

World Biography (/in... / Sh-Z (index.html) / Yao Ming Biography

Yao Ming Biography

September 12, 1980 • Shanghai, China

Basketball player



Yao Ming.
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Yao Ming of China became basketball's most unlikely new celebrity athlete in 2002 when he joined the Houston Rockets. The first foreign athlete ever to become a number-one draft pick in the National Basketball League (NBA), Yao stands seven-foot, five inches tall, and proved to be a surprisingly quick and graceful player during his rookie season. He is a favorite among fans and sportswriters, coming across as humble, modest, and immensely likable. He is also the first Chinese athlete to attain international celebrity status.

(Reached adult height by third grade

The future NBA star was born on September 12, 1980, in Shanghai, the largest city in China. Yao is his family's name, and Ming his given name. At birth, he weighed ten pounds and was the only child of parents who were unusually tall themselves. His father, Yao Zhiyuan, stands six-foot, ten inches tall, and was a basketball player for a local Shanghai team. Yao's mother, Fang Fengdi, was six-foot, two inches in height and had played on the Chinese national team in the early 1970s.

Yao grew rapidly as a child. Because China had historically struggled to feed its population of 1.3 billion, city dwellers sometimes had to use ration coupons to buy food. For Yao's family, it seemed there was never enough food to satisfy the young boy's appetite, and his mother would visit the stalls of the city's food market near closing time to buy extra items cheaply. By the time he was in the third grade, he was five-foot, seven inches tall. Local sports officials took notice, and he was chosen to take part in a local sports school in Shanghai.

At first Yao was not overly interested in basketball or in any other sport. Instead, he liked books about military history, and could recite details of ancient battles from China's past. When he reached the sixth grade he was taller than his mother, and three years later had reached his father's impressive height.

That same year, when he was in the ninth grade, he was signed to a contract with a Shanghai youth team. At the age of seventeen, he became the Shanghai Sharks' star player during its first full season.

"I want people in China to know that part of why I play basketball is simply personal. In the eyes of Americans, if I fail then I fail. It's just me. But for the Chinese if I fail then that means that thousands of other people fail along with me. They feel as if I'm representing them."

The Sharks belonged to the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA), a government-controlled national league. Though soccer was still China's most popular spectator sport, basketball had grown increasingly popular during the 1990s. Soon there were more participants in basketball programs than there were playing soccer in China, and NBA games broadcast on state-run television attracted large audiences. Yao was also a member of the Chinese national team, which competes in international events like the Olympics.

(The NBA's New International Flavor

Yao Ming was one of several new foreign players signed to American teams in the 2002 NBA draft. Though he was the first to become a number one draft pick, Yao joined a roster of players that included Luis Scola from Argentina, Bostjan Nachbar from Slovenia, and Brazilian star Maybyner "Nene" Hilario. Of the fifty-seven players drafted, sixteen were from overseas teams, a league record.

Some thirty-four nations are represented in the NBA player roster. One of the first foreign stars was Manute Bol, a seven-foot, seven-inch Sudanese player in the 1980s. The increasing number of athletes from Europe, Africa, and now even Asia comes thanks to interest in the sport in faraway places. Interest in the NBA teams grew with the help of satellite television, which broadcast NBA games, and when the league began taking top players on overseas exhibition tours.

In countries outside of the United States, the college athletic tradition is virtually nonexistent. Sports facilities exist solely for training national athletes for the Olympics. Professional sports is dominated by soccer, with intense national rivalries, players who become household names, and sold-out stadiums in every city. But professional basketball teams have also gained a foothold in European cities. Talented players, both homegrown and imported, can join teams and turn professional when they are still in their teens. They gain valuable competitive experience which makes them ready to play in the NBA.

Still, there is some criticism of the new face of the NBA, and hints that the new emphasis on foreign players may be a backlash against the "bad boy" reputation of some of its biggest stars, like Dennis Rodman, Charles Barkley, and Kobe Bryant. As *Village Voice* writer Dan McGraw explained: "The perception—and perception is always important in matters of race—is that the NBA is acing out the black man because of corporate (read: white) fans and international marketing money. High-scoring white guys equals big bucks."

