

New Home Court: How Political Relationships and Economic Motivations Shaped the Experiences of Chinese NBA Players in the United States in the Early 21st Century

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Author Bio

A Bay Area native, Angel Guo is currently a senior at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. She is a writer, author, and researcher who is interested in the intersection of history, economics, politics, and race studies. Passionate about social justice and innovation in empowering marginalized communities and promoting diversity and inclusivity, she founded Bouncing Back, a youth-led social venture that uplifts underrepresented AAPI student athletes worldwide, while also serving as the Editor-in-Chief of its print magazine ‘Beyond Boundary.’ Angel is also an avid cook and sports fan enjoying exploring different recipes and reading ESPN in her free time.

Abstract

Like many other American businesses, The National Basketball Association (NBA) has gradually capitalized on China’s enormous market potential since the establishment of the Open Door Policy. At the turn of the century, the NBA exploded in international popularity with the introduction of three native Chinese basketball players onto its rosters. This paper delves deeper into the dynamics between the NBA and the Chinese trio, Wang, Yao, and Yi, as not only foreign athletes, but as reflections of US-China relations. Through a chronological and correlational exploration of this relationship, the paper argues that while the NBA grew economically by expanding into Chinese markets, Chinese athletes in the NBA faced both political barriers exiting China and increased cultural pressures once in the United States. The experiences of these athletes serve as a microcosm of the intricate interplay between economics, politics, and culture in the context of international relations. This research concludes that the Chinese athletes were used both as economic pawns by the NBA and diplomatic pawns by China, highlighting the relevance of sports as a lens through which to navigate and understand the complexities of global affairs.

Keywords: Sports, Basketball, NBA, Asian American, China, United States, Global, Political, Economic, Cultural

Introduction

In October 2011, fifteen thousand Chinese citizens stood outside a venue at 9:00 am for a 4:00 pm event (Ding, 2017). When an entourage of black vans pulled up, the horde flocked to the vehicles, crying and kissing the windows. One would think the cars contained the Chinese president, a famous movie star, or even God, but it was Kobe Bryant, American National Basketball Association (NBA) champion of the Los Angeles Lakers. Equally passionately, Kobe embraced his fans, having visited China for eight consecutive off-seasons. Across the Pacific Ocean, Chinese native NBA player Yao Ming had been received with equal vigor by American fans in 2002. From coast to coast, American citizens donned the number eleven jersey of that year's first overall draft pick.

The above scenes demonstrate a strong US-China affinity based on the two nations' shared passion for basketball. This affinity would have been impossible without China's economic advances beginning in the late 1970s. After three decades lacking in formal international relations, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping committed China to economic and political reform, "open[ing] its door and never clos[ing] it again" (Reagen, 1987). With the opening of lucrative Chinese markets to globalization, American political leaders sought to capitalize on the opportunity. In a 1984 speech, President Ronald Reagan noted that foreign investment priorities for the United States included the expansion of private corporate ventures with China (Reagen, 1984).

Like many other American businesses, the NBA strove to expand into China due to the economic potential presented by its vast population. The NBA, which was founded in 1946, first started interacting with China and its citizens in the 1980s through broadcasting its games across the Pacific (Zhang, 2017, p. 84). Over the next two decades, NBA Commissioner David Stern facilitated a strategic infiltration of Chinese media until the NBA became a daily TV staple for millions of Chinese citizens. At the turn of the century, the NBA exploded in popularity with the introduction of Chinese native basketball players onto NBA rosters. Seeing Chinese fans' attachment to American superstars such as Michael Jordan, NBA recruiters scouted China for hometown

heroes—mostly notably Yao Ming, Wang Zhizhi, and Yi Jianlian.

The NBA's expansion into China created complex experiences for its Chinese athletes in the early 2000s; Yao, Wang, and Yi's careers reflect a long history of political and economic tensions between China and the US. While the NBA grew economically by expanding into Chinese markets and by showcasing and profiting from Chinese players, the athletes faced both political barriers exiting China and increased cultural pressures once in the US. Through their trials as prospects, experiences on American soil, and finally retirements from the NBA, the Chinese trio show how international political dealings and economic motivations pervade all industries, including professional basketball.

US-China Relations Before and After 1978

Prior to the 1980s, however, the two nations maintained a weak economic relationship due to a lack of formal political relations and China's isolationism. The Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976, promoted nationalism while sacrificing living standards and self-expression. During the Mao-led revolution, Chinese businesses avoided interaction with the US. American products were often imported from other nations rather than bought directly, even if American companies offered superior bargaining (Guo, 2010, p. 163).

