"I Believe You Can Fly": Basketball Culture in Postsocialist China

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My greatest desire in this life is to truly make a real dunk, and to experience just once the feeling of being "the flier" [feiren, i.e., Michael Jordan]... I am 1.75 meters [5'9"] tall, my arms spanning 1.77 meters [5'10"]... I am not blessed with the best physical qualifications. Please suggest some training program for me.

—Wang Qiang1

During the summer of 1998, more than half a million basketball fans all over China purchased copies of the magazine Lanqiu (Basketball), published by the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA), the Chinese official state basketball bureaucracy.2 The magazine's flashy covers promised details on such subjects as "Can Utah Strum Some 'Jazz' and Again Become an NBA Power?" "An Illuminating Record of the PLA [People's Liberation Army] Capturing the Men's Championship," "The CBA's Flaws and Future Hopes," and "Conversations with the Flier [Jordan]."3 Thus drawn in, fans gladly paid ¥4.20 for the forty-eight-page issues full of photos and news of basketball leagues—professional and amateur, men's and women's, Chinese and international.

As readers eagerly opened the magazine to get to the heart of these issues, they saw on the front inside cover a tempting advertisement for Beijing-based Handsun Footwear, which teased in bold print, "Do you dream of slam-dunking [a basketball]? Maybe you could."4 What Handsun offered, for ¥623 (plus ¥30 shipping and handling, for a total of some U.S.$80), was a "revolutionary" new training shoe that would strengthen the wearer's calf muscles so dramatically that he would be able "to casually do things on the basketball court that before could only flash across your mind." This company prepared to fulfill the dreams of millions of Chinese young people—for a lower price than even a new pair of
Nike Air Jordans and their English-language corporate slogan that said it all: “I believe you can fly.”

This Handsun slogan was of course a play on R. Kelly’s hit theme song, “I Believe I Can Fly,” from the Michael Jordan-Warner Brothers film Space Jam, widely screened in China in the summer of 1997. Any young Chinese basketball fan who had seen this film or had heard the omnipresent theme music played on CCTV basketball highlight shows would surely be able to connect personal desires for achievement, fame, and dunking a basketball with the charisma, superhuman basketball skills, and globalized commercial force that are Michael Jordan.

Yet Handsun’s tweaking of Kelly was significant in other ways as well. Kelly’s anthem invited the properly inspired listener to imagine himself or herself succeeding in life in the smooth, seemingly effortless way in which Jordan dominated the basketball court. Handsun’s “I believe you can fly,” however, was a direct challenge to the reader. (Much like the state’s unofficial new mantra, “I believe you can find a job and health care”?) Here “flying” was linked directly to the purchase of these Y653 training shoes, and the challenge, the dare even, that the truly committed basketball player/consumer would spare no expense to achieve these Jordanesque dreams. Where their parents heeded Deng Xiaoping’s summons to get rich in the 1980s, youth all over China are now answering this updated clarion call—the call of globalized desire, capitalism, and modernity, the call that teaches us all to believe that we too can fly.

GLOBALIZED CHINESE BASKETBALL

Handsun Footwear’s “revolutionary” training shoe and savvy advertising campaign represent much that is fascinating about youth basketball culture in the postsocialist PRC. The aspects of basketball culture mentioned above—the commercialized basketball media, broad exposure to American professional basketball, the availability of specialized training equipment and other paraphernalia for the player and avid fan—make this realm more than just sport, fitness, sportsmanship, or competition. Basketball culture has become an important mode of understanding and negotiating Chinese modernity, desires, and this fin-de-siècle postsocialist moment.

Today’s Chinese basketball culture reflects the language of globalization. Frederic Jameson’s recent essay on globalization is quite useful here. On its best days, the globalization NBA (National Basketball Association) culture can bring the “tolerant contact” between peoples and the “immense cultural pluralism” that Jameson cites. And the other side of this physical culture—the destruction of “traditional cultural systems, which extend to the way people live in their bodies and use language”—is just as indisputably a cornerstone of basketball culture.

Yet a model of globalization like Jameson’s ignores the often more complicated and subtle process by which recipients of these global cultures can use them to understand or shape their identities and communities. If world basketball culture indeed destroys many indigenous cultural norms (and it is a safe bet, just for starters, that notions of body, leisure, race, class, gender, and education are just several among many that it substantially impacts wherever it lands), it is also true that this culture is just as subject to corruption, transformation, and displacement by its recipients as they are by it. This is the purpose of this chapter—to understand how it is agents like Wang Qiang, desiring and yearning to dunk a basketball, much more than Michael Jordan or David Stern, who make this culture a truly globalizing one.

Recent studies of other transnational, or “globalizing,” cultures offer some strategies for understanding this aspect of local processing of these forms of knowledge, behavior, and discipline. James Watson has tried to challenge the stereotype of a brutally hegemonic “McDonaldization” of East Asia, instead seeing the Golden Arches as providing “local” cuisine that holds and creates local significances anywhere and everywhere it is served up. Avid Raz has written on Tokyo Disneyland, the institution feared in Japan as a cultural “black ship,” the very “shock troops of American capitalism.” The globalizing culture that Watson calls “multilocial,” Raz describes with his own term “glocalization,” coined to describe the tension between global cultural production and local acquisition. He suggests that a newer, more sophisticated model is necessary to clearly show “the more colorful and playful themes characterizing the (usually ingenious) local practices of consumption.”

John Van Maanen uses another violent metaphor to describe Tokyo Disneyland: “a cultural bomb dropped on perfect strangers.” He also urges the researcher to investigate how “the local core may even be recharged, reinvigorated” by contact with these commercialized word cultures. Eric Zolov, in his work on rock and roll music in Mexico, has recently asked important questions about capitalism and its ability to create subversive, if still wholly commodified, popular memories out of such globalizing cultures as American rock music.

The globalized NBA/basketball culture as received in urban China today, I would argue, is certainly a presence that disrupts and corrupts previous norms and assumptions. At the same time, once on the ground in China, basketball culture has quickly become subject to redefinition and reconstitution at the hands of its Chinese recipients and practitioners. This is the problem in which I am most interested: How has basketball culture become an instrument for questioning, testing, and working out notions about China and modernity in the postsocialist age?

This research began as an investigation of Chinese men’s professional basketball—the CBA and its vanquished competitor league, the Chinese New Basketball Alliance (CNBA). The CBA professional league, inaugurated in 1995, is funded totally by the International Marketing Group and its sponsors, among them Hilton Tobacco, Nike, and Motorola. Each of the league’s twelve teams...
is managed by the appropriate provincial or municipal sports commission. These are the same bureaucratic units (under the State Sports Commission) that managed the teams during the forty-plus previous years of socialist-style organization, which consisted of yearlong training for a single, almost annual national tournament. The difference in the postsocialist "professional" age is the source of team funding for salaries and training expenses—now local corporations that grace the team name with their corporate moniker, for example, the Shanghai Oriental Sharks or the Zhejiang Wanna Cyclone. The teams are concentrated almost exclusively along the coastal provinces; the PLA Rockets (previously based in Xi'an and Chongqing, now in Ningbo) and the Sichuan Blue Sword Beer Pandas are the only squads from west of Guangzhou or Beijing that have joined the league.

Upon arriving in Beijing in July 1998, I learned that the CBA hardly occupies the center of the Chinese basketball universe. Fan support around the league is spotty—ranging from the fanatic (the Guangdong boom city Dongguan and its South China Hongyuan Tigers) to the enthusiastic (Hangzhou, home of the Cyclone) to the fantastically apathetic (Beijing and its two teams, the Capital Steel Ducks and Beijing Vanguard Olympian). In fact, in China's capital, CBA action ranks a distant third behind the two leading sources of basketball culture production—the NBA and the Japanese animation series Slam Dunk (Guanlan gaoshou), both widely televised in Chinese cities. Given such a state of affairs, the focus of this research quickly evolved into a new project—an attempt to understand the larger cultural meanings of the Chinese leagues and of basketball culture as a whole.

While the Chinese Basketball Association is still trying to define and situate itself as a major cultural and commercial force, the larger globalizing basketball culture is already an important part of youth culture in China today. This game, which has become a way of life for so many Chinese youth, has come to represent a significant and meaningful way of interrogating their society and politics, as well as their role in a new globalizing China. Training shoes and dunking a basketball are hardly the only concerns of this realm. Modernity, global markets, consumption, individualism, gender, class, race, corruption, mobility, inequity, nationalism—all these crucial concepts become fair game in virtually any discussion of this new world sport.

