

What Really Happened to the Hoyas in Beijing

by Victor D. Cha

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The Georgetown University Hoyas men's basketball team's trip to China gained international attention as video of the unfortunate fight between the Hoyas and the Bayi Rockets went viral around the world. There have since been a plethora of stories written about the incident, many with factual errors and misinterpretations. I offer an account of the events as someone who traveled with the team throughout the trip to Beijing and Shanghai, including the fateful game with the Bayi Rockets.

The purpose of the trip was to build upon Georgetown's growing academic linkages with China by showcasing the University's most well-known brand, the Hoyas basketball team, in a series of exhibition games in Beijing and Shanghai. After being mobbed for pictures with Chinese youth as they visited the Great Wall and Forbidden City, the Hoyas played a sedate and friendly game against the Shanxi Brave Dragons. Vice President Joe Biden, traveling to China for meetings with the future leader of China Xi Jinping, dropped by the game upon his arrival in the country, and amiably engaged the Chinese audience at the stadium exchanging jokes and high-fives. The evening was nothing short of ideal.

By contrast, the mood at the game the following evening with the Bayi Rockets, a professional basketball team sponsored by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), was tense, and the game was very physical from the start. The PLA sent a spectator section of soldiers who chanted loud, disciplined cheers every time the Rockets scored. There was some scuffling among players during the game, prompting several technical fouls, and a bizarre moment when one of the Bayi players approached and started yelling at Georgetown Coach John Thompson III for some unknown reason (Thompson ignored it, but Georgetown players became very upset at this). The foul count was imbalanced (at one point 28 against Georgetown and 11 against Bayi), but other NCAA teams playing in China like Duke experienced similar problems. Unfortunately, that is what you get when you play in China. The Rockets, former Chinese Basketball Association champions, played to win, and though this was billed as a "friendship match," competitive juices got flowing, emotions got high, and things got out of hand. At the start of the fourth quarter, a sequence of foul-plagued plays involving mad scrambles for loose balls led to the fracas. The decision was made to pull the Georgetown players off the court and alumni out of the stands onto awaiting buses for safety reasons once

the crowd starting throwing debris onto the court in the direction of the players.

Despite the widespread play of the video clips in the US, things calmed down considerably after the event. No one was seriously hurt. The coaches and player representatives from the two teams were immediately in contact after the incident to express sincere regrets and worked together through the night to find a proper way of reconciling. Senior levels of the Chinese government offered to help the team in any way possible. The Bayi coach and two players the following morning met Coach Thompson and two of the upperclassmen on the team. It was a very friendly meeting and they talked about future events where Chinese youth might come to participate in summer basketball clinics in the US. The two groups exchanged gifts at the end of the meeting and there were no hard feelings on either side.

Georgetown's two players at the meeting were the ultimate sports ambassadors. Polite and attentive, they talked about their studies at Georgetown and their glowing impressions of China (it was the first trip for both of them). Contrary to press speculation, the delegation never considered cancelling the remainder of its itinerary and flew to Shanghai as scheduled the next day, where it conducted basketball clinics to a resoundingly friendly reception from the Chinese players and audience. The US consulate in Shanghai hosted a reception for Georgetown and I had a chance to chat with several of the players (one of whose picture was everywhere as the Hoya player on the court with Chinese players on top of him). He is one of the nicest young men you could meet, and this incident did not change his overall positive impression of the trip.

Whenever an incident like this occurs, the Chinese system is inherently geared to block the rapid passage of bad news up the chain to higher-level decision makers. This results in inordinate delay. But in this instance, the response was prompt. I think Chinese authorities were especially concerned that the event not be seen as a deterrent for future NCAA teams coming to China to play exhibition games. The images of US student-athletes from storied institutions like Georgetown being beaten upon by the PLA basketball team does not play well for China's international image. The video of the incident was quickly censored in China, which arguably indicated embarrassment on the part of Chinese authorities. Very senior levels of the Chinese government were personally in touch with the university to express regret and concern for any who were hurt.

One press report described the incident as the antithesis to ping-pong diplomacy, marking the increasingly competitive nature of US-China relations. I do not think this is correct. In the end, this was a scrap between youthful athletes, not between countries. The direction of US-China relations will be

determined less by a basketball game than by contemporaneous events like Vice President Biden's meetings in China the same week of our trip. Nevertheless, Georgetown's experiences on that one evening are emblematic of the growing pains in US-China relations. There will inevitably be moments such as these where cultural differences and competition create tensions in our relationship.

As long as both sides reconcile and learn from these incidents, they will be for the betterment of relations between the two people and countries. That was certainly the experience that these young ballplayers and their Chinese counterparts took away from that game.