

## Xinjiang: A New Arena for Sports Activism?

Written by Grant Alexander

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GRANT ALEXANDER, JUN 24 2021

In the era of COVID-19, it seems almost everything that was prominent in the news beforehand (and that came up during the pandemic) has taken secondary status in importance. It is the topic of sports that is the focus of this paper, not for the adjustments it made during COVID-19, but for the changes in how athletes interact with political and social issues. While over the last two years BLM, Anthem protests, and Hong Kong protests have dominated the news in relation to professional sports, it is athletes protesting the human rights abuses in Xinjiang that stands out. The Chinese government's growing lack of response to these protests reflects a desire to avoid drawing any additional international attention on Xinjiang out of fear of the problems it would create if discussed more openly.

Research on how China's responses to athletes (and their teams and leagues) speaking out about the atrocities committed against the Uyghurs[1] as different from athletes speaking out on other political and social issues in China matters for four reasons. First, over the last ten years, not only have professional athletes and coaches increasingly raised their voices on social and political issues (primarily BLM), there are a growing number of people (especially in the West) who want them to get more involved in certain political and social causes. Much of this was originally focused on events in the U.S., but sports activism in recent years has spread beyond America. Since it is not likely that professional athletes are discontinuing their involvement in political and social issues anytime soon, it is necessary to study how countries respond to athletes criticizing their governments or foreign ones. The second reason has to do with how China's responses to members of prominent professional sports leagues commenting/criticizing them differs from other countries reactions. While Daryl Morey's tweet in October 2019 received the most attention, this paper will show he was not the only one.

Third, although BLM activism holds the current monopoly on many professional sports leagues for engagement in social and political issues, the growing attention to the human rights abuses in Xinjiang (with growing accusations of cultural genocide) has the potential to become the second biggest issue that professional athletes and leagues speak out on in the future. To briefly unpack Xinjiang, over the last four years, a growing number of scholars, human rights groups, and politicians have brought up China's human rights violations in Xinjiang that include the placement of at least one million Uyghur Muslims into "reeducation" camps, the mass sterilization of women at childbearing age in Xinjiang, the separation of as many as 500,000 children from their parents and their relocation them into state-controlled "children shelters" (i.e. boarding schools), and the use of people from the detention camps as forced labor in factories of companies including Apple, Amazon, Adidas, and Sony (Asat and Diamond 2020). Moreover, the "technological sophistication" used to monitor the Uyghurs has been described as "the most advanced police state, with extensive controls and restrictions on every aspect of life—religious, familial, cultural, and social" (Asat and Diamond 2020). This makes Xinjiang different from BLM protests, with the latter's primary focuses being police brutality, institutional racism, and racial profiling. While BLM does raise very important issues, Xinjiang protests are different in that they focus on mass atrocities that growing number of scholars and human rights activists are either calling cultural genocide or something very close to that.

Fourth and finally, the longer the human rights abuses in Xinjiang go on, the more likely that they will receive a greater degree of attention (especially, if more documents are leaked or eyewitnesses come forward about what is happening). Should nothing be resolved by late 2021, some nations might boycott the 2022 Winter Olympics (hosted in Beijing) or some athletes might conduct protests at Beijing's games. In short, the rise of athletes' involvement in political and social issues across the world, China's responses to protests about their country, the level of

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accusations concerning Xinjiang, the unknown as to how long the growing human rights abuses in Xinjiang will continue, and a possible boycott of a Winter Olympic games, provide important reasons for the need to study China's responses sports activism concerning Xinjiang and how they differ from other issues.

The structure of this paper will consist of looking at five events from October 2019 to October 2020 where professional athletes, a retired athlete, and a General Manager (GM) made comments and/or social media posts that were critical about a social or political matter in China. Additionally, I will also look at how China (news media, businesses, politicians, and many citizens) responded to the athletes and GM. The events in professional sports world that I will focus on are as follows:

- I. Daryl Morey's tweet supporting the Hong Kong protests (Oct. 2019)
- II. Mesut Özil's posts on Instagram and Twitter about the Uyghurs (Dec. 2019)
- III. Hǎo Hǎidōng calling for the overthrow of the Chinese Communist Party (June 2020)
- IV. Demba Ba calling for more people to speak up for the Uyghurs (Aug. 2020)
- V. Professional athletes who posted about the Uyghurs on China's National Day (October 1) in 2020

After addressing these events and the reactions by the sports leagues and China, I will show how China's responses to the comments about Xinjiang differ from comments made about other political and social issues and provide three reasons for why China responded differently to athletes speaking out about the atrocities toward the Uyghurs. Finally, I will be using the term "football" for soccer.

