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

Jim Yardley

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The wonderfully original story of a struggling Chinese basketball team and its quixotic, often comical attempt to right its fortunes by copying the American stars of the NBA—a season of cultural misunderstanding that transcends sports and reveals China's ambivalent relationship with the West.

When the Shanxi Brave Dragons, one of China's worst professional basketball teams, hired former NBA coach Bob Weiss, the team's owner, Boss Wang, promised that Weiss would be allowed to Americanize his players by teaching them "advanced basketball culture." That promise would be broken from the moment Weiss landed in China. Desperate for his team to play like Americans, Wang—a peasant turned steel tycoon—nevertheless refused to allow his players the freedom and individual expression necessary to truly change their games.

Former *New York Times* Beijing bureau chief Jim Yardley tells the story of the resulting culture clash with sensitivity and a keen comic sensibility. Readers meet the Brave Dragons, a cast of colorful, sometimes heartbreaking oddballs from around the world: the ambitious Chinese assistant coach, Liu Tie, who believes that Chinese players are genetically inferior and can improve only through the repetitious drilling once advocated by ancient kung fu masters; the moody and selfish American import, Bonzi Wells, a former NBA star so unnerved by China that initially he locks himself in his apartment; the Taiwanese point guard, Little Sun, who is demonized by his mainland Chinese coaches; and the other Chinese players, whose lives sometimes seem little different from those of factory workers.

As readers follow the team on a fascinating road trip through modern China—from glamorous Shanghai and bureaucratic Beijing to the booming port city Tianjin and the polluted coal capital of Taiyuan—we see Weiss learn firsthand what so many other foreigners in China have discovered: China changes only when and how it wants to change.

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