After this decade of national economic decline, Chinese leaders began to realize that imposed economic isolation would widen the gap between themselves and other leading nations. In 1978, newly-elected Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping proposed his "Open Door Policy," which would transform China's economy into one committed to reform and growing relations with outside nations (Huan, 1986, p. 1). Deng's policy established Special Economic Zones, which supported foreign trade and investment (Huan, 1986, p. 6). The following year, the US and China established formal diplomatic relations, ending a thirty-year period of estrangement (Guo, 2010, p. 19). This arrangement, which included a significant trade agreement, led to a swift and considerable expansion in bilateral trade. (Guo, 2010, p. 20).

Starting in 1980, the American government and economy capitalized on China's new stance, and

the following decades consisted of frequent state visits and partnerships. While economic negotiations were often halted by political hurdles such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, American leaders remained dedicated to maintaining their newfound relationship with the eastern nation. President Bill Clinton, who served from 1993 to 2001, targeted US-China relations through a “strategic collaboration” approach (Guo, 2010, p. 19). During the Clinton administration, landmark trade developments such as China’s long-awaited 2001 entrance into the World Trade Organization brought the two countries’ economies closer. By entering the WTO, Chinese businesses gained access to worldwide economic expansion, and foreign companies were allowed to directly interact with Chinese companies without government intermediaries. This decision greatly expanded trade between the United States and China, with the percentage of American exports to China rising from \$19.2 billion to \$65.2 billion from 2001 to 2007 (Guo, 2010, p. 105). This 340% increase demonstrated that Chinese citizens were increasingly invested in American products and amenities.

Clinton’s successor, President George W. Bush, initially presented a more strict ‘strategic competition’ framework regarding US-China foreign relations. After the 9/11 attacks, however, China collaborated with the United States in the War on Terror and Bush reverted to his predecessor’s more synergetic stance on China (Roberts, 2011, p. 57). In 2006, President Bush and Chinese President Hu launched the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) to further expand political, economic, and social discussion. By 2010, after years of collaboration and competition, China had joined the United States as one of the most widely recognized global powers.

Basketball and the NBA in China

As the two countries joined in economic partnerships, professional sports sought to profit from this new relationship. In 1891, Educator James Naismith invented basketball in the Springfield, Massachusetts, Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) by nailing a peach crate to a wall (Polumbaum, 2002, p. 184). YMCA dispersed around the globe, spreading reformist ideals and promoting both spirituality and athleticism. YMCA missionaries introduced basketball to China soon after in 1895 to 1896 as a way for young Chinese men to exercise their

bodies alongside their minds (Polumbaum, 2002, p. 186). The game grew more popular in China over the years, surviving a civil revolution and the formation of a new republic. Chou En Lai, the People’s Republic of China’s first prime minister, publicly promoted basketball as it promoted both fitness and teamwork (Blinebury, 2016). During the Cultural Revolution of the mid 1900s, basketball was the most popular form of recreation for communist soldiers and had become the most widespread physical activity in China (Polumbaum, 2002, p. 197).

Basketball’s professional side saw substantial growth with the NBA’s increasing presence in China in the late 1900s. Professional sports leagues sought to capitalize on China’s promising markets after the enactment of the 1978 Open Door Policy. To target China’s rapidly-growing television industry, in the late 1980s, NBA commissioner David Stern offered free content to CCTV, China’s government-run TV channel, to encourage media collaboration (Zhang, 2017, p. 84). Basketball especially appealed to younger viewers; one survey showed that it was the most popular spectator sport and sport played (Polumbaum, 2002, p. 202). In the 1990s, Chinese media began broadcasting all regular season, playoff, and All-Star games (Zhang, 2017, p. 84). To maintain support from the Chinese government, the NBA helped found the similarly-modeled Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) in 1995. During an interview, commissioner Stern noted that “we have committed to work every way possible [with] the CBA ... to help it perform to its potential and develop young [Chinese] basketball players” (Polumbaum 2002, 204). By the turn of the century, the NBA’s success in China fueled the league’s globalization mindset to such an extent that the website unabashedly read: “The sun never sets on the NBA.” (Polumbaum, 2002, 204).

