

A Multi-Dimension View on the Value of Chinese and American Basketball Activities in 1979

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Abstract: Reviewing the Chinese and American basketball activities at the beginning of the year 1979, it can be seen how Americans implement the foreign culture permeation in their diplomatic policies after the Cold War. When these activities brought forth the foreign basketball culture and the sports industrial value concepts which were seldom known by Chinese people, a great preparation that NBA will march for the Chinese basketball market has already been made. And the multi-dimension value of Chinese and American basketball activities in 1979 is disclosed.

1. Introduction

1979 was the first year of China's reform and opening up, and it was also a milestone year in the history of China's basketball development. On January 1, 1979, China and the United States established diplomatic relations. On January 29, Deng Xiaoping led a Chinese government delegation to visit the United States for the first time and watched the funny basketball performance arranged by the Carter government. On April 9th, the American men's basketball team composed of NBA all-star players visited China and played 5 games with China's Bayi, Beijing, Shanghai and Sichuan men's basketball teams in Beijing and Shanghai^[1]. These two activities let the Chinese people see the demeanor of NBA stars in the process of foreign exchanges at home. At the same time, these activities have paved the way for the development of National Basketball Association (NBA) in China's basketball market in the future.

2. The “Basketball Diplomacy” Strategy of the Carter Administration and the Political Wisdom of Chinese Leaders

2.1 “Basketball Diplomacy” of the Carter Administration

Basketball originated in the United States, and “funny basketball” is one of the manifestations of American basketball culture. In this political and foreign affairs activity between China and the United States, the U.S. government specially arranged for the “Harlem Globetrotters Basketball Team” to perform “funny basketball” performances for Chinese leaders who visited the United States for the first time. The performance is not only a Carter government's purpose to satisfy Deng Xiaoping's unique interest and hobby in basketball^[2], it is also the American “basketball

diplomacy” strategy.

According to the data, President Carter's \$500,000 evening party for Comrade Xiaoping at the Kennedy Art Center was the most extravagant event during Carter's presidency (No government funding) . The event was sponsored by an oil company. This oil company is essentially optimistic about China's huge potential market and wants to use the Chinese leader's first visit to the United States to advertise for itself ^[2]. In fact, in May 1979, a delegation led by American oil giant Armand Hammer visited Beijing and became the first foreign entrepreneur to knock on China's door. In subsequent visits, he signed a series of trade contracts with China and established the Antaibao open-pit coal mine, the largest joint venture project in China at that time. As a basketball league which has developed in the American commercial society for decades and is designed to aggregate the common commercial interests of various clubs, NBA obviously sees the potential market value in China. In such an important state event, the Carter administration arranged “funny basketball” which does not match the mainstream ideology of China to perform for Chinese leaders. Although it has something to do with Deng Xiaoping's love for basketball, it is by no means a simple diplomatic event. At that time, China had just gone through the 10-year catastrophe of the “Cultural Revolution”. Not only is the level of social productivity very low throughout the country, the people’s spiritual and cultural life is also extremely poor. The main ideas and consciousness formed by the people under the guidance of the “Far Left” thought has almost lost the ability to appreciate Western sports culture and commercial sports. Therefore, most people in society regards all kinds of commercial sports competitions that seem to be common now as rebellious “gambling”. And other basic manifestations of basketball culture, such as the American “basketball baby” and “funny basketball” performances are classified as an offensive “hippie” culture and are not accepted by China’s ideology.

Therefore, the author believes that Deng Xiaoping's watched the “funny basketball” performance when he visited to the United States in January 1979 has not only laid the political foundation for the two-way exchanges between China and the United States in all future sports and cultural activities. What's meaningful is that Deng Xiaoping's interest and behavior in leading the crowd to watch the “Funny Basketball” show created an opportunity for American politicians. Let the Americans use their most sacred and proud professional basketball (one of the basic elements of mainstream American culture) to help the Carter administration complete the most important political exchange in the history of Sino-US diplomacy. At the same time, it also attracted the high-level managers of the NBA league to pay attention to China's huge basketball industry market.

