

# **The Cultural Politics of the NBA and China: Understanding the Daryl Morey Incident**

**by**  
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## **Declaration of Committee**

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the Daryl Morey incident as a case of international communication. On October 4, 2019, the general manager of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Houston Rockets, Daryl Morey, posted a seven-word tweet saying "Fight for Freedom, Stand with Hong Kong" that showed support for the violent protests in Hong Kong. This led to a major fallout in the NBA's relationship with China. This paper analyzes this case as an index to the larger picture of US-China relationship. Firstly, I evaluate the development of the NBA in China with the efforts made by Yao Ming from cultural, political, and economical perspectives. Secondly, I examine the details of the Daryl Morey incident to reveal the influence of this incident in China and the factors influencing the NBA's campaign in China. Lastly, I develop insights from the Daryl Morey incident at both macro and micro levels to evaluate the influence of this incident on US-China relationship. In conducting this research, I will pay particular attention to the impact of social media in shaping the incident and considers the future of NBA's sport diplomacy in China.

**Keywords:** National Basketball Association; Sport Diplomacy; China; Hong Kong; Sino-American Relations

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, grandparents, and boyfriend who shared their words of advice and encouragement to me, offered unconditional love and support, and encouraged me to go on every adventure, especially this one. To Stephen Curry, who is the best NBA player ever and will never read this.

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## List of Acronyms

CBA	Chinese Basketball Association
CCTV	China Central Radio and Television
NBA	National Basketball Association
PRC	People's Republic of China



# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

As the world's cultures are becoming increasingly interconnected, there are also increases in friction, collision, and intermingling. "Ping-Pong diplomacy" played a pivotal role in the initial contacts that led to the establishment of the Sino-U.S. diplomatic relationship. Nowadays, the NBA has become the most popular sport in China with around 500 million fans. Over the years, Yao Ming plays a vital role in the link between the East and the West. As an influential figure of transnational communication globally, Yao Ming tried to establish a strong and amicable connection between China and the NBA over the years (Huang, 2013). Nevertheless, the future of the NBA and China was called into doubt. In October 2019, the general manager of the NBA Houston Rockets, Daryl Morey, gave rise to conflicts by sharing an image with the caption "Fight for Freedom, Stand with Hong Kong" on his personal Twitter account. The tweet posted by him refers to the support for the Hong Kong protest. This incident has been a trigger of the dispute between the NBA and China. Even though nearly two years have passed, the Daryl Morey incident remained as a concern within the relationship between the NBA and China.

This research focuses on the development of the NBA in China as an example of cultural globalization. Since the 1980s, the NBA can be considered a successful model for promoting international sporting events in China (Polumbaum, 2002). In this research, I will start by describing the rise of the Chinese basketball market and how Yao Ming plays a critical role in promoting the NBA in China. It then focuses on the far-reaching influence of the Daryl Morey incident on the NBA. Finally, I analyze the different views between the NBA and China on the Hong Kong protest and critique Cha & Lim's (2019) argument, which claims that China controls the world through restrictions and sanctions based on its massive market share. Their position states that China is an authoritarian country, focused on maintaining its population through these measures. However, this apparently contradicts what configures the predatory behavior they point out. I strongly disagree with Cha and Lim's opinion that China's predatory liberalism is an affront to the liberal international order (Cha and Lim, 2019).

The existing literature focuses on the globalization of sport and the impacts of the NBA in China. However, there has been little qualitative analysis of the influence of the Daryl Morey incident in China. This research explores the Daryl Morey incident by conducting the analysis of the comments from the Chinese public and the trended hashtag #莫雷关上了斯特恩敲开的大门# (#Morey closed the door that Stern had knocked open#) on Weibo. I explained the reason why the Chinese public boycotts the NBA's official response. One of the significant discussions in those comments is what the NBA needs to do to address this problem. In addition, freedom of speech has been a controversial and much-disputed subject amid the Daryl Morey incident. The small Ping-Pong ball started the normalization of Sino-American diplomacy, but now, the big basketball threatens the friendship between the people of China and that of the United States.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **From “Ping-Pong Diplomacy” to “Basketball Diplomacy”: The Development of the NBA in China**

I begin this chapter by reviewing the history of sports diplomacy between the United States and China. I then discuss how Yao Ming became a basketball star, corporate pitchman, and transcultural emissary. Then, I explore the development of the NBA in China and the achievement of the NBA's diffusion in China from different angles, including revenue, sports fans, sponsorship, and merchandise. I conclude this chapter by discussing the influence of the NBA in China and how the NBA promoted the popularity of basketball in China through Chinese social media.

#### **2.1. Sports Diplomacy Background between the United States and China ---“Ping-Pong Diplomacy”**

On April 10, 1971, the United States table tennis delegation and accompanying American journalists arrived in Beijing, becoming the first Americans allowed to enter the Chinese Mainland since 1949 (the founding of the People's Republic of China). This move positively impacted on the breakthrough in Sino-American relations and is credited with being “the little ball moved the big ball, a Ping-Pong ball moved the earth.” The goodwill between the United States and Chinese Ping-Pong teams contributed to the normalization of relations between the two countries. The United States and China officially started “the dialogue between states” (Watson, 1991, p. xii) by sports. In February 1972, President Nixon set foot on the Chinese Mainland and opened up relations with China. The diplomatic move made by President Nixon laid a good foundation for basketball diplomacy with China.

#### **2.2. The Development of the NBA in China**

Following the success of Ping-Pong diplomacy, Chinese and American authorities continued to develop the value of intercultural communication through sports. Basketball diplomacy began in August 1979, with the NBA's Washington Wizards (then known as the Washington Bullets) as the first American basketball team being invited to China to make

a historic visit (Parker, 2020). Two exhibition games were hosted in Beijing and Shanghai, respectively. The Washington Wizard played against the Chinese national team and the Chinese army team called “Bayi”. This visit was extremely well received, and the United States and China started negotiating for a follow-up visit immediately. In 1984, the Chinese national basketball team visited the United States to compete in the Olympic games in Los Angeles, California. Basketball diplomacy between the United States and China reached a new level, contributing to Sino-American relations and sports.

