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Basketbrawls Past and Present

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By James Carter

Many readers have by now heard of [the brawl](#) that broke out in the first half of an international basketball match between China and Brazil on October 12 in Henan province. The international “friendly” became increasingly chippy as the Chinese side objected to hard fouls and “dirty” play by the Brazilians. Dissatisfied with the officials’ response, the Chinese team (and its American coach, it should be noted) took matters into its own hands:



I was particularly struck by [footage](#) of the coach of the Chinese team taunting the officials by screaming, “You call yourself Chinese?!” Apparently, national allegiance should have led the officials to call the game differently. While some internet comments on the incident criticize the Chinese team for its lack of dignity, others celebrate that the Chinese athletes stood up to bullying from foreign guests.

The scene reminded me of the episode that, in many ways, was my first foray into Chinese history. In graduate school, I worked with the papers of Howard Lee Haag, the American director of the YMCA in Harbin in the 1920s. In these papers, Haag included his firsthand account of a basketball game—the city championship—in 1926, between a team of Russian refugees and a local Chinese middle school. The game ended in violence when the Russians won. In that case, the crowd—not the athletes or coaches—took their wrath out on the Russian officials, whom they accused of fixing the game, by hurling roof tiles onto the court and chasing the referees into the YMCA building. Order was restored when police, called by Haag and the American Consul, arrived on the scene. (I recount the incident in more detail in the introduction of *Creating a Chinese Harbin*, available at [Google Books](#).)

In the weeks that followed, editorials in local Chinese newspapers described the incident as illustrating foreigners’ condescending attitudes toward China. In this case, the Americans and Russians were accused of being unable to accept China’s new status (having supplanted Russian colonial rule in Harbin) and of having resorted to fixing a basketball game to avoid further national (racial?) embarrassment.

The issues in the Brazil-China game—and in similar recent episodes of violence in athletics—are somewhat different. However, as China continues its growth as a cultural, economic, and political

power, events like the “basketbrawl” seem to illustrate both the power of Chinese nationalism and the frustration that boils over when other nations are perceived to be slighting China’s success, or attempting to “bully” China and deny its power. Internet commentators make the connection plain when they post [remarks](#) like “Break out of Asia towards the world, courageous and upright men’s basketball team, bravely throw your punches!”

James Carter is Professor of History at Saint Joseph’s University, editor of [Twentieth-Century China](#), and author of [Heart of Buddha, Heart of China: The Life of Tanxu, a Twentieth Century Monk](#), forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Photo from [Interbasket.net](#)

Tags: [basketball](#), [Harbin](#)