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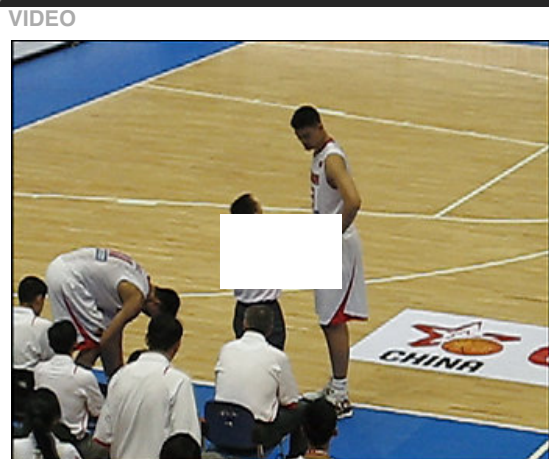
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The 7-foot-6 Vessel of China's Hopes

By *Maureen Fan*
 Washington Post Foreign Service
 Thursday, July 24, 2008

HANGZHOU, [China](#), July 23 -- In the affluent lakefront capital of Zhejiang province last week, Yao Ming, China's 7-foot-6 center, walked onto the basketball court at Yellow Dragon Stadium to thunderous applause. It was a small but significant step for the upcoming Beijing Olympics: Yao would play.



China's Ambassador of Hoops

Basketball first came to China via foreign missionaries near the end of the 1890s. Later, under communist rule, athletics were used as politics. This video includes scenes from a recent game between China and Serbia, including shots of China's most famous hoopster, NBA All-Star center Yao Ming. Video by Maureen Fan/The Washington Post

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Since February, when Yao suffered a stress fracture in his left foot, ending his season with the Houston Rockets, the Chinese had held their breath over the specter of their most famous athlete riding the bench for the national team.

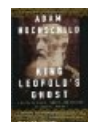
A six-year veteran of the NBA, Yao is a towering global commodity. But in the Olympics, his value is even greater: He is a reflection of the China that many people here hope the world will see during the Games -- a humble, hard-working superstar unchanged by his vast new wealth. In that way, he personifies for many Chinese the spirit of the nation, which has embraced capitalism even as it has clung to the mantle of communism.

"For ordinary Chinese, who have a very strong concept



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about their nation, Yao represents China in the U.S.," said Wang Songtao, 27, a Beijing-based lawyer. "He handles national interests and his individual interests well. He always remembers that he is from China."

Even China's president, Hu Jintao, has taken note of the Yao phenomenon. He chatted Wednesday with the basketball star as he visited Chinese athletes training in Beijing for the Games.

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"The whole nation is very concerned about your foot. How is it going now?" Yao asked Yao, China's state-run People's Daily newspaper reported.

"It's okay," Yao replied.

Through the decades, China has worried about its image at the Olympics. It boycotted the Games for more than two decades beginning in the late 1950s, when organizers began to allow Taiwan to participate. Later, Chinese leaders fretted over the country's failure to win many

medals in sports dominated by the West.

Since China was awarded the Games, Communist Party leaders have been preoccupied with how best to showcase Chinese culture and athletic prowess this summer. But the government has been pushed back on its heels -- forced to defend itself from criticism of its crackdown on political dissidents, its role in Tibet and Darfur, and its effectiveness in handling the Sichuan earthquake.

Yao, with a size-18 shoe planted both in this country and in the United States, is the type of export China is more interested in promoting.

The 27-year-old player was born to two basketball stars whose marriage was arranged by the government, which then measured him regularly even as an infant, predicted his growth and trained him for years. He is not the first Chinese basketball player to make it in the NBA -- that would be Wang Zhizhi, his teammate on the Chinese national team, who played for the Dallas Mavericks beginning in 2001. Yao, however, is the most successful. His earnings in 2007 were estimated by Forbes magazine at \$56.6 million.

No matter what his physical condition during the Games, "once he shows up, his appearance will make a difference," said Jin Wenhui, 21, a student at Texas A&M University who is a regular at Beijing's Dongdan basketball courts when in town.

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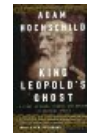


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"People will feel differently as soon as he stands there," Jin said. "In our hearts, he is the image ambassador of China."