**BACKGROUND**

The history of basketball in China situates the game in a liminal space between essentialized dichotomies of the West and China, of capitalist and socialist, of imperialist and revolutionary. It always has been impossible to characterize basketball as simply a legacy of Western capitalist cultural imperialism, or of Chinese revolutionary nationalism. Basketball was brought to China by YMCA instructors in Tianjin, depending on whose account one believes, sometime between 1895 and 1898. By the 1920s the game had taken hold in urban centers and school physical education curricula, and in 1935 it was voted (along with soccer) as China's "national pastime" (guomin yóuxí). Basketball teams, made up mostly of college stars, were among the most successful representatives of the Chinese Olympic delegations of 1936 and 1948.

If basketball was a national pastime of Old China, introduced by the hated and hegemonic American imperialists, this did not damage the game's utility in the new PRC state; until the soccer boom of the 1990s, basketball was clearly the most popular sport, at elite and popular levels, in China. The PRC's international sports debut was in the basketball competition at the Tenth World University Summer Games held in Budapest in August 1949 (several weeks before the People's Republic was actually inaugurated). National men's and women's championships were established in 1951 and 1952 and, except for several years during the Great Leap Forward famine and the Cultural Revolution, have been held annually ever since. Even in periods of great political radicalism, the game's revolutionary credentials were unquestionably red. Xie Jin's 1957 film Woman Basketball Player No. 5 showed how hardworking players and coaches transformed the game, once defiled by Guomindang-era capitalism and corruption, into a symbol of Communist sportsmanship and will. In 1962 New Sport magazine published pictures of a Beijing nightsoil carriers' work unit engaged in a healthy basketball game with high school students, another revolutionary alliance unthinkable in Old China. And Liang Heng, in his memoir Son of the Revolution, discusses the great emphasis placed on, and the great amount of material and bureaucratic resources devoted to, basketball teams from factory through provincial levels even during the Cultural Revolution.

In the 1970s, Chinese basketball culture was defined by its military and rural contexts, its "popular" quality by the Maoist or any other definition. By the 1990s, however, the domination of this culture by the globalizing commercial forces of the NBA and Nike had displaced the center of the Chinese basketball world. If the sport is still universally popular in China, urban sporting goods and department stores are clearly seen as a more crucial arena than the crowded dirt courts of the inland provinces. The state sports bureaucracy supports fully the infusion of Chinese basketball with Jordan's soaring presence; long gone are the days when the Party might have labeled Jordan and his NBA a cultural weapon imperializing the minds of the people, like the eastern bloc's understanding of Elvis Presley in the 1950s. And the loyalty dance performed by Chairman Mao by youth all over China now has been replaced by a different choreography—one of stutter steps and leaps, legs kicked out wide and tongue thrust forward—performed in tribute to a different red idol, not in Beijing but in Chicago, Illinois. Yet the game clearly remains a cornerstone of the PRC's march toward international sporting glory.

Soccer is truly a world sport, making the efforts of Michael Jordan and David...
Stern's NBA to conquer the world seem at times quaintly quixotic. Though soccer culture in China is more spectator-based than participatory, and therefore counter to the spoken state goals of popular sport and fitness, the PRC and its sports bureaucracy work hard to achieve a Chinese presence on the glorious world soccer stage. Yet world soccer offers little of the dynamic tension that the U.S.-dominated global basketball culture carries. To be a soccer fan in China, to follow teams not only in the Chinese A-League but in several European leagues as well, to stay up until dawn watching World Cup matches, is indeed to engage in the multiculturalism and "tolerant contact" that Jameson cites. Participation in the new global basketball culture, however, is a much more loaded and liminal experience. It entails, almost by definition, dangerously flirting with the American cultural and economic hegemony that forms the basis of this sphere. Yet for all the exciting and menacing globalized (here read American) connotations that this basketball enterprise carries, it is still a culture that, in many ways, could not be more Chinese.

AN APPROACH TO POSTSOCIALIST CHINESE BASKETBALL

Basketball has become a form of engagement with modernity and globalizing forces on several different levels. The state invests in, and profits from, the dominant performances by Chinese basketball teams in Asian and world competitions. (Nevertheless, the state is roundly criticized for its "gold medal strategy" that deemphasizes basketball and other team sports and favors individual events such as swimming, track, and gymnastics that can produce a higher and more efficient gold medal count.) One level down, those in the official basketball bureaucracy have found their profit-making niche via the professional CBA league and its deep-pocketed sponsors. Even with its sub-par fan base, the league has become quite remunerative for the basketball bureaucracy. In 1998 the league's main sponsor, the International Marketing Group, was forced to fend off the Adidas-funded International Sports and Leisure agency in a bidding war for CBA marketing rights through 2002. However, where the national and bureaucratic investment in the new world basketball culture is important, it is the popular-level engagement (mostly through the force of the American NBA) with the world, with modernity, and with the issues that face postsocialist Chinese society, that I address in this chapter.

The data that I use here come mainly from three sources: personal interviews, a survey by mail conducted in Beijing during the summer of 1998, and the popular magazine Basketball (Lanqiu), official publication of the CBA and an important source of NBA news for Chinese readers. There is no doubt that much of the material in Basketball, especially the articles on the Chinese game, is self-serving Party-line pap. Among the least worthwhile reading presently available in the PRC are the pieces submitted by China's future cadres and bureaucrats for essay contests on such topics as "Chinese Professional Basketball Reform for the Socialist Market Economy." Yet in some ways this magazine provides a view of the common reader and basketball fan. Besides several articles each month on Chinese and American star players and standout teams, Basketball also includes several monthly features that put the spotlight squarely on the fan/reader. The columns "Fan Mailbox," "Rules Q & A," "Making Connections and Building Bridges" (in which fans and amateur players can place personal advertisements), and "Fan Gauntlet" (in which readers debate issues important to the Chinese and world basketball scene) allow hundreds of thousands of Basketball readers to participate in shaping China's new basketball culture.

These contemporary discussions of basketball are hardly ever limited to basketball. Whether they touch on the importance of fan participation in the 1990s professional game (the odd yet oft repeated mantra is that "The fan is God"), crooked or heavily biased officiating during games, or the pros and cons of recruiting foreign players into the league, other larger topics pertinent to Chinese society, politics, and economics are never far from the surface. For the Chinese multitudes who consider basketball an important part of their lives at the turn of the century, a conversation about basketball can well provide many vantage points for examination and critique of contemporary life. The conversations I had with basketball fans in Beijing and the responses I received from my mailed survey, as well as readers' contributions to Basketball, were loaded with commentary on the China and the world that they are inheriting.

BASKETBALL AND THE MARKET

One of the central themes of popular basketball discourse ties the new game to the workings of the capitalist market system. The basketball public has no monopoly on this language; "marketization" and "professionalization" are two important cornerstones of the Chinese basketball bureaucracy's standard justification for the sport's new direction. Beginning with the new CBA format unveiled in 1995, the language of "marketization" and "professionalization" has consistently been used to bless the new enterprise.

Few would argue against the centrality of these new tenets of the postsocialist world, but it is interesting to see how these official terms are put to use in daily practice. On one hand, this language can be used to justify tacky and tawdry elements of the market, such as the presence of scantily clad cheerleader squads at games during the 1996–1997 season. On the other hand, this terminology is used to justify the other side of the "Market-Leninist" logic that rules Chinese society today, the modern disciplining effects that are so easy to forget in these liberating and "multicultural" times. The official CBA perspective on "the market" reminds the reader of how quickly the invisible hand can be clenched into
an iron fist. For example, the Liaoning Shenfei Passenger Car Hunters, perpetual
CBA runners-up to the powerful PLA Rockets, are praised for their front office
formulas of “strict management” and “strict punishment” in running their top-
level club.  The “market” and the elusive concept of “professionalization” can
validate other authoritarian visions as well. One editorial writer concerned with
the “basketball market” praised the enthusiasm and even the craziness of Chi-
nese fans but added that these qualities could be admirable only if properly ratio-
nal, market-trained fans “also work to cultivate a civilized politeness, and refrain
from disturbing the order of the arena.” In the age of the expanding, moderniz-
ing, and bureaucratizing People’s Liberation Army, the term “professional” can
even become code for “militaristic.” One official observer proclaimed that only
a larger proportion of military teams in the CBA (besides just the PLA Rockets
and Ji’nan Army Doublestar Pegasus) could provide a truly “professional” and
patriotic spirit in Chinese basketball.

