

# Training China's Sports Journalists for the Future: The Shantou University Experiment

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## **Summary**

This paper presents the first results of a new program at Shantou University in Guangdong Province, China to train China's next generation of sports journalists. With private funding from the Li Ka Shing Foundation of Hong Kong, Shantou University is undergoing a thorough overhaul. The eventual goal is to establish Shantou as a Western-style university with a credit system, innovative teaching methods, and high-quality research facilities. In the spring of 2005, Shantou University's Cheung Kong School of Journalism and Communication added sports journalism to its undergraduate curriculum. The author of this study, an American sports journalist and television producer, is the founder and director of this program.

## **Introduction**

Shantou University's Cheung Kong School of Journalism and Communication launched a sports journalism curriculum in the spring of 2005. The program began as a single weekly non-credit workshop for interested students. With the support of the Li Ka Shing Foundation, the school was able to fully fund a reporting trip for five students to attend and report on the world table tennis championships in Shanghai in May. More programs of this type are planned for the future, and the sports journalism curriculum itself is expanding to a series of full-credit courses in the coming semesters.

The cultural challenges inherent in bringing Western-style sports journalism training to China are significant. Hands-on journalism training programs as practiced at top American journalism schools such as Columbia University and the University of California-Berkeley are not the norm in China. In fact, sending students out into the field to report, even on something as harmless-seeming as a sports event, is sometimes construed by potential interview subjects as threatening. The status of journalists themselves in China is far different than in Western nations. ("We are the mouth of the government," said one earnest Shantou student when asked what being a journalist meant to her).

In addition, investigative journalism in China is in its infancy, held back by strict government controls and the threat of job loss or even more serious consequences, making inquiries into doping stories and other scandals extremely difficult. As one reporter for the Xinhua news agency who covered the 2000 Sydney Olympics said to the author of this study, “When it comes to drug stories, we just don’t cover them.” That has changed somewhat in the wake of the Ma Junren women’s distance running controversy and other high-profile drug cases in sports such as women’s swimming, and news coverage of the most recent major sporting event in China, the National Games, included significant coverage of drug scandals and corruption on the part of referees and coaches. But this is a new development; up until recently the reporting of such scandals was rarely forthcoming in the Chinese-language media.

The 2008 Olympics have already resulted in one high-profile media backlash. A May 10, 2005 story in the *New York Times* reported that Harvard University’s Nieman Foundation had agreed to “conduct a training session for Chinese officials on how to deal with the media during the 2008 Olympics.” After much protest from Nieman alumni who were portrayed in the American press as feeling that the foundation was aiding Chinese officials on learning how to frustrate media efforts during the Games, the program was cancelled.

Clearly, the challenges of training China’s sports journalists for the future are many. This paper will highlight the successes and failures of one of the country’s first attempts to introduce a Western-style sports journalism program into a Chinese university curriculum.

### **Teaching Sports Journalism in China: The Landscape**

The push for development in the People’s Republic of China in the years preceding the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing is coinciding with a push towards greater development in the field of higher education. Student enrollments are increasing markedly and the Ministry of Education has taken a critical look at the traditionally highly-centralized system of higher education and concluded that “a new system” must be put into place, one which allows institutions to “enjoy the autonomy to provide education according to the needs of the society.”<sup>1</sup>

With a growing number of sports journalism degree programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels in China, it is clear that training China’s next generation of sports journalists is a goal very much on the radar of the nation’s educational leaders. This paper describes the efforts by one university to begin a degree program in sports journalism that incorporates Western-style teaching, an emphasis on student creativity and journalistic ethics, and a faculty that includes working journalists from Western nations.

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<sup>1</sup> “Higher Education In China.” Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China. [http://www.moe.edu.cn/english/higher\\_h.htm](http://www.moe.edu.cn/english/higher_h.htm).

Teaching journalism in China is not an easy undertaking. Journalists in China today operate under far stricter government controls than any Olympic host country since perhaps the Soviet Union in 1980. Training professional sports journalists for 2008 and beyond presents unique challenges both because of the traditional methods of training journalists at China's universities and the fact that the Chinese government has a history of discouraging its journalists from reporting news that is deemed to be unflattering to the country. Arrests of journalists are not uncommon, as are arrests of those who speak to journalists about controversial subjects such as corruption within the government and economic spheres, or human rights issues.

In the midst of this challenging environment, Shantou University, a provincial university in eastern Guangdong province, is in the process of establishing a Western-style journalism degree program. The city of Shantou is probably not the first place one would expect to find a national-class sports journalism program, even though it is one of only five "Special Economic Zones" (SEZ) in China<sup>2</sup>, regions targeted for development as key export cities. Shantou is a coastal city of 4 million people in northeastern Guangdong province, located five hours by bus from the capital city of the province, Guangzhou, and four and a half hours from Shenzhen, the gateway to Hong Kong. Its population is small by Chinese standards, and the city is not considered one of the country's media centers. Despite its SEZ status, Shantou has lagged far behind the other SEZ's in terms of its development.