## October 2019: Daryl Morey

To understand the importance of professional athletes speaking up on Xinjiang, we need to go back to October 4, 2019, when Houston Rockets GM Daryl Morey tweeted, "Fight for freedom, stand with Hong Kong" (Desert Editorial Board 2019). Although Morey deleted the tweet and apologized, it sparked three firestorms. First, there was the uproar between China and the NBA, with the former's state media and many of its citizens condemning the tweet and the China Central Television (CCTV) suspended televising NBA games (Bauer 2019). In addition, the Houston Rockets lost Chinese sponsors including Tencent, Li-Ning, Shanghai Pudong Development Bank Credit Card Center, and the Chinese Basketball Association (Bauer 2019; The Associated Press 2019; Deb and Stain 2020).[2] Although Rockets Owner Tilman Fertitta condemned the tweet, Rockets basketball player James Harden apologized to China, and the NBA released a statement calling Morey's tweet "regrettable," those responses created a backlash (the second firestorm) in the U.S. from individuals, media, and politicians on both sides of the political and ideological aisle including Fox News, *Washington Post*, and U.S. Senators Marco Rubio and Charles Schumer (Desert Editorial Board 2019; Scribner 2019). This in turn, prompted NBA Commissioner Adam Silver to backtrack the league's previous criticism about Morey, saying that "the NBA will not put itself in a position of regulating what players, employees, and team owners say or will not say on these issues" (Bauer 2019). At this point—October 7, 2019—the whole situation revealed the difficulties the NBA had in balancing its social/political activism with business objectives, when, a week later, LeBron James entered the fray. On October 14, 2019, after a preseason game in Shanghai, James criticized Morey's tweet, saying the following:

Yes, we do have freedom of speech, but at times, there are ramifications for the negative that can happen when you're not thinking about others, when you only think about yourself... So many people could have been harmed, not only financially but physically, emotionally, spiritually. So just be careful what we tweet and what we say and what we do. Even though yes, we do have freedom of speech, it can be a lot of negative that comes with it... [and that Morey] wasn't educated on the situation that he spoke.

Bauer 2019; Leicester 2019; Mansfield 2019

This caused another backlash (the third firestorm) in the U.S. and Hong Kong because of how James contradicted his own record of calling for political/social activism around the world and encouraging people to get involved even if they didn't understand much about the political/social issues at hand (Bauer 2019).

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The fallout between the NBA and China was different than the challenges that Apple, Google, and Blizzard faced in their handling of the Hong Kong protests due to the NBA's reputation of balancing profits with having a reputation as the "the wokest professional sports league" (Bauer 2019; Mansfield 2019; Minsberg 2018). Examples of the NBA's political and social activism include involvement with Black Lives Matter protests, moving the 2017 All-Star game from North Carolina to Louisiana because of the former state's bathroom bill that was accused of being transphobic, and not punishing Ernes Kantar for his comments on Turkey's Prime Minister. While Kantar's 2016 comments about Turkey's President—calling him a "dictator" and the "Hitler of our century"—lead to Kantar's loss of Turkish citizenship and a blackout of all his games being covered by the Turkish press, the NBA's indifference contrasted with the approach to their handling of China, as well as confirming an underlying reality about the NBA (Bauer 2019). Their business-political activism reputation had taken two different approaches between Turkey and China. Turkey is a country of eighty million, while China has about 1.4 billion people, is the second largest economy in the world, accounts for about 10% of the NBA's revenue[3], and is not as tolerant of international businesses and professional sports leagues protesting sensitive issues in their country as had been the case in other countries, thus requiring the NBA to re-evaluate its business-sports activism approach (Bauer 2019; Helin 2019; Minsberg 2018). In short, Morey's tweet revealed the limits of making money and social/political activism as a win-win, and how China would not tolerate outsiders offering verbal support to Hong Kong protesters.