The NBA’s grip on China skyrocketed with the introduction of “hometown heroes.” As the NBA’s presence became pervasive in China in the 1990s, the world fell in love with Chicago Bulls guard Michael Jordan. Chinese fans and nonfans alike dubbed the superstar “the man who can fly” (Blinebury, 2016). Upon his retirement in January 1999, Jordan’s face was plastered on over a quarter of China’s newspapers’ front pages (Polumbaum, 2002, p. 206). American companies noticed that Chinese fans were more devoted to players than the game itself and understood that profit was directly linked to exposure of heroes.

As a result, the NBA fervently scouted Chinese athletes in hopes of finding a national icon who could effectively appeal to American and Asian culture and increase the league's audience. Firms such as Nike and IMG, a sports marketing company, began to hold exhibition games in China in hopes of finding a future NBA player ("Boxed Out," 2010). In the 2000s, the NBA achieved its goal by drafting CBA stars Wang Zhizhi, Yao Ming, and Yi Jianlian to join the limited ranks of Asian NBA players.

Pre-21st Century Asian-American NBA Players

The world these Chinese players joined was historically inhospitable, as the NBA's relationship with Asian players reflected a long history of hostile racial attitudes in the US. Since Asians arrived on America's west coast in the 1800s to join the growing labor force, they have been subject to racial discrimination throughout daily life as well as in the legislature. Over the ensuing decades, distinct periods of racism towards certain Asians have prevailed: Chinese immigrants were excluded from the country during the 1800s, the Japanese were discriminated against and interned in camps during World War II, and South-East Asians were targeted during the Vietnam War (Lee, 2015, p. 2-3). Additionally, Asian athletes who played sports had to contend with stereotypes of physical inferiority such as the model minority myth, which paints Asians as having strong minds but weak bodies (Lee, 2015, p. 374). These stereotypes created additional obstacles for Asian athletes to overcome.

Prior to the twenty-first century, representation of Asian athletes in the NBA was minimal. Only three notable players made their mark in the league: Wataru Misaka, Raymond Townsend, and Rex Walters. Their careers were filled with struggles with racism and prejudice as they battled to defy stereotypes. Misaka, a Japanese-American, broke the NBA's color barrier in 1947 amidst strong anti-Japanese sentiment following World War II. Growing up, Misaka was called a "Jap" and told to "go home" (Goldstein, 2019). While playing collegiate basketball for the University of Utah, he was described in the New York Times as "a 'cute' fellow intercepting passes" ("1944 NCAA," 1944). Such belittling language followed the five foot seven Misaka to the NBA in 1947 when he debuted with the

New York Knicks, where he only played three games before being cut (Misaka Will Leave, 1947).

Twenty years after Misaka, Raymond Townsend, a Filipino-American, stepped onto the court. He grew up facing anti-South-East Asian sentiment primarily due to increased immigration levels after the rise of Asian communist regimes. Townsend, a star player at UCLA who was drafted twenty second overall by the Golden State Warriors in 1978, stated that "I could tell people I was Filipino all my life and nobody would believe me because Filipinos aren't good basketball players" (Iyer, 2020). Townsend's contemporary, half-Japanese player Rex Walters, did not face racial discrimination. A two-time All-Big Eight selection and sixteenth overall pick in the 1993 draft, Walters' white-passing appearance was likely a key factor as to why anti-Asian racism did not define his career ("Nets Make Walters," 1993). The experiences of Misaka, Townsend, and Walters serve as an important backdrop for the NBA's role in the intersection of race and politics.

Getting to America

Unlike these Asian-American trailblazers, the experiences of native Chinese players symbolized less these trends in racism but reflected US-China political and economic conflict. Hailing from a country with a vastly different political system and cultural background, the athletes found themselves caught in the crosscurrents of geopolitical tensions. Their presence in American sports became a reflection of the broader issues surrounding the United States' relationship with China, encompassing specific economic conflicts and overarching ideological differences. Despite their individual talents and achievements, the Chinese trio faced heightened scrutiny and pressure due to their nationality. Every success or failure on the field became a potential talking point in the larger narrative of US-China relations, demonstrating the relevance of using sports as a lens through which to view international dynamics.