At the same time, this elite use of the language of capitalism is deftly coun-
tered at a popular level by young basketball fans skilled in the art of market-
speak and critical of the state of the Chinese game. Readers write regularly to
Basketball with critiques of the CBA, often grounded in concepts of “the mar-
ket.” Dong Weihu of Tianjin, citing the NBA precedent of fan-pleasing rule
changes, suggested sweeping changes for the CBA, such as awarding three points
for a successful dunk, a shorter (eighteen-second) shot clock to encourage more
scoring, and dunking contests before games, all as a means of enlarging the bas-
ketball market. A Basketball reader from Xiamen University suggested another
NBA-tested practice, the sales of licensed team merchandise, as another means
of increasing the CBA’s market potential. But even when nationalism trumps
market considerations, “professionalism” remains the lingua franca of late-1990s
Chinese basketball. Xing Desheng, a native of Heze, Shandong, was able to cite
the league’s weak and immature commercial structure as a way of registering his
disapproval of the CBA foreigner allowance of two non-Chinese players per

The basketball bureaucracy’s use of the language of “the market” and
“professionalization” to explain its new format and approach has thus opened up
a new avenue for popular and original critiques of the CBA via the creative use
of this very same terminology.

This explicit language of capitalism is used often in official and popular narra-
tives of China’s new basketball culture, even as the implications of China’s new
postsocialist market economy are discussed in more veiled terms in the new bas-
ketball discourse.

One such context involves the realization and negotiation of the new inequi-
ties that shape postsocialist Chinese society. The Dengist reforms take it for
granted that some people and regions will “get rich first.” Official CBA discourse
explicitly shuns, and also ridicules as pathetically antiquated, the old Maoist-
tinged policies of egalitarianism in favor of the brave new capitalist world. One
dogmatic winner of the Chinese basketball reform for the socialist market econ-
omy essay contest urged the total abolition of the old state-subsidized basketball
structure, in which “everyone ate but no one got full.” The Jiangsu Nanjing
Steel Dragons were likewise praised for “destroying the ‘big rice pot’ egalitarian-
ism of the past,” when they instituted a bonus system and acquired new players
from outside the Jiangsu province basketball pipeline. But this departure from
the egalitarian commitment, regardless of its Maoist inconsistency, has brought
just as much anxiety as self-congratulation. One joke published in Basketball in
1995 touched on the selfish, dog-eat-dog ways of the new China:

A. Ah, today’s society—public morals and manners just get worse by the day!
B. What do you mean?
A. Just look at those people—adults—surrounding a little leather ball, swiping
and grabbing; it’s really indecent!
B. Indeed! And what’s worse is that all those people around them just clap and
cheer—no one goes down to try and settle the issue.

Less humorous and more jarring are the quiet commentaries made by many
respondents to the questionnaire I distributed to readers of Basketball all around
China. In many of the returned surveys, I see respondents utilizing understand-
ings of space and social inequality that echo Xin Liu’s work on new social mean-
ings of space, as well as the ways in which geography can serve as a signifier for
socioeconomic differentiation in today’s China. The last of thirty-four ques-
tions on my questionnaire asked what type of basketball shoes the recipient
wore. Many of these respondents, fully aware of the new socioeconomic hierar-
chies and how central even basketball shoes can be to these calculations,
answered my question by citing the relative status of their home region. Wang
Fei, a Shaquille O’Neal fan from Shanxi, answered that he wears Huili brand, only
because “Huili shoes are the best shoes in Qixian county.” Li Li, a student in
Yuechi county, Sichuan, explained that she wears Li Ning shoes because “the
area where we live has its economic limitations.” And an anonymous respond-
ent from the Ili Kazak autonomous prefecture, Xinjiang, wrote that he wears
Huili because “our place here only has this type of shoe.” I read these responses as
reflecting a sophisticated understanding of China’s new hierarchy of place and
the distribution of modern goods like Nike or Converse sneakers. Clearly, read-
ers like these, who are bombarded with advertisements for these absolutely unaf-
fordable trappings of market modernity, have learned—if in no other way than
through the hierarchy of basketball sneakers—where “their place here” ranks in
the new postegalitarian PRC.

Other respondents with the good fortune to be located higher up on national hierarchies discuss the material culture of their basketball lives in very different

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Nike shoes "are perfect for me (shìtè zìjǐ)." Wang Zhao gang of Gongyi city, Henan, had a different but equally cosmopolitan reason for choosing Nike—"They created the myth of Michael Jordan the flier." Nike, author of this seamless Jordan mythology and modern sporting goods marketing as we know it, is such a unanimous choice among these basketball players/fans that its swoosh, not the PRC's five gold stars, has perhaps become the most enduringly hegemonic symbol in China today.

The swoosh has become an unquestionably superior sign of all that is good and right in any Nike-infiltrated society, as demonstrated by the imitation Nike swooshes plastered on so many types of Chinese-made consumer goods. Ex-student leader Urkesh Doulat (Wuierkaixi) remarked that what students wanted in the 1989 Beijing spring was "Nike shoes." Indeed, even Pan Jinjin, a student from Qinhuangdao who played basketball "on a court on the side of the road" and a faithful wearer of more affordable Chinese-made Huili sneakers, could deliver on command a convincing argument for Nike superiority. Pan wrote to me, "If I had more money, I would wear Nikes because they protect the foot, provide strong traction, allow one to exhibit speed and jumping ability, and are comfortable, shockproof, and good-looking." Discussions of the new hegemonic basketball material culture, then, end up telling us much about young Chinese people's imagination of space and status, as well as of the new market of culture and desire that has displaced or reinforced so many older Chinese and socialist hierarchies.

While I was in Beijing in July 1998, I watched and participated in the Third Annual Beijing Municipal Three-on-Three Basketball Challenge, an all-day affair held at the Beijing Children's Palace and sponsored by Basketball. The tournament attracted 165 teams in five divisions: boys' and girls' junior high and high school teams and men's at-large teams. Stakes were high, with championship teams in each division winning top-of-the-line Nike and Spalding paraphernalia. More interesting than the fabulous prizes were the ways in which these Beijing youth sought to represent themselves to the world of their peers via their team names. Many of the team names were roughly what one would expect, especially from the schoolboy teams—Cobra, The Wild Men, The Bombs, Super, The Zeros, The Virgin Boys, The All-Stars, Assassin, The Charming Boys, Burning Sun, Super Sensation, The Dream Stars, UFO, ZOOM, Big Foot, and Super Man (the last four in English). Yet many of the team names showed a consumer savvy that would have been unheard of in decades past. Among the teams that came to compete that day at the Children's Palace were Barbie Girls (in English), Sanling (i.e., Mitsubishi), The Wild "555" (after the cigarette brand), Alaklin, Garfield, E.T., and The Ever-Victorious Guests (Bishengke, the official transliteration for "Pizza Hut"). Such a lineup would be hard to imagine in many areas of China, where youth are less plugged in to these Madison Avenue buzzwords. That Beijing youth are able to identify with symbols of globalized capitalist power clearly and consciously sets them apart from the lower, Chinese-sneaker-wearing, dirt-court playing orders of the Chinese basketball scene.

One young man whom I met at this all-city tourney was an unforgettable example of China's new globalized basketball culture. Wang Liang, seventeen years old that summer, was captain of a team called (in English) Bloody Mary. Not quite understanding my shock at this moniker, he explained to me matter-of-factly that he just liked the name of this popular cocktail. He was familiar with it through his job as a bartender at the Beijing Hotel (although he was hoping to move up to the Shangri-La or the China World Hotel soon). His ease in talking to me was certainly a product of working in such a multicultural atmosphere, and we talked for quite a while about games and basketball. Foremost on his mind was whether Michael Jordan would return to play in the 1998-1999 season—a question into which he had put a great deal of thought. When I asked him about his basketball-related consumer habits, he estimated that he spent about ¥300 a month on the game. This amount did not include the two ¥23 bottles of Michael Jordan Cologne that Wang had recently bought at the Sogo Department Store. (He bought one extra because each bottle came with a free Jordan model basketball.) It did include an expensive and thoroughly unnecessary-looking Nike elbow band. When I asked why he wore it, he answered that it was for protection but then smiled and admitted, "Because Jordan wears one—it's just my blind worship (mangmu de chongbai) [of Jordan]."