Establishing diplomatic relations with China is one of Carter’s greatest achievements. Before Deng Xiaoping visited the United States, President Carter issued a televised speech focusing on explaining to the Chinese people the significance of the new relationship for China and the United States, the Pacific region and the world^[2]. In this historical period (the latter stage of the Cold War between the East and the West), arranging basketball teams composed of NBA players to visit or perform around the world was a way of the U.S. government for foreign exchanges. In doing so, it catered to the cultural and spiritual needs of the people of all countries, and it also keep in line with the NBA League's strategy to spread basketball culture and expand basketball products.

2.2 The Extraordinary Courage and Political Wisdom of Chinese Leader Deng Xiaoping

On January 29, 1979, Deng Xiaoping, the Vice Premier of the State Council at that time, visited the United States as the ruling party and state leader of the Republic. In the evening, he led the crowd to attend the welcome party arranged by the US government and watched the performance that the Harlem Globetrotters Basketball Team specially arranged for him.

It is worth noting that in the late 1970s, the far-left ideological trend was still solidified in the

“body” of the Chinese political system. Although the entire society would not resist American basketball led by the NBA, there are still many ideological and diplomatic restrictions on the different form expression of this project, such as hot “basketball baby” and “funny” basketball performances.

Deng Xiaoping led the follow-up staff to watch the performance of the “Harlem Globetrotters Basketball Team” with great interest. During the period, Deng Xiaoping applauded for the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team’s humorous performances, and cheered from time to time for their superb skills. The American “funny basketball” performance, which is called “hippie culture” by the “far-left” ideology of our country, has given full affirmation, which not only let the uneasy American politicians put down a hanging heart^[2]. This “affirmation” also shows that Deng Xiaoping took the lead in breaking through the ideological confinement and shackles of the “far-left”, and with his unique political wisdom, at the level of national culture, he accepted and recognized basketball, which is now one of the mainstream American cultural elements culture.

3. Basketball Has Not Only a Good Market Position in the United States, But Also a Strong Cultural Position

“Shortly after the advent of basketball in the United States, there were paid games for the purpose of making money”. The development of the American basketball industry market has undergone nearly a century of historical changes. It has not only become an industry market that attracts people from all over the world, but the “American Professional Basketball League” has also become the world's best sports industry project . However, in addition to the market value of the NBA, it has a stronger cultural position in the United States, because it is already a core element of mainstream American culture.

In the hearts of Americans, the cultural status of basketball has been long entrenched. Americans who have almost no historical depth have never forgotten the NBA when they count their cultural foundations. Therefore, Americans always regard the NBA as an element of the country’s mainstream culture. Data shows that Americans regard the NBA as one of the 20 cultural elements that constitute the mainstream American culture, ranking fifth.

We know from the classification principle of cultural elements that although basketball culture is not a pure cultural element, this kind of pan-culture can be popular around the world and guide fashion. As the most outstanding representative of the NBA, Mike Jordan, who won the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Men's Basketball Championship and six NBA championship trophies, was ranked sixth after Martin Luther among the top ten American cultural icons by the American media.. This shows that basketball has a very high status in the hearts of Americans, and this status is like the status of table tennis in the hearts of Chinese people. It is precisely because of Americans' strong international vision, keen business thinking and market tentacles that they use basketball performances to draw closer relations between different ethnic groups and countries with different ideologies, and become a way for them to communicate with foreign countries in many specific historical periods. Participating in various basketball events in other countries or places is itself an attempt by the NBA to cultivate and develop the “basketball industry market” in the process of spreading “basketball sports culture.”