Basketball soared in popularity when Chinese media broadcasting NBA games in the 1980s. David Stern, the former NBA commissioner, went to Beijing with a demo tape in hand in the hope of brokering a historic deal in 1987 (Huang, 2008). He built a relationship between the NBA and CCTV, China Central Radio and Television, which is the government-controlled television network in China (Huang, 2008), offering the video-recorded games of the NBA finals to them. That was how the story began in China. Also, this was the time that basketball replaced Ping-Pong as the most significant sports diplomacy effort between the United States and China. Since then, the NBA has been considered as a successful model for promoting international sporting events in China.

By the time Yao Ming was drafted by the Houston Rockets as the No.1 pick in June 2002, the NBA’s attention and influence in the Chinese market have increased dramatically. Yao Ming’s emergence as a basketball star, corporate pitchman, and transcultural emissary expresses a relatively new phenomenon within late capitalism (Oates & Polunbaum, 2004). It also intertwines interests of basketball and merchandising through mass media. Yao Ming is one of the few players in the NBA from mainland China. He managed to capture the interest of global brands such as McDonald’s through his youthfulness, dynamism, and sense of humor (Oates & Polunbaum, 2004). He embodied the new idea of marketing for pro-sport and consumer products and established the NBA’s key strategy of expanding its global reach (Oates & Polunbaum, 2004).

Yao Ming’s influence in the NBA is highlighted during his spring 2003 practice with the Chinese national team. He had a campaign against SARS and NBA took the opportunity to promote itself under a team message that stated “The Houston Rockets and China. You’re part of us. We’re part of you.” (Oates & Polunbaum, 2004). Additionally, most of his campaigns and promotions utilized Chinese language advertising to improve the Chinese fan base in the NBA (Oates & Polunbaum, 2004). It fostered the increase in

the awareness of Chinese culture in the NBA through radio interviews done in Mandarin and the creation of Asian Americans Night by the Celtics. It highlights the improved relations between China and the NBA.

Gradually, the NBA arranged several pre-season games in China, and the Chinese companies showed a huge passion for sponsoring the event. They were well aware of the potential that Yao brought to their interests by expanding the market in China through sport. By October 2004, the NBA's Chinese market had become mature. As the NBA's China game landed in the Shanghai Stadium, the NBA became the first of the four major North American professional leagues (National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), and National Hockey League (NHL)) to host a China tournament. The game floor, cameras, and basketball hoops were flown in from the United States to give Chinese fans a taste of the original NBA game, representing the highest level of basketball competition.

In an era of global, star-centered sport, the Chinese government has put a huge investment in Yao's public persona since Yao brings a unique model to the hyper-masculine arena of the U.S.-style commodified basketball (Oates & Polumbaum, 2004). The idea of 'flexible citizenship' allows for migration and relocation to enable growth and development in the late periods of capitalism for the United States and China (Oates & Polumbaum, 2004). It allowed China to capitalize on the global recognition of Yao to establish and strengthen the sports Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) and encourage hyper-masculinity in the country's sports. As Yao drew the Chinese spectators to the NBA, he contributed to improving the two country's relations. He manages to portray the values of national pride, loyalty, and entitlement that are much valued and widely recognized in China than in the US (Oates & Polumbaum, 2004). It is believed that Yao only provides labor to the US, while he is loyal to China, and it is described as a 'national duty' to put the country's name at the top (Oates & Polumbaum, 2004). The Chinese have embraced, adapted, and increasingly reciprocated a sport of Western origin (Polumbaum, 2002).

At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Chinese fans showed great passion and love when the US national team walked into the opening ceremony. Since then, the NBA has held more than twenty NBA China games in Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen. Even though they are all pre-season games, the tickets sold out in one minute. The NBA plans to hold NBA China games in many other cities in China further to enhance its influence in various

regions of China. Acknowledging the global nature of the sport and claiming Chinese competence in the sport, are the next step.

## **2.3. The NBA as the Most Successful Overseas Sports Events in China**

The NBA's main revenue segment in China comprises broadcast revenue, sponsorship revenue, China game tickets revenue, and merchandise sales revenue. The NBA essentially operates on the "Fan economy", and long-term growth mainly relies on the overseas market. Sina Weibo is the most popular official social media platform of NBA China. Because of the popularity of basketball in China, it is one of the NBA's most important target markets. From the research on Sina Weibo, there are 45.72 million followers on the NBA China official account. The Chinese market has a significant impact on the promotion of the enterprise value of the NBA.

### **2.3.1. Broadcast Revenue**

Broadcast revenue is the most significant source of revenue for the NBA in China, including two major components, which are the right of digital network broadcasting, and the right of television broadcasting, respectively. From the television revenue, CCTV is the exclusive TV broadcaster of the NBA in China, and the annual TV broadcasting revenue is about 70 million dollars. According to Deb (2020), the number of people watching NBA games on Tencent's streaming services has approximately tripled in the last four years. As many as 300 million people in China watched the 2019 NBA Finals Game 6 (Warriors vs Raptors). This data set the record as the most-watched game. Moreover, from the network broadcasting revenue, Tencent and the NBA league agreed on a five-year extension cooperation contract for broadcasting through the 2024-25 season, which is worth \$1.5 billion (Deb, 2020).