In June of 2004, Ha Seung-Jin became the NBA's first Korean player. Drafted by the Portland Trail Blazers, the seven-foot, three-inch player has been hailed as the next Yao Ming. His Asian fans have dubbed him "Ha-Quille O'Neal." But Ha hopes to follow Yao's example, telling Peter Hessler of the *New Yorker*, "I want to be a Korean Yao Ming."

(Visited America in 1998

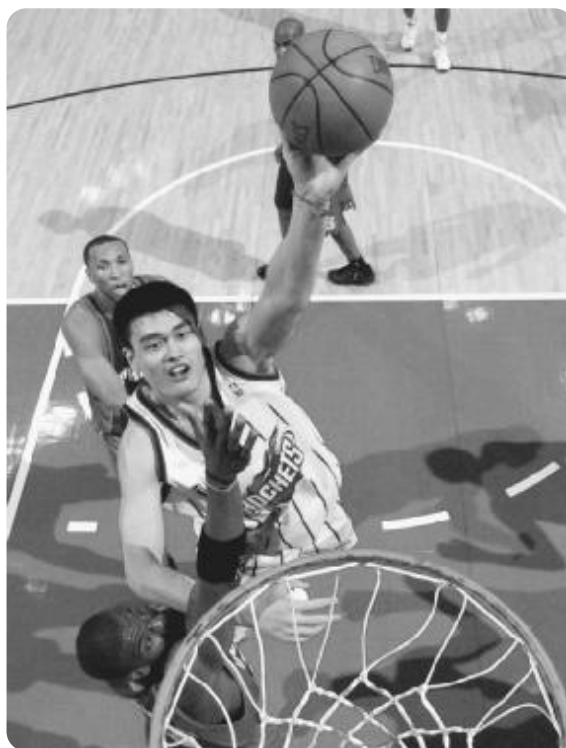
Yao's immense height and court skills began attracting notice outside of China. Player scouts for NBA teams had discovered him, and so had sports marketing companies. In 1998 the athletic gear maker Nike invited him to the United States for a series of basketball camps. It was an important milestone for Yao, as he told Peter Hessler in a profile that appeared in the *New Yorker*. "Before then, I was always playing with people who were two or three years older than me," he explained. "They were always more developed, and I didn't think that I was any good. But in America I finally played against people my own age, and I realized that I was actually very good. That gave me a lot of confidence."

For the next few years, Yao was caught between his country and the chance to become an international superstar. China wanted to keep him with the Sharks and on the national team, and was not eager to see him leave the country for a million-dollar contract to play with the NBA. A sports marketing firm almost engineered a deal in 1999, but it involved giving the Sharks a large percentage of his potential American paycheck, which would have been prohibited by NBA players' union rules. In the spring of 2000, Yao was invited to the Nike Hoop Summit—where many international players show off their talents before NBA scouts—but the Chinese government refused to let him go. The Chinese national team was about to begin its Olympic workouts, the official explanation went, and wanted Yao to be prepared for the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney, Australia.

Yao and his national teammates made an impression in Sydney. He played alongside six-foot, eleven-inch Beijing Ducks player Menk Batere and Wang Zhizhi, a seven-foot, one-inch standout on the Chinese Army team. They were dubbed the "Walking Wall of China" for their prowess, but China was defeated by an all-star U.S. team, 119–72. Wang went on to become the first player from China to enter the NBA draft in 2001, and Batere was also signed that year by the Denver Nuggets, but Yao remained in China. One of the reasons may have been his age: if a player has not come up through the college ranks, he must be twenty-two years old to play in the NBA when his rookie season kicks off.

(Joined Rockets in 2002

Yao continued to play for the Sharks, where he earned about \$20,000 a year, leading them to the CBA championship in 2002. During one of the playoff games, Yao he took twenty-one shots and sank every one of them. Finally, terms were hammered out between NBA and CBA



Yao Ming of the Houston Rockets shoots over Amare Stoudemire (bottom) during a 2003 game against the Phoenix Suns.

AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission.

officials that allowed Yao to enter the 2002 NBA draft. The CBA agreed to release him from his contract in exchange for a small percentage of his NBA salary. When the Houston Rockets won the draft-pick lottery that gave them first dibs, Yao was their first choice as a center. He was signed to a four-year, \$18 million contract, with five percent of his salary going to the CBA. He was also the first number one draft pick to come from the international players' ranks.

