a sports celebrity, national idol, favorite of commercial endorsement, cultural ambassador, and even a kind of performed “whiteness” in the black dominated NBA (see Farred, 2006). Regardless of the debates about whether Yao Ming was a “good” or “great” player, no one doubts that Yao’s influence has gone far beyond his performance on the court. For this study, I am not so much interested in his athletic achievement but in his historical importance as a cultural icon.

Yao Ming, as an international sports celebrity, especially active across the Pacific Ocean, was born in a very unique historical period in which Communist China favors the idea of “open markets” for its neoliberal-like “socialist” economy, and energetically disseminates its influence

and power to the world. For nearly a decade, “China has been enthralled by the cult of Yao spun by Communist Party propagandists and corporate sponsors: the winner, the gentle giant, the favorite son” (Levin, 2011, p. b10). To Chinese companies, the characteristics of Yao Ming were what they had been dreaming of for a long time. Cheap “Made in China” products can no longer satisfy the economic base; to continue to grow, quality and prestige would take on an increased importance. No one was more suited to bring forth this message than Yao Ming, with his global reputation, positive personal image, and giant while agile body all communicating high quality.

Yao Ming articulates Chinese companies’ imagination of ‘going global’: from “Made in China” to “Made *by* China”. In the domestic market, he was the symbol of a world-class product, one that had been tested in the United States, and which was filled with Chinese consumers’ imagination of high technology, pop culture and global brands. To the government, Yao was an ideal spokesperson. His high priority on teamwork, loyalty to the nation and rigorous work ethic perfectly fit the idea of “harmonious citizenship”, which is vigorously trumpeted by the communist government. For example, the “model worker,” as he was nominated in 2005, is the highest honor for Chinese citizens. The award, which once honored hard-working factory workers and peasants, now celebrates entrepreneurs, millionaires and the NBA star. Thirty years ago, these people were called “capitalists”, denounced and even imprisoned as enemies of *renmin* (People). However, the “Reform and Open-Up” policy since 1978 turned around everything. Now the communist government needs Yao Ming—the new “model worker” in the era of globalization, generating capital in the most capitalized country in the world—to show its advent to the new global politic and economic system.

During Yao Ming’s NBA career, the People’s Republic of China-United States relationship (or Sino-American, for short) became more sensitive and unpredictable as the fast growing economy of China gave the current American economic leadership a bittersweet taste. On one side, the booming Chinese economy is the most desired market for struggling American interests; on the other side, however, this also makes China the most powerful economic competitor to the United States, with the possibility to disturb US imperial economic ambitions.

The NBA was one institution desperate to expand its market in China, and Yao, labeled as China’s biggest export to the United States by former US president George H.W. Bush, carried a country’s aspirations to a broader global stage. Yao’s first impression reflects the stereotype of China in many American people’s eyes: big while skinny, unfamiliar while curious.

During his nine-year NBA career, he was often called the “smiling giant”, and did much to change stereotypes about China and Chinese people. That is, and through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese people, as well as many Asian Americans in general, were regularly stereotyped as Kung Fu experts in the movies, as poorly-speaking restaurateurs in Chinatown, or as technology nerds on high school and college campuses (Farhi, 2011). Additionally, the specter of China as a cold, harsh, Communist country has been ever-present in popular and political depictions of the country. When Yao Ming entered the North American sporting popular, however, he presented one of the most public counter-narratives to this idea; his body historically carries the burden of representing the new face of his country to the world.

In this way, and through the sporting popular, both American people and Chinese people are able to learn about their destined partner and competitor through Yao; his celebrity persona performs the role of cultural pedagogy (Giroux, 2001), creating a popular or mainstream cultural bridge where none existed before. As Wang (2006) indicates, the “complexity of Yao as a sports celebrity articulates the ambivalent relationship between global capital, ethnicity, and the nation-state” (p. 263). As a cultural icon of a country’s growth and global status, Yao Ming is far more than a basketball legend; he is a historical symbol representative of the new tendency of global capitalism and the development of Sino-American relations under the circumstance.

### **Focus and Purpose**

In this study I employed a qualitative approach and took Yao Ming’s retirement as an occasion to examine his flexible and transnational identity, his role in the global expansion of the NBA into China, his cultural and political influence on both American and Chinese society. More specifically, I analyzed Yao Ming’s dynamic while symbolic roles in a new era of Sino-American relationship against the backdrop of accelerated globalization, especially the pervasive neo-liberal capitalism that deeply affected the (future) socialist order of China.

### **Potential Significance**

This study contributed to our understanding of how globalization, celebrity culture, and international relations actively work together in the service of politics. The study might have some practical significance for the globalization of professional sports in terms of marketing the “international” sports celebrity. The study also broadened the understanding of how the globalization of sport impacts politics, culture and economics beyond the boundaries of nation-states and between disparate social systems.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

The literature review is conducted in order to provide a context for the exploration of globalization, its impact on sports, and how the concept of globalization are reflected in the particular case of Yao Ming. As an interdisciplinary research project, the scope of this literature review is expanded to include related areas such as sports culture, international relations, US-China political relations, and so forth. Through the literature review, I also identify related research and provide the rationale for the proposed study. It is further used to identify the gap in the previous research in the related area and leads to further discussion on the investigated questions.

#### **Theories of Globalization**

We are living in a “global age” (Albrow, 1997) in which the world has never been so closely interconnected in human history. The borders between nation-states and cultures are becoming more porous and ambiguous, and the tendency of this integration is even more intensified in recent years. In response to this seemingly inevitable tide, the term globalization has been widely used and has become a buzzword in many contexts. However, most scholars still have not reached a consensus on its definition, and its impact and even existence are fiercely debated. While there is no single definition of globalization that meets everyone’s interests, most of the concepts are concentrated on the integration and change in relation to culture, economy, technology, and politics. These main threads in the study of globalization help construct the framework for exporting the concepts of globalization and expand its further implications and influences to the sports area.

#### **Defining Globalization**

It is arbitrary to try to indicate a universal definition of globalization here, as the meaning of globalization varies in different contexts and disciplines. However, most of the globalization literature indicate that globalization is a process that involves the flows of people and objects across borders and results in integration in a global dimension (Ritzer, 2010; Burbules & Torres 1999; Beerkens, 2007; Hirst & Thompson 1999). Here I will provide an overview of the concept of globalization from separate perspectives of economy, culture and politics.

## **Economy**

Most of the definitions of globalization start from economic concerns. Economic globalization often refers to the process of increasing economic integration through the cross-border flows of capital and service in the form of trade, production system, and investment. This capital flow plays an instrumental role in the process of economic globalization. The recent wave of globalization since the mid-1980s has been marked by a surge in such flows of capital, notably between industrialized and developing countries (Prasad & International Monetary Fund, 2003). The accelerated flow of transnational capital further evokes a new structure of global economy with porous barriers and convenient access, which as Friedman (1999) explains, reveals the emergence of free-market capitalism based on neo-liberal economic theory (as explained in the next section). While economic globalization flattens the world to a more homogenous economic structure (at least in theory), its resultant inequality also brings to bare highly criticized imbalances, particularly between the developed and developing countries.

**Neoliberalism.** Neoliberalism is arguably considered one of the most important theories in the field of globalization studies. Ritzer (2010) defines it as a “Liberal commitment to individual liberty, a belief in the free market and opposition to state invention in it” (p. 11). As a revival of classical liberalism, the emergence of neoliberalism was in response to the dominant interventionism and collectivism represented by Keynesian economics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The call for economic freedom in capitalist societies stimulated the popularity of neoliberalism, where it eventually dominated western economies. “Free Market” is the heart of neoliberalism and it requires the market to be operated free of any interventions.

As a general term, neoliberalism is particularly applicable to both economics and politics in the process of globalization (Nederveen Pieterse, 2004). The freedom inhibited in the western economic structure further influences its social ideology and political decisions. Harvey (2005) claims policies inspired by neoliberalism could be executed under the ruling of autocrats as well as within liberal democracies. Such neoliberal globalization is marked by the demand of breaking barriers for capital flow along with distribution of western value and ideology. In the present moment, “Capitalism has predominately assumed the form of global neoliberalism” (Kotz, 2003, p. 4), and its influence has reached not only to Western countries, but surprisingly to more socialist countries like China. China is arguably in the process of its neoliberalization after the open markets reform led by Deng, which has led to great success in economic

development since then. It is important to note that this neoliberalization process in China is mainly limited to the economic area, as its political structure stands firm to socialism and is ruled under a single-party (CCP) system. This interesting and unique phenomenon raises further questions on the economic and political relations between communist China and the capitalist West, particularly the United States in the context of globalization.

## **Politics**

The second concern of globalization emanates from a political perspective. Generally speaking, political globalization is the erosion of nation-state and national sovereignty by new international actors (Yeates, 2001). The actors here are particularly referred to transnational sovereignty in both regional (e.g. European Union) and international (e.g. United Nation) dimensions and specialized international organizations (e.g. International Monetary Fund [IMF], World Bank [WB], International Olympic Committee [IOC] and Fédération Internationale de Football [FIFA]). These global organizations are based on transnational agreements and convenience between nation-states aiming at inter-state exchange and assistance beyond geographical location or proximity. The process of globalization brings direct or indirect change to the nation-states and has served to structure new political relations (Ritzer, 2010). In some contexts, this form of globalization is considered as having the power to diminish the role of a nation-state by reducing the control of local government (Tanzi, 1998), while another viewpoint argues that the change of the power dynamics between “south-north” in the process of globalization may awaken the popularity of geopolitics (Khanna, 2008).

**Nationalism.** Nationalism is prevalent in the study of politics; when it comes to theories of globalization, its role with respect to the nation-state becomes more prominent. (Anderson, 2006; Hobsbawm, 1992). Nationalism normally exists among a group of individuals sharing a strong national identification (Smith, 2003). It is an ideology that is rooted in human history and generated through the interaction between individuals and their social environments (DiMaggio, 1997). The interaction between nation-states in the process of globalization makes the world more connected while simultaneously highlighting the difference in values and interests when individual groups meet. There is widespread criticism that nationalism is dangerous, as it often results in conflicts and wars (Kahler & Walter, 2006).

In contrast, some studies assume that in the wave of globalization, human beings are tending to belong to a single community and share the same morality, called cosmopolitanism

(Appiah, 2006). Anderson (2006) suggests the nation is an “imagined political community” that is socially constructed and exists primarily as a set of ideas in people’s minds. (p. 6). He believes the “imagined political community” is inherently limited and forms the cultural root of nationalism. It is clear that sports, especially national teams, provide strong evidence to the existence of this “imagined community” (e.g., consider the importance of the Brazilian or English national soccer teams); as Hobsbawm (1992) indicates in respect to soccer, “the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people” (p. 143). As such, it can be argued that globalization greatly stimulates the development of international sports (and vice versa). This is especially true of mega-events like the Olympic Games and the World Cup, which are celebrated by people all over the world. One of the most significant characteristics of these international sporting events is that participants are characterized as representatives of the nation, which consciously or unconsciously provides a platform for the celebration of nationalism. Therefore, the symbolic competition between countries in sports often mirrors the conflict of national interest and has been widely used as a tool of diplomacy. This mechanism reached its peak in the Cold War and continues up to the present moment (e.g., 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa after apartheid, which was memorialized in the movie *Invictus*).

Some studies further narrow the relationship between nationalism and sports through the discussion of athletes. Gilchrist (2005) used the term “totem” to describe the sports heroes who compete in the international fields. He indicates that totems were “sacred representative objects of a group” (p. 109) and that sporting heroes, through achieving victory, recognition and fame were treated as totems by the nation of their origin or the nation which they represented in competition. I will elaborate on this point later.

## **Culture**

Social and cultural globalization indicates the third thread of flows in the globalization process and is considered comparatively the most visible manifestation (Ritzer, 2010). It is marked by the transmission of ideas, values and commodities across borders through the advances in the development of communication technology and point toward the concept of worldwide cultural standardization. Nederveen Pieterse (2004) points out three main concepts around cultural globalization as being differentialism, hybridization and convergence (in terms of the relationship between flows and barriers). As he defines, differentialism is “a mosaic of

immutably different cultures and civilizations” that emphasizes the distinction between nation-states in terms of ideology, culture and economy; hybridization leads to weaker barriers between nation-states and involves more combination in the process of cultural mixture; and convergence tends to create a “global cultural homogeny” that the global culture is growing increasingly alike.

Many scholars believe the process of globalization is transfiguring worldwide diversity to a uniform, westernized value system through cultural, linguistic and ideological distribution and “a trend toward homogenization around Western (or, even more narrowly, American) norms and culture” (Crook, 2001; Burbules & Torres, 1999, p. ix). The United States of America, as the dominant cultural power, is arguably considered the main force in this convergence process and its influence on culture and business is referred as Americanization. While the concept of Americanization represents the assumption of unidirectional convergence, it dismisses the entirety of globalization in terms of its components, development and result from any kind of *multidirectional* flow.

**Americanization/Anti-Americanism.** The term “Americanization” can be defined as a powerful one-directional or uni-directional process in which non-Americans (or non-American countries) import American popular culture, commodities, technology and lifestyles (Ritzer & Stillman, 2003). To some extent, Americanization can also be conceived as the transfer of American values and behavior on a global scale (Kuisel, 2003). Americanization is an important theory in globalization; as former U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger (1999), observed, “What is called globalization is really another name for the dominant role of the United States.” I believe this point of view from Kissinger (1999) is somewhat overstated, but it reflects the key role the United States is playing or has played in the process of globalization.

The reach of Americanization is vast, although its impact is often controversial. In terms of economic impact, American-led neoliberalism is thought to be the key to the global triumph of the United States, while it is also feared by other nations in terms of independence of sovereignty or the security of finance. In the political realm, Americanization is often related to “Western liberal democracy” (Fukuyama, 2006), in which the United States always seems to have a need or obligation to distribute or impose its ideology to other parts of the world.

As I have discussed above, the flow of culture thesis is arguably the easiest to witness, especially with respect to the notion of “Americanization”. The cultural signifiers inherent in American products and brands together constitute a kind of culture imperialism (Tomlinson,

1991). Hollywood films, Disney, McDonalds, Coca-Cola, and other representative symbols of American popular culture are widely recognized and consumed throughout the world, the spread of which has been followed by a shift in the means of consumption like fast-food restaurants, shopping malls, and supermarkets (Ritzer, 1995; Goodman, 2007). The change in the realm of consumption is further labeled “McDonaldization” (Ritzer, 2004), “Coco-Colonization” (Kuisel, 1993), “Walmartization,” etc. While it is important to understand the significant impact of Americanization on culture, politics and economy, we also need to differentiate its influence under specific contexts.

Ritzer (2010), for example, indicates that the impact of Americanization on Chinese politics is far less than that on the significant change on Chinese popular culture and economics. China has abandoned its old time “planned economy” system and been carrying out “market economy” for more than three decades. The influx of western products and ideas has brought significant change to the country. However, the natural resistance for the consideration of the governing party’s sovereign and ideological difference finally led up to an ongoing “selective globalization” in China, particularly in the realm of its economic reform (Potter, 2003). As noted previously, the process of globalization appears to be more selective in China; that is, it was greatly implemented in the economic realm while obstinately barred from the politic realm.

The aggressive expansion of American professional sports like the NBA is considered a new epitome of Americanization (Andrews, 1999). Its commercialized, yet mixed, cultural content makes American sports not only a product of American culture, but also an independent cultural phenomenon reflecting the processes of globalization. That is, international expansion within American sports aided transnational athlete migration, at least flowing to the US as marked by the increasing number of international players competing in the NBA, NHL and MLB while simultaneously promoting the popularity of American culture in the opposite direction through the frequent commodity transactions and commercial activities of those leagues. The fascination of American sports, ultimately, is the fascination of being Americanized.

However, Americanization as a homogeneous force is not well received by everyone; anti-Americanism is not uncommon in the world. The dislike for its militarism (recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), the rigid conflicts with Islam after 9/11, its economic imperialism and recent financial crisis all result in different levels of resistance to Americanization. Naim (2002) categorized the reasons of anti-Americanization from the perspective of psychological and

religious hostility, anti-Americanism history, political and economic anti-Americanism and cultural anti-Americanism. American sport, as a complex amalgamation of American culture, politics and economics, also has a role to play in this dynamic global environment.

### **Globalization and Sports**

Globalization has significantly changed the look of the contemporary sports world. Sports, as one of the most universal popular cultural forms, is “central to our contemporary moment’s blend of transnational cultural industrialization” (Miller, 2001, p. 4). The terms related to globalization I have previously discussed like neoliberalism, nationalism, Americanization and so on are all experienced in the process of sports globalization. In this section, I will mainly review the related studies on sports and globalization, particularly from the perspectives of the sports-media nexus and sports in international relations.

#### **Sports-media nexus**

Innovations in technology, especially communication technologies like satellite broadcasting and the Internet, have greatly accelerated the process of globalization as well as the development of mass media. Where once sports were localized events with great geographical limitation they are now more likely to be embedded in a global media spectacle (Maguire, 1999). Some international sports events like the Olympic Games and World Cup are widely celebrated throughout the world and broadcast to more than 200 countries and territories. The mass media further promotes international sport as an emerging business model that generates substantial revenues in the forms of advertising, broadcasting rights, merchandising, etc. For example, NBC sold all of its 30-second advertisements for the 2012 Super Bowl for an average price of 3.5 million dollars each (Marot, 2012), and the Beijing Olympic Games generated more than 2 billion dollars in revenue and attracted a cumulative viewing audience of 4.7 billion people (Lu, 2008).

Simultaneously, the progress in communication technologies has enhanced the ability of change among individuals, organizations and governments via sports (Thibault, 2009). Maguire (1999) indicates that “the development of a global sport system is connected to the emergence of global media and the contemporary experience of sports is intertwined with the sports media concerns” (p. 145). In Thibault’s (2009) study, she argues that the global media-sport complex is highly related to the products of Westernization, Americanization and homogenization. She uses the examples of how the American basketball hero Michael Jordan built up and led the NBA to a

global stage and how the broadcast media like ABC and NBC influenced the IOC's decisions on game times for the Olympic Games to explain the role of American concerns in the sports-media complex. She further raises questions like whether the presence of a cultural product from a "foreign" culture involves a shift in habits and the conscious "make-up" of people and how people have to understand, embrace or resist this process of homogenization/Americanization.

Modern sport and media developed simultaneously and symbiotically, supplying each other with the necessary resources to development like capital, audiences, promotion and content (Miller et al, 2001). While American culture has been playing a key role in the current global sports-media complex, its homogenizing view of influence can somewhat be dismissed as the recipients or consumers in other countries are able to reinterpret and reassemble the American culture product (Hebdige, 1982; Bigsby, 1975). Simultaneously, the mass media is extremely effective at portraying the inter-state worldview as "real." The sports reporting in the print and electronic media is deeply reliant on imaging the body (Miller et al, 2001), and the information transferred via sports-media nexus is playing an important role in building nations, nation-states and national identities (Levermore, 2004).

Some studies move even further toward examining the role of athletes in the global sports-media complex (Andrews, 2001; Wahl, 2009; Miller et al. 2001). The imagined bodies of athletes, especially star athletes, move easily between different media forms and sites beyond the board of nations (Miller et al, 2001). Commercial models like endorsements, promotional appearances, and TV performances all boost the athletes as a significant component in the media complexity especially in popular culture. Some of the symbolic examples include international sports celebrities like Michael Jordan, David Beckham, and Yao Ming.

### **Sports and International Relations**

Sports have long been intertwined with the political dynamics of international relations. The study of international relations (IR) is normally considered as a branch of political science, and has concentrated on the relations between different countries in terms of state policy, diplomacy, and military affairs. Simultaneously, the growing influence of global flows of culture leads to more frequent interaction between countries in the sports field. Despite its importance, the academic analysis of sports within the context of international relations has been largely neglected (Levermore & Budd, 2004).

In the realm of international relations, there are three major perspectives: realism, pluralism, and globalism (Houlihan, 1994). Realism emphasizes the priority of states and assumes the world is driven by competitive self-interest (Rourke, 2004). While analysis based on realism is mainly located on the concerns of national security between nation-states, the growing interaction between societies complicates the actors and issues within international relations. Pluralism expands the units of analysis to non-state actors in consideration of the growth of intergovernmental organizations (IGO), non-governmental organizations (NGO), and multinational cooperations (MNC). Some of the influential actors in sports include the IOC, FIFA and the recently fast growing professional sports leagues like English Premier League (EPL) and NBA. The last thread of international relations theory, globalism, focuses on the international system formed in a broader background of globalization. Proponents of globalism believe the classes, including the nation-state actors, are both the product of economic tension as well as the producer of tension (Viotti & Kauppi, 1999). In application to sports, globalists believe the primary agents for the maintenance of the international system are the multinational corporations seeking capital gain through marketing, television and other media, leisure wear and sports equipment and the trade in human sporting talent (Houlihan, 1994).

Keohane (1989) indicates the world has moved into an era of “complex interdependence”, characterized by “multiple channels between societies, including both state and non-state channels” (p. 64). Sport is not excluded from these “channels”; it has been playing an important role in international relations. Levermore (2004) suggests that sports is playing an important role in constructing and portraying the inter-state worldview, or how the political world is “cartographically” and socially/politically divided into competing states. Sport is also frequently used as a tool of foreign diplomacy, whether projecting nation-state ideological priorities, seeking for international recognition, building national stereotyping, or evoking patriotism. One of the most representative examples of the political impact of sports is the Olympic Games (Levermore, 2004; Houlihan, 1994). The history of the Olympic Games is tightly associated with the host countries’ dedicated aspiration of showing national power. The 1964 Tokyo Olympics, for example, exhibited to the world a new Japan that had quickly recovered after World War II; and the 2008 Beijing Olympics portrayed the new face of China as a rising power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the other hand, the Olympic games were also under the

shadow of intense conflicts between nation-states; the most notable cases are the boycotts of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and 1980 Moscow Olympics during the Cold War.