### **2.3.2. Sponsorship Revenue**

The establishment of NBA China in 2008 provided more sponsorship opportunities for companies looking to develop their market in China. The NBA's official partners are shown on the official website in China as 25 in total, which are 2K Games, Adidas, Beats, Changhong 长虹, CLEAR 清扬男士, Trip.com Group 携程旅行, Dicos 德克士, 一嗨 chi,

Mobil 美孚, Gatorade 佳得乐, Manulife-sinochem 中宏保险, Master Kang 康师傅, Meling 美菱, Mengniu Dairy 蒙牛, Migu 咪咕, NIKE 耐克, SAP, Wilson, Tissot, Under Armour, XYF 小赢科技, New Balance, Hyper Ice, Xpeng 小鹏汽车 (NBA official partners, 2021). For instance, according to Jiemian, the sponsorship fee of Anta is 200 million RMB per year from 2014.

### **2.3.3. China Game Tickets Revenue**

The NBA holds two pre-season games in China every year, with its tickets often being sold out in a second. In addition to the NBA China game tickets revenue, China game sponsorship fees are also the main revenues. The league's revenue is estimated to be around \$500 million per year (Medina & Zillgitt, 2019).

### **2.3.4. Merchandise Sales Revenue**

Basketball has become a global phenomenon, with fans from all over the world consuming any and all forms of the sport. Apart from the NBA's partnerships in China, multiple famous players, including Klay Thompson, Dwayne Wade, and Andrew Wiggins, are signing exclusive shoe deals with several major Chinese companies—Anta, Li-Ning, and Peak worth hundreds of millions of dollars (Cha & Lim, 2019). Thompson's deal with Anta, in particular, reached \$80 million over ten years (Medina & Zillgitt, 2019).

### **2.3.5. The Influence of NBA in China**

The NBA dominates social media platforms like Weibo. To attract the interest of younger fans, NBA has collaborated with Chinese digital media. Nearly 500 million people, actually more than the entire population of the US, watched the NBA using Tencent, China's largest streaming platform. And this means there were tremendous opportunities in China. Moreover, NBA stars like Kobe Bryant, Stephen Curry, and LeBron James, are widely recognized in China. News of the legend, Kobe Bryant's shocking death immediately became a top trending topic on every social media site when many Chinese fans woke up in the morning on January 27, 2019, in China. On the same day, more than 3.7 million fans sent their wishes and paid tribute through a digital vigil on Tencent and Weibo in China (Wang, 2020). Chinese fans of Kobe Bryant spent two months planning light shows on his 42<sup>nd</sup> Birthday at 24 buildings in 14 cities in China (Zhao, 2020). Kobe

Bryant inspired the young generation in China as a perfect basketball idol because of his mamba mentality, perseverance, and leadership. Consequently, his influence has gone far beyond his performance on the court in China. That is nothing about politics, but the true passion and love about basketball. The entry of the NBA in China has promoted the popularity of basketball in China. It can further expand the social and market base of basketball and promote the international exchange and cooperation of basketball in China.



## Chapter 3.

# Facing “No-win” Situation: Analysis of the Daryl Morey Incident

### 3.1. Methodology and Data Sources

After having outlined the historical context of Sino-US sports diplomacy and the importance of the Chinese market for the NBA, this chapter moves on to analyze the Daryl Morey incident in detail. Specifically, I employ discourse analysis methods to analyze the NBA's official statements, comments under the statements, and the hashtag #莫雷关上了斯特恩敲开的大门# (which means #Morey closed the door that Stern had knocked on#). As a textual analysis method, Discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) focuses on language use and the ideology embedded in the specific ways of using language. According to Fairclough (1995, p 59), text, discursive practices, and sociocultural practices are interdependent and interconnected. I try to understand the symbolic weight of the materials and how it carries or contradicts a culture by using discourse analysis. The discourse analysis method is used to analyze the comments of the post about the statement released by the NBA and the content under the hashtag #Morey closed the door that Stern had knocked on#, which is the most trend hashtag about Daryl Morey incident on Weibo to investigate public reactions from China. I will analyze specific Weibo content, and the comments with more than 1000 likes to determine Chinese audiences' response to the statement released by the NBA for the Daryl Morey incident. The post immediately drew strong opposition from Chinese social media users, who targeted his Twitter account with angry messages and called for his dismissal. Moreover, I will analyze the #Morey closed the door that Stern had knocked on# on Weibo, which has the most views and comments about the Daryl Morey incident, with 1.09 billion views and 82 thousand comments.

The data and information have been accessed through an internet search on leading databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, government websites, NBA websites, and academic articles from non-profit organizations such as Pacific Affairs. Keywords are used to fast-track the procedure of retrieving specific information relevant to the research. Other relevant information includes news and other commentaries about NBA's media

communication. I collected the Weibo comments under the official responses released by the NBA on Weibo social media platform on October 6, 2019, and translated them into English.

## 3.2. The Analysis of the Daryl Morey Incident

### 3.2.1. Conflict

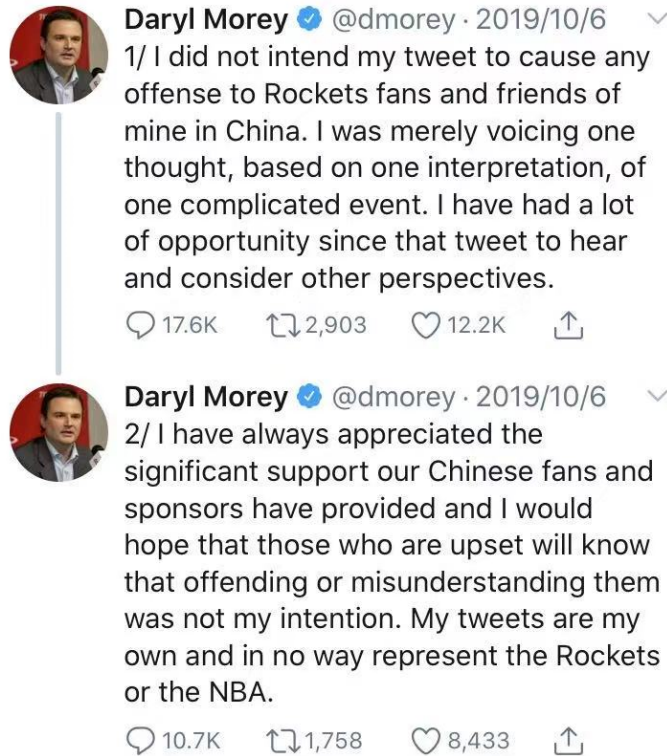
On October 4, 2019, the general manager of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) Houston Rockets, Daryl Morey, posted a seven-word tweet saying "Fight for Freedom, Stand with Hong Kong" and an image that showed support.