Besides being a charming and delightful (and before long probably very successful) young man, Wang also taught me more about the role of basketball in postsocialist China than any of the experts, writers, or bureaucrats who work to shape an official Chinese basketball discourse. In his study of Tokyo Disneyland Raz suggests that the "playful" local variations on global culture are the important sites to examine. Sherry Ortner's thoughts on "social games" are relevant as well, her point being that social life requires that we actors "play with skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence" at social "games," which, if sometimes playful, can also carry very high stakes. Young Wang's negotiation of globalized culture through his hotel bartending job (which surely sits in the eye of the globalizing hurricane in China), as well as his self-conscious "blind worship" of MJ and all products Jordan, is nothing if not contagiously "playful." Yet it must surely will prove, in his case, to be a genius strategy for shaping a cosmopolitan future that would have been unthinkable in China less than a decade earlier. In Wang's future, globalization will work just as efficiently for him as it does for Michael Jordan, Jack Valenti, or Tommy Hilfiger. Globalization is serious business, but these hegemonizing cultures, no matter how hard they try, are still far from brutal juggernauts that flatten native cultures like so many screaming apartment dwellers under Godzilla's heels. They win and hegemonize via the efforts of actors like Wang Liang, who has skillfully shaped his future according to the fun and liberating possibilities that hotel bars and NBA telescasts open up and come together perfectly in playing on a basketball team called "Bloody Mary."
The advantages of life in the capital and rewarding jobs in flashy hotels are obviously open to only a minuscule percentage of the youth I surveyed or read about in the pages of Basketball. Much more common were the respondents who said they could spend ten, twenty, thirty yuan a month on basketball supplies, those who were conscious of the real economic limitations of “their place there” in the provinces. The opportunities that globalized basketball culture has provided them likely have little to do with world-class consumer goods. Yet concepts of the market are understood as part of new basketball culture, as youth in far-off towns and villages feel comfortable writing on “professionalization” or dreaming of a comfortable pair of Nikes, even though they know that these things are simply not for them. What is left for them is another type of “playful” use of basketball culture, which can be utilized in the creation of a new individual self.

**BASKETBALL AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

Basketball is a team sport, yet, thanks to recent trends in the NBA, perhaps the team sport most dominated by the individual megastar. The old debate over the team versus the individual, as much a part of modern sports history in China as it is anywhere else, has been rendered almost moot by the relentless worldwide NBA marketing of stars like Jordan, Penny Hardaway, Shaquille O’Neal, and Kobe Bryant. Jiang Zemin’s “core” Party leadership’s recent efforts to develop a new cult of personality for Deng Xiaoping and Jiang himself look like the work of some tinhorn dictator occupying an AM radio station when compared with the truly awe-inspiring star marketing projects achieved by Nike, Sprite, Converse, and Pils.

“The individual” is a central concept in Chinese basketball culture today, and one that its Chinese subjects wear well. The surveys returned to me were full of observations about what basketball meant to all these “selves” across China—that the game is “my choice” or that it “shows my skills.” Many respondents’ parents support their interest in basketball because it is “my interest” or “my ideal” or “my life’s goal.” Others explained that through basketball they could “show my own individual style” or simply “make more and more people know who I am.” The creation of this new space of discourse on individual and inherent talents and skills by the new me-generation is at the very heart of the basketball realm in China.

This theme of the individual in the new world basketball culture is closely related to the discourse, described above, of the global market in Chinese basketball. The unanimous acceptance that Nike shoes “perfectly fit me” or that an Adidas shoe “when worn over one’s real foot, feels as comfortable as if it was just another foot” betrays an understanding of the real self that can only be truly fulfilled through the market and consumer desires. I will address separately the individual and individualism that permeates popular and official discussions of Chinese basketball today.

Official CBA publicity, just like American popular sports media, includes panegyric to teamwork and the team spirit. In China teamwork is located in the traditions of Lei Feng or Lee Kuan Yew as a Chinese quality, as opposed to an American-style individualistic game. This is a predictable move, one that attempts to occidentalize “individualism” as a distinctly un-Chinese mode and ignores the ways in which global market forces can grip individual Chinese “selves” much more vividly than any Politburo proclamation. But there is also an understanding at the bureaucratic level that the flashy “individualistic” game is what works in the basketball market that now justifies all. Thus a writer for Beijing Youth Report can call for “an individualization of fundamental skills” in the CBA, another commentator can identify the cultivation of real individualism as one of three tasks facing the league, and another can suggest that the league begin keeping and publishing more individual statistics that are ignored by the league’s team-centered statistical approach. This “market discourse” is surely popular among China’s basketball-playing and basketball-consuming youth, but it may already be too late for the CBA. In the NBA and its awesome propaganda machine, young Chinese have found the most potent and attractive model of this individualist spirit imaginable.

One important expression of this spirit in basketball discourse is that most thrilling and individualistic staple of the modern game, the slam dunk (in Chinese koulan, “strike the basket,” or guanlan, “throw down the basket”). Beijing’s Handsun Company’s exploitation of the now universal desire to “fly” and dunk like Mike or Kobe has already been noted. Indeed, probably few goals occupy as many Chinese minds today as this great challenge. The most common letter to the editors of Basketball seems to be one that goes, as Wang Qiang from Linfen city, Shanxi, wrote, “My greatest desire in this life is to truly make a real dunk.” Another fan submitted an essay titled “I Have a Dream” on his similarly consuming desire to dunk a basketball like Julius Erving, Shaquille O’Neal, or Patrick Ewing. The physical mastery that goes into a slam dunk—the flying, the momentary transcendence of any team or group concept—have made this feat not just a focus for consumer desires but the ultimate life goal of many youth in China today. Among these young people of postsocialist China, the point is no longer to serve the people but to dunk in an opponent’s face.

The slam dunk is a site where fans’ desires converge with the basketball bureaucracy’s marketing quest. Since the 1995 CBA season, when this exciting technique was first encouraged, slam dunks have been tabulated as an official league statistic (although this is not the case in the American game). In 1996 Basketball printed several articles by fans imploring CBA players to dunk the basketball for the sake of the Chinese game. “Please courageously dunk,” pleaded one, who lamented the disappointment of CBA fans when fast breaks were concluded by less impressive means and suggested that a successful dunk be worth
three points. Pei Yongli from Hebei testified that the slam dunk was the most efficient way to uplift a player’s confidence and thrill a crowd. Zhou You from Jiangxi turned his appeal into a moral challenge to CBA players, opining that the scarcity of CBA dunks proved that Chinese players simply were not physically fit and, moreover, were afraid of failing in front of an audience.54

Lisa Rofel, in her work on women silk workers, explains that in the postsocialist era capitalist desire has become “a sign of daring, the site of risk, glory, individual achievement, and masculine strength.”55 This is exactly the significance that is imagined in the slam dunk, a desire that the enterprising basketball bureaucracy has tried to frame. In 1997, to encourage players to meet and master this stiff challenge, the CBA/Nike All-Star Game ceremonies included the first Nike slam dunk contest. However, CBA fans’ fears about Chinese dunking inferiority were reinforced when the dunk title was captured by Liaoning’s James Hodges, whose 360-degree slam showed why he was known as “the Shawn Kemp of the CBA.”

Producing Chinese CBA heroes to rival the American stars depends on the league’s ability to integrate these fan-pleasing but team-denying moves. Xiaomei Chen’s term “Occidentalism” describes the practice in which “constructing its Western Other [allows] the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation.”56 The Chinese fans who hold out these precedents of the thrilling NBA Other as the only acceptable standard for their CBA are participating in what Chen calls “anti-official Occidentalism,” in which Chinese design powerful discourses “using the Western Other as a metaphor for liberation.”57 Although Chinese basketball discourse holds little of the subversive, antistate connotations that Chen describes, the dunk can certainly be seen as a form of liberation from what youth see as the older, provincial, and “backward” forms of their parents’ age. The fans’ challenge to the CBA and its players clarified the stakes in this popular desire for the transcendent individualism of the dunk.