In the Cold War period following World War II, international sports, particularly the Olympic games, became symbolic of the competition between superpowers for supremacy (Wagg & Andrews, 2006). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States, as the only remaining super power, brought a new order to the world. In recent years, the rise of China intensified the delicate Sino-American relationship in both political and economic areas while further extended to the world of sports. Interestingly, the normalization of a relationship between the PRC and the United States started from a significant political incident in sports, known as “ping pong diplomacy” in the 1970s when China invited an American table tennis player to visit.

In April 1970, the American Ping-Pong team’s surprising visit to China made them the first group of Americans allowed into China since the communist takeover in 1949. This historical event marked a thaw in the Sino-American relation and started a series of momentous incidents including President Nixon’s visit to Beijing in 1972 and the following normalization of diplomatic relation. The boost from the recent success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics further encouraged Chinese government’s aspiration in exhibiting a more powerful image in the global stage challenging the current hegemonic United States. Sport, as I have discussed above in terms of its salient influence in culture, economic and politics, is continuously weighed as an efficient vehicle to implement or reinforce diplomatic ideas.

## **Sports and Celebrity**

### **The Context**

It is unlikely that everyone will have the chance to meet celebrities in person, but it is undoubtedly the case that the influences from these celebrities are significant in helping people understand the contemporary social order. Celebrities, defined by Dyer (2004), are people who represent typical ways of “behaving, feeling and thinking that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed” (p. 14). According to Marshall (1997), most North American celebrities are active in the center of culture and serve as a powerful system embodying ideological western symbols – “capitalism”, “individualism” and “commercialism”.

Media is instrumental to the promotion of celebrities. Andrews and Jackson (2001) indicate that the rising popularity of television since the 1950s accelerated the production of “mass-mediated” public individuals. In the context of the increasing popularity of neoliberalism,

and the dominance of new mediums like the Internet, celebrities are becoming even more multi-faceted, integrated and marketable to the public across multiple media platforms. Andrews and Jackson (2001) further note that everyone is involved in producing or consuming the celebrities, whether as “products (celebrity-driven media and commodities)” or “process (celebrity endorsement)” (p. 4). Simultaneously, the fluidity and instability of celebrities is located within “collective configurations” including social class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, etc. (Marshall, 1997). An individual celebrity always represents various configurations in his/her body.

The sports celebrity is further defined as a “multi-textual” and “multi-platform” promotional entity (Andrews & Jackson, 2001). To the public, sports celebrities are highly associated with terms like elite and meritocratic, endowing them not only with the ability of generating public concerns, but also acting as symbolic role models to the public. The role model effect further advances sports celebrities beyond their playing field and corporate endorsement to the imaginary myth intertwined with ideas of culture, politics and economics. The history of celebrity in socialist China has long been influenced by political agendas. The celebrities in the early years of People’s Republic of China were generally molded and characterized by the state-run media as role models calling for the whole society to study like brave combat heroes, unselfish socialism constructors to the party and people or athletes won medal and glories for the country. Some of the well-known celebrities include People’s Liberation Army soldier Lei Feng<sup>1</sup>, oil worker “Iron Man” Wang Jingxi<sup>2</sup>, table tennis player Rong Guotuan<sup>3</sup> and of course, the epitome of communist personality cult, Mao Zedong. During that period, the homogeneous nature of Chinese celebrities primarily served for the building of a socialist regime; they were normally called “red stars” (Yue, 1999).

During the Cultural Revolution (1960s and 1970s), the imprisonment of thought and complicated political struggle vacuumed the space of celebrities (Yue & Yan, 2007). Since the 1980s, due to the economic reform and influx of western products and values, celebrities in Chinese society also went through a dramatic shift. The traditional celebrities like hard working peasant and factory workers were still trumpeted by the government, however, the opening up of public outlook disassembled the former homogenous celebrity structure. The emergence of pop culture attributed to the imports of foreign entertainment products created more celebrated individuals that were active in films, pop songs or other Western forms of culture, which was

generally against the official propaganda (or even celebrated in an “underground” way such as the Taiwan pop singer Deng Lijun<sup>4</sup>).

Entering the 1990s, the further opening up of social and economic culture promoted the “market” as the driving force of creating public celebrities. The political factors in the creation of celebrities were gradually shifted to economic interest, as the commercialization of celebrities finally replaced outright propaganda (Bao, 2009). During the same time, western celebrities also began to play important roles in Chinese social culture. Nowadays, Western celebrities in China are not limited in popular culture like sports or music but have expanded to broader areas including technology, political figures and so on. For example, Steve Jobs had a huge fan base in China. Inside four hours of the announcement of Job’s death in 2011, nearly 35 million messages were posted on Sina Weibo (a Twitter-like microblog) about his death (Voigt, FlorCruz, & Chen, 2011). Yue (1999) indicated that the transition of celebrities in China went through the shift from “producing” to “consumption” and from “learning” to “admiration”. The current celebrity culture in China is more likely to be a mixture of traditional regime-oriented and contemporary market-oriented forces with significant characters of pluralism and “folksy”.

These two forces are not opposite to each other as market-oriented celebrity culture has been accepted and manipulated by the government; regime-oriented celebrities can be also marketed as cultural icons. The shift of Chinese celebrities reflects the development of Chinese society, economy and politics. According to *2012 Forbes Chinese Celebrities List*, entertainment celebrities like actor/actress, pop singer and sports players occupied the overwhelming majority on the list in contrast to the rare names of traditional celebrities (Flannery, 2012). Among the new celebrities in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century of China, Yao Ming was undoubtedly the most celebrated one as he topped the *Forbes* list for 6 straight years (2004-2009). The celebrityhood of Yao Ming suggests the feasibility of a combination between regime-oriented and market-oriented forces. On one side, he is employed as a propaganda vehicle by the Chinese government both domestically and globally for his loyalty to the nation. On the other side, he is celebrated internationally as a sports super star as well as the ultimate marketing machine by both Chinese and American societies.

The commercial information delivered via sports celebrities is occupying a considerable part of our daily life in forms of advertisement, endorsement and other business promotion activities. In a neoliberal market preoccupied with consumer culture, celebrity figures are

increasingly considered as the “idol of consumption” and recruited by companies for commercial purpose (Lowenthal, 1968). Although the symbolic value of sports celebrities, for its capacity to project multiple images, is far beyond simply a product of commercial culture, the globalization of sports with the aid of broadcasting from mass media and platforms like the Olympic games, World Cup and professional leagues, bestowes international sports celebrities more versatile roles including athletic labors, entertainers, marketable commodities, role models and political figures (Andrews & Jackson, 2001).

### **The Migration of Elite Athletes**

Player movement, or athlete migration, is also considered as a sports version of free trade in the context of accelerating globalization (Weston, 2006). The pioneer of global professional leagues, the NBA, featured a record 84 international players from 38 countries and territories in its 2010-11 seasons compared to only 3 players in its 1993-94 season (Stein, 2010). In the more “global” English Premier League, foreign players now generally occupy more than half of its total number of players (Williams, 2009). The influx of athlete-migrants often brings significant impact to the local environment. Ritzer (2010) points out that the migration of people has not been “liberalized” with solid barriers set by the nations and sometimes may result in various type of conflicts with the local populace. The most representative example in sports is the racial and working permit issues on the European football field. The diverse cultural background and nationality of the athlete immigrants, especially international star athletes with outstanding skills or personality, can be further used to deliver their specific ideology to the local society.

Using the example of the “Beckham Effect”, British soccer star David Beckham, who has been considered as one of the most famous athletes in the world, brought much-needed attention to Major League Soccer (MLS). His presence helped bring international respectability to the league (Wahl, 2009). Yet the impact brought by these sports migrants is not only one-directional. On the basketball court, the German-born NBA star, Dirk Nowitzki, helps the NBA open his homeland’s market and promote the development of basketball with his exceptional fame in German society. For example, every Mavericks game is televised in Germany and the news related to the NBA and the Mavericks frequently appear in major newspapers. Though basketball is still unable to compete with soccer in Germany, Nowitzki’s success in the NBA has inspired more basketball dreams in his country especially among the youth group (Markovits & Rensmann, 2010; Mendoza, 2010). This two-way effect brought by sports migrants exists in

many cases. As their “foreignness” brings their individual cultural identity to the new environment they simultaneously act as a “returnee” to promote back-flow of “outsides” to their homelands.

### **“Local” and “Global” Celebrities**

The inherited mutual relationship between “global” and “local” is one of the most significant characteristics of sports migrants. Their “universal moralistic and heroic traits” and symbolic “excellence” and “success” afford them unique transnational mobility with enough power in transforming their images and influence beyond the boundaries of nation-state and culture (Amis & Cornwell, 2005). Mobility, or flexibility, is the key in the process of border-crossing from local (homeland) to a global stage and then to another locale (other countries). For example, Giardina (2001) examines former tennis celebrity Martina Hingis and her capability to adapt her “flexible citizenship” to local consumer markets across the Atlantic. He points out that there is “an increasing trend among (trans)national sporting leagues and organizations that engenders an environment conducive to the emergence of flexible citizenship” (p. 206). Hingis, as a cosmopolitan figure, is able to assume various roles in different cultural environments. Grainger, Newman & Andrews (2005) further summarize three typologies of “global sport celebrity” by examining the celebrity endorsement strategies of adidas: “transnational” celebrity, “global-local” celebrity, and “exotic-local” celebrity (p. 89). Grainger et al (2005) argue that these three typologies of sports celebrities are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they often overlap or ‘bleed’ into each other. Therefore the athletic individuals can be either deployed as “symbolic of a placeless universality” or “a local accent to a global brand” (p. 93).

The dominance of culture, economy and politics of western countries is always deeply engraved on the studies in the realm of sports celebrity. Scholars have realized the significance of transnational characters among international sports celebrities as commercial vehicles, political figures or cultural icons beyond nation-state boundaries and case studies specified on celebrity individuals have been widely conducted. Other scholars progressively advance their observation and analysis to the macroscopic spectacle of how the sports celebrities are built up and reflect underlying social changes. However, the dominance of the West, in the matter of sports celebrity studies, results in the dominant western perspective, dominant western objects and dominant western interests mainly centralized in America and Europe being of primary scholarly focus. Within this current situation, as Nalapat and Parker (2005) indicates:

There is a related tendency to ignore a boarder range of sporting heroes; individuals who, to all intents and purposes, mean just as much (if not more) to millions of people as national and international celebrities and yet who, for some or other reason, are not considered in quite the same way. (p. 434)

Or, more simply put, there is a lack of studies on global celebrity athletes in Asia and the global South, especially as written from those perspectives rather than Western interpretations of them.

What do the above processes mean for Chinese athletes and/or celebrities? In terms of modern inter-state relations, the most important and influential bilateral relationship is widely considered to be the Sino-American relationship between the western, dominant United States and eastern, rising China. The great difference, both real and imagined, between these two most powerful countries in the world can be articulated to one body, Yao Ming. As the most recognizable Chinese athlete in the United States, Yao Ming has been viewed as a unique icon in the relationship between the two countries. His great basketball skills and artistic playing style, his appealing characterization and respectful personality, his foreignness and Chinese identity, in the context of globalization and new era of Sino-American relations, all make him a special and significant symbol far beyond the basketball court.

### **Conclusion**

After reviewing the fundamental theories of globalization, its application in sports and to a more particular area of sports celebrity, I acknowledge that globalization has multiple and complex effects on the fields of politics, culture and economy. Neoliberalism as the most influential mechanism of globalization promotes the world to a new era, symbolized with the free market and ideology of democratization. The inequality between nation-states is at high risk of being enlarged followed with the increasing inter-states conflicts in different levels and resulted in awaking of nationalism in a wider scope. The conflicts are specifically manifested in the economic realm like intensified trade friction and further expanded to the political dissent (e.g. U.S. & China on democracy) and cultural exclusion (e.g. Western). Though the conflicts seem to be inevitable, countries are seeking for different methods to mitigate the negative impact and many of them turn to sports.

When it comes to the sports field, the sports-media nexus builds up multiple platforms and channels to global sports, resulting in sports elevated to a broader stage of international relations. The migration of athletes in the context of globalization helps bridge the channels for

cultural interaction and their transnational identity and mobility leads to the emergence of an increasing number of international sports celebrities. In the remainder of this thesis, I examine Yao's impact across both US and Chinese society and how he reflects the latent changes in the Sino-American relationship under the above described background of globalization.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

I first employed a qualitative newspaper content analysis as the research method. Content analysis is defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1278). Berelson (1971) summarizes some of the possible uses of content analysis on revealing “international differences in communication content”, detecting “the existence of propaganda”, identifying “the intentions, focus or communication trends of an individual, group or institution”, describing “attitudinal and behavioral responses to communications” and determining “psychological or emotional state of persons or groups” (p. 74; p. 89; p. 93). Content analysis has become an increasingly important tool in the assessment of media profile in response to the prosperity of mass media. Newspaper reporting in particular, for its ready accessibility and wide coverage, is adopted by many researchers as the primary source of content analysis. Accordingly, I drew from four representative news agencies, two from the United States and two from China, to acquire the related news articles on Yao Ming from different perspectives of Western and Eastern societies and to understand how he was portrayed and perceived in the media’s eyes.

#### Data Source

A purposive sample of newspaper articles was selected from *The New York Times*, *Houston Chronicle*, *China Daily*, and *Xinhua News Agency*:

*The New York Times* was selected for its agenda-setting role, extensive national distribution and global influence. The news articles from *The New York Times*, considered the ‘paper of record’ in the United States, usually deliver more important messages that go far beyond the game itself, extending to more sophisticated and broader political, cultural and economic issues.

The *Houston Chronicle* was utilized for its largest circulation and readership in the Houston area, and represents the regional perspectives towards Yao Ming where he played. It was used to generate detailed observations on Yao Ming’s performance on the Houston Rockets and his social impact, especially as related to Houston.

*China Daily* is an English Language Newspaper with a circulation of more than 500,000 worldwide. It was first designed to introduce the economic reform and open-door policy of China to foreign readers and consumers. *China Daily* is currently the most recognized and quoted Chinese newspaper by the Western press and is dedicated to serving as a window for “China to understand the world and be understood by the world.”

*Xinhua News Agency* is the official press agency subordinated to the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. It is described as the “eye and tongue” of the Communist party and used to portray official policy and political propaganda. The articles published by the *Xinhua News Agency* feed all levels of newspapers in China and is supposed to represent the mainstream value developed by the government.

### **Sampling**

The time frame for the analysis stretches from May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002 when Yao Ming landed in Chicago for his first NBA practice training session to August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011 after he officially announced his retirement. The Lexis-Nexis database was used to locate the related news stories in the *New York Times* and *Houston Chronicle*. Chinese academic database CNKI and the newspapers’ own search engine were used to capture news articles from *China Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency*. By searching for the keywords “Yao Ming”, the initial search retrieved 791 articles from the *New York Times*, 5,172 articles from *Houston Chronicle*, 1,290 articles from *China Daily* and 17,778 articles from *Xinhua News Agency*. The *Xinhua News Agency* also had English versions serving the foreign press; that search yielded 1,404 related articles. The initial search produced a large amount of raw data that related to Yao Ming. After further review, it was discovered that unnecessary information to this study occupied a considerable percentage of the whole result (e.g., game reports that only mentioned Yao Ming’s game statistics without deeper comment on his social importance, marketing impact, etc.).

To achieve more precise and useful information serving this study, more limited terms were then applied within the initial results. The review of the initial results showed that the articles including “Yao Ming” or “Yao” in news headlines told the most relevant stories. Game reports and news briefs that only mentioned Yao Ming rather than focused on him, and articles with fewer than 350 words, were also discarded. The game reports generally recorded the process of the game as well as the statistical information of players without further useful information for this study. The word limit of news articles was set to manipulate the size of

sampling. The limit of 350 words was based on similar content analysis that had to deal with a huge sample size<sup>5</sup>. Also, in the process of reviewing the original data I found that articles with less than 350 words were generally unable to generate enough useful information (e.g., a simple level of descriptive analysis about singular game performance was deemed unimportant to the particular focus of the study at hand). Photography articles were excluded and only text articles were collected. After filtering the initial data with the above rules, 706 articles from the *Houston Chronicle*, 125 from *the New York Times*, 127 from *China Daily* and 1,233 from *Xinhua News Agency* were finally selected. The English version of *Xinhua News Agency* also retrieved 225 articles. The English version articles of *Xinhua News Agency* were also excluded for overlap because the articles were generally translated from the selected original news in Chinese. Another round of review was then conducted and after excluding duplicated and unrelated articles, 89 articles from *the New York Times*, 107 from *China Daily*, 138 from the *Houston Chronicle* and 133 from *Xinhua News Agency* were ultimately selected for content analysis (see, Fig. 1).

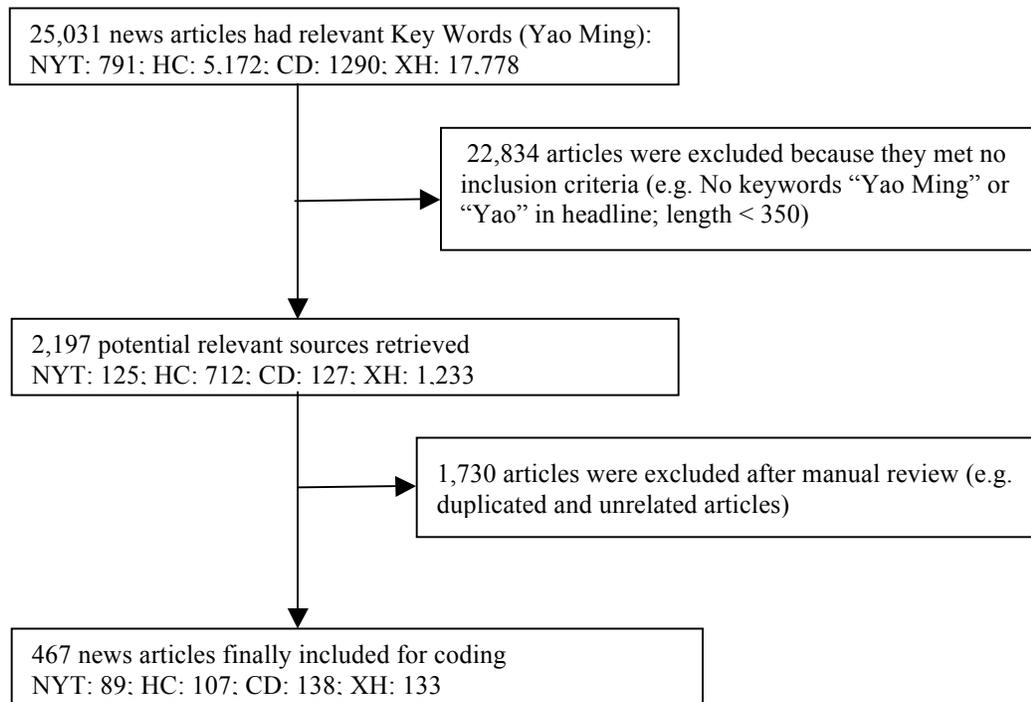


Fig. 1. Selection process for the coding sources

## **Coding Procedure**

My primary goal in the content analysis was to gain a comprehensive understanding of Yao Ming's image in both American and Chinese society, and the related information delivered via news media in terms of his athletic ability, personality, commercial value and cultural impact. To help achieve better coding results, I divided Yao Ming's nine-year NBA career into three periods in a designed time order and use keywords to help better collect useful data. The time order is set based on Yao Ming's major events in the NBA: the first stage is from 2002-2004, including Yao Ming's NBA draft, rookie year and how he progressively adapted to the NBA. The second period is from 2004-2009, during which time Yao Ming quickly grew to be one of the best centers in the NBA and was paired with star player Tracy McGrady to bring the Houston Rockets their best results in a decade. Some of the major moments addressed by many articles in this period include his attendance in the Beijing Olympic games, and defeat of the Dallas Mavericks and Los Angeles Lakers in the NBA playoffs. The third time period is from 2009-2011, when he struggled with a troublesome injury and finally retired from the NBA. In the third period, Yao Ming was more active in social activities like philanthropy, environmental protection and cultural exchanges. A total of 467 articles were then coded into the above 4 topics based on specific rules.

First, athletic ability mainly focused on Yao Ming's game performance, the concerns about his big body and the debate on his playing style. Keywords like "soft", "dominant", "dunk", "big", and "All-Star" were used in the coding process. The analysis of Yao Ming's athletic ability could help generate the ideas of how he was expected to perform and was observed on court by the media in regard to his athletic skills. The retrieved articles that referred to Yao Ming's athletic ability went through the whole three periods.

Second, personality was categorized by how the articles described the personality of Yao Ming as an Asian basketball player and how he reflected or changed the stereotypes of Asian people in American society. The articles about his off-court activities like philanthropy, media interview and other social activities were also coded in this category to help have an integrated understanding of Yao's personality. Keywords like "humble", "humor", "friendly", "hardworking", "loyalty" and "low key" are used to help coding. The articles in this part were mainly assembled in Period I and Period III, during which people got to know more about him gradually.

