

Blood Money: How America's Sports Owners Are in Bed with Communist China

[Lara Gwinn](#) 17 Apr 2022



Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

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There is no question that basketball is China's most popular sport. "Roughly 800 million people in China tuned into an NBA game. ... That's more than twice the population of the United States," NBC News

[reported](#) in 2019. That was before Daryl Moray sent his simple tweet, "Fight for Freedom, Stand with Hong Kong," in October of 2019 and started a firestorm that would shake the NBA to its core and begin a nearly 18-month-long [ban](#) on NBA games aired on Chinese television.

This was also before ESPN [exposed](#) Brooklyn Nets Owner Joe Tsai this week, in a report titled "Brooklyn Nets owner Joe Tsai is the face of NBA's uneasy China relationship." Tsai, who also owns WNBA's New York Liberty and the San Diego Seals of the National Lacrosse League, is worth \$8.5 billion, mostly from his Amazon-esque company Alibaba, headquartered in Hangzhou, China, with a revenue of over \$700 billion per year. Tsai is among many owners in the NBA and other sports associations who have shown public support for protest movements that are publicly critical of America's supposed human rights struggles, while at the same time covering up, and in some cases defending, China's abysmal human rights record.

ESPN reported that Tsai's "efforts to support the social justice movement in the U.S. come into conflict with statements he made about the personal freedoms of Chinese citizens and the silence around the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang region of the Communist country."

Human rights groups have warned the world of the government-led atrocities against Uyghur people in China's Xinjiang region, where [reports](#) of concentration camps, forced labor, torture, rape, sterilization, and assimilation have plagued the Chinese Communist state for many years. As a result, pressure [mounted](#) on the Chinese government during the Beijing Olympics, dubbed the "Genocide Games," to stop the inhumane treatment.

"The NBA is a fan-first league," [wrote](#) Tsai. "When hundreds of millions of fans are furious over an issue, the league, and anyone associated with the NBA, will have to pay attention," Tsai said, presumably referring to fans only in China.

"Clearly, something is bigger than basketball," Qin Gang, the Chinese ambassador to the U.S., [said](#) in a pre-recorded speech during a Washington Wizards and Los Angeles Clippers game in January 2022 in a celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year which Capital One Arena billed as an "apolitical event," and included a performance of *The Star-Spangled Banner* on a traditional Chinese instrument, and other activities "honoring Chinese culture."

Qin may have a point, and the thing bigger than basketball for many NBA owners could indeed be mollifying the Chinese Communist Party.

Chinese Ambassador to [#US @AmbQinGang](#) greeted spectators for Washington Wizards vs Los Angeles Clippers on Tue night, sending congratulations for [@NBA](#) 75th Anniversary. He also wished the Chinese and US delegations [@TeamUSA](#) to [@Beijing2022](#) have good performance. [#ChinaUSRelations pic.twitter.com/Hs4i6HasKS](#)

— Qingqing_Chen (@qingqingparis) [January 26, 2022](#)

Breitbart News [noted](#) that Tsai's company, Alibaba, "has a troubling habit of funding the companies developing the technology to track, record, and control China's inhabitants. As a result, China has the most advanced, inhuman surveillance state ever created. And the NBA's favorite team owner has helped China build the infrastructure to create that oppressive regime."

Fox News further [reported](#) on Alibaba's role in the suppression of the Uyghur people:

The technologies Alibaba helped produce were used for government surveillance, according to a congressional report in 2020. The technologies have been used to 're-educate' Uyghur Muslims and force millions into camps in the western part of China – something the Chinese government has denied.

Tsai, the Taiwan-born billionaire, is a naturalized citizen of Canada, holds a Hong Kong passport, and identifies as ethnic Chinese. He has been very forgiving of the Chinese government restricting its people's freedoms. In 2019 at the University of California, Tsai said, "China today is a single-party system, so there's going to be restrictions on academic freedoms and freedom of expression. ... Dissent has to take a backseat and whatever they're doing is right," according to Fox News. The outlet also quoted Tsai in 2018, telling an audience at the Milken Institute, "In the American context, we talk about freedom of speech, freedom of the press, but in the China context, being able to restrict some of those freedoms is an important element to keep the stability."