**Figure 3.1. Tweet Posted by Daryl Morey showed support for the Hong Kong protest**

Source: Daryl Morey Twitter account @dmorey, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019

The tweet was referred to as the Hong Kong protest movement. The tweet evoked the displeasure and anger of Chinese fans and was deleted by Morey shortly afterward, but the negative publicity had already been created. Since then, Morey posted two tweets to explain with no apology. Morey tried to explain that the tweet was an expression of his personal views (Cai et al., 2019). The efforts did not stop the commercial repercussion, as China immediately cut all ties with the Rockets Franchise, with the Rockets losing up to a hundred million in revenue and potential income.



**Figure 3.2. Tweets posted by Daryl Morey explained his remarks on the Hong Kong protest**

Source: Daryl Morey Twitter account @dmorey, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019

### 3.2.2. Chinese Government Response and Reactions

On October 8, the Chinese Government demanded Morey apologize for his remarks. “We believe that any speech that challenges the sovereignty of a country and the stability of society does not fall within the scope of the freedom of speech,” said a statement from CCTV Sports (CCTV, which had broadcast NBA games for over three decades) (October 6, 2019). CCTV and Tencent announced that they were suspending all live-streaming and broadcasting of Houston Rockets games, and immediately investigated all collaborations and exchanges involved with the NBA (Cha & Lim, 2019). The Chinese government and companies quickly cut all ties with the Rockets Franchise. For Tencent, this is undoubtedly a blow to its interests because Tencent and the NBA league agreed on a five-year extension cooperation contract for broadcasting through the 2024-25 season, which is worth \$1.5 billion (Deb, 2020).

The reason why this incident had such a huge impact is that the Houston Rockets is one of the most critical and popular teams in China. The Houston Rockets had an

excellent reputation among the Chinese fans because of the legendary player, Yao Ming, who was selected by the Houston Rockets with the No.1 pick of the 2002 NBA draft. Even Yao Ming had retired, the Rockets still earned substantial profits in China. The NBA treated Yao Ming as a crucial tool in expanding its Chinese markets (Keeler, 2005). The Rockets put a large amount of investment and effort into the Chinese market and gained a lot of interest in return (Dustin, 2014). The Chinese perceive that the Rockets should not have supported separatism in Hong Kong as it hurt the feelings of the Chinese fans, who have made the Houston Rockets into a massively popular team in China. These official responses essentially demonstrate a firm diplomatic stand, which conveys China's positions and values to the world.

The measures taken by the Chinese government will complicate the NBA's future in China with Morey's indirect response to his speech, as well as the Houston Rockets and the NBA's official response. The Chinese government perceives that there is no room for compromise when it comes to safeguarding national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security (Kung, 2019). The ongoing debate between the United States and the Chinese government is about far more than just a single tweet. This phenomenon is likely to be a microcosm of the overall competition between China and the United States since the beginning.

### **3.2.3. NBA Official Response**

As the situation escalated, the NBA's official statement and NBA Commissioner Silver's statement were considered to be disappointing to the Chinese side. It only emphasized that Morey's remarks are his personal views, and he is supported to exercise his freedom of expression.

#### **Statement 1 from Chief Communications Officer Mike Bass**

As shown below, Bass' original statement does not recognize Morey's remarks on Twitter as being "inappropriate" nor "hurt feelings". The English word "regrettable" that Morey's views deeply offended many fans in China.



**Figure 3.3. NBA Official Response for Daryl Morey Incident**

Source: NBA official Weibo account, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020,  
<https://m.weibo.cn/1883881851/4424678237631251>

When the NBA says “respects China’s history and culture”, can it be interpreted as the NBA respects China’s culture, which is a cultural issue, but it does not respect China’s exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong? The NBA did not offer any apology in the statement, nor did it punish Morey in any way, but simply glossed over the issue by saying Morey had “made it clear”.

### **Statement 2 from NBA Commissioner Adam Silver**

NBA commissioner Adam Silver, who was attending an event in Japan on October 7, 2019, faced the media in response to Houston Rockets general manager Morey’s improper remarks involving Hong Kong. He said:

“There is no doubt, the economic impact is already clear,” he said. “There have already been fairly dramatic consequences from that tweet, and I have read some of the media suggesting that we are not supporting Daryl Morey, but in fact, we have.”

“I think as a values-based organization that I want to make it clear ... that Daryl Morey is supported in terms of his ability to exercise his freedom of expression.” (NBA commissioner Adam Silver, 2019)

### **3.2.4. Reasons for the NBA’s Response**

Why was the NBA indifferent to such remarks? Why was the response of the United States so one-sided and even superficial, compared with the intense dissatisfaction of the Chinese domestic media, Chinese audiences, and other sectors?

Confucianism profoundly influences the Chinese. China is a state of ceremonies, where how people speak is very important. Over a long period of patriotic education, Chinese subconsciously regard their own country as very important, and in some ways, have integrated the individual with the country. Any words and deeds that are disrespectful to the country will arouse strong opposition from the Chinese people.