Third, commercial value was mainly concerned with marketing efforts around Yao. The articles on his endorsements in both the United States and China were coded. Reference to brands like “APPLE”, “VISA”, “PEPSI”, “Coca-Cola”, “Reebok”, “McDonald’s”, “China Life”, and “China Unicom” were used in the coding process. Yao Ming was active in commercial activities in all three periods.

Fourth, and finally, cultural impact included comments on Yao’s role bridging boundaries between the two countries and the NBA’s global expansion. Some of the keywords used here included “Diplomacy”, “Bridge”, “Symbol”, “Ambassador”, “NBA Globalization”, “Cultural Exchange”. Articles referring to cultural impact mainly clustered in the beginning and end of his NBA career, or in period I and period III. The final results are reflected in Table 1:

Table 1: Coding results of the four news sources

	Athletic Ability	Personality	Commercial Value	Cultural Influence	Total
<i>The New York Times</i>	12	11	6	34	63
<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	35	24	19	41	119
<i>China Daily</i>	25	22	18	36	101
<i>Xinhua News</i>	26	27	32	47	132
Total	97	84	75	158	415

*Note:* 415 of 467 sampled data were coded. Some articles covering more than one frame were coded to only one frame based on their content. The purpose of the coding was to sort the media news to different frames and help further analysis. In this case, only one coder was used to code all the articles.

The total number of articles that were coded validly was 415. The articles focusing on Yao Ming’s cultural influence generated about 38 percent of the total media reports, followed by articles on Yao Ming’s athletic ability (23 percent). The news reports related to Yao Ming’s personality and commercial value shared 20 percent and 19 percent of the total coded articles respectively. The general findings from the retrieved articles are summarized as follows:

## Physicality

The media concerns with Yao Ming's physicality mainly focused on his athletic skills, game performance and career expectation. In regard to his athletic skills, Yao Ming was first well known for his big body; his 7-foot-6 and more than 300 pound body size gave Yao Ming a competitive advantage to be a dominant center as well as the nickname "little giant" and "the great wall" from the media (Herskowitz, 2002; Xinhua News Agency, 2011). Besides his "bigness", Yao Ming's outstanding while atypical center skills were also remarkable:

"Most observers know what Yao brings to the game—soft shooting touch, deft passing skills, graceful footwork and keen court awareness" (Broussard, 2003)<sup>6</sup>.

"Yao had more tools than most centers including: versatile low-post maneuvering, surprising footwork and a brilliant shooting touch. His mobility in the post and a jump hook that was practically impossible to block were keys to him being a top player" (Williams, 2011).

Yao Ming's difference compared to other centers was obvious: he preferred to shoot rather than dunk; he liked using technique more than strength. However, and during his early years in the NBA, Yao Ming's playing style was subjected to criticism for his "soft" and "unaggressive" performance. As one reporter stated, "Yao isn't as aggressive as American players" (Blinebury, 2003).

But with the growth of experience, as well as adjustments to the rigorous competition environment, Yao Ming tended to be more "masculinized" in the league:

"Yao has spent his time in the weight room, and he has learned many of the dark arts of being an alpha dog NBA big man. Hard work is its own brand of toughness, and Yao Ming knows hard work" (espn.com, 2008).

Another big issue particularly at the end of his NBA career was his frequent injury. Yao Ming missed more than 250 regular-season games due to his foot and ankle injuries from 2005 to 2011. Among the news reports on why Yao Ming was so vulnerable to the injuries, two reasons stood out. The first one was to blame the Houston Rockets organization or the NBA, an idea that was widely supported by the Chinese media:

"Houston Rockets should be blamed for overusing Yao Ming and failing to offer reliable substitute for him. Each NBA team has so many games to play every season that players can hardly have enough rest time." (Shan, 2009).

In contrast, the media in the United States appeared to attribute his injury more to his national team obligation:

“Everybody wanted a piece of the budding superstar, including the Chinese government, which insisted that he play for its national team” (Houston Chronicle, 2010).

His career was also scrutinized retrospectively following his retirement, especially as to whether or not he deserved a spot in the Basketball Hall of Fame. The selected media all shared the consensus that Yao Ming deserved a spot in the Hall of Fame, particularly for his contribution to the globalization of the sport:

“I don't care if you put him in as player, as a contributor or put him in with his own heading. This guy definitely gets in for the greatness as a player when healthy or what he did as ambassador.” (former Rockets head coach Jeff Van Gundy, quoted in Feigan, 2011).

Yao Ming's NBA career expectation was also highly valued. He was described as “The Next Big Thing” on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* and his arrival to the Houston Rockets set off a sensational “Yao Ming Mania” to the Bayou City. *The Houston Chronicle* often compared Yao Ming with the Rocket's legend center Hakeem Olajuwon, who led the Houston Rockets to back-to-back NBA Championship in 1994 and 1995. Yao Ming was described as the natural successor of Hakeem Olajuwon, and carried the city's dream of coming back to the past glory:

“The Rockets were at the forefront of the African explosion with Hakeem Olajuwon. Will Yao Ming start a new era in the NBA?” (Hohlfeld, 2002).

"He can revolutionize this team the same way Hakeem first did when he came out of college." (Duarte, 2002).

### **Personality**

For a long time, the NBA had been obsessed with negative images of drug abuse, sex scandals and game violence of its players. However, the emergence of Yao Ming reinvigorated the league like a “breath of fresh air” in an era of sports idols as rock stars (Westbrook, 2005). Yao Ming's outstanding personality traits were highly valued in the media:

“[S]chooled and talented athlete, tough and smart” (Lipsyte, 2002).

“[S]ingle-handedly changed the image of Chinese athletes abroad with his humility, modesty, social responsibility and smart thinking” (Xinhua News Agency, 2011).

Yao Ming was also trademarked for his unique low-key humor:

“there are qualities valued in China, particularly humility”, that Yao Ming hoped to demonstrate to the American society (Feigan, 2004).

Another characteristic mentioned many times in the news reports was his loyalty, both to the Houston Rockets and the Chinese national team. For the Houston Rockets, his self-discipline and work ethic as well as a sense of responsibility made him “a leader in the locker room and on the court” (Solomon, 2009). His loyalty to the team also reflected on his pledge to remain with the Houston Rockets when he became a free agent in the process of injury recovery. Yao Ming’s loyalty to its national team was more noticeable. *The New York Times* reported his solid commitment to the national team for the Beijing Olympics after a long-term injury comeback. The article titled “Ever loyal, Yao risks his career” introduced Yao’s “overburden” national responsibility and questioned whether it was worth to do so at the potential risk of his health (Araton, 2008). The *Houston Chronicle* also expressed its concerns on his national duty:

“If Yao pushes himself hard on behalf of the Chinese national team and his 1.2 billion countrymen, perhaps he runs the risk of reinjuring his foot and jeopardizing his future and fortunes of the Rockets” (Blinebury, 2006).

But from the perspective of Chinese media, Yao Ming’s loyalty to the national team made him a “model worker” to the society and further elevated him to a level of patriotic behavior (Xinhua News Agency, 2005).

In the news articles that referred to his private life, Yao Ming was portrayed as a traditional and family man. His love story with his wife, Ye Li, a former Chinese national women’s basketball player, was widely reported in both the Chinese and American media (Feigan, 2007; Xinhua News Agency, 2007). There were also news articles that covered Yao Ming’s case of living with his parents in Houston, which was rare to the U.S. society while to the Chinese media it was seen as sort of preservation of the traditional Eastern value (Feigan, 2007).

Yao Ming’s energetic involvement in charity was displayed as another example of his humanity. When a devastating earthquake struck China in 2008, Yao Ming quickly responded and donated USD\$2 million from his Yao Ming Foundation to help rebuild schools (Zhou, 2008; Feigan, 2009). In Houston, he also helped restore the facilities for kids damaged by Hurricane Ike (Houston Chronicle, 2009). He also frequently appeared in activist campaigns, including those against Shark fin soup and for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which named him an “Environmental Champion” (Xinhua News Agency, 2010).

## Commercial Value

The reference to Yao Ming as “big” is not only about his body size, but also his commercial value. Since the first day he played in the NBA, Yao Ming had been valued as one of the most marketable athletes in the world. The commercial value of Yao Ming also attracted blanket coverage from both the U.S. and Chinese media. The media generally pointed out that Yao Ming’s transnational identity and Chinese nationality bestowed him with great business value, particularly remarkable for the rapid growing Chinese market:

“He represents an entree into the largest untapped market in the world” (Barron, 2002).

“There is a gold mine behind Yao Ming” (Xinhua News Agency, 2003).

The NBA is undoubtedly one of the biggest beneficiaries on Yao Ming’s global business impact. From the perspective of media, the globalization of the NBA, especially its popularity in China, was greatly attributed to Yao Ming. As one of the most recognizable sports icon worldwide, Yao Ming had single-handedly expanded the NBA's reach throughout Asia after debuting in the NBA in 2002 (Sun, 2011). It was reported in the *Houston Chronicle* that China was the second-most prolific market of the NBA, after the U.S., with the league holding 570 events in China, ranging from clinics to a reality-television dance competition in 2010. Because of Yao Ming, many Chinese companies began to sponsor the league and its players:

“When you look at the most popular teams in the league, everybody has Chinese-based sponsors, or they have sponsors that are multinationals that put Chinese signage on their courtside” (Feigan, 2010).

Besides that, the NBA also has successfully hosted a series of “China Games” in China and attracted a huge number of audiences: “The NBA has rushed in to capitalize on the most populous nation's rapidly growing affection for its product” (Feigan, 2010). *Xinhua News Agency* further reported that the inflow of NBA products as well as the related international commercial sponsorship was “recognition to the Chinese market from the world” (Xinhua News Agency, 2004).

Besides the NBA, Yao Ming was also favored by a number of prestigious global corporations including Apple, McDonalds, Visa, Coca Cola, Reebok, Garmin, and Tag Heuer, and Chinese companies like mobile communication operator China Unicom and insurance company China Life. The articles on Yao Ming’s commercial activities frequently appeared on the newspapers. Yao Ming’s Visa commercial on the Super Bowl XXXVII with Yogi Berra and

Apple advertisement with “Mini-me” Verne Troyer both drew enthusiastic responses from the U.S. society. In regard to Yao Ming’s image in the advertisements, it was widely reported in the U.S. media that Yao Ming showed his unique sense of humor, which was loved by the public, and that his “wisdom” perfectly fit the endorsement of technology products (Fowler, 2003; Barron, 2003). Yao Ming’s endorsement with McDonalds as their global spokesman was another hot issue in media reports: *Houston Chronicle* and *Xinhua News Agency* both reported that Yao Ming’s global popularity and healthy image were what McDonalds wanted to deliver to the world, especially compared to his predecessor, Kobe Bryant, who was in the midst of a sex scandal at that time (Hoffman, 2004; China Daily, 2004).

Along with the growth of his global fame and wealth, Yao Ming also began to put increasing attention on his private business. He bought the Shanghai Sharks Basketball Club where he played before, launched his own luxury wine brand made in Napa Valley and opened his own Chinese food restaurant “Yao Restaurant” in both China and the United States. Thus was Yao Ming portrayed as a successful pitchman off the court besides his dominance in basketball by the media (Huynh, 2005).

### **Cultural Influence**

Yao Ming made the cover story of the Asian Edition of *Time* magazine twice and was selected by the magazine as one of its "100 most influential people in the world today" twice. He also topped the “*Forbes* Chinese Celebrity List” for six consecutive years. The news reports covering Yao Ming’s cultural influence generated the highest percentage of the coded articles. In the tributes to Yao Ming’s retirement in 2011, his exceptional influence between the U.S. and Chinese society was highly valued by the media:

“He gave the Chinese fans a huge reason to follow the NBA and become even more familiar with it and feel so good about themselves to have produced such a great player and person. Secondly, it gave Americans a way to follow China through a different lens. It's been wonderful”- commented by NBA Commissioner David Stern (Feigan, 2011).

“an unofficial ambassador for China, and did much to promote Sino-American cultural exchange” (Lu, 2011).

“Yao Ming used basketball, an international language, to introduce China to the outside world and Yao Ming’s humor, modesty and tolerance shown in the game, had impressed

the world and helped resolve misunderstanding across different cultures” (Xinhua News Agency, 2011).

Yao Ming’s career in the NBA also deeply influenced the Asian minority in the United States. Yao Ming was greatly embraced by Asian groups and was expected to change the inherent stereotype towards Asian in the American society:

“Yao represents an opportunity to change the perception of their people”(Graves, 2002).

“While Asian-Americans had made significant economic and political gains, they still had slights that Yao Ming’s presence might help change”(Longman, 2002).

When Yao Ming was taunted by Shaquille O’Neal in his rookie year, for example, an Asian group was reported to start a protest campaign against O’Neal and even boycotted his endorsing products like Burger King and Radio Shack (Crow, 2003).

Yao Ming’s impact in Chinese society was also remarkable. For example, Yao Ming’s significant role in building the confidence of the young generation and winning the respect from the world for China was reported in one article from *Xinhua News Agency*. The article indicated that the concerns on Yao Ming from the West were in fact the awareness of the resurging China and Chinese people also got to learn more about the American society via Yao Ming at the same time. It quoted one well-known sports journalist in China Xu Jicheng:

“some people went to the United States and Europe before Yao but returned with blind worship of the west, losing their own cultural identity. However, Yao has kept asserting that he is a Shanghai boy, and Chinese, while enjoying and learning from the west” (quoted in Xinhua News Agency, 2011).

Yao Ming was flag bearer for the Chinese Olympic team twice, including the Beijing Olympic games. He was also appointed as the ambassador of Houston for the U.S. bid for World Cup 2018. The *Houston Chronicle* commented that Yao Ming was the “Symbol of diversity” of Houston as an international city and an “International sports sensation” (Ortiz, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

My content analysis based on selective media came up with a comprehensive retrospective account of Yao Ming’s NBA career and his further commercial, cultural and political impacts between the United States and China. My analysis also facilitated the understanding of Yao Ming’s iconic role from the different perspectives of West and East and summarized the most remarkable characteristics around him for further discussion.

This data, and the interpretive results therefrom, are incorporated into the remaining chapters of this thesis, and understood through globalization theory. In Chapter 4, I look at Yao as Asia's Son/American Idol, compare the Chinese Dream to the American Dream, and discuss his role as a international pitchman against other such as Michael Jordan. In Chapter 5, I discuss the specific political importance of Yao and sport, as we witnessed an historical move of U.S.-China relations from Ping Pong Diplomacy to what I would call "Hoops Diplomacy". In Chapter 6, I briefly conclude the findings from this study and discuss some further research projects that might be extended based on this thesis.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### BODY CULTURE, POLITICS IN CHINA, AND INTERNATIONAL YAO MING

#### From Mao to Yao

The NBA commissioner David Stern sent a message to Yao's retirement press conference, which was covered by hundreds of news journalists from around the world and nationally broadcasted for an unprecedented record of five hours by the CCTV-5:

I don't think anybody was more of global icon in the NBA than Michael Jordan. But Yao is different. He's Chinese, and he is an icon for the globalization of our game. He is a symbol of this Chinese renaissance and their determination to compete on a world stage (Wu, 2011).

Human history has never lacked for stories of giants. The Great Polyphemus, the invincible Titans of Greek lore, and KuaFu in Chinese antiquity who chased the sun, each put impressive marks on our mythological past. Perceived as supernatural totems, the myths of giants are embodied with human's imagination of power and strength. In the present moment, Yao Ming was nicknamed a real-life "little giant". His mother served as the captain of national team competing for the Culture Revolution<sup>7</sup> that shadowed China in the 1970; his father was also a veteran of Shanghai men's basketball team. When Yao Ming was 9 years old, he was sent to the local sports school—his parents drawn by a promise of a bottle of milk everyday for their son (Xiao, 2000).

Even though Yao Ming's parents were professional players at that time, the egalitarian fashion of the Communist nation could only guarantee them a very frugal life. Sending children to sports schools was an option for many families at that time, especially for the ones who had physically talented offspring and lacked sufficient means to raise them. The state-run sports academies were widely spread throughout the country serving as athlete factories as well as recruiting the most promising talents. The kids in the sports schools were put through rigorous drills; most struggled in a cruel elimination system at their young ages: only very few of them were able to make it to the top of this pyramid system - national team or professional team – while most of them were eliminated after receiving very limited academic education. In the 1980s, there were more than 200,000 people trained in over 2,000 sports academies; their

graduates made up over 90% of all the Chinese World Champions and Olympic Gold Medal winners (General Administration of Sports, 2003).

Since the first day Yao Ming entered the basketball world, he had been desired by the local sports officials and perceived as a great national treasure. When he was only 9 years old, Yao Ming was drafted by a Shanghai sports academy and began to receive systematic training. Against such a backdrop, Yao Ming's entrance to the professional if not global basketball world seemed to be more a destiny rather than a coincidence. In a sports system filled with all kinds of political missions and reasons, Yao Ming's missionary role was expected to be more than simply playing basketball.

In this chapter, and drawing from my content analysis explained in Chapter Three, I examine Yao's 'missionary' role both inside and outside of China and the United States, and across the borders between the two countries. To this end, I begin by situating basketball within the cultural history of China, especially as it pertains to politics, from its early introduction up through to the present. Next, I discuss Yao's position as a transnational figure whose celebrity appeal extends beyond China to the United States (and back again). In so doing, I deploy Aiwaha Ong's notion of flexible citizenship as a means of unpacking his complex, border crossing relationships and identities. That is, I examine the ways in which Yao was: (a) viewed as a Chinese person among Asian Americans in the United States, as well as in contrast to other Asian celebrities; (b) represented as a distinctly Chinese celebrity within China; (c) deployed as a symbolic exemplar of China to "the West"; and (d) consumed as a representative outcome of global capitalism back to and in China. I conclude the chapter by examining the ways in which Yao, based on the above dynamics gleaned from my content analysis, was utilized as a transnational pitchman for global brands in both the U.S and China.

### **Training the Body for the Nation**

The introduction of basketball into China came not long after its invention by Dr. James Naismith in 1891. The corrupt and languishing imperial Qing Dynasty<sup>8</sup> reluctantly embraced Western countries after hundreds of years of a closed-door policy, which isolated the country from the outside world until it yielded to the hands of its own externally-imposed inventions: gunpowder and compass<sup>9</sup>. The invading western warships and imposed unequal treaties brought this old empire to the darkest period in its thousands years' history. The semi-colonized China of the time was not only the untapped market desired by the hyper-capitalists for raw resources or

consumption markets; to those associated with the YMCA, it was also a miserable land with millions of souls struggling in opium and poverty and waiting to be saved. Polumbaum (2002) argued that the diffusion of basketball worldwide not only highlighted the “civilizing” ambition by the YMCA, but also mirrored a global expansion of capitalism, in the guidance of “muscular Christianity”<sup>10</sup>, to the supremacy of the world.

The introduction of basketball in China coincided with the *Hundred Day's Reform* in 1889<sup>11</sup>, which was led by Chinese scholars and officials deeply affected by Western economic and political ideologies in favor of creating a constitutional monarchy in China. The influx of Christian missionaries brought Western religions and cultures to the Far East, including the newly invented game of basketball. Inspired by a broader range of religious, moral and social objects, the YMCA diligently cultivated the Far East virgin land of basketball at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ironically, these American forerunners might never know that about one hundred years later, a young Chinese missionary would follow their way back to the West with a basketball in hand (and a political agenda inscribed on his body).

Basketball then took its roots and flourished in the Middle Kingdom<sup>12</sup>. The YMCA organized the first National Athletic Games in China in 1910 and basketball was also played in that event (Polumbaum, 2002). China then played in the first ever basketball game in Olympics history at the 1936 Berlin Olympic games. In 1935, basketball was declared a national pastime by the then National Government (Polumbaum, 2002). During World War II and the Chinese Civil War<sup>13</sup>, basketball was extremely popular in the Communist-controlled areas and widely employed as a both training and recreation practice among the Red Army Soldiers (then known as the People's Liberation Army). The famous *Zhandoulanqiudui* (The Fighting Basketball Team) made up of Red Army troops was dispatched everywhere to recruit and seek support from the peasants. The popularity of “The Fighting Basketball Team” also began the tradition of using athletes as propaganda tools by the communist sovereign (Larmer, 2005).

After Mao's triumph in 1949, basketball was continually encouraged and promoted by the government and was one of the few Western imports that was not condemned in the Culture Revolution. The values of teamwork and self-sacrifice in basketball were rewarded communist values and the games were widely operated through the country. In a communist country where every foreign affair is a matter of prestige, the basketball games on the international court often trapped the government in awkward situations time after time.

For example, there had been a long-term stereotype on this imported game that basketball was only for tall people. That is, the ten-foot “peach hoop” appeared to be too far away from the reach of most Chinese folks. The humiliations and defeats since the end of Qing Dynasty gradually sapped the confidence of the country and even brought the insulting nickname of “Sick man of East Asia” by the Western world and Japan, which constituted a deeper sense of physiological inferiority in Chinese people when competing with Western powers. This perceived inferiority further directed the Chinese to sports they believed most suited to their body structures: table tennis, gymnastics, badminton (the so called “small balls”). The ideas of *Xiao* (small), *Kuai* (quick), and *Ling* (agile) quickly dominated Chinese sports and deeply affected the future development of Chinese sports. The traditional Confucian culture advocating peace and self-restraint also facilitated an aversion to body contact and favor of a preference toward more mild sports.