These pro-Communist China comments differ greatly from [comments](#) made by Tsai's wife, Clara Wu, explaining the Joe and Clara Tsai Foundation's Social Justice Fund, which the pair created in 2020:

That's why it is so important to us to invest in the Black leaders combating racial injustice from every angle right here in Brooklyn. ... They are on the ground day in and day out — working to eliminate racial disparities in our healthcare system, advocating for environmental justice, amplifying the untold stories of Black Americans, mentoring young people of color, and fighting on the

front lines of the most pressing social justice issues of our time.

Under the title of "Player Voice," Tsai's Social Justice Fund [said](#) in its Commitment Statement, "We are committed to supporting our athletes and amplifying their voices for activism around anti-racism, anti-discrimination, and equal opportunity," which is the opposite of China's restrictions on freedom of expression and the country's squashing of dissent that Tsai so readily defends.



Hong Kong riot police guard detained anti-government protesters in the Causeway Bay district of Hong Kong, Wednesday, May 27, 2020. Hong Kong police massed outside the legislature complex Wednesday, ahead of debate on a bill that would criminalize abuse of the Chinese national anthem in the semi-autonomous city. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

Other NBA owners have jumped on the China money train as well.

"Let us be perfectly clear, this is just the beginning," Miami Heat Owner Micky Arison [said](#) during a Juneteenth 2020 video released by the team called "Our Pledge for Social Justice."

"We pledge to use our platform and resources to promote equality and social justice," members of the Heat organization said in the video, and promised "to make financial contributions to organizations working to rid the world of racial inequality" and "to enhance our company mentoring and internship programs to provide opportunities for black students to gain experience and advance their careers."

Our Pledge for Social Justice

We will not sit on the sidelines. This is just the beginning. [#BlackLivesMatter](#) | [#Juneteenth](#)
pic.twitter.com/ZGqk8cfhKe

— Miami HEAT (@MiamiHEAT) [June 19, 2020](#)

"We want to assure you that the Miami Heat will not sit on the sidelines," Arison proclaimed about his commitment to battling America's "systemic racism." One thing Arison has definitely sat on the sidelines about is China's human rights offenses. However, Arison not bringing attention to China's transgressions might be good for his multi-million dollar business dealings with the communist state and excellent for the People's Liberation Army Navy, also known as the Chinese Navy. Along with owning the Heat, Arison is also Chairman of the Board at Carnival Corporation, the world's largest cruise operator, who, as ESPN reported, "has a joint venture with a state-owned Chinese shipbuilder."

Now, Carnival Cruise Line is helping the Chinese Navy build and modernize their warships.

"A new [report](#) says that commercial shipbuilding efforts by prominent companies – including Carnival Cruise Lines, CMA CGM, and Taiwan's Evergreen Shipping – are helping China finance warships," Captain [reported](#) in April, citing a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and an [article](#) by Reuters.

CSIS [reported](#):

Perhaps even more striking, in 2016, Carnival Cruise Lines entered a joint venture with [China State Shipbuilding Corporation] CSSC to stand up CSSC Cruise Technology Development. As part of the \$1.5 billion deal, Carnival transferred two of its existing cruise ships to the new joint venture. Another two vessels are being built at Shanghai Waigaoqiao Shipyard, located just across the Yangtze River from Jiangnan. While CSIS has not observed the construction of military vessels at Waigaoqiao, the shipyard is operated by yet another CSSC subsidiary.

...

At face value, sharing capital and technology with CSSC subsidiaries may seem innocuous, but it should raise red flags for nations concerned about China's growing military power. Facilitating better resource-sharing between military and civilian ventures is a critical element of China's MCF strategy, and many of China's shipbuilding facilities are being used for both commercial and military operations. Foreign capital can also aid in offsetting the research and development costs of military assets. Workers trained

to construct commercial vessels may even be able to transfer some of their skills when working on PLAN warships.

In August, Cruise Industry News [announced](#) that “Carnival’s China-Built Cruise Ship Is Coming Along” and included photos of the ship’s construction ahead of its planned 2023 launch:



China State Shipbuilding Corporation

China’s navy has long caused disruption in the South China Sea, as it bullies other smaller nations with [claims](#) to land such as the Paracel Islands, illegally [mines](#) the natural resources in nations such as the Philippines, and terrorizes countries such as Brunei, Taiwan, [Malaysia](#), Indonesia, and [Vietnam](#).

