



YAO

A LIFE IN TWO WORLDS

YAO MING WITH RIC BUCHER

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INTRODUCTION

When I was approached about helping Yao Ming write his autobiography, I was thrilled by the prospect of being part of such a historic project. I knew the story would go way beyond that of a great Chinese athlete and how he became an NBA superstar; sports, in fact, was merely the backdrop for something far more momentous. Yao Ming had single-handedly showed the world's oldest civilization that it could not only compete but also excel in domains beyond its own borders. In fact, he had influenced how *two* of the world's most powerful nations think of themselves and of each other. All this—plus his inspiration of unprecedented transglobal business and cultural alliances—Yao had accomplished with a personal effervescence that transcended every barrier.

It was captivating to watch Yao Ming defy all the skeptics and emerge from an inauspicious debut with the Houston Rockets in 2002 to become a force among the world's best basketball players halfway through his first season. That drama, given the conditions under which he learned the game and his struggle merely to make it to the NBA, was interesting in itself. But the truly tantalizing part

of helping Yao tell his story was the opportunity to see and hear about events that resonated far beyond a bouncing ball and rattled our big blue orb. Part of Yao's charm is that he has steadfastly refused to think of himself as a historic figure, and yet, as you will learn here, he was aware that every one of his decisions would have a widespread cultural impact, the effects of which would be felt long after he retired, and he acted accordingly.

One other enticement for becoming Yao's Boswell: the chance to help this bright young man, who is uneasy speaking a second language in front of strangers, express himself fully, at last, to the legions of basketball fans and casual observers who have found themselves liking and admiring Yao without knowing all that much about him. I would be the conduit, the can opener, their cultural liaison. The only glitch in that plan, I realized as I prepared to fly to Shanghai in March 2002 to meet Yao for the first time, was that I didn't know much more about the People's Republic of China than the average NBA fan.

I knew there had to be valleys of subjects and events between the cultural peaks that had caught my eye as a casual observer—Jet Li, Free Tibet, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Chairman Mao, Confucius, acupuncture, feng shui—but they were shrouded in fog. I scrambled to learn more before my trip. In a month-long cram course on Chinese language, culture, and history, I plowed through anything that seemed remotely helpful, a desperate hodgepodge that included Pang-Mei Natasha Chang's memoir, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Ben-Fong Torres's autobiography, half a dozen travel books, and Dai Sijie's *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. I listened to Pinyin tapes, and I read any magazine article I could find that seemed it might shed some light on China's twentieth-century evolution. Then I grilled friends and friends of friends if they had even the slightest China connection.

The end result: I now knew for a fact that there were valleys beneath all that fog.

If I had anything going for me, it was being a first-generation American whose first language was not English. I grew up in Ohio trying to reconcile my German heritage with being accepted by my completely American friends. My fluency in German returned during a term studying in Germany as a college sophomore, and I occasionally was mistaken for a native. I was going to China, then, with at least a little understanding of the difference between studying a culture and living it.

Yao embodies that distinction. Everything about him—from his square jaw, flattop, and immense size to his skills on the basketball court—defies the world's ideas about China and the Chinese. He's the equivalent of a blinking neon sign that reads: "ALL PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS ARE HEREBY NULL AND VOID!" In the end, that may prove to be his greatest accomplishment.

That first trip was on my own time and my own dime, a hastily arranged weekend visit to see the NBA-bound Yao play in his last Chinese Basketball Association regular-season home game. I'd been asked whether I thought Yao's story would make for a good book. I did and agreed to an exploratory visit, but there wasn't much more to it than that. Having covered the NBA for more than ten years, including trips to South Africa, Yugoslavia, and Turkey to write about other players who had used basketball to cross a cultural divide, I knew what awaited him here. This was my chance to see what, if anything, I could discover about what he was leaving behind.

Yao and I didn't exactly hit it off right away. We first met in the back corner of a hotel bar with NBA agent Bill Duffy, who approached me with the book idea, and Frank Sha, a Nike China representative who had grown up with Yao. We talked for maybe

twenty minutes with Sha translating. Yao was drinking juice and wearing a gray Dallas Mavericks warm-up suit, a gift from Mavs president Donnie Nelson, a pioneer among NBA scouts in China. He seemed so wary that I didn't have the heart to pull out my notebook or turn on a tape recorder. I had a camera with me as well, and Duffy took a photo of us before I left. It shows Yao standing stiffly beside me, hands clasped in front of him. He did not smile.