The founding of the Communist People’s Republic of China (PRC) was a turning point in Chinese history. When the vow of “the Chinese people have stood up” was announced by the “Great Helmsman”, Mao Zedong, on Tiananmen Square in 1949, the fate of basketball in China also dramatically changed. The newborn communist nation was desperate to restore respect from the world and hunt for the evidences of its system superiority over “imperialist” West. To defend the country, invigorating or building up its people’s body was the priority<sup>14</sup>. As Mao Zedong claimed, “To spiritually civilize the people, we need physically wild men first” (Ji, 2007).

Susan Brownell (1995), in her book *Training the body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People’s Republic*, indicated that sports in Mao’s era was primarily to serve the nation through labor and military service. The communist government hoped its people could exhibit a new *jinshenmiaomao* (spiritual outlook) to the world as well as the rebirth and vitality of a new nation. The slogan “Promote Physical Culture and Build Up the People’s Health” was promoted by Chairman Mao and the campaign quickly swept the whole country, from factories to schools. The sport then reached its first climax since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China. While still enjoyed by many, the “small balls” and the millions of practitioners of TaiChi was not enough to complete the historical mission Mao had inscribed on sports for the nation. Instead, China needed more masculinized, competitive, or simply Western sports to claim its “stand up”.

The term “Three Big Balls” was then invented. “Three Big Balls” referred to soccer, volleyball and basketball, which were very popular teamwork sports in Western countries at the time. The government believed that the triumph of the “big balls” in international competition could be a huge boost to spreading of the gospel of communism and an awakening of nationalism in China. The communist mission needed its best comrades to accomplish this endeavor, but the government quickly realized that it could not find enough talented players, especially for games like volleyball and basketball that were mainly ruled by tall people. Under the Soviet model, height was always the Holy Grail. The sensitivity of height in East Asian can be best reflected on the frequent comparison between Chinese and Japanese adolescents, which was measured as an important index to the fitness of future generation of these two old rivalries. The militarized sports system inherited from the “old brother” Soviet Union was then built up to recruit the new missionaries from the age of 7 or 8 years old as well as the “giants” over 7 feet (Coplton, 2003).

### **”Big Game” in China**

The rapid growth of China in recent years has been greatly attributed to the neoliberal-like Reform and Open-up Policy since the 1980s (Brandt & Rawski, 2008). For its sports system with long-term political overtones, the renaissance of the East also needed its best athletes with equal prestige on the sports field. The state sports machine first produced the heroic national women’s volleyball team, which won five consecutive World Champions in the 1980s; it later produced a powerful women’s soccer team in the 1990s. The volleyball gold medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic games, which came as a result of beating the Japanese and American teams, brought the whole nation to exultation. “You can smell the patriotism everywhere”, recalled team captain Lang Ping, who was later the head coach of the U.S women’s volleyball team in the Beijing Olympic games.

In contrast to the continuous success in women’s sports, the men’s national teams of the “Three Big Balls” were lost in the gloom even though they received much more attention from the public. Although men’s soccer had long been the most popular sport in China, the endless disappointments on the international fields gradually exhausted the public’s patience. Men’s volleyball, by contrast, was completely overshadowed by the women’s team. For basketball, dominance in the Asian Games was far away from being in the spotlight of the society;

ironically, however, the emergence of Michael Jordan in the 1980s became a spectacular sensation that deeply affected the new Chinese generation.

During this time, it was generally accepted that women's sports and "small balls" would never change the "feminized" image of Chinese sports. Furthermore, there was not a single Chinese sports star with worldwide recognition. People trained in the rigorous, rigid, and ordered sports system become averse to the characteristics of being an individualistic "star" player and were tightly controlled by the government. The Chinese sports system had for a long time been shadowed in negative reports by Western media and criticized as targets of immoral labor use and violation of human rights. The denouements on underage gymnastics and the abuse of doping in the Olympics further tarnished the image of Chinese athletes to the Western public (Longman & Macur, 2008; Associate Press, 2008).

More importantly, perhaps, was that there was still no breakthrough success in the men's "big ball" sports. The old, red and insulated sports empire was still looking for its missionaries, while the world outside of China was undergoing enormous changes against a backdrop of growing globalization, remarkable for the prevalence of commercialism, appeals of political reformation and particularly their synthesis of "Americanization" (or at least, free-market capitalism). With the penetration of a market economy replacing its former central "planned economy" expanding to more areas, the Chinese sports system had also been through a shift from the state-funded model to the more market-oriented one symbolized by the emergence of professional sports. In 1995, the first professional basketball league was established, now known as the CBA (Chinese Basketball Association). The CBA was primarily built upon the former government-sponsored league and supervised by the central government's basketball bureau. Even though it was not operated as an independent organization and still had a strong connection with the fashion of bureaucratic administration, the CBA has been perceived as a breakthrough embracing the decentralization and commercialization of Chinese sports (Polumbaum, 2002).

The NBA, for its accomplished marketing and operation tactics and emerging influence in China greatly attributed to its broadcasting on the CCTV since 1990s and the popularity of Michael Jordan, has long been the ultimate model of the CBA. The CBA teams were originally owned by the province and municipalities; inspired by the NBA or from a deeper motivation of privatization process resulted from economic reform, the CBA teams were then majorly purchased by enterprises like tobacco companies or media groups.

The import of halftime contests, All-Star Games, and even the energizing music and cheerleaders from the NBA all remarkably shaped the development of Chinese professional basketball. The landing of Chinese players in the NBA further raised another climax of the NBA mania in China and Yao Ming, as the biggest Chinese basketball star ever, was playing a crucial role in promoting the popularity of basketball in China particularly among the youth group. A large number of NBA players flew into the CBA in light of the national craze ignited by Yao Ming; the NBA further formed a partnership with Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG) and the Chinese government to build and develop 12 NBA-styles arenas in major Chinese cities (Associate Press, 2008). According to the leading global market researcher TNS, there are 300 million people playing basketball now in China, and 89 percent of Chinese people aged 15 to 54 are aware of the NBA (He & Yuille, 2009). The popularity of the NBA in China, from another aspect, could be explained as a reflection of neoliberalism sweeping Chinese market since the economic reform in 1980s. The sports in China have also been defined with different features against the politics-oriented system in Mao's era, while concentrating more about the public demands on entertainment and commercialization.

The NBA has done well on its transformation of basketball games into spectacular entertainment and consumption culture. As a cultural and corporate signifier, the NBA is dynamic in distributing American popular culture, commodities, technology and lifestyles to other parts of the world. Its complete and standard line of commodities including the star players, game design, licensed caps, jerseys, videos, films, etc with its appealing themes of making dreams come true like the current slogan "where amazing happens" all made it much similar to another multinational conglomerate Disney, as McDonald (1996) argued that the "NBA had been successfully Disneyfied" (p. 152). NBA commissioner David Stern himself used to compare his basketball empire with the fantasy world of Disney:

They have theme parks... And we have theme parks, only we call them arenas. They have characters: Mickey Mouse, Goofy. Our characters are named Magic (Johnson) and Michael (Jordan). Disney sells apparel; we sell apparel. They make home videos; we make home videos (quoted in Swift, 1991).

The similarity in the content of entertainment products between Disney and the NBA can be also applied to their specific roles in the wave of globalization, as exemplars of global American cultural brands. The term Disneyization was used as a complementary form to

McDonaldization. According to Bryman (2004), Disneyization is a process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are widely used in other sectors of the society. On such a basis, the influence of the NBA in China can be analogous to the definition of Disneyization or McDonaldization. From a micro perspective, the introduction of NBA players, game schedules, program designs, construction of NBA-style arenas, and so forth can be perceived as the relocation of operation and marketing principles of the NBA. From a macro perspective, the celebration of the NBA by Chinese society symbolizes the fancy of American popular culture, celebration of American life-style, and the assimilation of neoliberalism principles like free market and commercialization in a socialist society. I call this process “NBAssimilation”, and view it as another complementary notion to the grounding theory of McDonaldization, and more remarkable to the ambivalent bilateral relations between the United States and China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Transnational Yao Ming**

#### **Asian’s Son**

Yao Ming was born in Shanghai, which is currently the economic capital of China and the forefront of the fusion of East and West. The “Paris of the Orient” used to be the dreamland of western adventures and now is an international metropolis full of vigor, dynamism and variety. The concrete jungles standing in the end of Yangtze River witnessed China’s emergence on the international stage as an economic powerhouse and game changer of the current global system. It was Shanghai that also produced two of the biggest athletic stars in Chinese sports: the Olympic 110 meter hurdles gold medal winner Liu Xiang, and Yao Ming. Both were considered the new faces of China, for their distinct personality and most importantly, their groundbreaking success in the Western dominated men’s sports: sprint and basketball. If Liu Xiang represents the nation’s astonished development speed (and he is worth further scholarly analysis in his own right), then Yao Ming is embodied with the ultimate dream of the resurrecting China: Bigness, both in global status and capital accumulation.

Yao Ming registered as the most powerful Chinese celebrity six consecutive times by *Forbes* Magazine and was arguably the most internationally recognizable Chinese person. He was also nominated as the *laomo* (Model Worker) in the 2005, which was perceived as the highest honor to the Chinese Citizens (Xinhua News Agency, 2002). The communist nation used to encourage unsung heroes and claim blue-collar “socialist constructors” like factory workers

and peasants to be their national idols, while after about 20-year Dengist economic reform, the whole nation's heartbeat resonated with the "little giant" on the other shore of the Pacific Ocean, *Meiguo* (United States, literally in Chinese, "Beautiful Country").

In Yao Ming's nine-year NBA career, he drew an average of 30 millions Chinese viewers per week to the NBA (Gottlieb, 2011). The first matchup between him and another Chinese player, Yi Jianlian<sup>15</sup>, in 2007 attracted about 200 million in viewership (Associate Press, 2007). In China, Yao Ming's No.1 draft pick was perceived as a great honor and he was named the *zhuangyuan* in the media, which was the top scorer of the examination system in imperial China designed to recruit the top national talents. This distinctive *zhuangyuan* shared his extraordinary celebrityhood with his compatriots and was embodied with more expectations of seeking for international recognition and reversing the long-term preconceived notions of China from the Western countries. The bulky sports machine finally produced what it had been dreaming for a long time, no more "small balls", no more women's sports, but a basketball superstar who was "Made in China."

Yao Ming's performance in the NBA further produced a Yao Ming Mania that quickly swept both the American and Chinese societies, particularly among the 14 million Asian Americans living in the United States. Long stereotyped as the "model minority"—as hard working and educated, while physically inferior and insulated from sports talents—Yao Ming's emergence was expected to break such a stereotype; he was also able to share a considerable degree of mobility among various Asian American groups. Beyond being celebrated solely by Chinese immigrants or Chinese-Americans, Yao Ming was also "claimed" as a representative of the whole Asian American community, in much the same way as we saw happen to Jeremy Lin in 2011-2012 (Wang, 2006).

For example, the founder of the popular Yao Ming forum YaoMingMania.com is a Japanese American and the fans active on the forum are from a broader range of East Pacific Rim including Korean American, Vietnamese American, and Filipino American (Jeung, 2005). The NBA is a unique environment in the American society: African-American players reign supreme while whites and other ethnicities are perceived as "minorities". Yao Ming was presumed to take up the historical role of breaking the dominant stereotype of Asian Americans with his performance on the hyper-masculinized NBA court and thus he had to bear the double burdens as a minority - both in the NBA and in American society. On the NBA court, Yao Ming

was expected as a stereotype breaker by Asian Americans. To the American society, Yao Ming was a cultural ambassador of a resurging nation, and a Asian mystery from the ‘unfamiliar while familiar’ China: the big and old country far away with a traditional image still located in the Cold War to most people while frequently appearing in the headlines nowadays accompanied with the disconcerting issues of large debt burden, increasing military power and deterioration of human rights.

As a global sports icon, Yao Ming shared extraordinary flexibility in both identity politics and marketing opportunities that transcended cultural and nation-state borders. The flexibility of Yao Ming was based on his complicated and indeed mobile individual identities and embodiments of different imaginations from different parties (Chinese, Asian Americans, white Americans, etc.). I employ the theory of “flexible citizenship” below to help explain how (and perhaps why) he was celebrated in different contexts. I further discuss how the characteristics of “flexible citizenship” can be applied to the specific case of Yao Ming for the facilitation of capital accumulation as a transnational pitchman (a main theme that arises in the commercial value and cultural importance findings of my content analysis).

The concept of “flexible citizenship” was first used by anthropologist Aihwa Ong against the backdrop of the development of “flexible notion of citizenship and sovereignty as strategies to accumulate capital and power” (Ong, 1999, p. 6). She assumed that the flexibility of transnational individuals or corporations had developed new practices of migration, travelling, relocation and displacement to negotiate the tension between local and global forces (Ong, 1999). Giardina (2001) examines former tennis celebrity Martina Hingis and her capability to adapt her “flexible citizenship” to local the consumer market across the Atlantic. He points out that there is “an increasing trend among (trans)national sporting leagues and organizations that engenders an environment conducive to the emergence of flexible citizenship” (p. 206). Hingis, as a cosmopolitan figure, is able to assume various roles in different cultural environments.

In a related fashion, Oates and Polumbaum (2004) in their previous study on the international flexibility of Yao Ming, tried to answer the question of how the characters of “flexible citizenship” fitted into the specific case of Yao Ming particularly in the consideration of his distinct Chinese background and multinational marketing possibility. Yao Ming’s ability of transcending (inter)national boundaries was greatly attributed to his effective negotiations with given localities. However, in Yao’s case, this negotiation process was not only unilaterally

dependent on how Yao Ming tried to model himself with multiple images to different consumption markets, it was also based on how he was perceived and understood in different environments for his unique cultural and economical significance. The analysis of the flexibility of Yao Ming is thus partially similar with Giardina's (2002) study on "Global Hingis" grounded with the theory of "flexible citizenship" while simultaneously focused on Yao's cultural and economical significance in the realm of consumer culture.

### **Model Minority Myth**

Yao Ming's "flexible citizenship" can be first applied to the Asian American group, which stands in the middle of the U.S and China, both geographically and culturally. According to the 2010 Census, Asian Americans made up 4.8% of the United States population (United States Census Bureau, 2010). The composition of the Asian American population also went through a major change in the past few decades. In the 1960s, two-thirds of Asian Americans were native born in the United States; since the 1980s, two-thirds were foreign born<sup>16</sup>. This significant shift has resulted from changes in immigration policies like the abolishment of the national origins quota system<sup>17</sup>, which was replaced with a preference system that focused on immigrants' skills and family relationships with citizens or U.S. residents.

Historically, the early Asian immigrants were mainly cheap or low-level labor forces like the transcontinental railroad workers in the nineteenth-century. These early immigrants also built up the traditional stereotypes of Asian Americans like laundry man and garment workers (Ong, 1999). In contrast, new immigrant flows in recent years were primarily constituted by capital investors or people with a high education background (Junn & Masuoka, 2008). These new immigrants, as Ong indicated, are enjoying the benefit of economic capital (wealth) while having difficulties in converting the economic capital to their social capital like prestige and reception for legal citizenship (Ong, 1999). This perceived mismatch of their social status and capital accumulation is to a certain degree the result of the inherited stereotype of the early immigrants, which still affects the racial status of Asian American community today.

Previous studies have revealed that Asian Americans share a pan-ethnic racial identity and there is an ongoing assimilation of their socioeconomic identity (Junn & Masuoka, 2008; Le, 2007). Yao Ming's "flexible citizenship" thus was tied to the new Asian Americans who were primarily fueled with high-educated and high-skilled laborers and significantly distinct with other major immigrant groups like (the comparatively poorer) Latino immigrants. As a minority

in American society, the general racial classification of Asian American as “Asian” regardless of the consideration of their origins of the countries of these new immigrants further facilitated an identity ambiguity and self-awareness as pan-ethnic “Asian” among the Asian American communities, even though they might share very distinct cultural or language background especially for the foreign born new immigrants. The consequence of “flexible citizenship” on these new immigrants, as Ong claimed, is presumed to “dodge state relation, spin human relations across space and find ever new niches to exploit” (Ong, 1999, p. 136).

In Yao Ming’s case, Asian Americans tended to claim Yao Ming as “theirs” or “Asian”, in a way of escaping their own distinct cultural background and relation to origin countries in accumulation of the imagined transfiguration of their social capitals (racial status and images). Celebration of the Yao Ming sensation further created an imagined community, as Anderson (2006) defined, that was socially constructed and perceived by Asian American who claim Yao Ming as part of “theirs” and celebrated his stereotype breaker role as a representative of the pan-ethnic Asian American community.

Having analyzed the rationale of Yao Ming’s flexibility among the Asian American community, I will now specify how Yao Ming’s celebrityhood was celebrated in a broader range of the Asian world. Yao Ming was not the only Asian sports star in the United States in his era. For example, Japanese baseball player Ichiro Suzuki is another superstar still competing in the MLB today. Although they both attained somewhat similar achievements in their respective sports (as both of them were perceived as one of the best players either in the NBA or the MLB at the height of their respective careers), they occupied relatively different cultural spaces. For example, and compared to Ichiro, Yao Ming cultivated more agility in his transnationality and appeared to be more adaptive to his celebrityhood. That is, Yao Ming used his translator in his first two years and then he was willing to talk English publicly. In contrast, Ichiro still uses his translator in the interviews and press conferences even though he has been in the league for more than ten years (perhaps to continue cultivating a distinctively Japanese identity, or to maintain a sense of privacy away from the eyes of the media).

While this distinction might be the result of personal factors, it did indeed make a difference in their mobility to both the American society and Asian Americans. Yao Ming’s willingness to speak English can be perceived as his willingness to integrate into American society, without regard to his language and skin (particularly as an Asian minority), which to

Asian Americans was also a notable symbol that embodied their long-term striving and aspiration to assimilate into the mainstream of society (Wang, 2006).

Yao Ming's flexibility was also remarkable for his personal characteristics, both physically and culturally, especially his highly expected stereotype breaker and ambassador role. Yao Ming's natural heritage, his 7-foot-6 and 300 pound giant body made him one of the biggest players in the league. His extraordinary body size stood in sharp contrast to other Asian public figures in American popular culture like movie actors or other sports stars, while this explicit contrast, in the consideration of the stereotypes he was expected to break like physical inferiority, was presumed to be a more efficient way to achieve such a goal. Unlike Ichiro or other Asian sports stars, Yao Ming's dominance on court was partially attributed to his body structure, which is rarely present in the Asian ethnicity. This distinct contrast of body image on Asians associated with the hyper-masculinized and fiercely competitive NBA playing style together constituted a masculine particularity of Yao Ming, which was expected and imagined to erase the feminized stereotype on Asians and Asian Americans.

### **The Great China Hope**

Recall the early years of his NBA career, when Yao Ming was frequently criticized for his "soft" playing style. In an article titled "NBA Gamble on Poker Deal", Darren Rovell (2005) of ESPN remarked that "Yao Ming has been criticized for being soft in the low post. No word whether that's why he's a Queen of Spades." Such criticism was not only limited in the American media but also prevalent among his Chinese compatriots. Personally speaking, when I watched Yao Ming's game with my friends in China, people cheered for his slam-dunks but complained when he chose to shoot jump shots when he was able to dunk. To some degree, he was expected to be more like a powerful and aggressive center (i.e. Shaquille O'Neal) who was more proficient in using his big body rather than technique. It was as if he was expected to dunk or produce an aggressive performance, yet beneath the surface, it was not only about surviving in the gladiator-style combats in the NBA, but also a masculinization process that fans were able to identify with. That is, an announcement of how China has trained equally strong bodies to compete with the Western players as well as national power in seeking of global prestige.

The awareness of "self" or "individual" embodied with the appreciation and cults of spectacular slam-dunks, was the ultimate cultural product of Western capitalism brought to China via basketball. If prevalent egalitarianism in Mao's era symbolized basketball as

communist fantasy characterized by teamwork, self-sacrifice or patriotism, then basketball in the new China, against the backdrop of expanding neoliberalism, is more about a capitalist adventure consisting of individualism, commodification and Americanization. Morris (2002), in fact, argued that the slam-dunk has become desired as the “ultimate life goal of many youth in China today” (p. 21). As a Chinese fan commented on one of the leading sports website *sina.com*: “Watching Yao Ming dunk on the NBA court is as cool as the scene of kicking the ass of the Westerners performed for countless times by Bruce Lee, Jet Li and many other Kung Fu films, while this is more real”. Not only for the Chinese people, the unique masculinity of Yao Ming based on his physical ascendancy and playing environment was also desired by the new Asian immigrants in seeking for a social capital as discussed above that have been long haunted by the bias and discrimination based on inherited stereotype.

For example, as *The New York Times* reported, “While Asian-Americans had made significant economic and political gains, they still had slights that Yao Ming’s presence might help change” (Longman, 2002). When Yao Ming was taunted by Shaquille O’Neal with an ethnically offensive attack before their first spectacular matchup (“Tell Yao Ming, Ching chong-yang-wah-ah-soh”) on a nationwide broadcast show, the whole Asian American community was enraged and many of them not only asked for apologies from Shaq but also began to boycott his product endorsements like Burger King and Radio Shack (Crow, 2003). This was very similar to the controversial issue that happened to Asian American basketball player Jeremy Lin in 2012 for the inappropriate use of the “C” word slang by ESPN. Both of these two cases created big stirs in Asian American communities and the defense of their rare public figures was also perceived as the defense of their ethnicity, which had resulted from the formation of a Pan-ethnic identity and sensitivity to their racial status in the current society.