However, the Shantou region has been helped tremendously by Hong Kong entrepreneur and philanthropist Li Ka-shing. Li, a self-made billionaire and the richest individual in East Asia, has taken a strong interest in mainland Chinese education through the efforts of his charitable foundation. Born in the Shantou region in 1928, Li and his family fled to Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation of China in 1940. He made his fortune in Hong Kong, eventually building an empire with a market capitalization of approximately US\$100 billion. The Li Ka Shing Foundation was founded in 1980 and has supported numerous endeavors in education and the health care field in the past 25 years. Shantou University's total income in the 2004 calendar year was 345 million renminbi (RMB), equivalent to 41.7 million U.S. dollars. Of that amount, 43% (147.7 million RMB, or 17.8 million U.S. dollars) was donated by the Li Ka Shing Foundation.<sup>3</sup>

In the fall of 2004, the Cheung Kong School of Journalism and Communication at Shantou University, with the support of the Li Ka Shing Foundation, began preparations for launching a sports journalism program. With the 2008 Olympics less than four years away, sports journalism is becoming a specialized field within journalism degree programs in China. While Americans, for example, do not need a specialized degree in order to report for the major sports newspapers and television

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<sup>2</sup> The others are Zhuhai and Shenzhen, also in Guangdong province, Xiamen in Fujian province, and the island province of Hainan.

<sup>3</sup> Shantou University Annual Report (English version), 2004, p. 142.

networks, in China the situation is somewhat different. An entree into a sports journalism career often requires a specialized degree from a prestigious school.<sup>4</sup> As a provincial university, Shantou does not enjoy status as one of China's "key" universities, making it harder for graduates to obtain prestigious employment after graduation.

In response to this challenge, the leadership at Shantou hopes to build the academic level of the university to a point where it is considered one of the country's best. The sports journalism program is being developed with an eye towards taking the most talented English-speaking journalism students and developing their reporting and writing skills to a point where they will be able to obtain employment with overseas organizations for whom skill sets are more important than prestige. Eventually the university hopes to be able to place its best graduates at prestigious jobs within China as well.

This project comes at an exciting time for the development of Chinese higher education. The country is currently implementing its ninth 5-year plan for the development of education, which includes plans to markedly increase the number of students for whom university-level education is available. The journalism department at Shantou has seen an almost 100% increase in its enrolment in one academic year alone (60 students per class to 110 students per class). The *New York Times* reported on October 28, 2005 that China's efforts to improve academic research at its top universities include a strategy of recruiting ethnic Chinese scholars who have made their name at some of the world's most prestigious universities to establish their own laboratories at China's most prestigious universities, including Beijing (Peking) University, Qinghua University and Fudan University.

At the same time, the *New York Times* makes clear the inherent challenges in incorporating Western-trained academics into a Chinese learning environment. Most obvious are the limitations on free speech and free inquiry in China, one reason why the Chinese are focusing on developing the science and technology spheres as opposed to those spheres that require critical thought in sensitive areas such as political theory and philosophy. Howard W. French notes in the article that "[t]he liberal arts often involve critical thinking about politics, economics and history, and China's government, which strictly limits public debate, has placed relatively little emphasis on achieving international status in those subjects."<sup>5</sup>

Though the reasons that Shantou has been able to develop its excellence in the liberal arts are many, perhaps the most important point to make is that the leadership of the school is based in Hong Kong, which is culturally and politically a different universe

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<sup>4</sup> For example, there were 36 journalists from China credentialed at the 2005 World Athletics Championships in Helsinki, Finland. All of the print journalists in that group graduated from sports journalism degree programs at universities in either Beijing or Shanghai. (Source: journalist interview with author)

<sup>5</sup> French, Howard W. "China Luring Foreign Scholars to Make Its Universities Great." *The New York Times*: October 28, 2005.

than mainland China. Li Ka-shing's influence in southern China is so great – and the political center of Beijing so far away – that at Shantou University it is possible to stretch the boundaries of what might normally be considered acceptable teaching by the conservative standards of the nation's key universities. Thus the Cheung Kong School of Journalism and Communication has made advances in bringing a new level of journalism education to China, including a 2004 conference on investigative journalism and a March 2005 conference taking a critical look at the successes and failures of the Asian press in covering the South Asian tsunami of December 26, 2004.

It is important to note that the goals of the sports journalism program do not include turning the program into an institution resembling an American school in terms of an American journalist's understanding of issues such as the First Amendment and free speech issues. The near-term goal is to take what has traditionally been a second-tier university in southern China and turn it into a leading institution of higher education in the region. For its part, the journalism school is using the opportunity afforded by the 2008 Olympics to introduce new areas of study into the curriculum, giving the school's graduates more and better opportunities to develop their careers.