According to Forbes, Mickey Arison is [worth](#) \$6.6 billion.

Washington, DC, sports teams are not about to be left off the China money train. According to reports, Ted Leonsis, Owner of the Washington Wizards, Capitals, and Mystics and CEO of Monumental Sports and Entertainment, wants to [buy](#) the Washington Nationals alongside billionaire David Rubenstein, a co-founder of investment firm Carlyle Group. Carlyle's CEO, Kewsong Lee, who is also vice-chair of the U.S. China Business Council, [said](#) in September the firm "is committed to China" and will "remain a long-term investor in China despite 'bumps' that have unnerved some investors."

In addition, Leonsis's business partners at Monumental Sports include Apple heiress Laurene Powell Jobs, who owns a 20% stake in Leonsis's company, and was happy to [take money](#) from China to promote the Beijing Olympics this year. The Washington Free Beacon reported, in an article titled "How China Used American Influencers To Shill for the 'Genocide Games':

The payments to Monumental mark another financial link between China and Jobs, whose \$18 billion fortune was largely derived from cheap Chinese labor. Apple, which was accused last year of relying on slave labor, [lobbied](#) against legislation aimed at punishing China for operating forced labor camps in Xinjiang, the region home to millions of Uyghurs.

Leonsis also sees untapped potential in the NHL for Chinese players and hopes for a day when a player born and trained in China will [play](#) for the NHL. "I believe that China is the next great market for hockey," the Capitals owner said in the leadup to the Beijing Olympics.

Ted Leonsis is [worth](#) \$1.6 billion, according to Forbes. David Rubenstein is [worth](#) \$4 billion, and Laurene Powell Jobs is [worth](#) \$17.1 billion.

After Morey, who was general manager for the Rockets from 2007-2020, posted his tweet in favor of democracy in Hong Kong in 2019, Rockets Owner Tilman Fertitta, who has contributed to Republican candidates, immediately distanced the team from Morey. "Listen... @dmorey does NOT speak for the Houston Rockets," Fertitta tweeted in 2019, claiming, "We are NOT a political organization."

Listen....[@dmorey](#) does NOT speak for the [@HoustonRockets](#). Our presence in Tokyo is all about the promotion of the [@NBA](#) internationally and we are NOT a political organization. [@espn](#)
<https://t.co/yNyQFtwTTi>

— Tilman Fertitta (@TilmanJFertitta) [October 5, 2019](#)

Fertitta, the billionaire owner of the NBA franchise that famously employed Shanghai-born center Yao Ming from 1997-2011, is the owner of Landry's Inc. and owns, according to SEC documents:

5 land-based casinos and substantial ownership of Golden Nugget Online Gaming, Inc. and over 500 restaurants, amusements, hotels, entertainment venues and other business units across 38 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, **Hong Kong, mainland China**, Mexico and Singapore, plus numerous licensed restaurants throughout the world. (Emphasis added)

Morton's Grille is one of the Landry restaurant chains. According to the Landry's [website](#):

Currently we have internationally franchised Morton's Grille restaurants in the following locations:

- Changing, China
- Guangzhou, China
- Suzhou, China

According to the SEC, the Bubba Gump restaurant chain, also under the Landry's name, is listed as Bubba Gump Hong Kong Limited, a Hong Kong corporation.

Fertitta did show support for Morey after his initial statement, [telling](#) ESPN, "I have the best general manager in the league. ... Everything is fine with Daryl and me. We got a huge backlash, and I wanted to make clear that [the organization] has no [political] position. We're here to play basketball and not to offend anybody."

Tilman Fertitta is [worth](#) \$5.8 billion, according to Forbes.

What is the future of the relationship between the NBA and Communist China? More may be revealed following a [letter](#) was sent last month from Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Rep. Mike Waltz (R-FL), and eight other members of Congress to NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, "urging him to condemn the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for its human rights abuses and chastising the association for 'allowing the political preferences of a malevolent regime to intervene in NBA business decisions and silence its employees and players.'"

It remains to be seen how the NBA will reconcile its billion-dollar China business deals with an American public [asking](#) "how the NBA plans to stand up to the CCP for its ongoing human rights abuses, including genocide, and educate players, employees, and franchises of the

CCP's oppression," and how the NBA will answer these questions.