



A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

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# THE GREAT LEAP



# THE GREAT LEAP SYNOPSIS

"It is better to take many small steps in the right direction than to make a great leap forward only to stumble backwards."

Chinese Proverb.

When an American college basketball team travels to Beijing for an exhibition game in 1989, the drama on the court goes deeper than the strain between the two countries. For two men with a past and one teen with a future, it's a chance to stake their moment in history and claim personal victories both on and off the court. American coach Saul grapples with his relevance to the sport while Chinese coach Wen Chang must define his role in his rapidly changing country. Chinese American player Manford must seek himself through his game and his roots. Tensions mount all the way to the final basket as history collides with sport.



## INSIDE OUT

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Chad Henry ..... Editor  
Sally Gass ..... Contributing Writer  
David Saphier ..... Education Contributor

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### THE GREAT LEAP

By **Lauren Yee**

Directed by **Eric Ting**

*The Great Leap* is the recipient of an  
**Edgerton Foundation New Play Award**

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# THE PLAYWRIGHT — LAUREN YEE

Lauren Yee was born and raised in San Francisco and currently lives in New York. She received her bachelor's degree from Yale University and her MFA in playwriting from UCSD, where she studied under Naomi Iizuka.

Her play *King of the Yees* premiered at the Goodman Theatre and Center Theatre Group, followed by productions at Seattle's ACT Theatre and Canada's National Arts Center. This season, her work includes *The Great Leap* (Denver Center, Seattle Rep, and Atlantic Theatre Company) and *Cambodian Rock Band* (South Coast Rep). Other plays include *Ching Chong Chinaman* (Pan Asian, Mu Performing Arts), *The Hatmaker's Wife* (Playwrights Realm, Moxie, PlayPenn), *Hookman* (Encore, Company One), *In A Word* (SF Playhouse, Cleveland Public, Strawdog), *Samsara* (Victory Gardens, O'Neill Conference, Bay Area Playwrights Festival), and *The Tiger Among Us* (MAP Fund, Mu).

She was a Dramatists Guild fellow, a MacDowell fellow, a MAP fund grantee, a member of the Public Theatre's Emerging Writers Group, a Time Warner

Fellow at the Women's Project Playwrights Lab, and the Shank playwright-in-residence at Second Stage Theatre, a Playwrights' Center Core Writer, and the Page One resident playwright at Playwrights Realm.

Lauren is the winner of the Kesselring Prize and the Francesca Primus Prize. She has been a finalist for the Jerome Fellowship, the PONY Fellowship, the Princess Grace Award, the Sundance Theatre Lab, the Wasserstein Prize, and the ATCA/Steinberg Award. Her play, *The Hatmaker's Wife*, was an Outer Critics Circle nominee for the John Gassner Award for best play by a new American playwright. Her work is published by Samuel French.

Lauren is a member of the Ma-Yi Theatre Writers Lab and will be a 2018/2019 Hodder fellow at Princeton University's Lewis Center for the Arts. She is currently under commission from the Geffen Playhouse, La Jolla Playhouse, Lincoln Center Theatre/LCT3, Mixed Blood Theatre, Portland Center Stage and Trinity Rep.

<http://laurenyee.com/about/>

## THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

"Learn from the masses and then teach them."

Mao Zedong

The Great Leap Forward was a Communist Chinese economic and social campaign intended to convert the country from an agrarian economy into a modern society. It was a sweeping plan, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, to transform China into a society able to compete with western industrialized nations, within a five-year time period. In January 1958, the Great Leap Forward was launched, and between 1958 and 1960, millions of Chinese citizens were moved to rural communes to work on farms and in manufacturing. Private farming was prohibited.

Mao announced that the Great Leap Forward plan would last from 1958 to 1963 so that with two more 5-year installments, China would have an economy that rivaled America.

The Great Leap Forward was halted in 1960 after a disastrous three years. As early as 1959, the Great Leap had started to have drastic consequences for the Chinese people. Mao's plan placed political principles above common sense: the communes were tasked with goals and deadlines which they were incapable of achieving. The failed initiative is said to have cost an estimated 20 to 48 million

lives as a result of catastrophic economic policy, compounded by drought, brutal treatment of the farmers, a flood that killed 2 million workers and the subsequent crop failures that led to widespread starvation, illness and death.