In contrast, Americans advocate freedom and democracy, in certain cases (except for speech that is radical or endangers the safety of others), they have freedom. The former United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1941) articulated the four freedoms in which all people had freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The first freedom he elaborated is “freedom of speech”. The Freedom of speech is demonstrated in the mainstream media and social networks in the United States, and all aspects of American daily life. Compared to China’s regulation of speech under its strict censorship of the media, freedom of speech in the United States allows people to speak almost uninhibitedly. However, it is one thing to have freedom of speech on domestic issues, it is another in supporting a foreign insurgent group that in the view of a foreign state, aims to undermine that state’s sovereignty.

American superiority and Chinese exclusion are the critical dimensions of this incident. The Houston Rockets has been dilatory in responding to Morey’s remarks. The NBA’s official statement was a bit better than Morey’s own, but they did not mention the words “apology” or “deeply regret” which the Chinese government expected to see. The NBA did not offer a formal apology mostly due to pressure from the American public. The NBA has a huge fan base in China, but the NBA originated in the United States, and this attribution requires the NBA to take into account the feelings of its people in its actions.

Ultimately, the core conflict of this issue lies in the fact that China and the United States cannot find a balance between the two sides and reach a consensus on the seriousness of the situation due to differences in education and culture. The Daryl Morey incident and its consequences could be a microcosm of the future development trend of Sino-American diplomatic relations.

### **3.2.5. The Voices of NBA Players**

As what Golden State Warriors Head coach, Steve Kerr, said in the post-game interview, he did not criticize China's response to the Hong Kong protesters because this controversial event needs to be speculated from different perspectives, "it's not [my] place to comment on the political situation in China and just 'to be a scared little boy' [irony made by President Trump to him]", (Kerr, 2019) "Freedom" is defined differently in every country. "In China, no one ever asked [me] why Americans shoot guns in shopping malls with AR-15s. Every country has different issues. There is more gray[places] than black and white" (Kerr, 2019). Additionally, Wardell Stephen Curry, player of the Golden State Warriors, who is one of the most popular NBA players on Chinese social media (Weibo), and who has gone to China for the past six years for his Under Armour Tour and interacted with his Chinese fans, emphasized that he "just doesn't know enough about Chinese history, and how that's influenced modern society enough to speak on it" (Curry, 2019).

### **3.2.6. Stalemate**












The suspension in the NBA basketball season in March 2020 because of the coronavirus outbreak gave both China and the NBA a reasonable opportunity for self-reflection. After a one-year suspension in October 2019, China's CCTV resumed its broadcast of NBA games, showing the 2020 NBA Finals Games 5 (Lakers vs Heats). In the short run, neither the Chinese Government nor the NBA is likely to change their opinion on the Hong Kong protest, but there is still a potential relationship between the NBA and Chinese business interests. On October 16, 2020, Daryl Morey announced his resignation from the Houston Rockets, which is a piece of news celebrated on Chinese social media and has become a trending topic. There has been much speculation about his resignation. Despite the resignation from the Houston Rockets, Morey soon found a new position with the Philadelphia Sixers as their general manager. After the official inaugural announcement, the future of the Philadelphia Sixers in China has become unpredictable.

### 3.3. Discourse Analysis of Public Reactions from China on Morey Incident

#### 3.3.1. The Analysis of Weibo Comments

I analyze relevant Weibo content and collected comments with more than 1000 likes to explore the Chinese public's response to the statement released by the NBA for the Daryl Morey incident. Citizens are still boycotting Morey and the NBA on Weibo to this day – many Chinese cannot forgive Morey's remarks and cannot accept the NBA's response to this incident until he apologizes.

the Comments of the post about the statement released by the NBA on Weibo (likes >1000)

	Date	Comment Content	Language	Numbers of Likes
	19-10-6	滚 Go to hell!	CHN	49,000
	19-10-6	还是没道歉, 有个👉用 Still no apology! It makes no difference!!	CHN	14,000
	19-10-6	NBA支持莫雷表达个人立场👉 NBA backs Morey to express personal stance👉	CHN	7,948
	19-10-6	哪怕你在最后加一句"NBA向来尊重并承认中华人民共和国领土和主权完整"之类的话也比现在这个声明来的好! NBA官方这声明一出, 事情已经完全无法逆转可能性了! Even if you add a sentence like "The NBA has always respected and recognized the territorial and sovereign integrity of the People's Republic of China" at the end, it would be better than this statement! As soon as this official statement comes out, there is no way to reverse the situation!	CHN	4,824
	19-10-6	官方给出的是regrettable, 是令人遗憾, 而不是极其失望。这翻译二手货夹带了情感因素。The original word used in the English statement is "regrettable" rather than "极其失望"(extremely disappointed) in the Chinese version. The emotion changes in translation.	CHN	4,876
	19-10-6	如果我们说支持911 美国猪做何感想 换位思考一下 How would Americans feel if we said we supported September 11 attacks? Try to put yourself in our place, please.	CHN	3,979
	19-10-6	跟放屁一样 It is nonsense.	CHN	3,418
	19-10-6	莫雷没错, 是林肯错了, 当初就应该尊重南部联邦独立的意愿和自由。 Morey was right. It was Lincoln who was wrong. Lincoln should have respected the will and freedom of the Confederacy to become independent in the first place.	CHN	3,270
	19-10-6	再这么下去nba一场球也播不了 If you go on like this, NBA games will no longer be broadcasted in China.	CHN	2,000
	19-10-6	???? 这就是耽误两天时间想出来的声明请NBA及莫雷们要认识到:在中国发表意图分裂国家的言论, 跟在美国发表种族歧视的言论是一个性质的。Is this the statement that took two days to come up with??? The NBA and people like Morey must realize that making statements in China with the intent to divide the country is the same as making racist statements in the US.	CHN	1,876
	19-10-6	我们也对NBA感到极其失望, NBA无疑已经严重地伤害了中国球迷的感情。 We are also extremely disappointed with the NBA, which has undoubtedly hurt the feelings of Chinese fans badly.	CHN	1,529
	19-10-6	在你NBA的价值观里, 对种族歧视也感兴趣也可以随便发表言论? 那当初快船队老板发表关于种族歧视的言论就一定是代表球队了? 如果只是深入了解分享看法呢? 当初怎么逼人家卖球队的? 就因为这是你们美帝的政治正确? In the values of the NBA, can racist comments be made at will? When the former Clippers owner made the comments about racism, did he necessarily represent the team's attitude? What if he was just sharing his own opinion after delving into the issue? Why should he be forced to sell the team? Is this the political correctness in the United States?	CHN	1,223
	19-10-6	中国球迷不需要这种模棱两可的道歉 该道歉的内容一样没说 Chinese fans don't buy such ambiguous apologies that don't mention anything that should be said.	CHN	1,082