I watched him play the next day in an unheated arena, the substitutes bundled in down jackets on the bench. Before the game, TV reporters stuck cameras and microphones in every non-Asian face and asked questions about the NBA and Yao Ming. The non-Asians present included Scott Layden, then the Knicks' GM, and Jerry Krause, then GM of the Bulls. No two NBA officials made more visits to scout Yao Ming, and when he was made aware of that, he agreed to meet with them privately during his predraft visit to Chicago. He did so for no other reason than to honor the special interest they'd taken in him.

Yao dominated the game despite looking out of shape. All the basic skills were there—passing, shooting, dribbling—and he was clearly the floor general, directing his teammates through each play, but two moments stood out. One was when he dived to the floor for a loose ball and instinctively flipped it behind his head to a teammate for an open jumper. The second was when the opposing center, a 6'8" Eastern European, turned to face Yao Ming with the ball. Yao dropped into a defensive crouch and waved his hand as if to say, "Come on. Try me." They were glimpses of an effort and attitude he'd need a lot more of to stand a chance in the NBA.

The comparisons to Shawn Bradley, though, never applied. Bradley, a 7'6" Mormon drafted after one year at Brigham Young University, entered the NBA after completing his religious mission

in Australia and not playing competitively for a year. He had neither Yao's thick torso, essential for holding position near the basket, nor his leadership qualities. Rik Smits, a 7'4" Dutchman with a sweet jumper who played twelve seasons for the Indiana Pacers, was a closer match, but he wasn't a leader, either, and didn't have Yao's fluid touch with his back to the basket. The greatest issue would be that the speed and strength of the NBA were many times greater than anything Yao had faced in China. I wondered if his athleticism—he's graceful and runs well for 7'6", but has average lateral mobility and a sub-par vertical leap—would allow him to adjust. I'd seen enough, though, to believe that, at worst, Yao would be a serviceable NBA center.

We met with Yao and his parents that night in the lobby of my hotel. The conversation lasted approximately fifteen minutes. There was an ease among Yao and his parents, as if they were three old friends, with Yao simply the youngest and therefore most deferential among them. The family circle served as refuge from the rabid investment that all of China seemed to have in Yao Ming's not just reaching the NBA but also becoming a star. It struck me as presumptuous, having seen the mediocre competition that had whetted his reputation. I flew home believing that, for all of Yao's ability, there were all sorts of ways he might be chewed up and spit out and the world would just keep turning.

Yao Ming's first NBA season, of course, was an unqualified success. He was selected by fans over Shaquille O'Neal as the Western Conference All-Star starting center and helped the Houston Rockets challenge for their first playoff berth in four years down to the final week of the season before falling short. The lone disappointment was his finishing second to Amare Stoudamire in Rookie of the Year balloting.

But all that's through a purely basketball prism. Big picture? It

might've been the most remarkable debut in league history. The NBA being a league of copycats, the league's Chinese talent pipeline would've been severely crimped, if not sealed, had Yao failed after the inconsequential showings of Wang Zhi Zhi and Mengke Bateer the year before. Instead, Yao had Allen Iverson referring to him as a "gift from God," coaches and other players anointing him Shaq's successor as the league's most dominant center, and Rockets owner Les Alexander predicting Yao would be bigger than both Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods combined. He endeared himself to the country in an Apple commercial, opposite 2'8" "Mini-Me" actor Verne Troyer, merely by smiling. His "Yo, Yao" Visa commercial for Super Bowl XXXVII in 2003 spawned an instant pop-culture catchphrase.

All while legions of Asian-American basketball fans suddenly began packing NBA arenas, and NBA teams, in turn, began courting an entirely new fan base.