Another important site for discussion of the individualist element is on the person of erstwhile NBA star Dennis Rodman. Rodman’s antics, self-mutilation, or even as John Hoberman has suggested, black self-hatred, have provided a perfect forum for American discussion of the team versus the individual in modern sport and society. In the United States, Rodman is marketed (by himself, as well as by the usual corporate suspects) “as spectacle to white America, which has always embraced variations of the black jester.”58 However, his wild personal life and showmanship have made him a different type of household name among China’s basketball population, a Bart Simpson–or Andre Agassi–like figure who serves as a virtual synonym for the disobedient yet market-friendly individualist spirit. Although it is no longer right to rebel in most ways in postsocialist China, “Rodman” has become a code for this safely carnivalesque esprit.

This Chinese-commodified Rodman image (i.e., the Chinese commodification of Rodman’s own commodified “rebellion” against traditional modes of commercialized sport) first appeared on the Chinese scene in 1997 in a series of print advertisements for the new Converse Chuck Taylor All-Star shoe. The first featured a close-up of Rodman’s stud- and ring-pierced mien, with the English-language print, “I’ve got the Vibe. Get it.” The second was a self-conscious (if tired and market-tested) tweaking of conventional ideals of the American “individualist” spirit—a shot of Rodman’s bared and tattoo-covered back superimposed over a giant American flag and a Converse symbol.59 However, by the second ad, the basketball establishment had already begun to coopt the image of the Worm (as Rodman is known in the United States and China). Baoyuan Shoes, national Converse agent and (at the time) official sponsor of the CBA’s Shandong Flaming Bulls, announced the Rodman Strange Image Creativity Contest. Readers sending in photos of themselves in Rodman-style “strange and weird costume” would be eligible to win Rodman shoes, jerseys, backpacks, and even adhesive body tattoos. The only entry pictured in Basketball was that of a third-place winner from Inner Mongolia. He and his young daughter posed in T-shirts and shorts, wearing sunglasses and do-rags, both holding basketballs against their hips, in a touched-up photo clearly taken in a professional studio.60 The photo was cute, but far from the dangerous threat to sporting, sexual, and sartorial mores that the “real” Rodman can constitute on even his more understated days. And this was the very point of the contest—to recast Rodman’s own potentially menacing commodified image in more G-rated and marketable shades.

Although Michael Jordan’s popularity in China is overwhelming (73 percent of my respondents named him as their favorite player), the Worm’s “individualist” image also captures the imagination of many Chinese youth. One can get a more specific picture of what Rodman signifies in China through images submitted by artistic readers/fans to Basketball’s occasional “Cartoon Page” feature. His flashy, controversial demeanor and lifestyle have made him a favorite among China’s aspiring cartoonists in very interesting and unlikely ways. In one cartoon, captioned “‘Playboy’ Rodman,” the reader is presented with a figure that looks more like Axl Rose or a West Side Story extra than it does the NBA star (fig 1.1). In one of the few such cartoons in which African American players’ features are not grotesquely exaggerated and transformed, Rodman the “playboy” is imagined here as a cheesy white hoodlum, only his partially visible Bulls number 91 jersey and oversized Nike bandanna marking his NBA status.61 The Nike swoosh even manages to trump dark skin—no small feat in China (or anywhere else for that matter). That Rodman is under contract with Converse and contractually could never don the Nike bandanna pictured here is beside the point; what matters is how smoothly his “individualist” spirit can translate into a purely commercial identity.

In another amateur rendering of Rodman, he is drawn thrusting forward a basketball on which is written (in English), “Do you know me?” This happens to be an appropriate question because the artist has portrayed Rodman squarely within
Figure 1.1 Basketball reader Shen Yi’s drawing of “Playboy Rodman” (1997)

about what basketball means to them. Wei Wei, captain of a Whirlwind basketball team in Wujianpu town, Hexian county, Anhui, included with his completed survey an unsolicited letter to me in which he explained what his eight years of playing basketball had taught him. Wei wrote that basketball now meant much more to him than just physical exercise; it was an enterprise that had taught him how to live—how to have a strong will and a steady spirit, how to banish vanity and pride from his heart, and how to fight to the end. Wei told me that, despite being 170 centimeters (5’7”) tall, he had skills that were the equal of anybody’s. Like the diminutive NBA star Muggsy Bogues, he would never give up basketball no matter how much others insulted him. He concluded, “To me, basketball is my life.”

Basketball has printed similar testimonies from readers, some going beyond the constraints of mere prose. Jin Xin, a Beijing student, wrote, “I’ve discovered that basketball has entered my life; I can’t separate myself from it for a single day.” He included a short poem to help express his deep and complicated, even strangely erotic, feelings:

Ball, I respect you, I want to hold you;  
Basket, I gaze at you, I want to fly to you;  
Court, I draw near you, I want to be inside you.

Another basketball poet named Huang Jun submitted a more substantial effort, a sonnet entitled “Gently You Come to Me,” which included the two lines: “Brimming with the powerful scent of the basketball season; / Ever after there is no trace of boredom in my heart.”

Not just basketball players but enthusiasts of a myriad hobbies and pastimes, from stamp collecting to foreign language study to Falun Gong, can now reflect that “X is my life,” a concept impossible to imagine when flows of information and market were still subject to political command. In this way, then, basketball becomes just one more destabilizing force that enables Chinese people to forget about rigid political commitments and participate in global communities, loyalties, and ideologies.

However, I argue that few of these globalized realms have the power of the new basketball culture to create truly globalized selves and identities. I have already mentioned Wang Liang, the young Beijing bartender who spoke so frankly about his “blind worship” and imitation of Michael Jordan. Other teams entered in the same Beijing three-on-three tournament used team names that showed their identification with NBA stars: MJ, Team 23, The Fliers (all after Jordan), The Little Worms (after Rodman’s nickname), LA, and Dream Team IV. Two respondents explained that they loved Stephon Marbury and Dennis Rodman because they shared similar playing styles and skills with these NBA stars. Zheng Yi from Guizhou wrote of his friend whose obsession with Houston Rock-
etet veteran Charles Barkley was so hopeless that his friends finally had to give in and just start calling him "Ba-ke-li."\(^{68}\)

Other youth in China now live their lives through *Slam Dunk*, the Japanese comic book/television animation series based on the sporting and social exploits of an impossibly skilled and ethnically diverse basketball team from Shōhoku High School. Long a favorite in Taiwan, *Slam Dunk* is now sweeping through the PRC as television stations in many large cities rush to show years' worth of old episodes during prime time. One team at the Beijing three-on-three tournament took the name Shōhoku (Xiangbei). *Basketball* also published a picture of a Chongwen Elementary School second-grade "Shōhoku" team, whose five members now go by the "Japanese" names of the show's main characters—Yingmu Huadao, Liuchuan Feng, Chimu Gangxian, and so on.\(^{69}\) Young Li Ping from Qionglai county, Sichuan, wrote to *Basketball* to testify that he enjoyed *Slam Dunk* even more than NBA basketball because the Shōhoku schoolboys' lives were so much more like his own.\(^{70}\)

The cosmopolitan basketball culture to which many Chinese youth are now exposed has become much more than just a sport; it and the market forces that it brings to China have become avenues for the very creation and redefinition of personal identities. From original and creative imaginations of basketball "individualism" and its icons to the impulse and ability to identify personally with representations of American or Japanese basketball culture, the loaded role of the individual in today's basketball discourse is one more factor that makes this realm important in understanding Chinese youth culture. In many ways the discussion of the individual in Chinese basketball is as hard to separate out from the market as it was for Jin Xin (mentioned above) to separate himself from his basketball for a day. These understandings of the "self" and the individual clearly are a product of the capitalist mission, here perfected by Nike and David Stern's NBA, to seek out and identify the unique identities and needs of each and every consumer. However, in China there is a force that can triumph over the destabilizing and unsettlingly diverse desires and loyalties that these youth are manufacturing, redefining, buying, and selling. It is, of course, the nation.

**BASKETBALL AND THE NATION**

Of the powerful globalizing market forces that shape Chinese postsocialist culture today, basketball is one of the few that are strongly grounded in ideas of the nation and nationalism. Basketball's history in modern China—its status as a national pastime in the republican era, a marker of revolutionary fitness and endeavor in the Maoist era, and a sport in which Chinese men's and women's teams have traditionally done quite well in international competition—has provided the game with a national resonance that, while certainly not uncomplicated, serves as an easy reference point for both popular and official basketball discourse. Although young basketball fans neglect their own CBA for the more glamorous American NBA, they seem to care passionately about "Chinese basketball" as a whole, whatever that is.