**Figure 3.4. the Comments of Statement 1 Released by the NBA on Weibo (likes >1000)**

Source: adapted from <https://m.weibo.cn/1883881851/4424678237631251>

The first type of comment compares the Daryl Morey incident with another example involving political remarks. Someone mentioned that Donald Sterling was fined straight away and forced to sell the team. Donald Sterling, the former owner of the NBA Clippers,



was fined \$2.5 million and banned for life in 2014 for making public racist remarks (Smith, 2014). One Weibo user asked a series of questions in the comment:

“In the values of the NBA, can racist comments be made at will? When the former Clippers owner commented about racism, did he necessarily represent the team’s attitude? What if he was just sharing his own opinion after delving into the issue? Why should he be forced to sell the team? Is this the political correctness in the United States?” (October 6, 2019)

When the incident touches on the bottom line of American society, why does the United States not defend its citizens’ freedom of speech? Therefore, it can be concluded that the “freedom of speech” as called by the American media is nonsense. In fact, ordinary Chinese actually respect the bottom line of American society. The diplomatic tradition of “mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs” has been deeply rooted among the Chinese, who will not comment on the affairs of other countries, especially political taboo.

The second type of comment is showing a backlash against the NBA’s response. Someone mentioned that the NBA just gave an ambiguous apology that does not mention anything that should be said. As shown from Figure 3.4. above, the comment with the most “likes” is “Go to Hell” which expresses their angry rejection against the statement released by the NBA. This comment directly expressed the attitude and emotion of the Chinese public.

The third type of comment is expressing what the Chinese netizens expected the NBA to address this problem.

“Even if you add a sentence like ‘The NBA has always respected and recognized the territorial and sovereign integrity of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’ at the end, it would be better than this statement! As soon as this official statement comes out, there is no way to reverse the situation!” (October 6, 2019)

“If you go on like this, NBA games will no longer be broadcasted in China.” (October 6, 2019)

These comments expressed that they expected the NBA to mention the content involving the respect of the territorial and sovereign integrity of the PRC, even if the NBA did not make an apology for Morey’s remarks. From these comments with solutions considered by the Chinese netizens, we can feel that the Chinese public is interested in the future return of the NBA in China.

### **3.3.2. The Analysis of the hashtag #莫雷关上了斯特恩敲开的大门# (#Morey closed the door that Stern had knocked on#)**

The most read hashtag on Weibo about the Daryl Morey incident was #Morey closed the door that Stern had knocked on#, with 1.09 billion readings and 8,2000 comments. The phrase “the door that Stern had knocked on” refers to the fact that it was Stern who brought the NBA to China. The phrase “Morey closed the door” indicates that Daryl Morey’s remarks destroyed the relationship between the NBA and China and ended the relationship. The NBA’s entry into the Chinese market began 30 years ago when David Stern himself came to the CCTV lobby with an NBA tape. He waited for hours in the lobby to meet the people in charge. Stern has gone to great lengths to open the potential market in China. In the end, he made a compromise and let China rebroadcast the NBA’s matches over free airwaves. In this view, Morey wasted Stern’s efforts to bring NBA to China. The Chinese market, which Stern managed to enter 30 years ago, severed the relationship with the NBA in just three days due to the inappropriate remarks by Morey, coupled with a misstatement by the NBA Commissioner.

From the analysis about the actions taken after the Daryl Morey incident by the NBA, the reasons for the Chinese netizens’ reactions to the specific incident of NBA is that Americans ignore that the Chinese people have a deep-rooted sense of territoriality, and there are differences in the concept of freedom of speech between Chinese and the United States cultures.

As noted by Rail (2002), the postmodern condition enables people to recognize that the critical questions are hardly about sociological theory in sport (Rail, 2002). The conflict between the NBA and China rests upon an understanding of “growing cultural differentiation and the multiplication of marginally situated forms of social agency as accompaniments of and potential modes of resistance to the homogenizing logic of global consumer society” (Smith, 1992). The NBA can be considered as a model for promoting international sporting events and represent this global consumer society. However, the NBA cannot solve the racism problem in American society by promoting famous black players alone. As a symbol of the United States, the NBA is a part of the cultural soft power of the United States hegemony. Human beings understand the world, describe and analyze it through language. We communicate by talking through language. Postmodernism holds that language is just a heterogeneous system of signs, full of

subjectivity, arbitrariness, and contingency. The antagonism between adversaries containing differences and contradictions is seen as an expression. For instance, from the analysis of the languages used in the content of the statements and comments, the Daryl Morey incident is controversial due to a cultural clash. The postmodern world is composed of constantly changing perspectives.

### **3.4. The Influence of the Daryl Morey Incident**

Daryl Morey was hugely influential as the general manager of the NBA Houston Rockets in 2019. To Chinese fans, his remarks then definitely go beyond his stance. Therefore, his blatant statement of support for the violence in Hong Kong has caused an outcry of opposition in China. The intertextuality with Morey on Twitter not only aroused Chinese audiences' memories of the protest but also demonstrated the negative influence of a public figure's improper remarks. Even though nearly two years have passed since the Daryl Morey incident, the impact of this incident is continuing to expand.