### **December 2019: Mesut Özil**

Another challenge between professional sports leagues and China over a controversial political/social issue in the latter's country took place on December 13, 2019 but did not involve Hong Kong or the NBA. Instead, it started with Mesut Özil—a German footballer for the Arsenal Football Club in the English Premier League—who posted on Instagram and Twitter (with an East Turkistan flag in the background of his posts) a condemnation of China's treatment of the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Province, and criticizing Muslims around the world for remaining silent on the matter (Buckley 2019). The backlash of these posts created tensions between Özil, Arsenal, and China. The Chinese state, foreign ministry, and social media heavily condemned Özil's comments, while Chinese broadcasters at CCTV and PP Sports stopped coverage of an Arsenal game, and, when they covered the next one, they did not mention Özil's name (Buckley 2019; Hafez 2020; Panja and Smith 2020). In addition, Arsenal apologized for Özil's posts, saying that it stays out of politics, removed Özil's name from merchandise celebrating the Chinese New Year, and from China's version of the "Pro Evolution Soccer 2020 video game" (Buckley, 2019; Hafez, 2020; Pania and Smith, 2020). Although Özil was left out of Arsenal's Premier League and Europa League squads in the fall of 2020, it is unknown as to how much of a factor his comments about Xinjiang impact his current situation (Hafez 2020). However, given that Premier League had a "[£700 million, three-year deal] arrangement with China, for broadcasting rights that [was supposed to run] through 2022,"[4] and given how such deals can fall apart as Morey's tweet showed, it is not surprising that the Arsenal team took self-censoring measures to avoid the major financial losses that the Houston Rockets and NBA had faced (Boren and Li 2019; Jourdan 2020).

Nevertheless, the negative reaction from the Chinese media and the public over Özil's posts was not as harsh as it had been with Daryl Morey a couple of months earlier. This was seen with Weibo "removing comments that addressed the issue [Xinjiang] directly, while leaving comments that only attacked Özil personally," and Chinese corporations not breaking off from Arsenal or the Premier League like they did with the Houston Rockets and the NBA (Jourdan 2016; Harker 2019). In short, while the standoff between the English Premier League and China over Xinjiang of late 2019 revealed not only the limitations of how far prominent sports leagues with business ties to China will go with a political/social activism approach it also showed how differently the Chinese government, companies and media handled the Özil's Xinjiang comments compared to Morey's tweet about Hong Kong.

### **June 2020: Hǎo Hǎidōng**

On June 4, 2020, the thirty-first anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, retired Chinese football star Hǎo Hǎidōng released two videos on Youtube (his wife Yè Zhāoyǐng, a retired badminton athlete and an Olympian, was in the second one) calling for the overthrow of the CCP and for the rise of the "New Federal State of China," labelling the CCP a "terrorist organization," and saying the CCP's "totalitarian rule in China [is responsible for] horrific atrocities against humanity" (Harker 2020a). The response by the Chinese government included the removal of the

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couple's Weibo accounts, and their online profiles on Sina Sports and Tencent Sport (Kin-wa 2020; White 2020a). Moreover, a few days after the YouTube video uploads, Hǎo and Yè's son, Runze Hao, was removed from the Serbian football team, FK Radnički Niš, although the club has denied any pressure from China over this (Harker 2020a). Nevertheless, the response from China reflects a somewhat similar pattern that Morey and Özil faced in terms of pushback and suppression of online activity (Ibid). However, it was different, not only in that Hǎidōng's comments called for the overthrow of the CCP, but also that the CCP targeted a Chinese athlete and citizen who was considered by many in China to be one of the greatest Chinese football athletes in recent times.

### **August 2020: Demba Ba**

In August, 2020, professional footballer Demba Ba of the İstanbul Başakşehir F.K. in the Turkish League of Süper Lig, spoke to BBC about China's mistreatment of Muslims in Xinjiang, saying that "Black Lives Matter movement is stronger when non-black people step up for it...When are we going to see the rest of the world stand up for Muslims?" (Henson 2020). Not only did he call for footballers to speak up about Xinjiang atrocities, but he also argued that professional sports teams and leagues had not taken action so far because they believed that the economic cost would be too great as Ba said in the following statements:

If there was a financial risk to Black Lives Matter, it would not have happened...Arsenal talked about Black Lives Matter but when it was about Uyghur lives Arsenal didn't want to talk about it because of the pressure and economic impact. When there are financial benefits, some people close their eyes. Money has more value than real values.

