



The NBA Bows to Beijing

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As the Boston Celtics and the Dallas Mavericks compete in the NBA Finals, the sport's biggest stars are doing what professional athletes have done for years: telling stories with their shoes. In Game 1, Celtics forward Jayson Tatum wore custom sneakers inspired by a sunset in China. In Game 2, Mavericks guard Kyrie Irving sported moccasin-inspired shoes as an homage to his Native American heritage. Both told stories familiar to the NBA's values of cultural exchange and diversity, equity, and inclusion. But they also, inadvertently, told another story: one the NBA would rather ignore.

Nike and ANTA, which produce these custom shoes, have come under congressional investigation for their use of cotton produced by slave labor in the People's Republic of China. These concerns are not new. Neither is the NBA's indifference to them. Time and again, the league has revealed a penchant for maximizing money at the expense of morality.

That critique may seem harsh to some, particularly given the association's political advocacy at home. Since 2020, the league has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the development of African-American communities, for example. When it comes to the human-rights atrocities of the Chinese Communist Party, however, the NBA has consistently chosen profits over principle. In so doing, it has become an unwitting vector of Beijing's malign influence within the United States.

The league should have learned its lesson in 2019. Back then, General Secretary Xi Jinping advanced a national-security law that sought to undermine Hong Kong's long-standing political autonomy from the PRC. Tensions were simmering, and Hong Kongers loudly protested in defense of their freedoms. Daryl Morey, then-general manager of the Houston Rockets, noticed the situation and simply tweeted: "Fight for freedom. Stand with Hong Kong." Beijing's retaliation was swift. It banned the broadcast of Houston Rockets games in China and cut off all cooperation with the team. NBA commissioner Adam Silver distanced the league from Morey's tweets and made no comment on the CCP's political oppression in Hong Kong. "We have great respect for the history and culture of China," he insisted.

The NBA's response achieved the impossible: It united the likes of Senator Ted Cruz (R., Texas) and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D., N.Y.). The pair, along with five other members of Congress, chastised the association: "Hundreds of millions of people within China will read your statements as an admission that their government's propaganda is correct; millions of people in Hong Kong will be dispirited."

In that watershed moment, the NBA remained intransigent. Rather than recognize how its response had strengthened Beijing's disinformation in Hong Kong and influence within America, it whitewashed the CCP's atrocities. In response to political pushback, Silver released a decidedly unsatisfactory follow-on statement: "At a time when divides between nations grow deeper and wider, we believe sports can be a unifying force that focuses on what we have in common as human beings rather than our differences."

But who exactly qualifies as a "human being" in the eyes of the NBA? In 2022, three years after the Morey episode, ESPN revealed that 17 NBA players had deals for shoes manufactured with cotton produced by Uyghur slave labor in Xinjiang, the region where the U.S. government has found evidence of an ongoing genocide. In response, the National Basketball Players Association insisted that it doesn't endorse the "commission of genocide or crimes against humanity." Absent from that statement was an actual condemnation of genocide, let alone an acknowledgment that Beijing is committing one. Even worse, when Congress asked the league to purge slave-labor-tainted cotton from its players' custom shoes, the union reportedly didn't even bother to notify the athletes. In the words of an anonymous agent, "It's such a sensitive topic. No one's going to talk about it." That calculated silence is all the CCP needs.

In a way, the NBA is proving the CCP's critique of American democracy. Xi Jinping and his predecessors have long held the cynical view that Washington's principles only go as far as its pocketbook. When conflict arises between liberty and prosperity, America will choose the latter. Indeed, over the decades, American politicians have turned a blind eye to Beijing's many atrocities because of the economic benefits of trading with China. As elected leaders in Washington rightly reevaluate that stance, NBA owners should not be surprised when their considerable economic exposure to the People's Republic of China comes under scrutiny.

The NBA is not a victim of Washington. It is a victim of its own hypocrisy. That said, it's never too late to do the right thing. Jayson Tatum and Kyrie Irving could, for instance, simply ask their agents where the cotton in their shoes came from.