Cha and Lim (2019) describe predatory liberalism as a system that is “leveraging the vulnerabilities of market independence to exert power over others in pursuit of political goals” (Cha and Lim, 2019, p. 24). This system assumes China controls the world based on its massive market share through restrictions and sanctions. This position states that China is an authoritarian country, focused on maintaining its population through these measures. However, this is in apparent disparity with what configures the predatory behavior they point out. I strongly disagree with Cha and Lim's opinion that China's predatory liberalism is an affront to the liberal international order (Cha and Lim, 2019). Whether the Chinese citizens live under an authoritarian government or not, they are just trying to sustain an undeniable One-China principle that is secured through the Chinese people's justiful struggle for national sovereignty and territorial integrity [“一个中国原则是在中国人民捍卫中国主权和领土完整的正义斗争中形成的，具有不可动摇的事实和法理基础。”] (Chinese Government, 2020), people need to respect the history of China and observe the principle of establishing diplomatic relations with foreign countries (Chinese Government, 2020). It is not only about political commitment but also about patriotism.

The Hong Kong issue concerns China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the view of the Chinese government and many Chinese people, extremists in Hong Kong have committed a series of outrageous acts—trampling on the rule of law, threatening social

order, and endangering the fundamental interests of the people in Hong Kong. These acts are a blatant violation of the policy of “one country, two systems”. Unlike peaceful demonstrations, violent people destroy infrastructure on a large scale and threaten the lives of others, which is more like an act of terror against humanity. They are not fighting for freedom. Instead, in the name of freedom, they were infringing China’s sacred sovereignty with the interference of outside forces. Therefore, Daryl Morey’s blatant statement of support for the violence in Hong Kong has caused an outcry of opposition in China.

The Chinese market severed the relationship with the NBA in just three days due to the inappropriate remarks by Morey, coupled with a misstatement by the NBA Commissioner. Adam Silver, the NBA commissioner, said at the 2020 NBA All-Star Game at the United Center in Chicago, the NBA is estimated to have lost up to \$400 million as its Chinese business partners cut ties with the league and suspend all broadcasts (Young, 2020). NBA aimed at minimizing any reputational damage and loss of glory of the game in China. China is a massive market with the potential to increase the game’s coverage and a significant source of income to both clubs and the league. However, in addition to the decrease in revenue, the NBA’s multi-year layout in China has been ruined. The China tournaments, which were annually held in October, were not held as scheduled. The NBA China games were cancelled for the first time since Yao Ming was involved in its sports. Even though NBA games were suspended for television and internet broadcast once before in China in 1999, the China tournaments still went ahead as scheduled. That suspension was linked to May 7, 1999, United States bombing of the People’s Republic of China’s embassy in Belgrade during the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) bombing of Yugoslavia. Afterward, the US said “sorry” to China and reached an agreement with China for compensation. During the summer vacation of that year, the footage of the NBA playoffs was broadcast on CCTV again.

The impact of the Morey incident on the NBA has also been tremendous, so other team owners have pressured NBA commissioner Adam Silver to resolve the incident early. Faced with a shrinking Chinese market worth up to \$4 billion, Adam Silver wants to meet with Yao Ming, president of the Chinese Basketball Association, as soon as possible to discuss solutions to the issue, but Yao has not responded. As the commissioner, Adam Silver is willing to take the initiative to seek a solution not only because of the fear that the NBA might lose the Chinese market entirely but also for the more profound reason of

preventing the NBA from facing another lockout crisis. In the 2019-20 NBA season, teams are cutting many more players than in previous years, causing anxiety across the association. From the experience of the NBA lockouts, its teams and players can be said to be on opposite sides. As the overall revenue of the NBA declines due to the Morey incident, team revenues will also be affected, and teams will then limit player salaries, leading to labor disputes. All of these problems are believed to be the result of a rift in the relationship between the NBA and China.

## **Chapter 4.**

### **Assessing the Impacts: Insights from the Daryl Morey Incident**

The Rockets general manager's six-word tweet pushed NBA into a difficult geopolitical dilemma with China. Hong Kong is an autonomous region in China and has exercised self-governance since the end of the British mandate. China considers Hong Kong a part of the country and a strategic part of its territory. However, introducing an extradition law requiring criminal suspects to be tried in mainland China has raised concerns about citizens' rights. The provisions of these laws attracted anti-government protests and pro-democracy pushes, some of which were turned down in violent altercations with Chinese authorities (Isidore, 2019). The tweet was a declaration by Morey that the Hong Kong protesters had a legitimate claim to not only freedom but independence from China – in the same way as Taiwan's de facto independence. This aspect offended the Chinese authorities and the Chinese general public because Hong Kong is a part of China. Morey's opinion was interpreted as an interference with the internal matter and instigated by the ideological position of the United States.

The reaction to different situations demonstrates the response of the NBA, in general, to retain the reputation and avoid confrontation with adverse implications on the game. The owner of the Rockets was quick to distance themselves from the comments by the manager, while Morey would walk back from the statement a few days later. Concerns and discussions were also raised about the possibility of Morey losing his job as a result of the incident. The representative of China at the Houston consulate termed the tweet as erroneous, while the Chinese Basketball Association ceased cooperation with the team. The consequences were dire because national television suspended the broadcast of all games. Other cancelled events included NBA's cares events organized by China's Education Bureau (Xu et al., 2020).