### **The Program**

The sports journalism program started as a single non-credit evening workshop for junior class students enrolled at the Cheung Kong School of Journalism and Communication in the spring of 2005. Coming in, I understood that establishing a solid training program for professional sports journalists would be a multi-year effort, and that because of the timing of my participation in the Shantou project, I would most likely need to start small and hire additional staff to take over when I returned to the United States. The initial goals of the program were to introduce them to the field of sports journalism as I practice it as a working journalist, and to gauge their interest in considering sports journalism as a potential career path.

Traditionally, journalism instruction in China has been done not by working journalists but by teachers steeped in theory and not professional experience. This can be easily contrasted with the United States, where faculties at top journalism graduate schools such as Columbia University and the University of California-Berkeley are expected not only to have significant achievement in their professional careers but also to continue working while teaching. Coming to China as both a teacher and a working journalist (albeit not actively reporting in China, which requires a special visa) created an interesting set of cultural problems. I was asked several times by my mainland Chinese colleagues “Well, what are you? A journalist, or a teacher?” To say that you are “both” in China produces a puzzled stare.

During the spring 2005 semester we offered a non-credit evening seminar on basic topics in sports journalism to members of the junior class. (Seniors at Shantou spend

the first half of the semester on internships in other cities, and so we went with the group of students most likely to have strong English-language skills.) Of the 45 students who were offered entry into the workshop, eighteen, or slightly over one-third of the group, expressed interest in the program, and 13 became regular attendees at the once-a-week seminar.

The curriculum included an examination of English-language sports journalism in a variety of media (newspapers, magazines, and documentary films). We spent much of the first half of the semester reading a long profile of Houston Rockets center Yao Ming, which had originally been published in the *New Yorker*. The article, written by China-based American journalist Peter Hessler, offered an opportunity to talk about sport and society in China and the United States, and the cultural differences that could be seen through the lens of sport. It also gave us an opportunity to increase the students' working vocabulary of sports-related English terms and the ways in which English-language sports journalism differs in terms of style and grammar from other types of reporting, such as business or economics.

In May 2005, the world championships of table tennis (ping pong) were due to be held in Shanghai. I proposed a reporting trip for five of our most outstanding students from the sports workshop, and we were given a budget of approximately US\$2250 to bring the students to Shanghai for the week to report on the tournament. In proposing the trip I emphasized that I have learned the craft of sports journalism through work in the field, and that there is no substitute for active professional work in learning how to effectively work as a journalist at a major international sports event. We were not credentialed, but through personal contacts we were able to interview several major figures in the sport, including the presidents of two national table tennis federations (United States and Iran), and several athletes. The project resulted in a website with both Chinese-language and English-language articles written by the students. The students also filmed their experience in Shanghai for a forthcoming documentary.

In the fall 2005 semester we are working to build momentum for the program. The workshop is now a two-credit class with 16 students (13 seniors and 3 juniors), several who took the evening workshop in the spring. An attempt to start a second class, "Introduction To Sports Journalism," which was to have been taught in English, produced little interest among the younger students. We realized we had probably overestimated the English proficiency of the students in general, so in the spring 2006 semester we are planning to offer the reporting workshop and a separate class in "Sports English." We are also examining the universities in China which offer full-fledged degree programs in sports journalism, such as the People's University of China (Zhongguo Renmin Daxue) and the Beijing Sports University (Beijing Tiyu Daxue), and we are planning to pattern future courses on those offered by these universities.

### **The Challenges and the Road Ahead**

This presentation is being prepared at a time when the sports journalism program at Shantou University is still in its infancy. The first class of students who have taken advantage of the coursework available to them in sports journalism at Shantou are now first-semester seniors. We do not expect to place them in sports journalism jobs directly out of university, but we do hope that the best English speakers of this initial group may be looked at for potential employment with foreign media organizations and national Olympic committees during the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

In the spring 2006 semester we will continue to expand the course offerings for the program and will also undertake faculty recruiting to expand the faculty for this program. With luck and persistence we hope to have a full complement of sports journalism courses available for students at Shantou University by 2008. While this will most likely make it impossible for a large number of Shantou graduates to work in jobs related to the 2008 Olympics, our hope is that the increased interest in sports in China at this time will make our program more visible to potential students for future study.

This paper will be expanded and revised at the conclusion of the 2005-06 academic year with information about the current state of the program and its longer-term goals. The author of this study encourages those with an interest in receiving further information about Shantou University and the Cheung Kong School of Journalism and Communication to contact her at [marynicole@stu.edu.cn](mailto:marynicole@stu.edu.cn). For reference, the website for Shantou University (in Chinese) is <http://www.stu.edu.cn> and the website for the Cheung Kong School of Journalism and Communication is <http://media.stu.edu.cn>.

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