Henson 2020

While Ba says his former team in Shanghai (the Shanghai Shenhua) was contacted by the Chinese government over his comments on social media, he has not faced any of the pushback with his current team or league that Morey and Özil faced (Ibid). He still plays for Başakşehir F.K.

### **October 2020: Raphaël Glucksmann**

About a month-and-a half after Demba Ba's comments on the plight of the Uyghurs, professional footballers Liga Franck Ribéry and Kalidou Koulibaly of Serie A, Riyad Mahrez of the English Premier League, Ousmane Dembele of La Liga, Moussa Marega of the Primeira Liga, and NBA player Rudy Gobert posted and/or reposted hashtags and blue squares on Twitter and Instagram that condemned China for its suppression of Uyghur culture and religious identity (White 2020b; Harker 2020b). The reasoning behind this sudden series of posts came from French politician and member of the European Parliament Raphaël Glucksmann who called for people "to post blue-square ('in Uyghur colors') on their social media platforms on October 1, 2020 China's National Day... to raise awareness of China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang" (Harker 2020b). Numerous people, including athletes and celebrities took part. While some people deleted their posts (e.g. Riyad Mahrez, Kalidou Koulibaly, and Ousmane Dembele), none of the athletes were punished, censored, apologized or faced brazen media attacks that Morey and Özil went through (Özil to a lesser extent).

### **Takeaways**

Having laid out the five events of prominent professional athletes, retired athletes, and a GM speaking out on political and social matters in China between October 2019 and October 2020, there are several distinctions that can be made. China's reactions over Xinjiang were less (or none at all) than the ones over Hong Kong or the call for the removal of the CCP. The timeframe (Dec. 2019-Oct. 2020) of the posts and comments criticizing China's handling of Xinjiang indicates that China is seeking to avoid bringing international attention to Xinjiang as well as the realization that professional sports leagues (especially in the West) are going to be selective in their complying with China on certain social issues as had been the case with Morey's tweet. There are three reasons for these changes.

First, the political atmosphere in 2020 changed dramatically. While BLM protests of George Floyd Jr.'s death made the headlines (the Premier League CEO called players' involvement in BLM as a "moral cause and not a political

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one,”), this did not stop (it might have even encouraged) players and teams from speaking on other matters including protests over police brutality in Nigeria and the call to the end of the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Evans 2020; Panja and Smith 2020). Moreover, news as to what was happening in Xinjiang got more attention in 2020 with reports from the press, scholars, human rights groups, and leaked documents (for example the Karakax List) giving credence to the accusations that the Chinese government is committing cultural genocide in Xinjiang. Furthermore, while the NBA did not state that human rights abuses in Xinjiang were the reason behind their decision to shut down their Academy in Xinjiang in 2019, those concerns had been brought up by U.S. politicians and NBA Academy employees (including coaches) (Fainaru and Fainaru-Wada 2020).[5] One employee “compared the atmosphere when he [employee] worked in Xinjiang to ‘World War II Germany’” (Fainaru and Fainaru-Wada 2020). The main point concerning the political climate of 2020 is to emphasize how the accusations of the Chinese government committing mass atrocities in Xinjiang have gained in traction in sports and pushed professional athletes and leagues to take some type of stance on it. Also, given that the athletes spoke up in response to a call by a politician further complicates the matter as efforts by the NBA or one major European football league to apologize or censor the players involved garnered greater backlash at home than the NBA’s initial handling of the Morey tweet did.