Following the NBA's commitment to drafting Chinese native players, the league targeted CBA star Wang Zhizhi as the first national hero. Wang, who stood at seven foot one and was a star player on the Baiyi Rockets and Chinese national team, had won six CBA championships in the 1990s ("A Great Leap",

2001). Unlike other CBA teams, the Rockets were affiliated with the Chinese army, and Wang became a bargaining chip between American and Chinese interests. NBA teams understood that Wang needed release from the military, which did not want to let go of its best player, yet the Dallas Mavericks were willing to risk the loss of a draft pick if he were denied release. In 1999, the Mavericks drafted Wang at thirty-sixth overall despite his lack of clearance (Price, 1999, p. 55). When Mavs owner Ross Perot Jr. flew to Beijing, he was not even allowed to meet Wang, much less bring him to Dallas. Rockets manager Qian Limin addressed Perot, stating that “we can’t let him go, because it’s not the right time, either for our team or Wang himself.” (Price, 1999, p. 55).

After two years of debate, however, the Chinese government relented as they sought positive publicity well in advance of hosting the 2008 summer Olympics, calculating that Wang would boost his nation’s popularity. Triumphant, Nelson declared that Wang’s permission to join the NBA could serve as a “model of how our two countries can get things done—by building trust and relationships” (“A Great Leap”, 2001). The Mavericks’ dedication to obtaining the NBA’s first Chinese professional emphasizes how cultural and political disagreements can interfere when businesses seek to expand into China. Ultimately, while the CBA feared losing control of their best basketball athlete, they finally allowed Wang to play in the NBA due to external pressures in the increasingly global political climate.

Capitalizing on Yao Ming

After Wang departed for the U.S. in 2001, the NBA looked to Shanghainese hero Yao Ming. Born to two basketball stars, Yao joined the Shanghai Sharks CBA junior team at fourteen. Yao’s international fame increased exponentially in the mid 1990s as he averaged over thirty points and eighteen rebounds per CBA game (Lago, 2002). As the 2000s approached, Yao was the most anticipated NBA prospect, with Commissioner Stern noting that “kids are going to want to be like Yao” (Fatsis et al., 2002).

In 2002, Yao’s Sharks won the CBA championship. The Sharks announced that Yao would be allowed to join the NBA, forgoing the years-long negotiations that occurred with Wang. The disappointed CBA immediately passed a rule stating

that “a player must use a Chinese agent to negotiate his way to another league” (Bucher & Ming, 2004, p. 76). While the ensuing talks were more streamlined, Yao stated he felt like the league “could control me, like I was something of theirs that could be sold” (Bucher & Ming, 2004, p. 77). Yao also noted that instead of being proud of a famous athlete, “the old CBA thought he’d be too hard to control” (Bucher & Ming, 2004, p. 92), reflecting the Chinese government’s authoritarian tendencies. After weeks of discussion, Yao was ultimately given the green light at 2:00 am on draft day, and was chosen as the first overall pick of the Houston Rockets. Once across the Pacific, Yao began to serve as more than just a professional athlete.

American companies quickly saw that Yao’s unique physique indicated his enormous economic potential. Yao exposed China’s vastly-expanding economy to Western markets, bringing tremendous value for the NBA and American economy. In the United States, his regular-season games pulled in roughly 1 million viewers, but in China, they garnered as many as 30 million viewers, establishing the Houston Rockets as China’s favorite team and the most-watched globally (Larmer, 2005). In 2002, “500 million Chinese tuned into Yao’s NBA debut on television,” and subsequent league viewership levels increased steadily (Keeler & Nauright, 2005, p. 204). Statistical evidence from 2012-2013 show that the NBA’s Chinese website rose by 34% in page views, demonstrating that Yao left his mark on NBA viewership as a whole, as his influence even in his retirement continued to build upon the viewerbase he solidified (Cabral, 2010, p. 5). In 2003, Time Magazine named Yao one of the Top 100 most influential people of the year, and he was projected to become the world’s most marketable individual athlete (Fatsis et al., 2002). In 2003 alone, Yao earned over \$10 million from American endorsements through brands including American Express and Apple. Yao became an international superstar with global appeal and marketability catalyzing economic growth on both sides of the Pacific.

Furthermore, Yao embodied a mode of new global capitalism from China that benefited Chinese foreign relations. Yao became the figurehead of the China Global—a concept that promoted Chinese cultural superiority to boost the nation’s international standing (Wang, 2004, p. 267-278). Yao, who towered over his American teammates at seven foot six, was

perceived as a spectacle of ‘bigness’ aligning with the demands of global capitalism and fulfilling China’s nationalist aspirations. Yao changed the perceptions of an entire population, painting his home nation as a political and cultural powerhouse.