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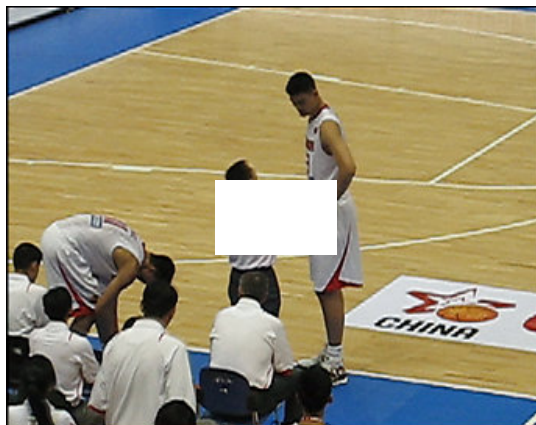
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Yao's loyalty to China has helped win him admirers. In May, after the earthquake that devastated Sichuan province, Yao donated \$71,000 for the relief effort. When his contribution prompted rare public complaints that, given his salary, he could afford to send more, he did so, upping the amount to \$286,000 that same week. In June, he announced he would give \$2 million to a foundation in his name to rebuild schools destroyed in the quake.

Basketball fans are quick to point out that Wang has not always been so loyal to his home country. He initially balked when asked to return to China to train for an Asian tournament -- and was not reinstated on the national team until he issued a written public apology.

"In China, the system is that the country cultivates you, so you need to pay it back when the country needs you," said Ma Jun, a 40-year-old clothing

VIDEO



China's Ambassador of Hoops

Basketball first came to China via foreign missionaries near the end of the 1890s. Later, under communist rule, athletics were used as politics. This video includes scenes from a recent game between China and Serbia, including shots of China's most famous hoopster, NBA All-Star center Yao Ming. Video by Maureen Fan/The Washington Post

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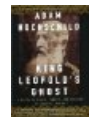
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merchant. "Yao did well. When China asked him to play for the Chinese team, he returned. When the earthquake happened, he stood up quickly."

Together with 20-year-old Yi Jianlian, who was recently traded to the New Jersey Nets, Yao and Wang form the three pillars of a "Great Wall" of Chinese basketball. They are a point of pride here -- pictures of the trio were on display in Hangzhou last week -- and will be watched closely during China's highly anticipated first game on Aug. 10 against the United States.

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"Basketball is the sport that has changed China the most in recent years, as important as the development of the Internet," said Di Zhu, 20, another regular on the Dongdan courts who holds a ticket to an Olympic basketball final.

A 1994 matchup between the Rockets and the New York Knicks was the first NBA Finals game televised live in China. By 2002, when Yao played his first game for the Rockets, an estimated 300 million people watched the Chinese telecast.

"Yao is very Chinese in style, very modest. He doesn't display a bad temper, and when he plays he never hurts the other athletes," said Di, a math and economics major at Edinburgh University in Scotland. "Every time he appears in public, he dresses formally and neatly. And he is quite patriotic."

Yao's sense of humor and duty are often among the first attributes Chinese praise.

Asked by a Chinese journalist four years ago what his favorite American music was, Yao replied: "I like the national anthem. I listen to it at least 82 times a year." When he quietly signed a five-year extension to his contract with the Rockets three years ago, sportswriters marveled at the lack of arrogance, drama and posturing that usually accompanies star negotiations in the NBA.

Like his parents in their youth, Yao initially hated basketball. A monotonous and strict state-sponsored training routine had him practicing six days a week. Not until his mother, a former Red Guard, scored tickets to see the Harlem Globetrotters did a 9-year-old Yao see players actually enjoying themselves, according to "Operation Yao Ming," a book by Brook Larmer.

By age 14, Yao was training 10 hours a day. His mother's revolutionary activities, while endearing her to Communist Party leaders in Chairman Mao's time, produced endless suffering when an official she persecuted was rehabilitated and placed in charge of Shanghai's sports system. Yao's parents could barely afford to feed their growing son.

Then, on the eve of entering the NBA draft in 2002, Yao's chances were almost snuffed out by Beijing's fears that his loyalties might also lie with the United States. Officials allowed him to enter the draft only after he pledged his loyalty to Beijing, which demanded that Yao give half his salary to the government.

China now plays down its chances for gold medals at the Games, and even fans say they would be happy if China finishes fifth or sixth among the 12 Olympic teams. But the country's hopes clearly rest with Yao's ability to strengthen the confidence of the Chinese people. If Yao can prove how good the Chinese are at basketball, the thinking goes, they will gain the respect of the United States.

At last week's game in Hangzhou, some of Yao's fans could barely contain their excitement.

"I can't even hold my digital video camera without trembling," said Hou Qi, a college student who paid nearly \$230 for his VIP section ticket Thursday. "Yao helps the cultural

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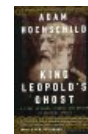


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exchange between the U.S. and China. He has all the traditional Chinese cultural elements and good points such as being steady, humble, a good communicator. Plus he has a kind heart."

Researcher Zhang Jie contributed to this report.

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