The second reason has to do with Demba Ba’s fortunate situation in Turkey. His current league, Süper Lig, and team Başakşehir F.K., do not have any prominent economic ties to China that would hinder their growth. While Süper Lig, in recent times, has faced financial losses, these started long before August, 2020 over pre-COVID-19 debt problems and the current COVID-19 pandemic (Turkish Football News 2020). Chinese political leadership could denounce Ba, but that would change nothing. Moreover, while Turkey’s current political leadership encourages closer cooperation with China (especially economically)[6], there are many Turkish politicians and citizens (outside of politics) who have condemned or protested what China is doing to the Uyghurs and have supported people, like Özil, who speak up about the Uyghurs. Additionally, the Uyghurs have a similar ethnic, linguistic, and Islamic heritage with most of the Turkish population and about 15,000-50,000 Uyghurs live in Turkey. Moreover, while Turkish President Recep Erdogan has not spoken out about the Uyghurs since 2015, he did not reprimand his Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu for saying in 2019 that “he was ‘deeply concerned [about China’s] persecution of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang’” (Ullah 2020; Kowalski 2020). This political and societal background is important for explaining why Ba’s comments did not face any pushback in Turkey. If İstanbul Başakşehir F.K. or Süper Lig, or Turkish politicians condemned, punished, or censored him, it would generate public backlash that could have led to political response(s) upholding Turkey’s commitment towards protecting Muslims and Turkic peoples around the world, and possibly straining their relations with China. In short, Ba did not face backlash in Turkey because the economic relationship between the Süper Lig and China was minimal, and the political and social environment of Turkey exhibits a strong degree of solidarity towards the Uyghurs not seen in other Muslim majority countries. As for China, they had neither the economic advantage over Süper Lig, nor a desire to give the discussion of Xinjiang any extra time.

The third reason for China’s increasingly muted response to the professional athletes who speak up about Xinjiang reflects a general desire by the Chinese government to avoid “highlighting Xinjiang internationally as it had done in Hong Kong” (Harker 2019). According to a source at Xinhua, “Xinjiang is seen as far more politically damaging overseas than a crackdown on violent protestors [in Hong Kong]” not only because of the growing accusations of cultural genocide, but also the backlash that would come from much of the Muslim world since the Uyghurs are primarily Muslim (Ibid). Moreover, the removal of Weibo posts that condemned Mesut Özil’s comments about Xinjiang, but “leaving comments that only attacked Özil personally,” reinforces the third reason (Ibid). Although Arsenal distanced themselves from Özil and censored some of his merchandise, the lack of a strong reaction by China that was displayed towards Morey indicates a desire to avoid Xinjiang. Additionally, considering the athletes that spoke out about Xinjiang in August and October, the lack of pushback in China further indicates their desire to minimize the international attention that Xinjiang receive. While China censored Hǎo Hǎidōng, he was calling for the overthrow of the CCP, compared to Xinjiang which is about the grave human rights atrocities, but not about removing the CCP. In short, China will not tolerate professional leagues—who have strong financial ties to China—and athletes to critique them on Hong Kong, but allows them to speak up about Xinjiang.

## Conclusion

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Although political and social matters in the U.S. are what athletes speak out on the most, activism in sports is spreading elsewhere. In the case of China, it stands out from other countries (e.g. U.S., France, Nigeria, and Turkey) because of the approaches to professional athletes criticizing political and social issues in their country have garnered economic and societal reactions not seen elsewhere. Nevertheless, China's response to professional athletes' criticism depends on the issue at hand. In the case of the Xinjiang, the growing accusations of the atrocities against the Uyghurs prove that China seeks to avoid, or at least minimize, the debate because it would be much harder for them to defend their actions in the international spotlight than it has been for Hong Kong. Although China's growing lack of responses to athletes' criticism of Xinjiang over the last year might be an anomaly, this remains unlikely. If anything, Xinjiang will continue to grow as a prominent new arena for sports activism.

## Notes

[1] The term Uyghur, throughout the paper, will encompass Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajiks, and Hui.

[2] CCTV broadcasted Game 5 of the 2020 NBA Finals, but no long-lasting deal has been reached at the time of this writing. Also Tencent still, does not broadcast Houston Rockets and Philadelphia 76ers games (the latter's relationship was ended at the beginning of the 2020 season). However Tencent's \$1.5 billion deal with the NBA through 2024 remains intact at the time of this writing.

[3] Could grow to about 20% by 2030.

[4] The deal was terminated in September 2020.

[5] NBA employees in Xinjiang had also complained about harassment, surveillance, and abuse of players by Chinese coaches.

[6] In exchange for suppressing and deporting certain Uyghurs back to China via third countries (example Tajikistan).

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