The NBA's newest player attracted immense media attention, but Yao had to give most of his press interviews through a translator at first. He did not start for the Rockets during the first months of his rookie season, but began to show impressive talents whenever coach Rudy Tomjanovich put him in a game. On November 17, 2002, in a match against the Los Angeles Lakers, Yao scored twenty points for his team and made all of the shots he attempted—nine for nine. A few games later, he scored thirty points in a game against the Dallas Mavericks and took sixteen rebounds. In December he was named the Western Conference's rookie of the month.

Several weeks later, Yao made it onto the NBA All-Star team, beating out Shaquille O'Neal of the Lakers in fan voting for the best center. Relations between the two players had been slightly strained when Yao first came to the United States, because sportswriters liked to ask O'Neal, the NBA's most famous center, what he thought of his new competition. At one point, O'Neal made a disparaging remark in which he mimicked the Chinese language. In response, Yao reacted gracefully. "Chinese is hard to learn," he told one journalist when asked what he thought about the "Shaq" attack, according to Hessler. "I had trouble with it when I was little."

(Dubbed basketball's "Gentle Giant"

With his own English-language skills improving, Yao began speaking to the media on his own more frequently. He quickly emerged as a fan favorite in Houston. During his rookie season, ticket sales for home games at Compaq Center jumped to about two thousand more than the previous year's figures. His nice-guy attitude and easy smile, combined with his immense height and lantern jaw, prompted the press to nickname him the "Gentle Giant." Corporate America was eager to hire him, too, and he was signed to a number of advertising contracts. In one of his first, which required no dialogue, he appeared alongside Verne "Mini Me" Troyer from the *Austin Powers* movies in an ad for Apple Computer. He also starred in a Visa check card commercial. Reebok signed him to an endorsement contract rumored to be \$100 million dollars, thought to be the largest ever between a shoe company and an athlete.

Yao was an even bigger celebrity in China now. He pitched the Yanjing brand of beer, made in Beijing, and appeared in television commercials for China Unicom, a telecommunications company. In 2003 he returned home to play on the Chinese national team, and also hosted a multi-national telethon that raised money for SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) awareness and prevention. Back in Houston, Yao had another excellent season with the Rockets in 2003, averaging 17.5 points and nine rebounds per game. In one match against the Atlanta Hawks in February of 2004, Yao scored a career-high forty-one points. More important, he helped take the Rockets to the NBA playoffs, but they lost the series to the Los Angeles Lakers.

Yao is well-liked by his teammates, even though his stardom could have brought bad feelings. They call him "Dynasty," a reference to the Ming era of Chinese history. His impressive court skills certainly help. Yao's former Rockets teammate Mookie Norris told one journalist that "when he throws you a pass, a lot of times he has to shout out your name so you know it's coming," the New York Knicks guard told Sean Deveney of the *Sporting News*.

(Dwarfed Olympic team delegation

Yao still played for the Chinese national team. At the opening ceremonies of the 2004 Summer Games in Athens, Greece, he carried the Chinese flag when his country's Olympic delegation marched into the stadium. Once again he was the tallest athlete at the Olympics. In the NBA, only seven-foot, six-inch Shawn Bradley of the Dallas Mavericks is taller than Yao. In China, broadcasts of Rockets' games on television draw fourteen million viewers, and Yao is mobbed by fans whenever he returns. One Chinese man, Zhang Guojun, explained to a journalist why China's most famous athletic is such a beloved figure. "Yao is important in our hearts," he told Hessler. "He went to America, and he returned."

Yao lives near Katy, Texas, in a home he shares with his parents. Though he is surprised at the media attention his NBA career has brought, he says he always hoped to achieve greatness in his profession. "When I was small, I always wanted to be famous," he confessed to Hessler. "I thought I'd be a scientist or maybe a political figure. It didn't matter, as long as I was famous."

(For More Information

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And for the record, I'm against unjustified zoning restrictions that increase housing costs in cities. Then you get people asking for rent control, which makes matters worse.

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