

## A Comparison of NBA & CBA Team Identification in China

*W. Chadwick Menefee, North Carolina State University*

*Jonathan M. Casper (Advisor), North Carolina State University*

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During the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, Kobe Bryant and other members of the U.S. men's basketball team were treated as celebrities in China (Loretta, 2008). Although it may have seemed strange that Chinese citizens warmly embraced these foreign athletes, it should not be surprising given the rapid growth in popularity of basketball in China over the past decade. In fact, basketball is quickly becoming the most popular sport in the country (e.g. Polumbaum, 1999; Euchner, 2008). International growth is poised to become a major topic in sport management during the next decade, but research remains limited in sport marketing. Although the growth of basketball in China has surged over the past decade and the National Basketball Association (NBA) has expressed interest in expansion to China (Thompson & Paul, 2008), researchers have not yet studied basketball consumers in this emerging market.

The purpose of this research project was to determine if there are differences in team identification of the NBA compared to the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) among Chinese basketball spectators. This study compared team identification of Chinese basketball spectators for their favorite NBA team with the team identification of their favorite CBA team. This study also compared the behavior of Chinese spectators through their merchandise consumption and media viewership of both the CBA and the NBA. Because the NBA has increased in popularity substantially in China, we hypothesized that Chinese spectators would exhibit significantly higher team identification for their favorite NBA teams than their favorite CBA teams. The participants for this study included spectators at four different CBA games during the 2007-08 season in China. The games were played at two different arenas in the Zhejiang province. Sport economics students from a university in China's Zhejiang province handed out surveys to spectators in their seats and then collected the completed questionnaires. Spectators were provided with souvenirs to encourage their participation and rarely rejected the students' requests. A total of 622 spectators completed the survey at the four games. After analyzing the responses for missing values, 608 of the surveys (97.7%) were deemed suitable for analysis. The average age of the spectators was 24.38 years old (SD=7.34). Within the sample, 82.8% of the respondents were male, and annual income ranged from 0 to 300,000 yuan (exchange rate is about 7 yuan = 1 U.S. dollar) per year (M=5,054.2, SD=26,632.4). The behavioral questions asked respondents to report their frequency of watching CBA and NBA games on television, as well as their annual merchandise spending on CBA and NBA merchandise. Finally, the team identification instrument included items from Wann and Branscombe's (1993) Sport Spectator Identification Scale because of its validation in a variety of sport settings with diverse respondents (Wann et al., 2001). The instrument was developed in English and translated into Chinese by sport economics professors in China. The results showed strong differences for both behavioral components and team identification for the NBA and CBA with Chinese fans. Specifically, the respondents watched significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more NBA games than CBA games on television and spent significantly ( $p < .001$ ) more money on NBA merchandise than CBA merchandise.

Overall, Chinese spectators indicated significantly ( $p < .001$ ) higher team identification scores for their favorite NBA team compared to their favorite CBA team. Individual item differences in the Team Identification Scale revealed that for six of the seven items, the Chinese fans identified more with the NBA teams. For this reason, the NBA may be more likely to be the driver of future growth in Chinese professional basketball. The significant differences indicate that the NBA is more popular than the CBA among basketball spectators in China. Even though these particular fans were actually attending CBA games, they still reported higher identification with their favorite NBA teams. The results were not surprising because of the NBA's increasing commitment to the Chinese market in recent years. During this time, top Chinese players like Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian have transitioned from the CBA to the NBA (e.g. Osnos, 2008). In China, the NBA has played preseason games, promoted grassroots programs (Thompson & Fong, 2006), announced plans to open 2,000 NBA retail stores (Chen, 2008), helped develop the Olympics basketball arena, and expressed interest in partnering with the CBA in the future (Thompson & Paul, 2008). The results hint that companies may be able to reach Chinese consumers by aligning their brands with the NBA, or endorsing teams and players from the NBA. Global companies have often employed a "glocalization" strategy in tailoring their marketing messages or products to the local needs of consumers (Ritzer, 2003). The results also present some unique challenges to the CBA. Basketball is becoming the most popular sport in the country, but this study's results suggest that basketball fans are becoming greater fans of the international league than the domestic league. This creates great potential for the NBA and its member leagues and players. However, the Chinese league and individual teams may need to develop new strategies for reaching basketball fans. Additional marketing recommendations will be discussed throughout the presentation.