My first official interview with Yao for this book took place in an elegant but austere cherrywood-paneled home office just inside his front door, and nearly the entire conversation was conducted through his translator, Colin Pine. I expected to need a translator again when I met Yao in Hong Kong during a Chinese national-team tour four months later, but after we had had an hour-long conversation in English, I realized we could go without one. Yao might not have a dazzling English vocabulary or talk in long paragraphs filled with nuance, but he has an eye for detail and a natural affinity for storytelling. I'm told all that is far more evident when he speaks Chinese, but I found that his plainspoken English by no means inhibits his ability or desire to speak his mind and share his observations about life. What I've tried to do in this book is capture the way Yao thinks and speaks, without imposing either my own diction or an interpreter's. I tried to stay as true as

I could to his syntax and word choice, in the hope that readers could experience what I did chatting with Yao on the back of the Chinese national-team bus from Jian Jing to Beijing or, by the end, at a Japanese sushi bar in Seattle the night before the Rockets' last 2003–2004 regular-season road game.

Talking for hours and hours with Yao didn't completely burn off the fog obscuring my understanding of all things Chinese, but there was something special about having him as my guide. Even if it did mean he had to endure hearing me repeatedly say in clumsy Chinese, "Ching Jiang Ingwen," which means, "In English, please."

Walking in public at Yao's side also gave me a disturbing look at the power of fame. In China, it was akin to the onslaught of a locust attack. As he strode through an airport terminal, you could sense heads turning and then hear sharp intakes of breath from every direction, followed by stampeding feet. Fans would crowd around him, oblivious to me, snapping photos or thrusting paper and pen at him and begging for an autograph. The Chinese national team also routinely sprung last-minute public appearances on him until he refused to get off the team bus for one. When the team hurried back on the bus after being gone only five minutes, one of his teammates said, "It's a good thing you didn't go. It was complete chaos." During that five minutes, part of the crowd pounded on the sides of the bus and yelled for Yao to come out. He looked distressed, not wanting to disappoint his fans but sensing he had to draw a line on nonbasketball demands because no one else would.

There were parts of Yao's story that he couldn't have described in English or Chinese, either because he wasn't present for vital moments in the drama of winning his release to the U.S. or because he wasn't fully aware of all the circumstances. I brought in other voices, of those who are close to Yao or have worked with

him, to provide the missing narrative. In the end, Yao is simply about courage and determination. Yao Ming has made, and continues to make, history. He is a flashpoint of profound cultural changes that will be felt throughout the world as China continues to open up and prosper. But what makes Yao special is that he has passed through a crucible of extraordinary events by steadfastly holding on to the solid, reassuring ordinariness of life. As revolutionary as every day of his life has been since the pursuit of his NBA dream began, he never has lost sight of the fact that his basketball career is only a phase and that his actions and attitude define who he is, not the events surrounding him. Maybe it's having been inordinately tall his entire life and thereby having always stood out, but I've never met anyone who takes such pleasure at just fitting in or being part of a crowd.

People inevitably ask what Yao is like when they hear that I've worked on this book. My stock answer: "Whatever you think of him as a basketball player, he's five times that as a human being." Those who've spent time with Yao invariably have a favorite anecdote about his kindheartedness or humility. Michael Goldberg, the Houston Rockets' attorney, can't forget how Yao called him just before boarding a flight back to China after his rookie season, to thank him once again for helping make his NBA dream come true. Or there's the one about Yao wanting to give each member of the Chinese national team one of his NBA trading cards. Rather than impose on the trading card company to send him the requisite cards, he had a friend go around to all the sports memorabilia shops in Houston and buy the cards he needed. As our relationship evolved from that first stilted meeting to one where we'd share a meal or watch a movie for the simple pleasure of hanging out together, my motivation to see this book written shifted from a desire to tell where Yao came from and how he got to the NBA to

providing a glimpse of the thoughtful soul that survived the journey. As his second-year NBA coach, Jeff Van Gundy, says, “If you were going to have an ambassador for your country in a sport, you couldn’t find a better one than Yao Ming.”

Here, then, in Yao’s words, is the story of how a tall, skinny kid from Shanghai, whose parents had higher hopes for him than playing basketball, became an NBA star and thereby a living symbol for a country of 1.3 billion people.

—Ric Bucher

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1

WELCOME TO MY WORLD(S)

My name is Yao Ming. That's what everybody calls me, but in America the right way would be to say Ming Yao, because Yao is my family name. My dad is also a Yao—Yao Zhi Yuan—but not my mom. Usually in the United States, when two people get married, the woman takes her husband's last name. They did that in China many years ago, but now they don't because the government has said that women should be equal to men. My mom's name is Fang Feng Di.