The narrative of the nation in Chinese basketball is one that official bureaucratic structures work to keep very prominent, even (and especially) as the game acts as a destabilizing force in Chinese youth culture. Almost any issue of *Basketball* includes reminders that, after all, national glory and status is the real reason for this basketball enterprise. This commitment then serves as the standard against which any member of the basketball community—players, referees, fans—can be evaluated.

The ways in which the nation figures in popular basketball discourse today are far more interesting than this clunky rhetoric because, for all of the consciousness of globalized market forces and a globalized individual self that China's basketball youth share today, the nation really does matter. One question on my mailed survey asked whether "winning glory for the nation" was a motivation for the respondent's participation in basketball; twenty-two of sixty (37 percent) answered that it was. These results are more interesting when paired with those of another question, one that asked the highest-level team the respondent hoped to join in his or her basketball career—school, county, provincial, (W)CBA, national, or (W)NBA.\(^{71}\) The results are in table 1.1.

The fact that twenty of sixty, or a full third, of my respondents hope someday to play in the NBA is surely an important sign of an unprecedented range of individual ambitions and goals. But we also see that the higher one's basketball career goals are, the more the nation seems to figure in one's notion of the very meanings of the game!\(^{72}\) Basketball nationalists would also have been comforted to see several of the Beijing three-on-three tournament team names that far from betraying a soft spot for things American and capitalist, referenced familiar PRC and Maoist images, such as Red Star, The Masses, and The East Is Rising.\(^{73}\)

Table 1.1 Survey Respondents' Basketball Goals and National Commitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basketball Career Goal</th>
<th>Number Hoping to Reach Goal</th>
<th>Respondents for Whom Nation Is Significant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School team</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County team</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial team</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(W)CBA team</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National team</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(W)NBA team</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage
Despite fears that the globalizing forms of knowledge and behavior which basketball culture brings to China will destabilize notions of the nation as the center, the nation does still remain an important focus for many Chinese basketball youth.

I have already explained that most young basketball fans and players focus more on the American NBA in terms of their identities and desires than on their own CBA. Although young Chinese seem to invest more in the performance of certain NBA players and teams, many of them retain strong national attachments to the idea and even the structure of the CBA, if not to the actual competitive affairs of the league itself.

The notion that the PRC has to have its own uniquely Chinese professional basketball league, even if no one pays attention to it, is a powerful one. A common concern of fans writing in to Basketball relates to the appropriate level of Chineseness maintained by the CBA. Liu Shichao, a junior high student from Ji'nan, asked why all the CBA players wore "foreign" shoe brands instead of supporting Chinese-made goods and the Chinese market.44 A fan from Shandong submitted an essay to the magazine in which he asked why players' names were stenciled on the backs of their jerseys in romanized pinyin, such as "Z. Z. Wang" or "X. B. Gong," instead of in China's own character script.45

Proving the uncanny success of the Jiang-era "patriotic education" program, and also the ingenuity of these educated patriots, the inevitable notion of "professional basketball with Chinese characteristics" is commonly cited by fans. It and the term guoqing ("national characteristics") are used frequently to articulate a uniquely Chinese basketball enterprise that need not always follow American or NBA precedents in its development. One reader even coined the remarkable term quanping xhua (basketball characteristics) in warning against the dangers of "total westernization" (quanchen xhua) in the Chinese basketball project.46 Indeed, as two fans explained, to support a CBA rule that the worst two teams each year face possible demotion to Division B, diverging from NBA precedent, is justification enough for many Chinese league policies.47 Thus, if fans' use of the NBA Other sometimes serves as an "Occidentalist" critique of the Chinese policy, here it works in an opposite direction. Fans like these are now more nationalistic than the state basketball bureaucracy that has sold this patriotic line. The power of their critique is in their ability to reference the Otherized "Occident" as a means of presenting their self-Orientalizing appeal for a CBA tied more closely to Chinese culture and "characteristics."

Another significant subject of nationalist basketball discourse relates to the recruitment of foreign players to supplement CBA rosters. Each team is allowed two foreign players, although their play is limited to four "player quarters" per game.48 The first waiyuan (literally, "foreign aid") player was an Uzbek who joined the old Zhejiang Zhongxin Squirrels for the 1995–1996 season, and other early waiyuan included several Russian players. Now, however, the foreigners are overwhelmingly American, a fact that elicits national (and often racial) sentiments about the CBA and its relationship to the hegemonic forces of American basketball culture.

Those in the basketball bureaucracy seem to take a very ambivalent stand on the role of the CBA's foreign players. In the lead article of the January 1998 issue of Basketball, "To Fire Up the Basketball Market, We Need More Foreign Players," the author told of the players' contributions to the CBA game and attempted to defuse narrow nationalistic arguments by pointing out even that the American NBA itself employed many foreign players.49 At the same time, Basketball reporters regularly praise such teams as the PLA Rockets or the Shan-dong Wing On Flaming Bulls that, because of military regulations or nationalistic pride, have not employed foreign players.50 Yet the careful ambivalence that the official basketball world maintains on this issue does not spill over into the popular realm. In fact, few questions about the CBA are debated more fiercely than this issue of waiyuan players' role in the league.

One aspect of the popular debate is fairly straightforward and revolves around how foreign players help or hinder the development of Chinese basketball. Some argue that the waiyuan presence acts as a catalyst for the CBA, pushing Chinese players to their limits, while others worry that these foreign players take up roster spots that could accommodate China's future stars. Yet for all these very practical considerations voiced by CBA fans, it is never long before purely nationalist narratives emerge in this space. Such nationalist lines obviously allow little room for those who like their waiyuan players, but many fans are able to show great creativity in justifying a foreign presence in the CBA. They maintain a national focus by explaining, as Zhang Long from Beijing did, that without this waiyuan catalyst, Chinese basketball would fall farther and farther behind the rest of the world. Hou Zhongwei from Daqing, Heilongjiang, called the inclusion of these foreign players an important step on "the road to national strength and widespread prosperity (jiananguo fumin)." And Qi Guangming from the Houma Electrical Cable Factory in Shanxi held out the tempting possibility that someday Chinese players would be desired as waiyuan in pro leagues in other foreign lands.51

The nationalist constraints of this debate clearly favor opponents of the foreign presence, however. Fans writing in to oppose the waiyuan policy—and its inherent implication that the Chinese game is merely a local variation of a global American standard—do an effective job of laying out their arguments. Chen Yan from Fuxin Mongol autonomous county, Liaoning, testified that these foreigners could not truly help the development of Chinese basketball because they were only in the CBA to "sell tricks" and make money. He also noted that although the NBA did include many foreign players, all the biggest stars were American. Zhang Shaping of Wujin county, Jiangsu, was disgusted, as were many other readers, that their CBA was becoming just "a place for foreign athletes to make money." Zhang Lei of Urumchi brought up another point—that the simple presence of foreigners brought chaos to any team—and he asked why
these "second- and third-rate European and American players" were worth the
disruption. One fan was even more explicit in his dislike of the CBA's foreign
players, vowing that the CBA would not serve as "the NBA's reject stand." He
also employed sensitive historical references to remind the community that
"[this is Chinese basketball. The ones winning glory for the nation in
international competition are the men of China, not these 'eight-nation allied
forces.'"

The tensions present in this nationalist narrative coalesced at the CBA All-
Star Game in Shenyang in April 1998, a contest that for the first time used an
ill-advised "Chinese versus foreigner" format. The game was marred by what
Basketball euphemized "patriotic officiating," the referees' blatant pro-Chinese
favoritism that even this official publication decried as shameful and "corrupt."
Even worse, however, was the scene after the game, won 83–80 by the Foreign
All-Stars on a last-second three-point shot by Ray Kelly of the Sichuan Blue
Sword Beer Pandas. As the victorious waiyuan celebrated at midcourt, the bitter
Shenyang crowd showered them with cans and bottles, a barrage so heavy and
prolonged that CCTV was forced to cut off its broadcast. The sight of China's
national all-star team losing to these third-rate American "rejects" was evidently
too much for these proud fans, whose own Shenyang Army Lions were one of
the few CBA squads that did not employ foreign players. Their spontaneous
demonstration against the waiyuan presence in the CBA was a clear statement
against American hegemony in the Chinese basketball world.