To many Chinese people, Yao Ming’s adventure in the NBA was perceived as an ideal Eastern figure accumulating capital in the Western world while preserving his originality. The integration of Western and Eastern culture has been the dominant theory when embracing the wave of globalization and dealing with the paradoxes of tradition and modernity in China since it first opened the door to the world in the late Qing Dynasty. Yao Ming’s flexibility was also attributed to a certain degree by his articulation of different cultures.

On one side, he was persistent with the traditional Eastern values. He lived with his parents in Houston like many young men at his age did in China. His modesty and work ethic

represented a supposed “model minority” in the United States. His unaggressive and unselfish playing style, which was occasionally criticized, was also perceived as the influence of Confucianism, which advocated the features of “Peace”, “Altruism” and “Self-discipline” that was present in Chinese culture for thousands of years (Hu, 2008). As *Xinhua News Agency* described, “In Yao Ming’s nine-year NBA career, he had only been ejected once and you can name few when he got technical foul. When facing provocations from other players, Yao Ming preferred to cool it down rather than strike back. This is not cowardice but humility under the influence of Eastern culture (Xinhua News Agency, 2011). *Time Magazine* on its tribute to Yao Ming’s nomination to the 2004 *Time*’s “100 Most Influential People in the World” likewise wrote: “The Chinese are intensely proud of Yao, who has done the Confucian thing by living with his parents and sending polite holiday cards to his teammates and opponents, Shaquille O’Neal included” (Larmer, 2004).

Additionally, Yao Ming’s commitment to his National Team’s obligation, unlike his predecessor Wang Zhizhi (who was expelled from National team for his refusal to state obligation<sup>18</sup>), was further favored by the government as a propaganda tool of patriotic education. In a transitional era from the celebration of communist egalitarianism to cults of capitalist individualism, the economic reforms take it for granted as Deng proclaimed that “Let some people get rich first”. But the communist core of the social ideology is still in favor of these gold rushers paying back or showing their appreciation of the country, as the officials repeatedly claimed, “the success is benefit from the reform and open-up policy” (Xinhua News Agency, 2011).

For example, when a young speed skater won the gold medal in Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, she was criticized by a senior sports official for “not thank[ing] the country first” when speaking publicly about her victory (Hong, 2010). Yao Ming not only shared his pride or talents with his country, it was also widely reported that a considerable amount of his earnings in the NBA was shared with his former Chinese franchise Shanghai Sharks, which he bought in 2009 because of its severe economic distress (Larmer, 2005). Before the Beijing Olympic games, Yao Ming almost missed the whole NBA season for injury problems, but he still decided to lead the Chinese National Team in the first ever Olympic games held on their home ground. The American media generally expressed their concerns on its potential risk to his NBA career, such as the *Houston Chronicle*, which pointed out, “If Yao puts him hard on behalf of the Chinese

national team and his 1.2 billion countrymen perhaps he runs the risk of reinjuring his foot and jeopardizing his future and fortunes of the Rockets” (Blinbury, 2006). In response he told the media in an interview, “If I couldn’t play in the Beijing Olympic games, it will be my lifelong pain” (Li, 2008).

Yao Ming’s persistence to the Beijing Olympic games was hailed as patriotic behavior by the government. When he once again carried the Five-Starred Red Flag in the Chinese red color uniform leading the Chinese team in the lavish and spectacular Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, it was more like the return of the Red Army’s “Fighting Basketball Team” to accomplish another propaganda role; this time, however, the audience was the whole world. Besides that, Yao Ming was also expected to be a role model to the increasing flows of overseas returnees in recent years and to encourage those who were able to accumulate capital overseas to also serve and requite the country with the returning of capital backflows. The state-run *Xinhua News Agency* further quoted one well-known sports journalist in China Xu Jicheng:

“Some people went to the United States and Europe before Yao but returned with blind worship of the west, losing their own cultural identity. However, Yao has kept asserting that he is a Shanghai boy, and Chinese, while enjoying and learning from the west” (Xinhua News Agency, 2011).

### **Giant “Soft Power”**

In the eyes of the Chinese government, the “bigness” of Yao Ming was also an appropriate metaphor of its growing power. His strength, power and other masculinized characteristics were all perceived as one form of the nation’s “soft power” (Nye, 2004). The term “soft power” was defined as the ability to get what people want through attraction rather than through coercion (Nye, 2004). Popular culture and mass media are also identified as sources of “soft power”. Yao Ming was acting as a vehicle of disseminating “soft power” to the United States via his personal influence and transnational flexibility, which was heavily invested and desired by the Chinese government. China is dedicated to delivering its messages as a rising country while simultaneously trying to minimize the negative images as a threatening power to the Western world particularly the current hegemony the United States. The use of “soft power” instead of the traditional “hard power” like military and economics are thus favored by the communist government to conform to its “Peaceful Rise”<sup>19</sup>. In such a circumstance, Yao Ming,

as the latest product of the Chinese sports factory, was distinct to many of his fellows or predecessors and entrusted with multiple roles not simply limited as an athlete.

Hailed by former U.S president George H.W. Bush as China's biggest export to the United States, Yao Ming's landing in the United States was different from other countless "Made in China" products. He presented a more direct and humane image of China to the American consuming populace as a unique while effective "soft power product" with expected characteristics including his persistence of eastern value, respectable personality, distinguished athletic skills and absolute loyalty to the home country. On the other side, the emergence of Yao Ming and the popularity of the NBA in China that followed can be also considered as a showcase of the "soft power" demonstrated by the United States<sup>20</sup>. The NBA has been a new channel of transferring American values, lifestyle and commoditization of culture to China, benefitting from its growing influence facilitated by Yao Ming in recent years. The high recognition and popularity of the NBA can be further equally perceived as the agreement and identification of capitalist culture by the Chinese society.

Yao Ming is thus celebrated by Chinese people, the communist government, as well as a broader range of Asian Americans. The flexibility of Yao Ming allows him an unusual popularity and acceptance that transcends the Asian world. As a new form of "soft power", Yao Ming's cultural and political significance to American society was equally paramount.

### **American Idol**

Yao Ming will arrive in Houston today to find himself the object of Beatlemania. And it will not stop. Every game, good or bad, and especially on the road, will bring media masses to him. He will be on magazine covers before he plays a regular-season NBA game. Television crews will shadow him. He will be asked to describe his meals, his home, his car, his friends, his family, his opinions and, on occasion, something about basketball (Feigan, 2002).

There is a saying that "Everything is bigger in Texas", and so is Yao. Before Yao Ming's arrival in Houston, the whole city was plastered with billboards featuring Yao's image and the slogan "Be Part of Something Big" (Barron, 2002). The first No.1 draft pick by the Houston Rockets since the former city's hero Hakeem Olajuwon, who also played the center position with an international background and won two NBA Championships there, was taken for granted to be his natural successor to lead the Houston Rockets back to past glories. As Blinebury (2003)

wrote in the *Houston Chronicle*, “he (Yao Ming) will rule like a king in the same regal fashion as Hakeem Olajuwon”. *Sports Illustrated* proclaimed him the “Next Big Thing” on its cover and the delighted Rockets owner Leslie Alexander flamboyantly included Yao Ming among the group of most marketable athletes in the world: “This is the biggest individual sports story of all time. Mark my words: in two or three years, he'll be bigger than Tiger Woods or Michael Jordan” (Larmer, 2004).

The No.1 pick of Yao Ming was more likely to be a No.1 myth in the American society. Most American people had never heard about Yao Ming’s name before the draft, let alone had watched him play. The previous international players of the NBA normally played in the NCAA or European leagues before they entered the NBA, where they were more easily scouted and evaluated before they were drafted. Yao Ming was another story. He played in a much less-competitive Chinese Basketball Association (CBA). The 7-foot-6 height and soft touch was noticeable, but his skinny body was unlikely to adapt to the rough-and-tumble NBA court. Many people expected Yao Ming to rival the then king of “Painted Area” Shaquille O’Neal, while the others were inclined to turn their curiosities to suspicions on this Asian myth.

Yao Ming’s NBA career did not start well - he scored zero points in his debut game against the Indiana Pacers, which seemed to be what the skeptics projected – another bust with incredible height, like Shawn Bradley, or even worse. Charles Barkley, the retired NBA star and TV commenter mocked: “Yao Ming makes Shawn Bradley look like Bill Russell” (Xinhua News Agency, 2005). He further bet his colleague Kenny Smith on a nationally broadcasted show: “He (Kenny) said Yao Ming's gonna get 19 points. If he gets 19 points in a game, I'll kiss (Kenny's) ass”. Barkley’s satire might just be a joke, but it indeed represented many people’s suspicions then: Yao Ming was unproved on the NBA court, could hardly speak English and was from China, where its previous best player Wang Zhizhi had never started a single game in the NBA.

The rooted stereotypes further raised a question to the American people: Asians, can they play basketball? But from the very beginning, the Houston Rockets were committed to this young man from Shanghai and the NBA was also working hard to clear all the boundaries on his way out to America. After rounds of intensified negotiations with the CBA and Yao Ming’s former club Shanghai Sharks, with the promises of sharing his earnings and National Team’s obligation, Yao Ming was finally released to the long-awaited NBA. It was natural for people at

that time to ask: “Is the cult of confidence from the Houston Rockets and the NBA on Yao Ming truly based solely on his potential athletic ability?” Now looking back, the answer is absolutely not.

Since David Stern took over the NBA, he had been dedicated to expanding his basketball empire to a global business center. Dating back to 1989, David Stern made his inaugural trip to China and waited for hours in the chilly wind of Beijing’s winter just in order to send his All-Star game tapes to the state-run broadcasting monopoly CCTV (Chinese Center Television). Stern’s patience secured him a contract of television rights with the CCTV to broadcast the NBA games in China for a price of zero, which was worth millions dollars in Japan, Europe or Latin America at that time (Larmer, 2005) The early cultivation of the NBA in China quickly paid off. In a 1992 national poll, Chinese schoolchildren ranked Michael Jordan and former prime minister Zhou Enlai as the two greatest people in the twentieth Century (LaFeber, 2002). In his book *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, LaFeber wrote:

The children knew Zhou because he helped create their Communist Revolution. They knew Jordan because he miraculously floated through the air as both an athlete and as a pitchman for American-produced advertisement for Nike shoes, which the children avidly followed on Television. (p. 28)

While not to necessarily suggest that Yao Ming was drafted *solely* for his potential marketing power, it is undeniable that it contributed to how he was positioned in the NBA and China. The long-term cultivation of the NBA in China needed its final shot, or breakthrough, to finalize its full access to the most populous market and it historically picked Yao Ming, the last part of the “Walking Great Walls” after Wang Zhizhi and Mengke Bateer<sup>21</sup>. As soon as Yao Ming was drafted, the Rockets owner Leslie Alexander jauntily told the media, “there will be an amazing economic impact” as if he had cashed in the outpouring revenue from this little giant (Feigan, 2002). *Houston Chronicle* went more straightforward:

For the Rockets, who have struggled on the court and at the box office since winning back-to-back titles in the mid-1990s, Yao represents a potential draw to the downtown arena that opens next season. For the NBA, he represents an entree into the largest untapped market in the world (Barron, 2002).

NBA’s success in the global stage was greatly attributed to its inept ability to create the “stars”. Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant and more recently LeBron James all have

drawn huge international followings around the world. Yao Ming was delicately decorated and celebrated, for his outstanding basketball skills, distinguished personality and unique cultural background, not only as a Chinese basketball player, but also an American idol, intertwined the latest wave of global capital accumulation of the United States and the forthcoming ambivalence in the American society upon China's rise. I use the term American idol to explain how the operation of Yao Ming symbolizes another round of global expansion of American capitalism to emerging markets (like the NBA to China) and how Yao Ming idolized the remarkable opportunities of globalization to the United States. It also describes how Yao Ming was celebrated as a rare Asian/Chinese figure with his extraordinary flexibility in the American society.

Yao Ming was expected as the missing part on the ambitious NBA globalization blueprint, but as an Asian figure, his flexibility and adaptability to the NBA and America were something unsure at first. The NBA has for a long time been haunted in the shadow of racial controversies, especially as related to African American players (e.g., drug problems in the 1970s, so-called 'hip-hop' culture in the 1990s, negative stereotypes concerning Allen Iverson and Ron Artest, etc.). White players, either from the United States or Europe, are perceived as minorities in the league, which is very similar to the role of Asians in American society. In contrast, African Americans, according to the 2011 Racial and Gender Report Card program (RGRC) published through the University of Central Florida, made up about 80 percent of the player pool, which was the highest percentage compared to other major leagues like the NFL, MLB or NHL (Lapchick et al., 2011).

The dominance of African-American players in the NBA paints the league with a particular "black" color and the proliferation of drug abuse and sex scandals among black players further has drawn criticism from the consuming public comprised primarily of affluent White fans. Some have pointed out the unbalanced racial composition had resulted in a decline of the NBA's popularity. Charles Barkley told the media: "white folks are not going to come to see a bunch of [Black] guys with tattoos, with cornrows" (Shields, 2004, p. 190). The retired basketball legend Larry Bird also talked publicly to plea for more white players in the league: "I think it's good for a fan base because as we all know the majority of the fans are white America. And if you just had a couple of white guys in there, you might get them a little excited" (Frazier & Markowitz, 2006, p. 139). Columnist of *The Daily Beast* Buzz Bissinger further argued that

the absence of white superstars was one of the major reasons why the NBA kept losing its popularity as “they (white fans) have trouble getting excited about African-American athletes” (Bissinger, 2011). Since the retirement of Larry Bird and John Stockton who were active in the 80s and 90s, there has not been a single white American-born player who could reach that level of prior celebrity. The only “white” stars in the league are foreigners: Dirk Nowitzki, Steve Nash, and Pau Gasol.

Yao Ming is not an American, and he is even not a white. But the emergence of yellow power since its debut on the NBA court has created an ambiguity of his self-identification. That is, Yao Ming was unlikely to be perceived as a black athlete. Farred (2005) argued that Yao Ming was granted a social status as “an honorary white” and he was also likely to be claimed as “white” particularly for the white American fantasy of trumping the African-American hegemony in the league (p. 55). Putting aside Farred’s (2005) hyperbolic statements about Yao Ming being perceived as “white” (or an “honorary white”) in American society, it is true that his non-black skin, “proper” behavior, and even playing style, as I have examined through the analysis on the media reports, was closer to the “model minority” in the NBA—whites—and allowed for a considerable flexibility to transcend black and white, both as an athlete and authorized commodity.

### **Transnational Pitchman**

“That all happened with a wonderful mixture of talent, dedication, humanitarian aspirations and a sense of humor. What a wonderful combination” — NBA commissioner David Stern (quoted in Feigan, 2011).

Yao Ming’s personality, as examined in *The New York Times* and *Houston Chronicle*, was highly valued by American media. Taking his racial controversy with Shaquille O’Neal for instance, when Yao Ming was asked about O’Neal’s racial taunt, he responded:

“I think there are a lot of difficulties in two different cultures understanding each other, especially countries of very large populations (such as) China and the United States. The world is getting smaller and has a greater understanding of cultures. I believe Shaquille O’Neal was joking with what he said, but I think a lot of Asian people don’t understand this kind of joke” (Feigan, 2003).

Yao Ming further impressed the American public with his unique sense of humor in response to O’Neal’s Chinese imitation: “Chinese is a hard language to learn”, he added. “Even

when I was little, I took a long time to learn Chinese” (Feigan, 2003). Yao Ming’s humility, humor and class act quickly received overflowing positive responses from the public. O’Neal also apologized and praised Yao Ming’s magnanimity. Positioned over and against a league that had long been framed by “gangster culture” and racial breakdown, Yao Ming’s emergence, as described in the *Houston Chronicle*, “is a breath of fresh air: humble and dedicated, warm and human” (Westbrook, 2005). Yao Ming’s public personality also facilitated the change of traditional Chinese athletes’ image in the American society, particularly for the infusion of humane elements, which had long been absent from the public images of Chinese athletes (and Chinese people in general). *China Daily* called him the “New Red Star”, who represented a new China to the world, as he “single-handedly changed the image of Chinese athletes abroad with humanity, modesty, social responsibility and smart thinking” (Lu, 2011).

On the other side, the diversity of the NBA, was not only marked by various ethnicities on the court, it was also a symbol of mixed playing styles. When basketball had become more a one-on-one battle in the NBA rather than a teamwork game, when the obsession of physical intimidation had overshadowed technical skills, when people kept talking about how the great Center-era had gone, Yao Ming became something rare and special to the NBA. Cao (2007) argued that Yao Ming was reserved as a symbol of “civilized manliness”, which was embodied with reliable and conservative cultural values to the league, the media, the white fans, and the commerce. Yao Ming had never hidden his loyalty to Houston Rockets and appreciation to the America. He said “Yes” when asked if he wanted to play his entire career for Houston Rockets and indeed he did. He stated that the national anthem of the United States was his favorite song, “for I have to listen to it at least 82 times every year” (Xinhua News Agency, 2011). His persistence with traditional culture, while initiatives to involve into the new environment, as well as his fairly normal family life and proper behavior on and off the court all contributed to his seamless connection to the middle-class majority. Larmer (2005) profiled Yao Ming as a reinvigorating power to the league, stating:

Yao seemed the perfect antidote to the NBA ills (problems): a clean-cut, 1950-style team player who exuded humility rather than hubris. Even his playing style was modest and methodical- a blue-collar game, he called it-with none of the high-flying flourishes that normally set off the crowds. Yao was, in essence, the anti-superstar, and fans-including

top corporate sponsors and NBA executives-couldn't get enough of his retro appeal. (p. 283)

Yao Ming's unique flexibility transcending China and America, white and black, all contributed to his emergence as a global cultural icon, as well as his extensive social influence in the American society. Yao Ming got his own "Yao Ming Song" from the Houston fans. His name turned up in Jay-Z's and Lil Wayne's rap songs. His animated image was featured alongside Tom Brady, LeBron James, and Michelle Kwan in *The Simpsons*. The NBA even made a documentary movie to record his phenomenal NBA journey from China to United States, *The year of the Yao*. One of his funny pictures taken in the interview was even celebrated in the worldwide Internet sensation "meme"<sup>22</sup>. Talk shows, charity bazaars, as well as overwhelming basketball hype all placed Yao Ming in the spotlight of the American society. The creation of the American idol further ignited the fancy of a marketing machine, in the post-Jordan era, to fill the vacuum Jordan left and to embrace an ever-growing global market.

The NBA reached its prime in the 1980s after years of struggling well behind baseball, football and in many places ice hockey for recognition. The golden age of basketball was attributed to the business miracle of Michael Jordan. When the "God of Basketball" slowly vanished from the once dazzling spotlight due to the increase of age, the NBA was dedicated to finding his successor to maintain its flourishing years. Good-looking, family guy, as well as godlike skills were the key features of Jordan's tremendous marketing possibility (see McDonald, 1996; Andrews, 1996). The NBA had invested so much to build Michael Jordan as the greatest ever player that one day they realized that no one could replace him. No matter it was Grant Hill or Jerry Stackhouse who were labeled as "Next Michael Jordan" hailed with very similar characters, the truth was simply that Jordan was irreplaceable.

Meanwhile, due to the resurgence of New Black Culture, marked by the popularity of Hip-Hop, R & B music and street ball, the marketing of black NBA players tended to be more concentrated on their "blackness", which was normally against the traditional social values with the heterodoxies like "rebellion", "hyper-masculine rival", "cool" and "underground". Charles Barkley's "I'm not a role model" campaign and the later "I'm what I am" commercial featuring Allen Iverson were both perceived as marketing products filled with the antithesis of tradition and "against all odds" themes. The prevalence of black culture from margin to mainstream, on

the other hand, also claimed the collapse of the NBA's struggling in seeking for the duplicate of Michael Jordan, as all the highlights of "black" was more likely to be anti-Jordan, who was initially catering for the middle-class American with his distinguished flexibility transcending racial binaries.

As I have discussed above, the primary consumers of the NBA are white. Even though the implication of overdetermined "black" character might appeal to young fans in some circumstances, it was unable to draw a consistent consumer interest from the public especially the white consumers (see, e.g., the NBA implementing a 'dress code' policy, critiqued by Leonard, 2012). Simultaneously, the overemphasis of "black" culture, which was trumpeted mainly by the sportswear and equipment suppliers like Nike, was unable to fulfill the interests of other potential corporations who were looking for Michael Jordan's features mainly focused on the middle-class consumers and committed to a healthy and friendly public image. The dominance of African Americans in the NBA, to some degree, greatly limited the marketability of the league in the late-1990s and early 2000s. Moreover, when the widely-recognized best marketable basketball player after Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, was charged with sexual assault and was dropped from a series of endorsement deals, there seemed to be a blank space for the NBA then to find someone like Michael Jordan with both respected athletics skills, distinguished personality as well as the flexibility transcending race, even boundaries of nation-state in a globalization age. But the emergence of Yao Ming, the rare yellow figure stood between white and black, was more likely to be its ultimate answer.

Just after Kobe Bryant was charged for sexual assault in 2003, one of his major sponsors, McDonald's, cut its ties with the star point guard and turned to the NBA sophomore Yao Ming. "Yao Ming personifies what the McDonald's brand is all about - a youthful, fun, dynamic spirit which connects to today's customers and cultures", said Larry Light, McDonald's Executive Vice-President and Global Chief Marketing Officer (Reuters, 2004), "His unique, larger-than-life personality and appeal transcends borders and makes him a perfect fit for our new global outreach to consumers". Yao Ming nailed down a multi-million contract with McDonald's as its global spokesman to promote its brand internationally; the partnership with the American fast food giant was just a tip of his colossal marketing iceberg. In the age of globalization, transnational corporations are keen on sponsoring the sports events and athletes in seeking of global influence and recognition.