4. The Multi-Dimensional Value of Basketball Activities between China and the United States in 1979

On April 9, 1979, the US National Men’s Basketball Team, composed of players from all NBA teams, visited China to compete. It was an organized, planned, and targeted cultural communication campaign carried out by US politicians and the NBA. In this action, the Americans did show the

cultural form of American basketball led by the NBA to the Chinese people. It not only brought the Chinese people a concept that “basketball is not only a culture, but also a commodity, but also an industry”, it also allows Chinese people to appreciate how basketball achieves the rebirth of competition and art during the game. The famous Chinese diplomat Mr. Wu Jianmin said, “There is a saying in the world that first-class countries export culture, second-rate countries Export talents, third-rate countries export products” in his speech “Chinese Culture Goes Out Can’t Hurry for Success” at the “Nishan World Civilization Forum” in Qufu, Shandong, , in September 2010^[5]. In fact, the American Basketball (NBA) launched by the Americans at this special historical period is a way for Americans to infiltrate foreign cultures in order to realize the national interests of the United States of America. From the competition between the US National Men’s Basketball Team composed of NBA stars and the current Chinese teams, we not only see the individual skills of the stars and the basketball skills and tactics they demonstrate in team cooperation, but also activated the Chinese sports fans and the basketball practitioner’s great interest.

Therefore, the recognition and acceptance of the mysterious American basketball from many Chinese people under the constraints of the political background and the main social ideology at the time shows that this Eastern country, which has been influenced by traditional culture for a long time, has a high tolerance on Western civilization and culture. It also shows the people’s expectation and yearning for all modern science and technology and advanced culture including basketball skills and tactics.

4.1 Leading Value to the Development of Chinese Basketball

In 1891, Canadian American Dr. James Naismith invented a sports game-basketball. After the missionary Dr. Lyou brought it to Tianjin, China in 1895, it has developed more than 100 years and has transformed from a purely competitive game in the past to a new cultural carrier that integrates political influence, economic productivity, social affinity, and cultural dissemination. It has become a popular sports and a cultural industry that occupies a huge share of the Chinese sports competition market. In the process of evolving from sports games to cultural industry, Deng Xiaoping’s 1979 watching of the “funny basketball” performance of the US “Harlem Globetrotters Basketball Team” and the US National Men’s Basketball Team’s visit to China played an important role in the development of Chinese basketball.

The performance of “Funny Basketball” is refreshing. It has injected the elements of entertainment into the traditional Chinese sports and fitness basketball, making Chinese people appreciate the broad and diverse content of modern basketball. Later, the American men’s basketball team composed of professional players visited China. In the game, the professional players’ superb basketball skills, skilled tactical cooperation, and the players’ brightly colored and fashionable sportswear strongly impressed the Chinese audience’s. This team perfectly demonstrates the collective nature of basketball and the movement style of athletes on the court, subverting the traditional concept of Eastern Europe (former Soviet Union) “stand-on style” as the main model. For a time, the NBA has become a model for learning, researching and imitating in the domestic basketball circle, and quickly improved the level of Chinese basketball.

4.2 Inspirational Value to the Construction of Chinese Sports Culture

Standing in the context of China’s comprehensive promotion of cultural construction nowadays, we examine the 1979 “Funny Basketball” performance of the US “Harlem Globetrotters Basketball Team” and the US National Men’s Basketball Team’s visit to China. At that time, the cultural information the American basketball passed on to Chinese sports and the great value of this information to China’s sports industry are clear.

Firstly, the exchange of sports culture is an important carrier of international exchanges in the world today. It is an “advance team” for cultural exchanges between countries of different political systems during the “Cold War”, and an “Esperanto” for cultural communication between nations of different colors and languages. Till this day, sports exchanges still play an important role in international communication. On February 26, 2013, a basketball delegation composed of former NBA star Rodman and “Harlem” basketball players visited North Korea (the 122nd country visited by the “Harlem” basketball team). During the period, Rodman had close contact with Kim Jong-un, the top leader of North Korea. When the situation on the peninsula was tense, the United States sent a basketball delegation to North Korea for cultural exchanges. The political intention behind it was self-evident.