This kind of hard, literal nationalism comes out in the basketball world in
other ways as well. One is a seeming impatience among fans for the 1997 Hong
Kong handover to have some real effect on their lives, and for teams from Hong
Kong's professional league to join the CBA. Fans write in to Basketball regularly
with this query. I read it as a challenge to the PRC's stated mission to "reunify"
all of the Qing dynasty's lost territories, a challenge that this official nationalism
produce some real tangible result for all the 1.3 billion Chinese, who will never
personally set foot in Hong Kong, to truly enjoy nonetheless.

Sometimes the state provides answers to these nationalist challenges, even if
they are not the ones that people want. In 1999 Chinese basketball fans who
were accustomed to watching the NBA playoffs and championship series on
CCTV had to find new, more appropriate entertainments. Among the measures
taken in the aftermath of the May 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy
in Belgrade was a ban on Chinese television broadcasts of the NBA playoffs.
The logic of these reactions in the cultural sphere seems unclear—are they
meant to punish the Western cultural producers of entertainment like the NBA,
or are they supposed to shelter the Chinese population from exposure to poison-
ous Western culture, which could produce such violence as the Belgrade
bombing?

Yet the Chinese urbanites who rose as one to condemn this latest example of
American hegemonism and imperialism are probably just as ambivalent about
the position of the NBA, again an extremely liminal one in these days of the
new détente. American media reports hoping to discredit with irony the anti-
U.S. protests in Beijing, Chengdu, and other cities were careful to point out the
number of demonstrators wearing NBA and Michael Jordan T-shirts and shoes.
All irony aside, however, it would be very interesting to know how many of these
anti-American protesters, before this decision was made for them by proper
authorities, would have been moved enough by their reflections on national
humiliation to sacrifice watching the 1999 NBA playoffs. When push comes to
shove in postsocialist China, how much does the nation matter? Could Ji Jiang
Zemin and his carefully crafted message of nationalism have defeated the grace
and appeal of Michael Jordan's NBA? And which anthem's lyrics would have
rung out the loudest—"Arise, ye who refuse to be slaves" or "I believe I can fly"?

**CONCLUSION**

Of the sixty respondents to my mailed survey, one stood out from all the rest. Li
Jinquing, a seventy-four-year-old retired cadre from Yulin city, Guangxi, was
among those Basketball readers who received my questionnaire. Li was the only
respondent to answer that he did not watch NBA or CBA games on television,
that he was not a basketball fan, that he did not spend money on basketball
merchandise, and that he did not prefer any particular brand of athletic shoe.
As I read his replies, I began thinking that I had finally located a basketball
enthusiast who, despite admitting to an admiration for the Chicago Bulls, some-
how had managed to avoid the great globalizing sweep of this new hegemonic
basketball culture.

But I was wrong, and I realized this when I read the six-page letter he mailed
to me along with his completed questionnaire, telling the story of his basketball
life. An avid basketball player since elementary school in the 1930s, Li became
even more dedicated after he retired in the mid-1980s, practicing free throws
and three-point shots for three hours every single day. Li told me that on 2 April
1997, this hard work paid off, as he became the proud owner of a new official
Guinness world record, making 4,691 of 5,795 free throws over a twelve-hour
span, breaking the old record by 821 baskets Next on Li's list was the world
record for three-point shooting, which he broke later that year by making 475
of 577 shots in a single hour. If Li, perhaps only by virtue of his age and his six
decades of basketball experience, had managed to withstand the global
onslaught in some ways, other facets of this basketball culture had clearly drawn
him in as deeply as any of my NBA-clone teenage respondents.

Yet Li is certainly no dupe for this global culture, on which he made his mark
from inside an old dusty gym in southeast Guangxi. His letter to me included a
photograph of him posing, basketball in hand, outside his front door. His door-
way is graced by a large calligraphic couplet, reading "Setting another Guinness
world record, greatly undertaking this grand enterprise and soaring into the heavens," complemented by a “Loving my China” above. There is no doubt that Li’s great enterprise has brought him more renown and reward than his long career in the Yulin Party branch ever could have—and this is exactly the logic of the forces of globalization in which Li is now forever engaged.

Each of my survey respondents, every Basketball reader and letter writer, every participant in the tournament I attended and others like it all around China, and every Chinese fan of teams from the Shandong Wing On Flaming Bulls to the Chicago Bulls, have done the same thing—corrupting, transforming, and displacing these new forms of knowledge, behavior, and desire to carve out one more piece of their own identities. The postsocialist moment in China promises exactly these unprecedented freedoms—to define one’s own individual identity, to explore the West of Michael Jordan and Nike, to see how this world could exist in their China, to make their contributions to a strong China (and for once) on their own unique terms.

I have discussed three segments of the new basketball narrative—ideas of the market, the individual, and the nation—which allow these imaginations of postsocialist China. There are surely many more—nations of gender, regionalism, race, class, fitness, sportsmanship—that are not addressed here at length but are no less meaningful to China’s basketball-playing millions.

The sport has been played in China for more than one hundred years now, and at each moment during the last century has been taken to represent different aspects of a Chinese drive for modernity and parity with the strong nations of the world. Now the absolute and irrevocable link that has been created between Chinese basketball and the hegemonic NBA/world basketball culture has loaded that much more capitalist import and bounce to the game. In China’s postsocialist age, basketball has become a site not only for strategy and skills but also for sonnets, dreams, playing ingenuity, profits, and desire. Perhaps today basketball is truly worthy of being called a “national pastime,” a realm as useful and important as any other for Chinese people busy theorizing, shaping, and negotiating Chinese modernity and the world around it.

NOTES

1. “Qumi xinxiang” (Fan mailbox), Lanqiu (Basketball), April 1995, 28.
2. Chinese Basketball Association (CBA, Zhongguo lanqiu xiehui) is technically the name of the state basketball bureaucracy, not the professional league that it cosponsors (see below). However, these initials are too close to NBA for the league to pass up.
3. Lanqiu was established in 1981 but did not adopt its current market-friendly format of color photos and advertisements and NBA feature stories until 1995, the same year as the CBA’s first professional season.
4. Advertisement for Handsun Footwear (Beijing xin hengxin tiyu yangpin youxian gongsi), Lanqiu (Basketball), June-August 1998, inside front covers.

11. Note the convenient connotations that come with this league’s abbreviated name as well. The CBA, managed by Hong Kong’s Jingying Company, was later forced to change its name to the Chinese Men’s Basketball Alliance after the American NBA threatened legal action over infringement of these three powerful initials. Before the league’s second season (1997–1998), the league folded; several teams and players have been incorporated into the CBA.
12. The formal name of the league is the Hilton Chinese Men’s Basketball First Division (Xi-er-dan nanzi lanqiu jia d liansi), but the snappier “CBA” is almost universal usage.
13. Besides this twelve-team first division, the CBA also operates a seventeen-team Division B, a minor league of sorts whose top two teams each year are eligible to replace Division A’s eleventh- and twelfth-place finishers.
14. The CBA also manages the WCBA, a far less publicized women’s “league” consisting of a yearly tournament for about twenty Division A and B teams. Much like the CBA, WCBA propaganda attempts to link their league to its American WNBA counterpart. However, the postsocialist moment seems to have made women’s basketball much less relevant to national goals than it was even a few years ago; male basketball players (see below) are apparently more deserving and capable with regard to the capitalist impetus that now justifies Chinese basketball culture. My concentration on men’s basketball in this chapter parallels, but does not explicitly question, the gross disparity in emphasizing men’s basketball over women’s basketball in today’s PRC.
15. The Guangdong team regularly sells out its ultramodern 5,000-seat stadium and has been officially praised for its marketing skills and its adaptability in switching from a passive/consumptive to an active/productive mode. Hao Ying, “Bian ‘gong xue’ tiwei ‘zaoxue’ jizhi—Guangdong Hongyuan Lanqiu Julebu de jingying celue” (The Guangdong Hongyuan Basketball Club’s marketing strategy: Changing the “supplied blood” structure to a mechanism for “creating blood”), Lanqiu (Basketball), January 1998, 12–13.
16. The first basketball game in China was the earliest YMCA-sponsored sporting

16. “Guomin youxi xuanzhang da'an jixiao” (Announcing the prizes and results of the 'national pastime' contest), Qinfen tiyu yuebao (The Chin Fan sports monthly), February 1936. For a discussion of the 1930s concern/obsession with creating a "national pastime" to rival American and Japanese baseball, British soccer, and German gymnastics, see Morris, “Cultivating the National Body,” 303–309.