In terms of athletic endorsement, besides celebrityhood, the flexibility of the endorsers in an international scope was also crucial to its potential marketability. China has already become the second-largest economy after the United States, but its cultural influence is still dwarfed by its fast growing GDP rate. To the American public, Yao Ming was something rare and fresh to the habitual commercial culture. The marketing of an Asian novelty with high-profile visibility was able to draw great curiosity from the potential consumers. To the transnational corporations dedicated to expanding their global market that signed Yao Ming to endorsement deals—Nike, VISA, Apple, McDonald’s, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Reebok, etc—his Asian identity was able to brand them with a more “global” image.

The impression of “global brand” associated with Yao Ming was both applied to the American market and to a broader scope of international markets. This “global” image was not what Michael Jordan was able to deliver, as it was impossible for American people to smell “global” from an All-American athlete. Likewise, consumers in other countries would not feel surprised if American companies were endorsed by American athletes (in fact, as McDonald, 1996, among others has noted, Jordan was selling “America” to the world). The adding of an international face, especially the rare yellow figure in the current dominant commercial culture by whites or sometimes blacks, was a new approach to maximize the corporation’s marketing efforts. Grainger, Newman & Andrews (2005) examined the marketing of New Zealand rugby player Jonah Lomu by Adidas, in which they argued that the marketing of Lomu’s “exotic” and “unknown” Maori identity was able to cross both culture and consumers. Grainger et al (2005) categorized the marketing of exoticness as “exotic – local”, which exudes a new commercial approach even consumers might not know anything about the athletes themselves. The marketing of Yao Ming in his early NBA years was also partially attributed to his “foreignness”, but in Yao’s case his celebrityhood had been well established while his “exception” as a Chinese figure was more cultivated in practice.

In particular, Yao Ming’s marketability, based on his flexibility, personality and athletic skills, also categorized him to specific endorsements. In a *Time* magazine article Yao Ming was written about as a young man who “loves Starbucks, computer games, action movies and SUVs” (Tyranigel & Bacon, 2003). In a *Houston Chronicle* profile Yao Ming was presented as “a winning combination of dignity, understated humor and undisguised wonder at a culture so different from the one in which he had been raised” (Houston Chronicle, 2010).

Technology products frequently showed up on the list of Yao Ming's commercial endorsements, including Apple, Garmin, game developer Sorrent, "Yao Monster" studio (Beats by Dr. Dre headphones) and Chinese telecommunication operator Unicom Group. Yao Ming's image – an Asian basketball player using more skills than body—perfectly fit in the branding of technology products. The natural connection between Asian and technology partially was based on a stereotype on the new Asian immigrants in the United States like engineers, computer programmers and technology supporters.

One Apple commercial, for example, featured Verne Troyer, the 2-foot actor most famous for playing Mini-Me in the *Austin Powers* series, Yao Ming sat next to the small "Mini-Me" who was watching *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* on an airplane. They both were tapping away on new Apple G4 PowerBooks. Yao used the one with a 12-inch screen — remarkably small and Troyer used the model with the 17-inch screen — remarkably large. They then watched enviously and covertly on each other's machine and finally burst out laughing. The commercial tried to create a sharp contrast between their body sizes to notify the consumers about different sizes of new Macintosh PowerBooks. Yao Ming's sense of humor and affability quickly became his trademarks and was deployed in his other endorsements.

Yao's cultural significance, as a foreigner active in the American popular culture, was more slowly cultivated by his sponsors. In his commercial for Visa Inc, which was aired before millions viewers during the 2003 Super Bowl, Yao Ming portrayed a New York tourist purchasing a statue of liberty replica in a New York souvenir shop and asked if he could write a check instead of using a credit card. The funny confusion of "Yo" and "Yao" in languages symbolized Yao Ming's "foreignness" and well illuminated his comic potential. Bill Sanders, the director of marketing for BBA Sports Management of Los Angeles and a member of the Team Yao management team said: "It's a progression, the Apple ad showed him smiling, and this one (VISA) has him actually acting. He's frustrated, he's happy, and he shows quite a range of emotions" (Barron, 2003). Sander's words told that Yao Ming's public image was well operated and developed in a planned routine by his management team as they tried to deliver a "real" and "humane" Yao Ming to the public. With the delicate operation of his marketing team "Team Yao"<sup>23</sup>, Yao Ming initial mystery as an intimidating giant gradually vanished through, and the new look of Asians in stark contrast to the haunted stereotypes was simultaneously built upon this procedure of combination between Chinese ethnicity and American products. Yao Ming's

flexibility thus bestowed him the possibility and permission in the endorsements that generally reserved for whites like technological and financial products.

The ultimate marketing fantasy of Yao Ming was not only placed on the American land. As the symbol from the most populous while untapped market, China, Yao Ming's corporate mission, was primarily expected to knock open the door to the Far East golden mine. Erick Zhang, Yao's distant cousin and member of "Team Yao" stated:

"China is the last frontier for multinational corporations that want to grow their brand and increase revenues. But figuring out the best way to get established there has been a challenge. So there is interest in aligning with a personality who already has captured the attention of the Chinese population." (Barron, 2002).

With the attention of hundreds of millions of people was focused on a single person, the market behind Yao Ming was simply unmatched. Yao Ming was not only one of the most recognized Chinese in the world, he was also the most marketable celebrity in China. Even though he has been retired since 2011 summer, the 2012 *Forbes* celebrity list discussed above still ranked him No.1 in the media exposure on newspapers and Top 10 overall.

The correlative motivation on Yao Ming's No.1 draft pick, as I have discussed above, would be to a large extent attributed to the concerns of exploiting Chinese market from the NBA, with its long term tradition and proficiency in creating marketing marvels and ongoing ambitions of global expansion. The skeptics on his No.1 pick, like Charles Barkley, were quickly overwhelmed by the appreciation and welcomes on Yao Ming's arrival. There had been an acquiescence reached, between the NBA, the corporate sponsors, and American society, to issue a special "visa" to Yao Ming. The Yao Ming mania was equally to be a celebration on its "passports" to the untapped Chinese market. In his rookie year, Yao Ming had signed contracts with international brands like Nike, Gatorade, Apple and VISA. In the recent depressed economic years, when Tiger Woods or LeBron James were plagued by series of unexpected endorsement cuts, Yao Ming stayed safe in harbor and even obtained more contracts. The persistence on Yao Ming, in fact, was more likely the confidence on an uprising economy entity with nearly annual 10% GDP growth.

Yao Ming's influence has even extended to and benefited people around him. His Rockets star teammate Tracy McGrady topped the 2006 NBA jersey sales in China and major endorsements were also secured for his influence in Asia. As reported in the *Houston Chronicle*:

“Tracy’s biggest deal is with Adidas and it absolutely helps to have the exposure he does in Asia, China in particular. If you have reach in China, that certainly gives you a cushion and he has it” (Blinebury, 2008).

Now looking back, NBA’s bet on Yao Ming was a great success. Since Yao Ming’s arrival, China has become the NBA’s second largest and fastest growing market. According to the *SportsBusiness Journal*, the league in 2010 was expected to draw revenue roughly between \$150 million and \$170 million and hold 570 events in China, ranging from clinics to a nationwide reality-television dance competition (Lombardo, 2010). The NBA also held a series of “China Games” since 2004 in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. The prosperity of the NBA in China simultaneously promoted the influx of American basketball players, including many ex-NBA players rushing in to play in the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA). Some big names on the list included Stephon Marbury, J.R. Smith, and Kenyon Martin.

Yao Ming also delivered the Houston Rockets to an unmatched reputation in China, as every game Rockets played was watched by over 20 million people in China (somewhat similar to the way Ichiro helped position the Seattle Mariners in Japan). Yao Ming’s former Rockets teammates were also favored in the CBA as Steve Francis, Gerald Green, Aaron Brooks, and Rafel Alston all headed to China in search of gold. Although not a teammate of Yao’s, Stephen Marbury even became the city hero of capital Beijing and got his own statute after leading Beijing Ducks to their first-ever CBA Championship in 2012. To the NBA’s success in China, Rockets CEO Tad Brown stated:

"If you look at the growth of the NBA in China, everything reflects on Yao, absolutely every single metric - the love of the game, the viewership numbers, the sales of the jerseys, the sponsorship numbers, the China Games and the popularity of the China Games not only in China but throughout the region. He's such a truly global force. He's really taken the league and taken the Rockets to incredible heights." (Feigan, 2010)

Yao Ming was instrumental to the promotion of the NBA in China, but it’s also interesting to see that with the growth of popularity of the NBA in China, Chinese basketball fans appeared to have no bias when it came to choosing their sports heroes. Yao Ming was undoubtedly the whole nation’s hero, but to many Chinese people, especially the youth generation, the admiration of Yao Ming was one thing and the cult of the NBA and basketball was another thing. David Barboza wrote in the *The New York Times* on this paradox:

Young people here, however, do not universally favor Yao. Allen Iverson and Kobe Bryant are also popular.

Lu Zhihua, 25, was playing today wearing a Kobe Bryant jersey and Air Jordans. (He insisted that he owns all 18 styles in the Air Jordan collection. His favorite player is Michael Jordan, but he admires Yao.

"Yao has the capability," he said. "And if you have the capability, you should go to the N.B.A. Everyone knows the N.B.A. is the best." (Barboza, 2003)

Yao Ming has been rarely among the top three jersey sales in China and even unranked in 2009-2010 season. At the height of his playing career, the top names on the list according to sales figures released by the NBA were Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, and Kevin Garnett. (NBA.com, 2007). Even though there were some possible reasons to explain that like his long-term injury or prevalence of unauthorized replicas in China might hurt his jersey sales, a more pragmatic answer would be that the influence of the NBA in current China was more about the celebration of the commercialization and liberation particularly brought by the influx of American popular culture rather than the old fashion of patriotism mania or worship on a single signifier. The shift from Mao's era symbolized with collectivism and planned economy to Yao's era remarkable for the popularity of commercialism and market economy, was widely attributed to Deng's economic reform since the pursuit of capital gradually replaced the privilege of politics.

The marketing timing for Yao could not be better, as he coincidentally played in China's first ever Olympics. Visa, McDonald's and Coca Cola were Yao Ming's major sponsors as well as the official partners of International Olympic Committee (IOC). The Beijing Olympics thus provided a precious platform for these sponsors to facilitate their global marketing reach via the sports celebrity from host country-Yao Ming. For example, Yao's Olympic commercial featured movie star Jackie Chan for VISA and his McDonald's ads with his animated image along with LeBron James were both parts of these cooperate sponsors' global campaign and promoted globally. At the same time, when the whole nation of China was preparing for the Beijing Olympic games at its full blast, Yao Ming's sponsors were also striving to cultivate their new markets in China benefit from his extraordinary celebrityhood in China. Ads featuring Yao Ming plastered almost every television and Chinese network. *Newsweek* reported that Yao Ming's endorsement packages in 2008 were worth a more than \$150 million (Li, 2011). On the list of

Yao Ming's endorsements it was rare to see the names of Chinese companies except for affluent monopolies like China telecommunication operator China Unicom and insurance company China Life. It was possible that his endorsement fee was unaffordable for many Chinese companies or as Bill Sanders from Team Yao told the media: "He will only do ads if he actually uses the products and has turned down some because he didn't like them" (Barron, 2003).

The popularity of the NBA simultaneously gives a cultivable market to the Chinese brands, which are either dedicated to stride onto the global stage or to exploit the domestic market through the exceptional influence of the NBA in China. For example, Chinese electronics companies like Lenevo and Haier are two of the few renowned Chinese brands in the United States and both of them cooperated with the NBA as its official sponsors in seeking of more influence in the United States. Other Chinese companies like dairy brand Mengniu and sportswear company PEAK were trying to build images of global brands via the international reach of the NBA.

The launch of NBA China in 2008 further created more flexible sponsorship opportunities for brands interested in expanding Chinese market. Goldman Sachs estimated NBA China to be worth a total of \$2.3 billion (Lombardo, 2010). NBA International president Heidi Ueberroth said: "Creating NBA China, we saw this incredible opportunity. Just the (construction of) arenas, for example, has moved faster than we thought possible. We have been involved with three state-of-the-art arenas since the Olympic Games (in 2008). The growth is amazing" (Feigan, 2010). Except for sponsoring the NBA, many Chinese companies turned to invest on the NBA teams. For example, Houston Rockets had seven corporate sponsors from China in 2010. Milwaukee bucks and New Jersey Nets both got Chinese sponsorship deals because of the arrival of another Chinese basketball player Yi Jianlian. Rockets CEO Tad Brown excitedly told the *Houston Chronicle*: "When you look at the most popular teams in the league, everybody has Chinese-based sponsors, or they have sponsors that are multinationals that put Chinese signage on their courtside" (Feigan, 2010). The "star economy" carried forward by the NBA or Nike was also learned by the Chinese companies. "If someone becomes Yao Ming's teammates, even he just stayed in the Rockets for one year, he will get a endorsement from the Chinese companies as well as big contracts by Chinese clubs" (Shan, Wang, & Huang, 2011).

As I have discussed above, many of Yao Ming's teammates had played in the CBA while almost all of them had endorsed Chinese brands particularly sports equipment companies in recent years: Shane Battier, Dikembe Mutombo, Kyle Lowry, Carl Landry, and Ron Artest were all contracted with PEAK; Steve Francis, Bonzi Wells, and Luis Scola received contracts from ANTA.

Besides Yao Ming's teammates, Chinese companies also had a strong interest in star players. Shaquille O'Neal signed with Li Ning and Kevin Garnett began to wear ANTA shoes since 2010. The rising stars were also captured as Evan Turner is now endorsing ANTA and Kevin Love for 361 Degree. The craze of Chinese companies on signing NBA players, from the other side, reflected the NBA's exceptional influence in China and as Luis Scola said: "It's all because of Yao" (Feigan, 2010). Yao Ming's own sportswear contract, with Reebok over Nike, was worth a reported \$100 million (Sweet, 2008).

Before the Rockets made their historic No.1 draft pick on Yao Ming, one columnist of Houston Chronicle used to warn the Rockets that "Yao choice must be made on purely basketball terms", he stated that there were two things they must not do: "Draft Yao because he's Chinese. Pass on him because he's Chinese" (Robertson, 2002). But the fact just happens to the opposite – they pick him because he is Chinese. They pass on him because he's Chinese. They celebrate him because he's Chinese.

As global sports icon operating across national borders, Yao Ming symbolizes the development of Chinese society since the economic reform in the 1980s. His flexibility transcending the American and Chinese society further reflects the delicate dynamics of U.S. – China relations, particularly in the discourse of accelerating globalization and rebalancing of geopolitics. As the most important bilateral relation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, U.S-China relations were perceived as the decisive power in shaping the future global order. The closer mutual economic corporation and cultural exchanges as well as the invincible conflicts between two superpowers all add complexity and possibility to the future development of U.S.-China relations. Against such a backdrop, Yao Ming plays a unique and important role between two societies especially as the cultural signifier. In the next chapter I will analyze the development of U.S.-China relations in the new period and how Yao Ming historically fits in such changing relations.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### LOVE AND HATE: U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

“As a new president and also as a basketball fan, I have learned from the words of Yao Ming, who said, ‘No matter whether you are new or an old team member, you need time to adjust to one another’. Well, through the constructive meetings that we've already had, and through this dialogue, I'm confident that we will meet Yao's standard.”

At the meeting of the first China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue on July 27, 2009, President Obama quoted Yao Ming in talking about the future Sino-American relations (Wu, 2011). The dynamics between the most powerful social, cultural, political, and economic body, the United States, and the most populous nation in the world, China, is destined to be the most important bilateral relationship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly against the backdrop of the redistribution of global capital and rebalance of geopolitics. The inevitable globalization process further strengthens the cultural, economical and political interactions between these two giants: the United States and China are currently the two largest economies in the world and they are also each other's second largest trading partners now. Additionally, U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner expected that in about 10 years, China would be the largest trading partner of the United States (Xinhua News Agency, 2011).

I begin this chapter by reviewing a brief history of US-China relations. I then discuss the role sport has played between the two countries, most notably ping-pong, with respect to political discourse. From there, I consider the rise of “red capitalism”, or free-market economic policy within a socialist environment, making note of how Yao Ming fits into and is operationalized within such a discourse. I then conclude this chapter by pointing to some specific instances where this dynamic has been revealed, such as with the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

#### **One World, Shared Dream**

Chinese society has long been influenced by American popular culture represented by McDonald's, Hollywood movies and the NBA, which are playing increasingly important roles in the social reformation taking place there. American society, on the other hand, is stuffed with inexpensive “Made in China” products that saved American consumers an estimated \$600 billion between 1995 and 2005 (Page & Xie, 2010). U.S-China relations have fluctuated over time, often between tension and ambivalence, and particularly shaped as much by the public—

sometime inaccurate—perceptions of the other as by real political and economic ties (McGiffert, 2003; McGiffert, 2005; Page & Xie, 2010). Ironically, for a long time, the mutual understandings of two countries in history were more likely to vacillate between romanticized or demonized images, rather than reality. Government propaganda, media censorship and the complacency and ignorance among both publics are all accountable for such a fact. However, this misperception, resulting from the lack of genuine channels of delivering real information, is dangerous, especially between two countries sharing very distinct kinds of culture, ideologies, and political systems as well as a long-term tradition of mutual criticism by both governments. The inequity between the emerging and existing superpowers could further breed tensions as China is dedicated to close the gap while the United States is wary of losing the global leadership.

China's economy has made remarkable achievements in the past few decades. Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), China's real GDP has multiplied itself more than 37 times (Page & Xie, 2010). In the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China maintained an average of over 10% annual growth and became the top contributor to Global GDP growth (Sharma, 2012). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has predicted China's economy to surpass the United States in 2016<sup>24</sup>. Despite this fact, China, as a developing nation, still falls far behind the United States in terms of GDP per capita (capital and income per person) -- only 1/10<sup>25</sup> of the United States in 2011 -- and encounters serious social problems in its social transition period. Additionally, the rise of China has provoked great concerns from various segments of American society (Page & Xie, 2010).

According to a Gallup poll in 2012, 53% of Americans viewed China as the world's leading economic power while only 33% believed the United States still held the leadership position. By contrast, in 2000, Americans overwhelmingly (65%) believed the U.S. was the leading economic power when offered the same question (Jones, 2012). Other surveys suggested that American people generally shared a "lukewarm" attitude towards the surge of China, as the 2011 Pew Global Attitude Project revealed that about half (51%) of Americans had a very or somewhat positive opinion on the current image of China while 36% expressed unfavorable responses (Pew Research Center, 2011). However, in dealing with the rise of China's power, the majority of American society favored further friendly cooperation and engagement with China: according to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA) surveys in 2008, about two-thirds (64%) of Americans supported strengthening friendly relations with China (CCGA, 2008). A

Gallup poll on the current U.S.–China relations also received a majority of positive responses as 76% Americans believed the current U.S.–China had a friendly or ally relation (Saad, 2012).

Thus might U.S.–China relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century be the most important, while also the most complicated, of bilateral relations. The shift of hegemony throughout human history has generally followed the path of one superpower replacing another, like the transition of world leadership from Great Britain to the United States since the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The twilight of the Cold War mentality witnessed a polarization of views that would lead to a long-term between super powers like the United States and then-Soviet Union. The rise of China, to many who see China in a negative light, might herald a repeat of history as an emerging force poised to take over the scepter of world leadership from the United States. Television news pundits and Washington politicians have repeatedly stressed this viewpoint, particularly in election years. Catalyzed by the considerations of the sluggish American economy heavily hurt by the financial crisis and much-hyped issues like trillions of dollars in treasury bonds held by the Chinese government or the great leap forward of the Chinese military force, the “China Threat” has quickly become one popular thesis of the U.S.–China relations (Gertz, 2001).

Will China’s surge threaten the United States? Should the United States “contain” or “engage” the rising China? Such concerns from the U.S. generally come from its current global status and the seeming incompatibility of ideological values between the two nations (or what Samuel Huntington termed the “clash of civilizations”). The logic of these concerns, though somewhat tenable, might be partial and misleading, at least in the eyes of the current Chinese government. As Wang (2007) indicated: “Race, domestic problems, and partisan powers struggles in the U.S. rather than what China actually did or did not do, were the key driving forces in the fluctuating diplomatic relations between China and the U.S” (p. 27). The primary objects of the Chinese foreign policy since Deng’s era has been more concentrated on “low-profile” diplomatic activities, as Deng stated, “hide the capabilities and bide the time”, which was supposed to accumulate (soft) power without confrontations with America (Friedberg, 2011).

The increasing concerns about its astonishing economic development and military capabilities from the United States alerted the Chinese government for the urgency to ease such tensions and build a supportive international environment for its future ascendancy. In such a circumstance, the Chinese government began to actively sponsor public relations events in order

to counteract negative images, such as displaying a promotional video in New York's Times Square, activating advertising campaign on CNN, and so on. The Confucius Institutes, which are supported by the Chinese government and are aimed at promoting Chinese language and culture, have set up over 100 programs in the United States.