Secondly, the US National Men’s Basketball Team composed of professional players represents the national image and national interests of the United States of America, is the diplomatic envoy of the US government, and also represents the fundamental interests of the National Professional League (NBA). It is also the spread of advanced basketball culture.

Thirdly, while demonstrating the high ornamental value of basketball game, the “funny basketball” performance and the strong physique and superb skills of NBA athletes also implies the huge business opportunity and economic value of sports competition market.

Fourthly, the professionalization, marketization and industrialization of competitive sports is the inevitable demand for the development of the modern social culture and China's competitive sports. The Chinese Men’s Basketball League, established in 1995, has been learning the NBA from the beginning. From the rules and playing methods to the structure and mode of the league, CBA has almost become a copy of NBA in China. Although there is a gap between CBA and NBA in market operation due to its weak capital strength, low quality of competition products and small brand influence, the professionalism, socialization and industrialization of basketball market have taken initial shape. At present, various professional leagues such as table tennis Super League, Football League A, badminton league and volleyball league are flourishing in China. The development situation is good.

4.3 Market Value Brought to the Nba's Globalization Strategy

NBA is not only a way of life, but also a way of making money. Speaking in a more accurate way, NBA is a successful profitable model for competitive sports. To put the words of NBA Commissioner Mr. Stern in another way, the NBA is integrating the cultural and commercial nature of American basketball, and its purpose is to develop and consolidate its global basketball industry market. Attracting spectators, gathering popularity, and cultivating the market through games have always been the focus of the NBA. Today, the NBA uses modern media to broadcast live games in 42 languages to 212 countries and regions around the world. The NBA Finals are already broadcast live in 45 languages to 250 countries and territories around the world, with an audience of 3.1 billion and an annual revenue stream of more than \$4 billion.

Many foreign players in the NBA (such as Yao Ming and other foreign stars who are familiar to Chinese people) are the international benchmarks that Americans have created in the process of commercialization and marketization of basketball. Mr. Stern’s marketing strategy is to use these “benchmarks” to drive the growth of their fans and obtain a bigger market share. The reason why today's NBA executives put Yao Ming, who has retired from the NBA, into the NBA Hall of Fame in the name of “outstanding contribution” is that Yao has not only the ability to enter the Hall of Fame, but he also has the inestimable value due to the Chinese market behind him.

China does have the huge and good growth market that the NBA hopes. On October 14, 2004, the NBA China Games landed in Shanghai and Beijing. The attention received by these two games

fully proved the influence of the NBA in the Chinese market and made the NBA felt the huge potential of the Chinese market. In May 2007 Mr. Stern declared that he wanted to host an NBA Chinese league after the Olympics, a sign of his ambition to expand. Mr. Stern has a set of statistics shows that there are 465 million young people in China. This huge team is the important market and target group for the NBA to seek future development. The “Funny Basketball” performances of the “Harlem Globetrotters Basketball Team” and the US National Men's Basketball Team's China Tour laid the foundation for the NBA to cultivate and develop the Chinese basketball industry market.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, in the “basketball diplomacy” activities of the US government in 1979, our leaders affirmed American “funny basketball” with extraordinary political wisdom, which actually conveyed to the world the goodwill of the Chinese people and China's reform and opening determination. Later, the American men's basketball team composed of NBA all-star players visited China for the first time has not only brought a brand-new basketball style and sports industry concept to the Chinese people, but also laid the foundation for the NBA to enter China in the future.

Throughout the past 30 years, the NBA's initial activities aimed at the Chinese market are indeed U.S. diplomacy to connect to China, and this approach fits the NBA's plan to open the Chinese basketball industry market. Meanwhile, those actions was taken when China is determined to reform and was urgently to learn from the excellent western culture and advanced technology. Therefore, these activities are the foundation for the National Basketball Association to open the Chinese basketball market. Sports know no borders. No matter what sports the people of that country choose in the Olympics, it must be in line with the cultural needs and cultural identity of the people of that country in order to have a foundation for sustainable development. This foundation is the core element of the sports industry.

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