In recent years, academics in sport management have become more aware of the powerful influence which media and commentary of sport can have on individuals and sport consumers (Coakley, 2007). The commentary which exists within the broadcasts not only presents powerful messages to consumers, but also displays a wide range of effects on viewers and society. In the sport management and communications literature there is a plethora of studies which have examined various aspects of commentary in sport broadcasts. However, these studies have considered the role of commentary mostly from the perspective of Western Nations or the America’s. Because of this, a good portion of the world’s commentary is left untouched. This study attempts to tackle this situation by focusing on sport commentary from televised broadcasts of sporting events in China. Additionally, this study attempts to not only examine how broadcasting in China portrays various themes and individuals, but also how it has evolved into its current form.

China presents an interesting context in which to study broadcast commentary for a number of reasons. First, as one of the growing economic and consumer powers of our increasing globalized society, China represents a large market of interest to corporations and organizations of all shapes and sizes. While the Chinese market remains an enticing and lucrative market, not all sport teams have had the success they thought they would in the market, and it still remains that many foreign companies do not understand the culture or the consumers (Simons, 2008). In this, the analysis of commentary can help to better understand the type of media that fans are exposed to in China. Second, because of both its non-Western context, as well as the fast-paced change of in the socio-political situation in the country, China presents a unique perspective, especially in being able to see political and nation-state based themes. Additionally, because the first television broadcast of sport in China was only three decades ago, the ability to trace the evolution of broadcasting from its early years to its formation in more recent times is quite intriguing. With this in mind, this study focuses on examining some major themes and the evolution of broadcast commentary for sport in China over the last three decades. Data for the analysis was conducted via a painstaking process of transcribing and translating actual commentary into Chinese, and then translating it to English. Additionally, archival research was conducted in China in order to be able to collect data on early sport commentary, because of the difficulty and lack of remaining evidence from the early 1980’s when sport commentary first became prevalent in China.

Within the sport commentary literature, there are three main themes in respect to individuals. First are the shifts in descriptions of sport “role models”. A body of work has examined sport role models (Whitaker & Molstad, 1988; Shropshire, 1995; Lines, 2001; Wilde & Crosswhite, 2007). The majority of these studies focus on sport role-modeling patterns (Whitaker & Molstad, 1988) as well as its effect on society (Wilde et al., 2007). Lines (2001) states that “sporting texts are designed to prioritize, personalize and sensationalize characters in an attempt to capture audience attention. The sporting hero has traditionally been perceived as epitomizing social ideals and masculine virtues, and as embodying values that learnt on the playing fields will readily transfer into everyday life.”

Traditional commentary in China illustrates Olympic champions as the unexceptionable embodiment of state and society, who are carved from the same mold, without distinct personality traits and with no obvious faults. This has shifted in modern Chinese commentary, where the champion is now becoming more of an “imperfect hero,” who owns distinct characteristics and is more symbolized as combination of advantages and disadvantages.

The second theme identified in this analysis, is the transition of the focus of the descriptor. Chun Wang (2007) suggested that “sport commentary has the obligation to pay more attention on losers, who may have more stories behind them than that of champions.” In our study, we also find that “win or failure” is not the only criterion through which to determine whether an athlete deserves more commentary or not. Oftentimes, those athletes who do not win obtain more descriptive and lengthy commentary partly due to their own personal story and the representative images of spirits of Olympic Games (friendship, fair competition, unity, mutual understanding). The third theme regards the concept of “collectivism” vs “individual heroism.” Many Chinese scholars have pointed out that,
compared with western sport, which attaches importance on the “individual hero,” Chinese sport had been emphasizing “collectivism” because of traditional ideology and value systems (e.g., Li, 1998; Lu, 2000; Ren, 2002). Current sport commentary is in an emerging transition. “Individual heroism” has become more frequently commented on, especially in some team sports. We thus propose, that through this commentary that one can see a tremendous shift of Chinese views on “Life, World and Value” in the latest three decades.

Regarding concepts of nationality reflected in sport commentary, it already has been an interesting research area both for the scholars in Eastern and Western countries (Yu; 2003; Xiao & Sun, 2004; Billings & Eastman, 2000; Woo, Kim et al, 2010). Guoming Yu (2003) pointed out that “the nationality in international sport, especially in Olympic Games, which can be reflected by the most-mentioned athletes of sport commentator, exhibits a strong self-identity for their own countries.” In this research, we find that, although the density of nationalistic bias in China sport commentary is gradually diminishing over time, its intensity has kept rather stable and sometimes has been reinvigorated, especially during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. We argue that the increased intensity of nationalism arises both from Chinese priorities of hosting the games as well as the increasing status and influence of China to the world.

In conclusion, this research presents a several-fold contribution. Not only does it provide an extension of prior research in the field done on sport commentary and media, but it also is done within the unique context of China. This study also helps to push forward the understanding and analysis of themes and evolution of sport commentary, especially in a specialized context such as China. In addition, we conclude by drawing several important notes about how the analysis of themes in this research leads to several important conclusions about changes in media that is presented to consumers in China. Understanding of these changes in media, can also help to better understand the consumers themselves, and better target and place advertisements, products, and sport services in China.