However, as a major composition of the soft power, China's cultural influence and competitiveness are often overshadowed by its rapid economic development. The popular images of China generally still dwell on its traditional culture globally with very limited visibility on its modernity. The holocaust of the Cultural Revolution and high-handed culture regulation by the government are both accountable for such a fact. Furthermore, direct cultural exports, such as the Western expansion of Confucius institutions, could easily strike a nerve in other countries. For example, there has been increasing criticism of Confucius institutions for their over-emphasis on political propaganda; the U.S. government recently clamp downed on visas for the institutions' teachers (Marklein, 2009; Guttenplan, 2012).

The eagerness of Chinese government in changing its perception as a rising power is plain and obvious, however, the natural weakness of its cultural soft power seriously constrains its ability to achieve such a goal. Its trumpeted thesis in response to the concerns and suspicions from other countries like the "Peaceful Rise" and "harmonious world" resonate poorly in the Western world. For example, according to the 2008 CCGA soft power survey, a vast majority (94%) of Americans had never heard about or knew very little about the concept of "harmonious world", which in contrast was heavily invested and promoted by the Chinese government (Page & Xie, 2010).

The development of U.S.–China relation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in large part is due to the mutual perceptions of each other, which is driven and shaped by the concerns of economic co-dependence, cultural integration and political incompatibility. The setup of the new era's U.S.–China relations shared very big distinctions with its early years in Mao's era, particularly due to the acceleration of globalization and the formation of tight mutual economic partnership. However, in dealing with the current puzzle of U.S.–China relation, history lends its best insights dating back to the 1970s when the whole world was shadowed in the anxieties and fragmentation of the Cold War. Nowadays the Iron curtain standing between the Pacific Ocean, which was once haunted by the mutual incomprehension of ideologies, has vanished while the waves of uneasiness on the relocation of capital accumulation has risen. The icebreaking role, as the

forefathers rendered to, once again entrusted to sports. Compared to other traditional diplomatic tools or culture transition channels, sports are more conducive in shaping perception and deliver diplomatic information (Houlihan, 1994). The small ping-pong ball rolled the earth and now the basketball is about to rock the world again.

### **From Ping-Pong Diplomacy to Hoop Diplomacy**

Following the communist takeover of Mainland China from the U.S.-backed Kuomintang government in 1949, the diplomatic relationship between the United States and the newborn People's Republic of China had been cut off for about 20 years. Catalyzed by the ideological split of the Cold War, the frosty bilateral relations between two giants gradually turned to mutual hostility and even led to direct conflicts like the fights during the Korean War. The prevalence of anti-communist ideas represented by McCarthyism in the 1950s portrayed a fearful and threatening image of communist China to the United States (Lautz, 2003). In contrast, under the impressions of continual attempts of isolating the PRC economically and politically, the United States was perceived as an "imperialist" power seeking for global hegemony at the cost of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity (especially on Taiwan issues) within Chinese society (Wang, 2005).

During the Cold War, sports symbolized the delicate changes on its bilateral relations, both sour and sweet. The antagonistic relationship between China and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s can be best reflected on the debates on the National representation of China between the People's Republic China (PRC) and Republic of China (ROC) in the Olympic games. Supported by the United States and its allies as well as the then American-born IOC president Avery Brundage, both PRC and ROC were allowed to participate in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics as representatives of China. In response, People's Republic of China boycotted the Melbourne Olympic games and finally split from the IOC in 1958 (Chan, 1985).

In the late 1960s, the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations and the PRC's increasing demand of global recognition loosened its hostile attitude towards the United States. In seeking for a broader alliance to cope with increasing menaces from the Soviet Union we witnessed a change in the global strategies of the United States on China, as President Nixon had written "taking the long view we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations" (MacMillan, 2000, p. 6). The historical turning point came to the 1971 World Table Tennis Championship in Nagoya, Japan, where the American Ping-Pong team received a

surprising invitation from their Chinese colleagues for a visit to China. The American Ping-Pong team became the first group of American people to be officially invited to China since 1949; Mao Zedong made the decision directly.

Table Tennis is probably the most prestigious and well-known sport in China, much as basketball or baseball in the United States. After China earned its first world championship in 1959, table tennis quickly became the symbol of Chinese sports. Mao declared the triumph the equivalent of a “spiritual nuclear weapon” and it also evolved to be a vehicle of Chinese political propaganda. The American table tennis team accepted the invitation and visited China in the following April. This historical event was popularly named “Ping-Pong diplomacy” and inspired the applications of sports in diplomacy. *Time* magazine described it as “The ping heard round the world”, which marked a thaw in normalization of U.S.-China relations and paved the way for President Nixon’s visit to China in 1972.

China and United States then officially established diplomatic relations in 1979. In the sports field, the IOC restored the legitimate right of the Chinese Olympic Committee in the same year and the two countries both boycotted Moscow Olympic games in 1980. U.S.-China relation entered its first ever honeymoon since 1949 and the favorable rating of China among the United States society even reached over 70 percent in the 1980s (Saad, 2012). During the same time, the wave of neoliberal-like “thought liberation” swept the whole Chinese society particularly among the youth generation due to the Reform and Open-up policy as well as massive influx of Western products and values such as the NBA and Michael Jordan. The sprawl of western ideas finally led to drastic public appeal for political reformation.

The Tiananmen incident in 1989<sup>26</sup>, however, claimed the end of honeymoon in U.S. – China relations. In the late 1990s and early of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the U.S. bombing of China’s Embassy in Belgrade during the War in Kosovo<sup>27</sup> in 1999 and a midair collision between a U.S. spy plane and Chinese air fighter in 2001<sup>28</sup> further undermined the sensitive bilateral relations. Nationalist displays erupted within Chinese society and anti-American sentiments consequently produced rising tides of protests against the U.S. government. However, these two remarkable crises at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century in U.S.-China relations were both ameliorated with peaceful approaches or compromises between two governments, which signaled new changes of this bilateral relation in new era.

9/11 marked another shift of U.S.-China relations, as initial concerns on the common threat from global terrorism brought the two countries to the same frontier. U.S. president George W. Bush deemed China as “an ally” rather than the former “strategic partner” designation (Garrison, 2005). In the post-911 era, U.S.–China relation entered a totally new era, with distinct characteristics compared to its normalization process in the 1970s, particularly in regard to their ever-closer economic ties.

Just like *Time* magazine described Ping Pong as “an apt metaphor for the relations between Washington and Peking with its premium on delicate skill and its onomatopoeic name implying an interplay of initiative and response”<sup>29</sup>, the current U.S.-China relations could be symbolized by the “Made in USA” basketball for its collectivism-individualism dynamics, market-oriented promotional strategies represented by the NBA as well as its nature of “big man’s game.” The employment of basketball as a new diplomatic tool in U.S-China relations has been invented and celebrated by both societies. Yao Ming, as the cultural ambassador bearing the historical missions of strengthening the U.S.-China ties played an instrumental role in the new “Hoop Diplomacy”.

Yao Ming’s arrival in the NBA in the 2002 coincided with a series of historical incidents that lay the foundation for U.S.-China relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The flaring nationalism against “American Imperialism” due to the aircraft collision incident over the South China Sea in 2001 was still evident. 9/11 however brought the two countries to the common front and heated up the bilateral relation in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was also in the same year that China was accepted into the World Trade Organizations (WTO) after 15 years of negotiations, which marked the introduction of a market of 1.3 billion people to the global trading system. As I have examined above, the No.1 draft pick of Yao Ming was tightly linked to the desirable yet untapped Chinese market to the NBA. The celebration of Yao Ming’s arrival as a basketball superstar was equally to be the celebration of a passport to the most populous market in the world by the American corporations.

However, U.S.-China economic relations were to most Americans more a bittersweet rather than palatable taste. According to the 2008 CCGA surveys, a majority (67%) of American people labeled China as an “unfair trader”, which was the only one of six major U.S. trading partners (Canada, China, EU, Japan, Mexico, and India) to be declared as such (Page & Xie, 2010). The truths behind the “unfair traders” are indeed the concerns from the American society

on the much-hyped issues by media and politicians on product quality and safety, trade deficit, protection of Intellectual Property, artificially low Chinese currency rate, trillion dollar debt owned by the Chinese government, or simply as 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney stated rather problematically: “They (China) are stealing our jobs”<sup>30</sup>.

This rhetoric is also found in sport. With respect to Yao Ming, consider the comments made by Dallas Mavericks owner, Mark Cuban, with respect to All Star game fan balloting:

“The majority of NBA Internet traffic is international, and the majority of that international traffic has been trained to vote along party lines. You have to adjust to that. It's an international vote, and a whole lot of communists voted. They always vote the party line” (Feigan, 2007).

Regardless of whether Cuban’s words along with Romney’s statement are tenable, they indeed reflect the ambivalent if not panicked concerns in American society when coping with the wave of globalization, and particularly the role of China, in the global economic structure. At the same time many Americans enjoy or are happy to get inexpensive goods from China, they are also concerned about the equity and safety of those goods and whether the unfair trade practices of China would hurt the jobs and wages of American workers (especially during the recent economic crisis).

Apple, one of Yao Ming’s endorsing companies, is a perfect example to explain such a paradox. As one of the most valuable companies in the world, Apple’s main products like iPhone, iPad or iPod are primarily assembled in China by manufacturers like Foxconn, a manufacturing company headquartered in Taiwan with factories in mainland China. Foxconn’s Shenzhen plant employs approximately 230,000 workers and people might ask: are these 230,000 jobs coming back to United States? (or, even, can they?) Indeed, President Obama had asked the same question to Steve Jobs: Jobs’ answer was simple and unambiguous: “Those jobs are not coming back” (quoted in Duhigg & Bradsher, 2012).

The reasons behind such a statement are clear. According to *Time* magazine, the average manufacturing wage in China is about \$3.10 an hour, compared with \$22.30 in the United States (Powell, 2011). The Foxconn factory has hospitals, police stations, banks, bookstores, super markets, and, pivotally, thousands of engineers and workers. Also, when the U.S. government repeatedly discusses the violation of labor rights among the “sweat factories” in China, their clients like Apple or Nike are selling cheap products back to American consumers. Since China

joined the WTO in 2001, United States has lost 5 millions manufacturing jobs, while the manufacturing sector in China had lost over 46 millions jobs (Chen, 2012). It is unnecessary to argue who benefits more on the other between the United States and China here, however, it is important to see how the new global economic system was structured by these two country and how it would influence the future U.S.-China relations. It is also important to see how a communist country has been involved in the global market primarily built upon capitalist countries and the principles of capitalism.

### **Red Capitalist**

In Yao Ming's autobiography *Yao: A Life In Two Worlds*, Yao acknowledged himself as a "capitalist". Dating back decades ago when Mao's Cultural Revolution swept across China, so called "capitalists" were denounced and imprisoned as the "enemy of people". Much like the shift of celebrities or idols in China from factory workers or soldiers to pop stars or millionaires, the "capitalist", which was once at odds with the communist fashion of egalitarianism, is now accepted and celebrated by most within Chinese society. The modernization of China has long been perceived as the process of capitalization of its economic entity (Guthrie, 1999; Redding & Witt, 2007). The Chinese government calls it "Socialism with Chinese characteristics"<sup>31</sup>.

Since the economic reform in the 1980s, the market economy has become the driving force of capital distribution in China. In 2009, the non-public sector created over 60% of the GDP as well as 70% of job opportunities (Xinhua News Agency, 2009). The growth of the private sector economy further stimulated the privatization of capital and property and produced hundreds of thousands of "capitalists". However, state-owned enterprises still lead the whole national economy, monopolizing the key industries like banks and transport, energy and telecommunication providers. The development of such a private sector economy, as *The Economist* defined, is still "under state's wing" (*Economist*, 3 September 2011). The development of Capitalism in China can be best explained by the prosperity of private business in China, however, the "Chinese characteristics" are more symbolized with the authoritarian of the communist government.

Hailed as China's biggest single export to the United States, Yao Ming ranked No.18 as the highest-paid athlete in the world in 2011 (Badenhausen, 2011). He also registers as a businessman that launched his own Napa Valley wine brand, opened up Yao restaurants, and even purchased the club for which he played in the CBA-Shanghai Sharks. "Boss Yao" was the

new name the public entitled Yao Ming and he never tried to reject it. Yao Ming said: “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 & Bucher, 2004). The “capitalist Yao”, from his perspective, does not have much difference with the “communist Yao” as the distribution of capital was primarily based on his individual work, which was the principle of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”. Yao Ming, except for his unmatched celebrityhood, was like many other private owners in China that enjoyed the explosion of wealth thanks to the economic reform. The emergence and rapid-growth of “capitalists”, on the other hand, reflects the proliferation of “free market” ideas in China. It is generally believed by western scholars and policy makers that the formation of a private sector will lead, through the emergence of a civil society, to political change and ultimately democratization (Dickson, 2003). However, in socialist China where the authoritarian regime still reigns, the subtle relation between state-owned and private sector or from a deeper perspective of nation and individual, still haunted by the Maoist halo.

The ironic contrast between Yao Ming and his compatriot Wang Zhizhi mirrored the ambivalence of nation-individual ties in its transition from Mao’s age to 21<sup>st</sup> century China. The once most hyped and first ever Chinese basketball player played in the NBA, Wang Zhizhi lost his crown in the 2002 summer for his decision to not to return to China to train with the National Team for Asian Games. Wang was dedicated to staying in the NBA and wanted to play in the summer league to improve himself. However, as a lieutenant serving in the prestigious People’s Liberation Army (PLA), Wang’s refusal to honor his national obligation was perceived as a “defection” by his country; he was finally expelled from the National Team. Wang, in this incident, was acting as an adventurous “capitalist” driven by individual interest as he sought to cut off ties to the authoritarian regime.

However, Wang failed, and the former national hero turned to be a soldier gone AWOL. Wang’s case, to some degree, demonstrated to Yao Ming (as well as NBA and other American companies involved with basketball) how to do business with Chinese government. That is, building up a strong relationship (*guanxi*) with the government has become the priority of many foreign companies in China, as this authority could be the decisive factor of doing business in many cases. As a result, the obligation to the National Team was written to the agreement on Yao Ming’s release and a large amount of financial compensation, as I have discussed above,

was shared by his “stakeholders” representing the state. The NBA and the Houston Rockets also realized the existence of such a bottom line and compromised on that. Such free-market capitalism, in the face of “Chinese characteristics”, had to yield to the sovereignty of government and for those who disagreed with it, like Google who rejected censorship on its search engine results, had to quit<sup>32</sup>. Yao Ming never hides his commitment to China, as he said: “Playing for the country is how I’ve been educated since I was young. The ultimate goal of playing basketball is one day I could play for the National team”<sup>33</sup>.

In this vein, Yao Ming ran the risk of jeopardizing his career to play in the Beijing Olympic games and was nominated to the “model worker” by the government in honor of his commitment to nation. Besides “Boss Yao” who articulates the individual ambition of capital accumulation, the return of ideological inheritance from Mao’s era was also presented on Yao Ming, remarkable for his symbolization of nationalism and willingness to sacrifice for country like the once idolized Maoist fighting heroes and blue-collar workers (how Yao called himself). Therefore, Yao Ming’s “model worker” role has been set, as a prototype to clarify the ambivalent tie between socialism and capitalism, state and individual, and collectivism and individualism.

The flexibility of Yao Ming here is beyond race or nationality, while transcending the boarder of ideological distinctiveness and economic status. With his delicately maintained political and economic tie with the authoritarian of central government, I argue that Yao Ming symbolized the existence of “red capitalists” in the privatization process of China. After his retirement, Yao Ming was elected as a member of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) of Shanghai, a position which is generally set to unite the non-party citizens for political consultation and supervision. The path from “Boss Yao” to “Chairman Yao” is simultaneously shared by many other businessmen in China seeking political positions along with the accumulation of capital, which is negotiated between state and individual for mutual demand.

*The New York Times* reported that more than 11 million private entrepreneurs had been persuaded to join the Communist Party by 2007 and they are playing increasingly important roles in the current political system (Lam, 2007). The acquaintance of “red capitalist” in fact reflects the Communist Party’s dedication to maintain the balance between economic reform and party sovereignty. In 2007, the highly debated bill of protecting private property rights for individuals

and companies was overwhelmingly passed by the National People's Congress (NPC), which marked the restoration of private property rights that were abolished since Maoist nationalization of the country's assets. The permission and adoption of internal privatization by the Communist party undermined its once solid foundation based on proletarians represented by peasants and workers and simultaneously directed China to a more Western-like economic regime. The United States, as the exemplar of capitalist triumph, has deeply influenced China in its economic reform process. However, the unique "Chinese characteristics" also determined its different approach in participating in global capital accumulation. The capitalism-prone economic reform will never result in a duplicate of America though it did lay the foundation for U.S.-China relations, as Yao Ming wrote: "In some ways China is becoming more like America, but I don't think they will ever be the same...One that is very new and different to me, and one that is very old and very different now, too" (Yao & Bucher, 2004, p. 1).

### **Forbidden City, the Olympics and Golden Arches**

China might not be another America, but it's arguably participating in the processes of Americanization—externally marked by the vast imports and consumption of American products and culture, and internally embodied in the privatization of property. Yet although the United States generally views itself as the global leader and defender of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism, socialist China is unlikely to embrace such democratic reforms. The proliferation of the "who lost China" theory when the Communist party took over China as Cohen argued, was actually the collapse of a "cherished image of America's liberal dream of China" (Cohen, 2003, p.35). At the same time, the historical lesson from the Tiananmen incident and the collapse of Soviet Union alarmed the communist party to the fatality of importing culture and ideology to the stability of its authoritarianism. Much like the invisible tie connected to the surging private sector in China, in terms of to what degree of open-up, the regime still reigns. Chinese government has been widely criticized for its over-censorship of the Internet, media, and culture.

The phantom of ideological priority and party prestige still haunt in the new Forbidden City of 21<sup>st</sup> China, which was embodied in the suspicions and resistance as the attitudes of Chinese government towards the influx of Western culture. Chinese President Hu Jintao used to warn: "Hostile international powers are strengthening their efforts to Westernize and divide us. We must be aware of the seriousness and complexity of the struggles and take powerful

measures to prevent and deal with them” (Wong, 2012). As one of the leading force of American culture in China, the NBA was also affected by the “powerful measures”. In seeking for “language purity”, the English acronym of the NBA was banned on the TV, replaced by the 10 characters of Chinese translation *Mei Guo Nan Zi Zhi Ye Lan Qiu Lian Sai* (National Basketball Association, Literally).

With the growth of economic power, the Chinese government is dedicated to boost its “soft power”, like I have discussed with the promotion of Confucius Institutes globally to increase its cultural influence abroad. To its domestic policy of coping with foreign culture, the government has turned to a more conservative approach. At the same time, Chinese government is using its authoritarian power to regulate or restrict the relations between individuals and state like the strict restrictions on Athletes’ national obligation and emigration to compete overseas. This inequity will remain for the foreseeable future as political reform in China always lagged behind its economic growth. The lagging political reform, however, has become the restriction for China’s further development as well as the reconstruction of global image. The Chinese government has realized this point as Premier Wen Jiabao stated: “Without a successful political reform, it’s impossible for China to fully institute economic reform and the gains we have made in these areas may be lost” (Tatlow, 2012). To the U.S.-China relations, particularly the American side, which advocates democratic ideas, this imbalance is primarily where the “unfair” comes from. The hesitations and ambivalence of Communist authoritarianism when embracing the external culture contrasts sharply to its ambition getting involved in the globalized economy and rebalance of geopolitics. It also presents a real China nowadays to the world—a new and progressive economy; an old and wandering sovereignty.

The more pragmatic China has never given up its historical tradition of symbolism. The Beijing Olympic games is widely perceived as the symbolization of state power and legitimization of communist regime. Yao Ming was honored as the flag bearer for the host country, symbolized with his height and global celebrityhood to deliver a strong and open China to the world. The spectacular opening ceremony, costly stadiums as well as the elaborately decorated Beijing city, all symbolized China’s dedication to present a new face to the world. The slogan of the Beijing Olympics “One World One Dream” further symbolized the ideas of “Harmonious World” self-promoted by Chinese government in seeking for more temperate responses for its rise.

At the same time, the Beijing Olympic games was expected by the communist government to legitimate its current regime to show the great progress and success of the socialism China, as Susan Brownell stated, “a clearly legitimized winner” (Brownell, 2008, p. 94). Except for the symbolism, the performance of host in this game was also expected to identify China as a strong and prosperous country (Cha, 2009). In Beijing Olympic games, China topped the gold-medals table for its first ever time over the United States and Soviet Union/Russia. The success of the “Olympic Glory Winning Plan” or the so-called “gold-medal plan” since the 1980s greatly stimulated the proliferation of nationalism in China, which constituted another exemplar of delicate employment of sports for political demands. The symbolism of state power in sports, however, can be metaphorically understood as the ambition of economic expansion and aggression of reconstructing the current global system.

In the era of Ping Pong diplomacy, the athletes were expected to be peaceful ambassadors playing under the banner of “Friendship First, Competition Second” and “emphasized friendship and camaraderie in their sports exchanges with other countries, playing down the competitive angle” (Xu, 2008, p. 49). Chinese players even lost games on purpose to show goodwill in their exhibition game with American table tennis players. However, in the age of “Hoop Diplomacy”, when Yao was celebrated as a “Mr. Goodman” on the NBA court, a friendly game in 2011 between Georgetown University and Chinese Army team Bayi Rockets (where Wang Zhizhi played) could lead to chair-heaving brawl (Larmer, 2011). The shift from “Ping Pong Diplomacy” to “Hoop Diplomacy” not only marks how capitalism gradually triumphed the ideology, it also symbolizes the rebalance of power between these two giants as well as the worry of potential confronts.