This is only one of many things that are different in China today compared to long ago. In some ways China is becoming more like America, but I don't think they will ever be the same. That means I live in two places—one that is very new and different to me, and one that is very old and very different now, too.

It's hard for me to see all the changes in China, maybe because when I go back, I'm not trying to see them. I'm more interested in the things that I know will not have changed—the food and my friends. Or maybe I'm changing, too, and that's why I can't see what is different. It's hard for me to know. I feel the same on the

inside, but maybe on the outside I'm different. As long as I change for the better, that's OK.

If you're reading this book, I would guess it's because you want to learn more about me. But I hope you can learn a lot more from it than that. Not many people have tried to do what I am doing, to be part of America and China at the same time. At least not many have tried to do it with so many people watching. One reason is that nobody was allowed to try before. Maybe that's the biggest change of all. Maybe that's an important lesson, too—that, with time, everything is possible.

I don't know if you'll learn everything about me and my life in this book, but I will give you as much as I can. I don't like to skip steps, so let me start at the very beginning, with my name as it is written in Chinese:

姚 明

In English, a name can mean something else—for example, first names like “Summer” or “Jack” or last names like “Rice” or “Bell.” It's the same in Chinese. My first name, Ming, means “light.” To write it, you use two Chinese characters. The first character means “the sun,” and the second one means “the moon.” The two names together mean light all the time, day and night.

My last name, Yao, doesn't mean anything in itself. It's just a last name, like Jones. But the two characters that are used to write it, when looked at separately, do mean something. The first character means “woman.” The second character means many, many, many—like a billion, only more. So that means more than Wilt Chamberlain, right?

If you know me, you know that's a joke. First, because I like to make jokes. Second, because I have been interested in only one girl since I was seventeen. When I tell people that, they don't believe me. Maybe I'm the only NBA player like that, but it's true.

There is another important difference between English and Chinese. With all Chinese words, the way you say them changes their meaning. If you say the word "shui"—it sounds like "shway"—it can mean "water," "sleep," or "who," depending on whether your voice rises, falls, or falls and then rises again.

Names are the same. If you say my full name the wrong way, it can mean "killer," or that I am a person who wants to take your life. That's the way a lot of Americans say it. To say it correctly, your voice must rise when you say "Yao" and again when you say "Ming." If you say it still another way, it means "incredible life." But translate "incredible life" into Chinese and you don't get Yao Ming; you get something different.

Maybe *that's* what this book is all about.

You should know that, at first, I said no to anyone who said I should write a book. There are many reasons. One is that I am a private person; that is my personality. Another is that I've always thought only heroes write books or have books written about them. It's important to understand the difference between heroes in the U.S. and in China. In the U.S., the heroes in movies and books almost always live. They face danger and they have the chance to die, but they don't. In China, the biggest heroes are those who have died for their country—not always (the first Chinese astronaut will be a hero no matter what happens), but usually. I'm not a hero. I don't think what I'm doing makes me a big hero. I'm just doing my job.

I also didn't think I'd lived long enough to have something im-

portant to say, and playing basketball in China, no matter how good you are, is not considered as important as I think it is in the United States. That's why I like to read books about history and biographies of important people in history. There are people who have faced more pressure than I will ever face. In Chinese history, the peasants revolted many, many times, but the dynasties changed only about ten times. If the leader of the peasants won, he would become the emperor, but there was little chance of winning, and he paid a big price for failing. His family would have a terrible reputation forever, and anyone directly related to him would be killed. That was the law.

Don't get me wrong; I don't see coming to the National Basketball Association as something revolutionary or see myself as a rebel. I am proud to be Chinese and proud that I learned to play basketball in China. I never want to lose my citizenship, and I will go back to live in China when my NBA career is over. I went through a lot to play in the NBA, but if I had to choose between playing in the NBA and playing for the Chinese national team, I would choose the national team.

Still, I like to read about people who have tried to make important changes because it makes what I face seem easier. I've never had to worry about what would happen to my family if I were to fail. And even though books of history and biography describe times that are very different from ours, reading about how someone under great pressure makes a decision can help me make my decisions. And sometimes reading about someone else just helps me not to think about the challenge I face for a little while. I know this, too: just because I'm in the NBA doesn't mean I can't still fail. People in China expect much more from me than just being able to say I played in the NBA. I expect more from myself than that, too.