Moreover, NBA's response drew several criticisms from United States politicians and other stakeholders in the government. America, founded on democratic values, is a country where individuals are allowed to give opinions on issues that affect their livelihood and call for freedom and other civil rights as a constitutional privilege, and organizations

have a moral responsibility to support social justice. However, the NBA used terms such as “regrettable,” “our friends and fans in China” and “respect for the history and culture of China” to distance themselves from the comment made by Morey. United States politicians thought that the sentiments expressed in the response are to please the Communist Chinese government. As such, it was interpreted that the NBA allowed China to punish Daryl Morey for freedom of expression to protect NBA’s market access in China. NBA’s commissioner, Silver, also clarified that the NBA understood that there are differences between America and China on several issues and that it is not the role of the NBA to adjudicate those matters (Guo et al., 2020). In this case, Silver was trying to communicate the information that the incident was an isolated case but not an official position of the NBA over the conflict between China and Hong Kong. Besides, the NBA dissociated from owners, players, employees, or other stakeholders of clubs and organizations involved in the sport. I found that adverse impact is a huge brand crisis for the organization due to the inappropriate behavior of the head of the company.

We can consider this Daryl Morey incident from both macro and micro perspectives. What American people don’t realize, is that the NBA and people from the Chinese mainland are discussing two completely different issues. From a macro perspective, China believes that territorial integrity is the most fundamental principle of a country, while the West interprets it as freedom of speech. Americans and the NBA have been talking about freedom of speech, while the Chinese are talking about the content of speech and the consequences. The Chinese have never denied Morey’s freedom of speech, even in response to the China issue, but simply strongly opposed the content of his remarks, which support the Hong Kong protest. Therefore, it is justifiable to believe that Americans are secretly replacing concepts under the name of political correctness. The case of the former owner of the Clippers mentioned in Chapter 3 can easily break their lie: can racist speech be made in the name of freedom of speech in the United States? On a micro level, Chinese fans have to choose between hobby and patriotism. The small Ping-Pong ball started the normalization of Sino-American diplomacy, but now the big basketball threatens the friendship between the people of China and the United States. Consequently, sport diplomacy is also part of Sino-American relations. From the contradictions above, the following findings can be drawn: this is more than a commercial issue, but one that involves politics.

Although the owner of the Rockets said that Morey's stance has nothing to do with the team, the termination of the cooperation between CCTV Sports and the Rockets and the naming and criticism of Morey by the People's Daily will undoubtedly put pressure on the Rockets officials. The best solution at the time would have been to fire Morey and offer a sincere apology, but now more than a year has passed since the Daryl Morey incident happened, and he has resigned from the Rockets. Can China's relationship with the Rockets ever return to the good old days? Even though China has close ties with the Rockets, it will not budge on the issue of political stand. Even if the Rockets wanted to reopen the Chinese market, it would be nowhere near the scale it was before. The Rockets' reputation is gone and cannot be redeemed in any way.



## Chapter 5.

### Conclusion

As one of millions of youth who are inspired by Yao Ming to become basketball fans and fans of the NBA, and also as a Chinese content editor of an NBA player's fan page on Weibo, I recognized that Yao Ming's effort in the NBA might be one of the most impressive stories in the history of basketball. Considering the transnational and symbolic image of Yao Ming, he tried to establish a strong connection between China and the NBA. The influence he has brought to the development of Sino-American relations is unquestionable. Yao Ming's unique 'flexible citizenship' enabled him to transcend national, racial, and cultural barriers between the United States and China (Oates & Polumbaum, 2004). Yao Ming's symbolic image of political and cultural importance went beyond the basketball court. He represented rising China and played a crucial role in the age of globalization. It allowed China to capitalize on the global recognition of Yao to establish and strengthen the sports industry and encourages hyper-masculinity in China.

In this research, I investigated the evolution from "Ping-Pong diplomacy" to the fallout of "Basketball diplomacy" in the history of the development of Sino-American relations and sports development in China. I further examined how China was perceived as a potential market impacting the promotion of the enterprise value of the NBA. It is argued that the NBA essentially operates on the "fan economy", and long-term growth in China mainly relies on broadcast revenue, sponsorship revenue, China game tickets revenue, and merchandise sales revenue. The NBA can be considered as a successful model for promoting international sporting events in China. I analyzed the Daryl Morey incident in detail by contextualizing the sports diplomacy relationship between the United States and China. From the analysis of the hashtag #莫雷关上了斯特恩敲开的大门# (which means #Morey closed the door that Stern had knocked on#) and the comments under the NBA official statements, I argued that the popularity of the NBA in China had suffered tremendously. In particular, the Chinese netizens' reactions to the NBA made it clear that Chinese people have a deep-rooted sense of territoriality and that there are differences in the concept of freedom of speech between Chinese and American cultures.

The future of basketball diplomacy between the United States and China after this conflict is unpredictable. Due to distinctive historical development paths, the United States and China possess different concepts of freedom and nationhood. In the United States, the primacy of individual freedom is emphasized while China celebrates its success as a group and national unity as the ultimate goal. Thus, the two different political environments have shaped the two countries with their respective focuses. Essentially, the NBA is an American company, and it is shaped by the policies of the United States government. Under the dual effect of social media and public figures, Morey's remarks regarding the Hong Kong situation have become a trigger for the conflict between the value systems of China and the United States. It shows the confrontation and impossibility of Chinese and Western social and political issues under the control of their respective value system. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Shuang Geng, indicated that he would not provide specific comments on some individual firms' commercial behaviors. Sports have always been playing a positive role in enhancing the friendship between the United States and China. His statement shows that the "Daryl Morey incident" is cooling down. With Morey's dismissal, the matter seems to have been temporarily improved. In today's cultural globalization, the governments of these two countries must also have serious conversations and negotiate about how their historically differing values on free speech and national sovereignty. Otherwise, they will face sustained difficulties in fostering understandings between the peoples of the United States and China, whether through sports or other means of cultural exchange.

At present, due to its surprisingly rapid development, China has secured a spot on the world's stage, and its interaction with the world has undergone historic changes. Mutual respect is an insurmountable bottom line between nations in cross-cultural communication. At the end of the day, as an editor of an NBA player's Chinese social media content, it is my hope that there will be a new chapter in the NBA's expansionary story in China.

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