In Thomas L. Friedman’s book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, he argued: “No two countries that both had McDonald’s had fought a war against each other since each got its McDonald’s” (Friedman, 1999, p. 248). This statement was developed as the “Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention”. Friedman believed that when a nation had a big enough middle-class to support a McDonald’s network, it was unlikely to fight a war with another McDonald’s country, as the countries were economically tethered and had too much at stake to go to war. McDonald’s has opened over 1,100 stores in its 20-year history in Mainland China. Meanwhile, China has a middle-class of more than 300 million people, which is almost the total population of the United States (Luhby, 2012). According to the “Golden Arches Theory of Conflict

Prevention”, the possibility of potential conflict between the United State and China is next to none.

Friedman then advanced this theory to the “Dell Theory of Conflict Prevention” in his book *The World is Flat*. In this book, Friedman stated: “No two countries that are both part of a major global supply chain, like Dell’s, will ever fight a war against each other as long as they are both part of the same global supply chain” (Friedman, 2005, p. 421). This theory might be more applicable to the current U.S.-China relations in the context of the reforming global economic system. The so-called “World’s Factory”, China is undoubtedly the most important supplier in the current global supply chain. The United States, however, is acting more to be the consumption ends as the largest importer while greatly invested on the supply chains in China like Apple. Against such a backdrop, I argue the de facto codependent relationship between the U.S. and China in facing of potential conflicts, would more likely to result in compromises between two countries, such as the peaceful approach of solving the aircraft collision crisis or the agreement on Yao Ming’s National Team obligation between the NBA and the CBA (or, more recently, the negotiated release of political activist Chen Guangcheng to the United States). However, instead of head-on fights, the conflicts between United States and China are seemly to occur more frequently on the economic realm. In fact, the intensified economic clash has emerged, remarkable for the heated issues of anti-dumping lawsuits, currency exchange rate and trade deficit. No matter if it is “Golden Arches Theory”, “Dell Theory”, or “Apple theory”, the codependent U.S.-China relations are unlikely to replicate darkness of the Cold War for their deepening economic interaction, too much stake to risk going to war on each side and positively the further progress of political reforms in China.

Looking back, it is interesting to see that U.S.-China relations since Yao Ming’s arrival in the NBA has maintained a sustainable improvement, or at least avoiding the occasionally direct confrontations on National Security. Yao Ming’s cultural ambassador role also facilitated the cultural exchange and reconsideration of misperceptions between two societies. The current U.S.-China relations are significantly distinct from the frigid Soviet Union–United States relations during the Cold War, and most remarkable for intimate economic cooperation. Simultaneously, the proliferation of a market economy and the ongoing privatization process in China make these two countries look more like each other and push off the political reform within the communist regime. The current conflicts of the two countries are primarily centered

on the competitions for the triumph of capital accumulation. The once leading character between U.S.-China relations - the difference between socialism and capitalism has gradually vanished, as concerns of economics has ultimately triumphed over the ideologies as the driving forces of the U.S.-China relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

As one of millions of Chinese youth inspired by Yao Ming to become a basketball fan and a fan of the NBA, I have tried in this thesis to add critical insight into the historical context in which Yao Ming emerged on the global scene, both culturally and politically. Yao Ming's adventure in the NBA might be one of the biggest stories in the history of basketball as well as an impressive mark in the U.S.-China relations. As a global sports icon and cultural signifier in the age of globalization, Yao Ming's unique flexibility bestowed upon him the capacity of transcending the boundaries of nation-state, race and different cultural spheres. He was celebrated and admired as "Asia's son" by both his billion compatriots in China and by Asian Americans. On one side, Yao Ming was expected and invested as a cultural ambassador carrying the nation's obligation to deliver a new and strong China to the world.

In this thesis I reviewed the shift from "small balls" to "big balls" in the history of PRC's sports development and argued this transition process was tightly connected with the growth of national power. On the other side, Yao Ming took up the role as a stereotype breaker representing the "model minority" in the American society with his extraordinary personality and physical ability. The shared celebrityhood of Yao Ming among Asian American groups also signals the formation and self-awareness of a Pan-ethnic Asian American community. I further examined that how Yao Ming was perceived in American society as an "honorable white" and "American idol" competing in the African American-dominated NBA. I argued that Yao Ming was a perfect exemplar of Aihwa Ong's "flexible citizenship" that proficiently accumulated global capital with the ability to negotiate in the transition of global-local relations (Ong, 1999). The flexibility of Yao Ming also facilitated his marketability as an international pitchman, which was distinct from Michael Jordan with his unique "exoticness" character as a rare Asian/Chinese sports figure. However, the shared and common human attributes and mobility trespassing race and culture on both Michael Jordan and Yao Ming signaled the ultimate requirements to the global sports celebrity in the age of globalization, as Denzin (2001) argued: "culture difference disappear, to be replaced by a universal, circumspect human nature that knows its place in the order of things" (p, 11).

Indeed, Denzin's (2001) argument also mirrored the rooted free-market ideas in the global capitalism that pursuing the free capital flows without the intervention of nation-states. U.S.-China relations, for its complexity resulted from history and political distinctiveness was simultaneously developed in such a circumstance. Yao Ming's symbolism of cultural and political significance went far beyond the basketball court. He symbolized the rising China as an emerging super power with prestigious pride of its thousand-year civilization while dedicated to wipe out the humiliation in modern history as "The sick man of East Asia". At the same time, the stunning economic growth of China as well as its communist authoritarian deepens the concerns in the U.S, as a potential challenger of its global hegemony. The Chinese government hoped Yao Ming could help reverse the misperception in a way of capturing the American society, as Wang (2007) indicated:

Perception and treatment of the Chinese in the U.S. is a decisive factor in shaping U.S. relations with China just as U.S.-China relations exert a profound impact on the well being of the Chinese in the U.S. In other words, race and race relations play a critical role in determining domestic racial policies toward the Chinese minority and foreign policies toward China. (p. 11)

The critical role of race in the U.S.-China relations could further be analyzed on the 2012 global sensation of Chinese American NBA player Jeremy Lin, whose celebrity sat at the intersection of United States, China, Taiwan and pan-ethnic Asian American community.

This thesis also concludes that the historical shift from "Ping-Pong diplomacy" to "Hoop Diplomacy" signals that economic issues have triumphed ideology as the driving force of U.S.-China relations. Transnational Corporations (TNC) like the NBA are playing an increasing role in the maintenance of global capital system as well as cultural products shaping social development. The popularity of the NBA in China symbolizes the proliferation of capitalist ideas in the socialism China remarkable for the celebration of commercialism and individualism. Yao Ming's case inspired another innovative approach of exploiting the potential market by employing global-local celebrities. The codependent economic relations between United States and China is unlikely to lead to another Cold War between these two super powers while the economic conflicts were expected to keep growing in the future.

The current and future economic and political reform in China since its open-door policy in the 1980s is equally noticeable. The shift of celebrities in China from government promoted

“socialist constructors” to market selected pop stars or millionaires marks the takeover of capital interest in the current Chinese social life. However, the national obligation on the Chinese athletes with their subtle tie between individual and state further reveals the specificity of the “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”, as the Communist Party’s authoritarian is still regulating and affecting the capital and labor flow both internally and externally. With the growth of its economy and deepening of an open-door policy, this ambivalence between state and individuals has become one of the primary concerns to the Chinese government and it also has significant influence to the future U.S.-China relations.

The transition of this ambivalent tie has been and would be signaled by the development of labor right of Chinese athletes. In 2009, the once-denounced Wang Zhizhi joined the celebration parade for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of People’s Republic of China and passed Tiananmen Square as a representative of Chinese athletes after he apologized and returned to the nation. Yao Ming is now proficiently shuffling through “Boss Yao” and “Chairman Yao”. However, the “exceptions”, those who decide to reject any tie with the nation like the tennis player Li Na<sup>34</sup>, are also celebrated by the public nowadays.

Privatization in China stimulates the proliferation of individualism. Nationalism, on the other hand, is still frequently employed by the government to legitimate its regime. The treatment and celebration of Yao Ming in American society, associated with his racial and cultural significance, also signaled the new changes of U.S.-China relations in the context of accelerating globalization. That is, how capitalism has become the driving force instead of the once dominant ideological difference.

It is too soon to tell how China will deal with such dilemmas and how future U.S.-China relations will be like. However, through the analysis on the realism and symbolism of Yao Ming, we may have a better understanding on the complexity of the old and new China as well as the critical bilateral relations between China and the United States. The gentle giant’s lucrative legacy will also be remembered by the two countries forever.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Lei Feng was a soldier of the People's Liberation Army in the People's Republic of China. After his death, Lei Feng was characterized as a selfless and modest person who was devoted to the Communist Party, Chairman Mao Zedong, and the people of China.
2. Wang Jinxi was born into a poor peasant family. He then became one of the first generation of drilling workers in the new China. Wang was honored as a National Model Worker in 1959 and promoted by the government as model of all workers in China.
3. Rong Guotuan won the first ever world championship representing the People's Republic of China at the 1959 World Table Tennis Championships in Dortmund.
4. Deng Lijun, also known as Teresa Teng, one of the most popular and influential pop singers from Taiwan active in the 1970s and 1980s.
5. See, for example. Hale, M. (2007). Superficial Friends: A Content Analysis of Nonprofit and Philanthropy Coverage in Nine Major Newspapers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 36(3), 465-486.
6. News article were retrieved from academic database and no page number was included.
7. Cultural Revolution, also known as The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a ten-year political campaign - a social experiment aimed at rekindling revolutionary fervor and purifying the party. Mao Zedong and his wife, Jiang Qing, directed popular anger against other members of the party leadership. While others were removed from office, Mao was named supreme commander of the nation and army. Ideological cleansing began with attacks by young Red Guards on so-called "intellectuals" to remove "bourgeois" influences. Millions were forced into manual labor, and tens of thousands were executed. The result was massive civil unrest, and the army was sent in to control student disorder. At the 1977 11th Party Congress, the Cultural Revolution was declared officially to have ended with the arrest of the Gang of Four.
8. Qing Dynasty (1644 to 1912), also known as Manchu Dynasty, was the last imperial dynasty of China. It was preceded by the Ming Dynasty and followed by the Republic of China. In the late years of the Qing Dynasty, the empire faced intensified social conflicts and invading wars. Uprisings led by Sun Yat-sen overthrew the Qing Dynasty and set up the Republic of China.
9. The Four Great Inventions are the inventions that are celebrated in Chinese culture for their historical significance and serve as symbols of China's advanced science and technology. The Four Great Inventions are: Compass, Gunpowder, Papermaking, and Printing.
10. Muscular Christianity is a term for a movement during the Victorian era which stressed the need for energetic Christian activism in combination with an ideal of vigorous

masculinity. It's the practice and opinion of those Christians who believe that it is a part of religious duty to maintain a vigorous condition of the body, and who therefore approve of athletic sports and exercises as conducive to good health, good morals, and right feelings in religious matters.

11. Hundred's Day's Reform (1898), was an imperial attempt at renovating the Chinese state and social system. It occurred after the Chinese defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the ensuing rush for concessions in China on the part of Western imperialist powers. It urged political reforms on Western-style industrialization without the abandonment of China's cultural heritage.
12. Middle Kingdom, "China" in Mandarin Chinese literally. In the past, Chinese believed that China was the centre of the world.
13. Chinese Civil War, (1927 to 1950), was a civil war fought between the Kuomintang (KMT), the governing party of the Republic of China, and the Communist Party of China (CPC), for the control of China. The war was essentially ended with the take over of the mainland by the Communist Party of China (CPC).
14. The modern physical education in China is generally believed to be introduced by Western Christian missionaries like Charles H. McCloy and organizations such as the YMCA since the late 19th century. The theory of Muscular Christianity was also introduced and inspired Chinese people the importance of physical constitution in seeking for national independence. In Mao Zedong's thesis in 1917 *luntiyuzhiyanjiu* (The study of Physical Education), he indicated that the importance of physical education was not only about building up stronger bodies, but also on civilizing the people with its spirit in contribution to the revolution and national defense. Mao's ideas were very similar with the then popular "Muscular Christianity" theories promoted by the Christianity missionaries and it further became one of the guiding concepts after the foundation of People's Republic of China.
15. Yi Jianlian was selected by the Milwaukee Bucks as the sixth overall pick in 2007 NBA Draft. He has also played in the NBA for the New Jersey Nets and Washington Wizards and Dallas Mavricks.
16. See. "A History Bursting with Telling: Asian Americans in Washington State: a Curriculum Project for the History of the Pacific Northwest in Washington State Schools" developed by Matthew Klinger and Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, University of Washington Department of History.  
<http://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/Classroom%20Materials/Curriculum%20Packets/Asian%20Americans/Asian%20American%20Main.html>
17. In 1924 Congress passed a discriminatory immigration law that restricted the immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans and practically excluded Asians and other nonwhites from entry into the United States. This act instituted admission quotas by using the 1890 census to determine the population of a particular nationality group; the

government then only allowed 2 percent of that population into the nation. In addition, the act completely barred immigration for all those whom the Supreme Court prohibited from obtaining U.S. citizenship, specifically Asians. The National Origins Act drastically lowered the annual quota of immigration, from 358,000 to 164,000. Congress abolished the national origins quota system in the 1960s.

18. Wang Zhizhi is the first Chinese basketball player selected with 36<sup>th</sup> overall pick by the Dallas Mavericks. Wang played in the prestigious Army team Bayi Rockets before his departure to the NBA. In 2002 summer, Wang refused to return for training with the Chinese National Team and chose to train in the United States. One article by Jodie Valade on *The Dallas Morning News* hinted that Wang might “defect” to the United States and he was finally dismissed from the National Team. In 2006, Wang rejoined the Chinese National Team.
19. Peaceful rise was widely used by the Chinese government when describing the nation’s foreign policy approach in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It seeks to characterize China as a responsible world leader. The Chinese premier Wen Jiabao put forward the thesis of "China's peaceful rise" in his speech to a Harvard University audience in December 2003. Under this thesis, there are several points: First, China's development depends upon and in return will contribute to the world peace; second, China will resort to peaceful means for development; third, China's development will rely more on its own resources and market; fourth, China is prepared for a long-term process of hard work, even several generations, for economic prosperity. Finally, even as China has achieved its economic development, it will not seek hegemony in the world or come out as a threat to any country.
20. The United States has been using “soft power” for a long time by virtue of its prosperity in culture and economy. For example, the Fulbright Program and Peace Corps are both considered as the applications of “soft power” and playing important role in maintaining the hegemony of the United States (Wang, 2011). With the development of the globalization, the content of “soft power” nowadays are no longer limited in the culture or education or simply conducted by the government, it has been expanded to broader ranges including media, commerce, popular culture and sports.
21. Mengke Bateer is a Chinese basketball player of Mongolia minority group. From 2002-2004, he played in the NBA for the Denver Nuggets, San Antonio Spurs and Toronto Raptors.
22. The term Internet meme is used to describe a concept that spreads via the Internet. The term is a reference to the concept of memes, although the latter concept refers to a much broader category of cultural information. The earliest known usage of the word meme is in the book *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins published in 1976.
23. Team Yao is Yao Ming’s management team. The team consisted of Yao’s negotiator, Erik Zhang, a MBA graduate from the University of Chicago; his NBA agent, Bill Duffy, founder of the BDA Sports Management; his Chinese agent, Lu Hao; University of

Chicago economics professor John Huizinga; and the vice president for marketing at BDA Sports Management, Bill Sanders.

24. According to IMF's forecast based on "purchasing power parities", China's GDP will rise from \$11.2 trillion in 2011 to \$19 trillion in 2016, while the US' economy will increase from \$15.2 trillion to \$18.8 trillion.
25. According to World Bank, the index of 2010 GDP per capita in China was US\$4,428; the United States was US\$47,153. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>
26. In 1989, Chinese government forcibly suppressed the public demonstration for political reformation on Tiananmen Square and other Chinese cities. The crackdown sharply diminished the image of Chinese government within the Western world. The U.S. government then imposed a series of sanctions against China and Chinese government accused the U.S. government for interference of internal affairs and imposition of its notions of human rights to other countries.
27. On May 7, 1999, during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (Operation Allied Force), five US JDAM bombs hit the People's Republic of China embassy in the Belgrade district of New Belgrade, killing three Chinese reporters and outraging the Chinese public. President Bill Clinton later apologized for the bombing, stating it was accidental. Central Intelligence Agency director George Tenet testified before a congressional committee that the bombing was the only one in the campaign organized and directed by his agency. The Chinese government maintains that the bombing was a deliberate act and has always regarded the entire Kosovo operation as an illegal war by NATO.
28. On April 1, 2001, a mid-air collision between a United States Navy EP-3E ARIES II signals intelligence aircraft and a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) J-8II interceptor fighter jet resulted in an international dispute between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China, called the Hainan Island incident. The EP-3 was operating about 70 miles (110 km) away from the PRC island province of Hainan, and about 100 miles (160 km) away from the Chinese military installation in the Paracel Islands, when it was intercepted by two J-8 fighters. A collision between the EP-3 and one of the J-8s caused the death of a PRC pilot, while the EP-3 was forced to make an emergency landing on Hainan. The 24 crew members were detained and interrogated by the Chinese authorities until a statement was delivered by United States government regarding the incident. The exact phrasing of this document was intentionally ambiguous and allowed both countries to save face while simultaneously defusing a potentially volatile situation between militarily strong regional states.
29. See cover story of *Time* on April 26, 1971.
30. Quoted from Mitt Romney's GOP primary debate on Foreign Policy in Spartanburg, South Carolina on November 12, 2011.

31. Socialism with Chinese characteristics is something that combines the basic principles of scientific socialism with the facts of building socialism unique to China. Socialism is the common rule and essential feature of the practice, while Chinese characteristics are what the basic principles of socialism really embody in China. On its economic fronts, China sticks to a multi-ownership-oriented basic market economic system, with the public ownership in the dominance. On its political fronts, China upholds a system of the People's Congress, a system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation, and a system of regional ethnic autonomy. And in its cultural fields, China keeps its socialist value system at the core of social trends, while respecting differences and expanding common grounds.
32. In Jan 2010, Goolge announced that they were no longer willing to censor searches in China and threatened to pull out completely if necessary. From March 2010, Google began to redirect all search queries from Google.cn to Google.com.hk. (Google Hong Kong), thereby bypassing Chinese regulators and allowing uncensored Simplified Chinese search results.
33. Quoted from Yao Ming's interview on the CCTV *Face to Face: Yao Ming* (May, 2003).
34. Li Na is currently the top Chinese tennis player who won the Grand Slam in 2011 French Open. She was trained in the Chinese state-run sports system and then quit Chinese tennis team and started her own team. Li Na is famous for her distinctive character compared to other Chinese athletes. She was criticized by the state sports bureau when she commented: "I'm not here for the country, I just play my tennis" during the 2012 Indian Wells Masters while received overwhelming support from the public. After quitting the national team, it is reportedly that Li Na still has to share her 8-12% winnings to the government. Compared to Yao Ming, Li Na is more symbolized for her individualism. She also receives general supports from the public on the issue of quitting from the state administration while unlike Wang Zhizhi's case 10 years ago.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Pu Haozhou was born in Sichuan, China in 1989. He earned his bachelor's degree of Management of Sport Industry from Beijing Sport University. He then traveled to the United States and is currently completing his master's degree of Sport Management in the Florida State University. Pu is dedicated to sports and used to be an amateur volleyball athlete at the college level. He also directed the volleyball association in the Beijing Sport University for two years and worked in the Beijing Olympic Games, IMG Golf and Florida State University Men's Basketball team. He has published two articles in academic journals and several conference papers and will continue on his doctoral degree in the Florida State University.

“Ping-Pong Diplomacy” is the story of how the Chinese used table tennis as the a tool for Communist propaganda. But kids in China today don’t swat Ping-Pong balls – they shoot hoops. They don’t wear Red Guard scarves but Houston Rockets jerseys. They don’t glorify Mao Zedong the revolutionary but Yao Ming the basketball player. Table tennis is now a “living fossil,” a sport “your dad plays.” So who’s winning after all? Steven V. Roberts teaches journalism and politics at George Washington University and is writing a book about immigrant athletes. PING-PONG DIPLOMACY. The Secret History Behind the Game That Changed the World. By Nicholas Griffin. Scribner. 336 pp. \$26. Keywords: ping-pong diplomacy; sports diplomacy; China-USA relations; interna- tional relations; politics and sport. Introduction. The aim of the paper is to investigate the ping-pong diplomacy between the Unites. States and China, one of the best known cases of sports diplomacy, within which. a sports exchange in table-tennis between national teams of both countries was es- 1 The project has been financed by National Science Centre (Poland), grant no. 2015/19/D/. HS5/00513. Towards the USSR, the concept of “three worlds” and the consequences of cultural. revolution, the change of the internal policy in the USA and its consequences in. foreign policy towards China and other Eastern Asian states. In the years since Mao Zedong’s communist revolution in 1949, relations between the People’s Republic of China and the United States had been clouded by Cold War propaganda, trade embargos and diplomatic silence. The two superpowers had met on the battlefield during the Korean War, but no official American delegation had set foot in the People’s Republic in over 20 years. By 1971, however, both nations were looking to open a dialogue with one another. China’s alliance with the Soviet Union had soured and produced a series of bloody border clashes, and Chairman Mao believed ties with the Americ