

YAO Ming

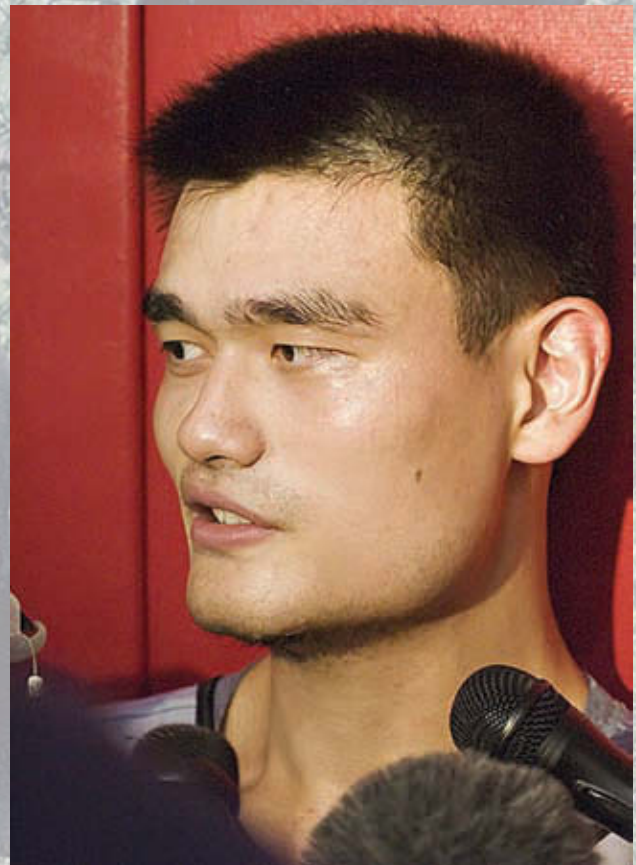
Yáo Míng 姚明

b. 1980 Professional basketball player

A member of the Chinese men's national basketball team, former player on China's Shanghai Sharks, and number one pick of the U.S. National Basketball Association draft in 2002, Yao Ming became a popular center on the Houston Rockets and China's first professional superstar athlete with global recognition.

Yao Ming may be deemed China's first crossover superstar athlete. Although Yao was not the first Chinese basketball player to play professionally in the United States, his recruitment into the National Basketball Association (NBA) was attended by far more fanfare than his predecessors'. Most fans have forgotten Wang Zhizhi and Menk Bateer, intermittent players on NBA teams from 2001 on, and the even less-known Zheng Haixia, who played for the Women's National Basketball Association Los Angeles Sparks in 1997–1998.

Son of a basketball-playing couple and groomed for the sport in state-run schools for future athletes, Yao approached his prime as a player at an opportune time. China's state-managed sports system was opening up to commercial forces, North American sports leagues were searching the world for athletic talent, and transnational corporations sought boundary-crossing spokespersons. Yao led his hometown team, the Shanghai Sharks, to the Chinese Basketball Association finals three years in a row, culminating in a championship in 2002. This helped position the 7-foot 6-inch center to be the Number 1 pick in the 2002 NBA player draft and to land lucrative corporate contracts worldwide.



Basketball star Yao Ming being interviewed.

Drafted by the Houston Rockets, Yao performed ably on the court and gained an enthusiastic following among American, Asian American, and expatriate Chinese fans. In his rookie year, he averaged 13.5 points and 8.2 rebounds per game and was among the top twenty in the league in

blocks, rebounds, and field-goal percentage. With a new influx from Chinese balloting, fans voted him to the NBA All Star team his first three seasons, and the Rockets signed him to a five-year extension lasting through the 2010–2011 season.

An ideal fit with the NBA's strategy of expanding international markets, Yao was called China's most valuable export. His appeal to multiple, multigenerational, and multinational audiences generated lucrative commercial sponsorships, negotiated by business advisers who call themselves Team Yao. He has represented the likes of Apple, Visa, Adidas, Gatorade, Pepsi, and McDonald's, and partnered with a California-based chain to open fitness clubs in China. He also lent his image to the Special Olympics, campaigns against SARS and HIV/AIDS, and other charitable causes. Yao ranked Number 6 on *Forbes* magazine's 2007 list of top-earning non-U.S. athletes, with an estimated income of nearly \$27.5 million.

Along with his celebrity and wealth, Yao has retained popularity and respect among compatriots as a representative of Chinese achievement abroad with enduring loyalties to his native country. His every move became an item for the Chinese media, from setbacks due to a broken foot

to plans to marry his longtime girlfriend Ye Li, a former player with China's national women's basketball team. As a member of the Chinese national team, Yao reported for training and competitions between NBA seasons, including Olympics practice and attendance. He was the obvious choice as China's final runner in the torch relay for the 2004 Athens Olympics and China's flag bearer at those games. At the 2008 Beijing Olympics he ran through the Tiananmen Gate, the ninth of 433 torch bearers, and was a logical figure in promotions for the Games.

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Further Reading

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- Rodgers, M. (2003, January 5). The tao of Yao. *Basketball Digest*, 46–51.

Approach heaven with a single stride.

一步登天

Yí bù dēng tiān