



Operation Yao Ming: The Chinese Sports Empire, American Big Business, and the Making of an NBA Superstar

By Brook Larmer

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The riveting story behind NBA giant Yao Ming, the ruthless Chinese sports machine that created him, and the East-West struggle over China's most famous son.

The NBA's 7'6" All-Star Yao Ming has changed the face of basketball, revitalizing a league desperate for a new hero while becoming a multimillionaire pitchman for Reebok and McDonald's. But his journey to America—like that of his forgotten foil, 7'1" Wang Zhizhi—began long before he set foot on the world's brightest athletic stage.

Operation Yao Ming opens with the story of the two boys' parents, basketball players brought together by Chinese officials intent on creating a generation of athletes who could bring glory to their resurgent motherland. Their children would have no more freedom to choose their fates. By age thirteen, Yao was pulled out of sports school to join the Shanghai Sharks pro team, following in the footsteps of Wang, then the star of the People's Liberation Army team. Rumors of the pair of Chinese giants soon attracted the NBA and American sports companies, all eager to tap a market of 1.3 billion consumers.

In suspenseful scenes, journalist Brook Larmer details the backroom maneuverings that brought China's first players to the NBA. Drawing on years of firsthand reporting, Larmer uncovers the disturbing truth behind China's drive to produce Olympic champions, while also taking readers behind the scenes of America's multibillion-dollar sports empire. Caught in the middle are two young men—one will become a mega-rich superstar and hero to millions, the other a struggling athlete rejected by his homeland yet lost in America.

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- Sales Rank: #1281371 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Gotham
- Published on: 2005-11-03
- Released on: 2005-11-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.22" h x 1.30" w x 6.26" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The 7'5" Yao Ming didn't get where he is today because of some lucky genes and a good three-point shot. Everything about him, from birth to first endorsement deal, was planned by a confluence of government and business interests intent on creating a superstar. Basketball has been popular in China since the late 19th century, so a government with a Soviet-style, militaristic sports system intent on creating world-class athletes thought little of mating its tallest athletes in an attempt to pass on their genes. Thus in 1980, Yao was born to the tallest couple in China, the result of matchmaking that carried with it the dark shadow of eugenics. From there, a government campaign worked to turn "a boy with an ideal genetic makeup into the best basketball player in Chinese history," writes Larmer, and it wasn't long before Nike and the NBA had their hooks in him. Larmer, *Newsweek's* former Shanghai bureau chief, crafts his narrative well, explaining the byzantine interests competing for their pound of Yao's flesh with admirable simplicity. Yao's story is so controlled that when he finally overcomes his initial clumsiness and starts rebelling against his government at book's end, it's hard not to feel empathy for the gentle giant.

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From [Booklist](#)

Larmer, former *Newsweek* bureau chief in Shanghai (and Buenos Aires, Miami, and Hong Kong), traces the development and emergence of Yao Ming as China's first bona fide NBA star, from the arranged marriage of his parents--both reluctant but sensational, and tall, basketball players in China--to his care and feeding as a youth by PRC sports officials, to Nike's savvy insinuation into Yao's career and into mainstream Chinese culture in the mid-1990s, to his number-one selection in the 2002 NBA draft. Not coincidentally, Yao's story here reflects the seismic shifts taking place in Chinese sports, post-1949; it starts with a country virtually invisible in the global arena that becomes, by the time of Yao's emergence, an international power not embarrassed to flex its muscle. If Larmer's account succeeds in contextualizing Yao in the high-octane world of the NBA, it also succeeds in revealing one aspect of China's more fundamental struggle with its socioeconomic identity in the world today. *Alan Moores*

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Review

...A moving tale of the heartaches and rewards of life at the topmost levels of professional basketball in China... -- *Jonathan Spence, author of The Search for Modern China*

...Offers a window on the Communist cult that swept Mao's China, and the capitalist cult that has replaced it. -- *David Ignatius, columnist for The Washington Post*

...A poignant personal adventure acted out on a global stage. -- *Walter Isaacson, author of Ben Franklin: An American Life and Kissinger: A Biography*

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Justin Tapscott:

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