Even after retiring from professional basketball, Yao has continued to serve as an ambassador for basketball and promote US-China collaborations. In 2011, the Rockets scheduled Yao’s jersey retirement coincidentally on the first day of Lunar New Year (Watkins, 2017). In 2014, Yao cemented himself as a political figure by attending the US-China SED, where he met with United States Secretary of State John Kerry and served as an intermediary between the two nations while discussing efforts to combat wildlife trafficking (Barron et al., 2021, p. 37). In 2017, Yao was elected as the chairman of the CBA and declared his primary goals to be expansion and globalization as well as furthering China and the CBA’s relationship with the NBA (Cohen, 2019). The new NBA commissioner Adam Silver celebrated Yao’s election as it would allow the NBA to expand into the “league’s most lucrative foreign market” even further (Isidore, 2019). Silver’s hopes continue to be fulfilled—in 2022, the number of Chinese NBA fans was more than double the number of American citizens (Deb, 2022). Yao Ming’s trajectory post-retirement demonstrates how the Chinese NBA players become not only athletes, but arbiters of economic and political interests.

Experiences Marred by Political and Economic Tension

While they also were commodified by the NBA and other companies, Yao’s counterparts Wang and Yi most prominently faced cultural and political struggles in America and upon return to China. In Dallas, Wang struggled to acclimate to the NBA’s more aggressive style of play. Despite his towering height, Wang’s teammates jokingly questioned his ability to dunk, asking, “Can he even get up there?” (Anderson, 2002). Although coaches and staff sought to make Wang comfortable, his language and cultural barriers eclipsed his athletic abilities and prevented him from making a tangible impact on the court. When Wang severed ties with China’s national team in order to stay in the US, he caused an uproar in his home nation, with spectators characterizing him as a traitor of the state (“Unpatriotic Star,” 2002). As China’s

presence on the global stage soared, so did Chinese patriotism, and upon the end of his unsuccessful NBA career and subsequent return to China in 2005, Wang was forced to issue an apology for abandoning his home country (“Expelled Basketball Star,” 2006). On the CBA website, Wang’s statement read: “I was young and immature ... I made a very wrong decision ... through these years of painful reflection and with the help of leaders of the army and the CBA, I have deeper recognition of the mistakes I’ve made in the past (“Expelled Basketball Star,” 2006). This highly-politicized proclamation painted Wang as a possession of the Chinese government. Wang’s Chinese nationality subjected him to special conflicts not imposed on international athletes from other countries.

Meanwhile, Yi’s experiences differed from his elders, as his slightly later career subjected him to less control from the Chinese government but more pressure from fans on both sides of the Pacific. Due to Yao’s success, Yi was strongly scouted by the NBA, even as a teenager. One shoe company executive admitted that, while Yi’s appeal was “partly the Yao Ming effect,” the young athlete was “so promising we would have pursued him anyway” (Larmer, 2003). In 2007, Yi declared for the NBA draft. Chinese officials, who had experienced the process previously with Wang and Yao, came up with a list of demands for the NBA, such as allowing Yi to stay in shape for the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Gardner, 2007). The second request, which coincided with Yi’s personal demand—namely, to play in an American city with a significant Asian population—highlighted a cultural pride that has been rarely displayed by Asian professional athletes (Tadishina 2011). Yi was ultimately chosen sixth overall by the Milwaukee Bucks, and his selection was described as “another great example of cooperation between the CBA and the NBA” (Gardner, 2007). In 2008, after two successful years with the Bucks, Yi was traded to the New York Nets, fulfilling his wish of playing in a community with a large Asian population (Tadishina, 2011). The situation was a win-win, as the Nets were glad to use Yi to connect with Chinese fans.

However, Yi simultaneously faced intense pressure under the shadow of Yao. The elder statesman even fueled these flames, remarking that Yi “may be better than me” after the latter scored nineteen points and recorded nine rebounds in a game against Houston (Ludden, 2007). Although complimentary on the surface, these comments also may have invited greater

scrutiny — and greater stress for Yi. After Yao's celebrated retirement in 2011, Yi's burden increased, as he was the only Chinese national on the American court—a proxy for China's continued success on the world stage. Not only did he face pressure from millions of cross-national fans, but Yi's situation also positioned him as a target for multiple corporations to economically exploit—using his unique position to gain capital from China's market. Yi's experience aptly demonstrates the challenges faced by foreign athletes who serve as the sole representative of their entire countries.

