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Book follows business of basketball in China

BY GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

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Following the debut of Yao Ming, a 7-foot, 6-inch center, with the Houston Rockets in 2002, basketball became all the rage in China. And, like other Chinese industries, the Chinese Basketball Association aspired to become a global powerhouse.

In the summer of 2008, Boss Wang, a steel tycoon who owned the Shanxi Brave Dragons, the worst team in the league - and a "madman" who had in six years fired a Korean coach, an Australian coach and more than a dozen Chinese coaches - hired Bob Weiss, a former coach in the National Basketball Association, to teach his athletes an American style of play.

In "Brave Dragons," Jim Yardley, a foreign correspondent for The New York Times, follows the team as it struggles to make the playoffs.

Although the court, the ball and the rules of the game were the same as in the United States, Yardley claims that in China, "everything else was different." Meddling "has a different definition in China," Coach Weiss learns. Although basketball provided a rare occasion where citizens could scream at authority figures, referees (and other league officials) were incompetent or corrupt.

Shanxi, Yardley demonstrates, ignored rules restricting the number of American players on each team. Faced with evidence that Sam Daghlas, the starting point guard for the national team in Jordan, had been born in the United States, team officials faxed a copy of a passport to the league office declaring that Osama Mohammed Fathi Daghlas had been born in Amman on Sept. 18, 1979.

This move helped clear the way for the Brave Dragons to sign Bonzi Wells, a terrific rebounder, defender and scorer for the Portland Trail Blazers.

Bonzi got his nickname from his mother's love of chocolate bonbons. He also earned his designation by GQ magazine as one of America's "Top Ten Hated Athletes" by giving the finger to fans and spitting in the face of an opposing player.

For Shanxi, Bonzi scored at will, showed no respect for his teammates, hated the food, became the antithesis of an American ambassador for basketball and decided by the end of the season to return home to Muncie, Ind.

"Brave Dragons" presents China as a country permeated by corruption and cynicism. Boss Wang, Yardley suggests, was part of the first generation who made lots of money and "pursued dreams often shaped by the West." The next generation, he implies, might be more flexible and less hierarchical.

Nonetheless, Yardley is not terribly sanguine about China's future. A metaphor, it seems, for a country stuck in a difficult transition, his tale of a basketball season ends with a flying squirrel, saved by Coach Weiss's wife, who wants him to be set free in the mountains.

Hoppy, however, is still in his cage, "making one mad flip after another, his tiny feet sticking at each landing, flipping and flopping and flipping, to the point of exhaustion."

BRAVE DRAGONS: A CHINESE BASKETBALL TEAM, AN AMERICAN COACH, AND TWO CULTURES CLASHING

By Jim Yardley

Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95

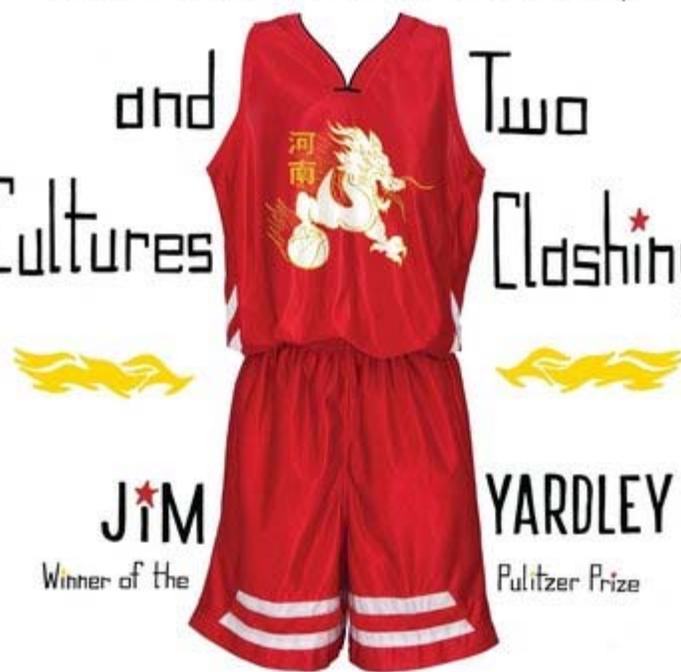
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BRAVE DRAGONS

A Chinese Basketball Team,
an American Coach,
and Two
Cultures Clashing



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