17. This tournament has historically been dominated by the People’s Liberation Army team; through 2001 the PLA men’s team had won thirty-five of forty national championships. Li Fucai, Wen Fuxiang, Dong Erzhi, Shen Enlu, and Zhong Tianfa, Zhongguo lanqiu yundongshi (The history of the Chinese basketball movement) (Wuhan: Wuhan chubanshe, 1991), 92, 110, 113.

18. Xie Jin, Ni ke wu hao (Woman basketball player no. 5) (Beijing: Tianma diyian shupianchang, 1957).

19. Shi Chuanxiang, “Women taofen gongren ye liu tiyu huodong” (We nightsoil carriers also take part in athletic activities now), Xin tiyu, February 1965, 24.


23. I mailed out one hundred surveys of thirty-four questions each to readers who had written in to Basketball with their name and address in the April 1998 through July 1998 issues. Each copy of my survey was accompanied by a stamped return envelope addressed to the People’s Sporting Press in Beijing. Of these one hundred, I received sixty surveys back.

24. Basketball, with a circulation between 150,000 and 200,000, is the third most popular of the twelve magazines published by the People’s Sporting Press in Beijing, behind Soccer World and Chinese Fishing. The magazine’s NBA concentration is clearly a marketing strategy; through January 1999, thirty-three of the last thirty-seven Basketball covers featured photos of NBA stars.

25. Of course, there is the important question of the authenticity of these submissions from "readers." I learned that in the magazines published by the People’s Sporting Press, a reliable rule of thumb is that submissions which come with full names and addresses are authentic communications from real fans, while those that include only a name are "plants" used by the editors to address certain issues.

26. Mao Aimin, “Yan’ge guanli qidui, ji ji gaohuo qishi” (Strictly manage the team, energetically fire up the basketball market), Lanqiu (Basketball), February 1998, 10.

27. Liang Xiyi, “Zhenxi qishi” (Cherish the basketball market), Lanqiu (Basketball), March 1998, 1.

28. Sun Yunyuan, “Lanqiu gaige ying fuhe guoqian” (Basketball reforms should accord with national characteristics), Lanqiu (Basketball), December 1998, 37. In past seasons, the CBA has featured other military teams such as the Chinese Air Force Eagles, the Shenyang Army Lions, the Nanjing Army Unicorns, and Guangzhou Army.

29. Dong Weihua, “Mianxiang shichang gai guize” (Face up to the market and change the rules), Lanqiu (Basketball), October 1996, 4.

30. Shen Zhiyu, “CBA de qian zai shichang” (CBA’s potential is in the market), Lanqiu (Basketball), April 1997, 8.

31. "Qianyi Leitai: CBA yinjin waiyuan li da yu bi" (Fan gauntlet: Do the benefits of CBA’s use of foreign players outweigh the negatives?), Lanqiu (Basketball), November 1997, 17.

32. Li Jianjun, “Zhongguo lanqiu de chanye hua yu zhiyehua” (Productionizing and professionalizing Chinese basketball), Lanqiu (Basketball), March 1998, 18.

33. Hao Guohua, “Tiandi guangkuo, jingying youfang” (Broadening earth and sky with effective management), Lanqiu (Basketball), April 1998, 11.

34. Kang Wenxiong, “Qiumang” (Sports blind), Lanqiu (Basketball), October 1995, 23.


36. Survey respondent 22.

37. Survey respondent 36.

38. Survey respondent 28. This respondent tore off the top part of the survey on which I had written his name. (I received back two of the six surveys I sent to Xinjiang readers, so I do not know whose this was.) This respondent was also the only one of sixty to name A-de-jiang, the Xinjiang native and starting point guard for the PLA Rockets, as his favorite player—another likely indication of this reader’s identification with Xinjiang’s place in national hierarchies.


41. Survey respondent 43.


43. Survey respondent 32.

44. "Lanqiu zaihui bei' Beijing shi di san jie sanren lanqiu tiaozhansai zhixue" (The "Basketball Cup" Beijing Municipal Three-on-Three Basketball Challenge Program), 1998.

45. That is not to say that this three-on-three tournament was purely a festival of materialist excess; in fact, opposite bottom-up expressions of class difference were utilized as well. One young man, furious with the officiating that he felt cost his team a championship, was almost inconsolable with dramatic rage during and after the final awards ceremony. When tournament organizers tried to calm him, he repeatedly, between curses, brought up the fact that both his parents had recently been “stood-down” (xiangang) from their state jobs. His notion that he thus deserved additional considerations was never challenged; however, organizers dismissed his claims as simply untrue, since he had been able to afford the tournament entrance fee and a nice pair of leather basketball sneakers.

46. Raz, Riding the Black Ship, 14.


48. Survey respondents 1 (Yin Ming, Zoucheng city, Shandong), 4 (Ma Jia, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia), 11 (Zeng Raofeng, Huizhou, Guangdong), 54 (Dong Bin, Pingba
county, Guizhou), 38 (Tan Weisen, Kaiping, Guangdong), 52 (Xiong Xueyou, Chafong village, Yunxian county, Yunnan), and 47 (Wang Zhiqiang, Baotou, Inner Mongolia).

49. Survey respondent 35 (Wang Xin, Beijing).

50. Again, the importance of the market is explained as “the fan is god”—an easy signifier for market forces as an omniscient “god” (or at least as the god’s invisible hands).

51. Jinyan, “CBA ziyao xuanzhan” (The CBA has to be concerned), Beijing qingguan bao (Beijing youth news), reprinted in Lan qui (Basketball), August 1998, 33; Ma Hong-guan, “CBA yonghan” (The CBA calls), Lan qui (Basketball), December 1998, 30; Yan Jiashun, “Ye tan CBA de shuji” (A discussion of CBA statistics), Lan qui (Basketball), September 1997, 10.

52. “Qumi xinxiang” (Fan mailbox), Lan qui (Basketball), April 1995, 28.

53. He referred to Ewing by the nickname that the Knicks star has picked up in China, the “Big Gorilla.” (Some of Ewing’s fans go even further with this unfortunate riff and affectionately call him the “African gorilla.”) Yang Jianbin, “Wo you yi ge meng” (I have a dream), Lan qui (Basketball), April 1998, 25.

54. Song Zhongyi, “Qing dao kan” (Please courageously dunk), Lan qui (Basketball), February 1996, 5; Pei Yongli, “Koulan—qiuyuan gongjili de zuo jia tixian” (The dunk: A player’s most effective means of exhibiting offensive power), Lan qui (Basketball), October 1996, 5; Zhou You, “Xiwang CBA qiuyuan duo koulan” (Hoping that more CBA players will dunk), Lan qui (Basketball), September 1996, 8–9.

55. Lisa Rofel, Other Modernities: Gendered Yarings in China after Socialism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 54.


57. Chen, Occidentalism, 8.


60. “Luo-de-man Guatiaoxing Chuang yi dai” pingjiang jiexiao” (announcing the prize winners of the Rodman strange image creativity contest), Lan qui (Basketball), March 1998, 43.

61. Shen Yi, “Huahua gongji Luo-de-man” (“Playboy” Rodman), Lan qui (Basketball), September 1997, 37.

62. Gu Wei, “Luo-de-man” (Rodman), Lan qui (Basketball), January 1999, 16.

63. Survey respondent 17.

64. “Qumi xinxiang” (Fan mailbox), Lan qui (Basketball), October 1995, 22.

65. Huang Jun, “Qingqing di, nin zou jin wo” (Gently you come to me), Lan qui (Basketball), April 1998, 25.

66. “Lan qui zhai bei.”

67. Survey respondents 10 (Tan Ke, Nanning, Guangxi) and 40 (Wu Raomin, Suhou city, Anhui).


85. Some fans, even less patient with Jiang Zemin's "reunification" project, ask when a team from Taiwan would join the CBA. Taiwan's own six-team professional Chinese Basketball Alliance folded in April 1999, but there are no plans for a Taiwan team to join China's CBA. Wei Guanzhong, "Dalu jia liansai Taiwan zhibu" (No admittance for Taiwan into the mainland's basketball first division), Huaxun xinwenwang (Taiwan Today News Network), 1 April 2000. www.ttnn.com/cna/000401/sp06.html. Accessed 2 May 2000.


87. Survey respondent 42.

88. This record was confirmed by Du Nengbin, a national-class basketball official. "Zhongguo dazhong lanqiu Ji-ni-si jilubang" (List of Guinness records from Chinese popular basketball), Lanqiu (Basketball), June 1997, 35.