Why there is a Modern Lack of Chinese NBA Stars

Following Yi's release from the NBA in 2012, very few Chinese-born athletes have joined the American league. Despite efforts to increase the NBA's popularity in China and relative media success, this recent lack of Chinese native basketball players has puzzled many industry insiders. In 2017, commissioner Silver noted that “it frustrates me that there are no Chinese players in the NBA right now... there's probably more basketball being played in China than anywhere else in the world. And more NBA basketball is being watched in China than anywhere else in the world” (Maloney, 2017).

One explanation for this lack of Chinese NBA players could be the increased tensions between China and the United States. Starting in the 2010s, China's economy had caught up with that of the United States, raising tensions between the two most powerful nations. The United States accused China of pursuing unfair trade policies and stealing scientific and technological knowledge and property (“A Quick Guide,” 2020). Meanwhile, Chinese officials asserted that America ignored free trade rules to promote their own dominance (“A Quick Guide,” 2020). As relations soured, a formal trade war began in March 2018 when President Donald Trump signed the “Presidential Memorandum Targeting China's Economic Aggression” (Rampton 2018). The two nations placed heavy tariffs on one another, which had major implications for the athletic industry. For instance, “the American government began collecting 15 percent of \$112 billion in Chinese imports, on...basketball jerseys, basketball shoes, basketballs and even hoops” (D’Innocenzio 2020). Although the NBA expressed disappointment in the trade war, Commissioner

Silver still noted that “we are at root an American company, and so we follow U.S. government policy” (Young, 2021). While the two nations agreed to roll back damaging tariffs in January 2020, the economic atmosphere remained tense. In May of 2020, the NBA looked to other nations, launching a high-potential Africa operation valued at \$1 billion dollars (Young, 2021). Although this expansion does not constitute a divorce between the NBA and China, it may indicate a new era in which China, where the economy has plateaued and political friendliness cooled, is no longer the league's most favored market.

Additionally, individuals within the NBA furthered conflict with China by speaking out regarding a sensitive international issue. In 2019, Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey posted a message in support of the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong (Deb, 2022). As retaliation, China pulled the NBA off state television, despite having broadcasted games since the 1980s. Although the league's leadership chastised Morey for his comments in an effort to placate Chinese interests, China kept NBA off the air until March of 2022. While Chinese fans still supported the American league through other streaming services during this hiatus, Chinese players were discouraged from interacting with the NBA.

One final possible explanation for the NBA's current lack of Chinese professionals could be the CBA's heightened appeal (and the NBA's lessened appeal) to Chinese-born athletes. In recent years, CBA salaries for domestic players have increased, providing an incentive to stay in China. For instance, Ding Yanyuhang, who played with the Dallas Mavericks summer league, would earn up to \$280k in the NBA compared to \$500k a year at home (Wong, 2017). Moreover, the CBA has been discouraging its athletes from joining the NBA. Sports journalist Alex Wong argues that “there's [no] financial benefit to CBA teams to nurturing these players with an eye to making them an NBA prospect” (Wong, 2017). If an athlete went to the NBA, the CBA the league would lose the profit and prestige attached to them. Perhaps, going to America is no longer the dream for Chinese basketball players. This phenomenon in the sports market reflects a larger trend in China's recent history, in which the nation is seeking to become more self-sufficient and an economic leader.

Conclusion

The NBA's strategic expansion into China starting from 1978 reflects the complicated yet increasingly interdependent—and perhaps recently distanced—relationship between the United States and China. The involvement of Wang Zhizhi, Yao Ming, and Yi Jianlian in the NBA provide a reflection of US-China political and economic relations, demonstrating shifting dynamics from the late 1900's to the present day. The political, economic, and cultural impact of these three athletes far exceeded that of any points, rebounds, or assists their athletic impact had on the league. Ultimately, the experiences of Wang, Yao, and Yi offer insight into how American businesses can use the professional athletics industry to promote positive relationships with China and other foreign nations. The Chinese athletes' presence in the NBA has become a reflection of the broader issues and interests surrounding US-China relations, highlighting the relevance of sports as a lens through which to view global dynamics.

Looking ahead, it is essential for all parties from the NBA to China to recognize the importance of adhering to the principles of international relations in order to forge meaningful progress. Recently, as bridge-building and alliances appear increasingly elusive, it has become imperative for sports organizations and figures to navigate the complex landscape of US-China relations with diplomacy. By upholding the rules of international engagement, fostering mutual respect, and seeking common ground, the two nations can continue to harness the power of sports as a unifying force, transcending political boundaries and fostering positive relationships. In doing so, they can pave the way for a future characterized by collaboration, cultural exchange, and shared understanding—on the courts and in the broader context of global affairs.

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