In addition, the Great Leap Forward had wreaked havoc on the environment: the communes were instructed to set up "backyard" production plants for needed supplies such as steel, timber and cement. In order to meet production quotas, the people cut down forests, melted their own pots and pans, and burned furniture, doors, and house timbers. They were also forced to use experimental Russian cultivation ideas that instead caused extensive erosion.

In 1960, a devastating drought further added to the country's troubles. In the face of the catastrophic results of the Great Leap, Mao Zedong was forced to resign from his position as Head of State, although he was allowed to remain in a powerful party position to save face and avoid public embarrassment.

The program enforced on the people of China by Mao's plan destroyed the ancient fabric of Chinese life and customs, demoralizing the people and leading to great suffering and loss of life.



# CHINA'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION

In the 1960s, Mao Zedong came to feel that the current party leadership in China, as in the Soviet Union, was moving too far in a revisionist direction, valuing economics over ideological purity. Mao's own position in government had weakened after the failure of his Great Leap Forward and the economic crisis that followed. Mao gathered a group of radicals, including his wife Jiang Qing and defense minister Lin Biao, to help him attack current party leadership and reassert his authority.

China's relations with the Soviet Union had grown increasingly tense, and Mao was worried what Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 and Khrushchev's removal from office in 1964 meant for himself as China's leader. To counter what he saw as the weakening of communist ideals, Mao issued a challenge to the country's youth to keep the Revolution alive.

Students who answered Mao's call for continuing revolution became the nucleus of the Red Guards. They targeted political enemies for abuse and humiliation. Under a campaign to wipe out the "Four Olds" — ideas, customs, culture, and habits — they carried out widespread destruction of historical sites and cultural relics, as well as ripping out the ancient pillars of Chinese spiritual and philosophical life: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and ancient practices such as acupuncture and herbal medicine. As the Red Guard grew more extreme, the People's Liberation Army was sent in to control them. The Red Guards

targeted the authorities on campuses, then party officials and "class enemies" in society at large. They carried out mass killings in Beijing and other cities as the violence swept across the country. The military joined the conflict, adding to the violence and the slaughter of civilians.

The chaos of the period, mass relocations and the closing of schools sharply curbed economic output.

Liu Shaoqi, China's president, who attempted to undo some of the damage of the Great Leap Forward, was imprisoned and died from lack of medical treatment. Zhou Enlai, the second-most senior leader, survived by virtue of his public loyalty to Mao. Jiang Qing, a former actress and Mao's wife, was the leading figure of the Gang of Four, radicals who attained political power during the Cultural Revolution. Arrested after Mao's death in 1976, she committed suicide in 1991. Lin Biao was the leader of the People's Liberation Army and played a crucial role in promoting the cult of Mao, which included ordering the compilation of the "Little Red Book", a collection of the chairman's sayings. Deng Xiaoping was a People's Liberation Army veteran and leader who was purged during the Cultural Revolution. He returned to power after Mao's death, pushing drastic economic reforms in the next decade.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/world/asia/china-cultural-revolution-explained.htm>.

Wasserstrom, Jeffrey N. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China*. Oxford, U. K.: Oxford University Press, 2016.

# THE HISTORY OF BASKETBALL IN CHINA

Basketball was invented in 1891 in Springfield Massachusetts, by James Naismith. The YMCA was an early sponsor and promoter of the game. The Y's missionaries took basketball to, among other places, the port city of Tianjin, China. China's ancient imperial dynasty was collapsing. Young Chinese elites were trying to emulate the military and industrial models of the West. To support them in their goals, the YMCA built gymnasiums, organized national and international sports tournaments, and preached that basketball could build stronger Chinese bodies and transform the country into a modern society.

Mao's nationalist vision for the People's Republic of China ended the YMCA's programs and closed the door on the West. He taught that sports were a "bourgeois affectation," but he permitted basketball because it was favored by the Chinese military, and because he personally loved it.<sup>1</sup> All other sports being banned by Mao, only ping pong and

basketball remained for the Chinese people.

In the United States, basketball was becoming an increasingly popular urban sport, played in neighborhoods and on school playgrounds, and giving rise to creative, uniquely individual playing styles which led to the careers of stars like Bill Russell, Larry Bird, Wilt Chamberlain, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson and so many others. In mid-20<sup>th</sup> century China, basketball existed in a social and cultural vacuum, as did China; the game was played to serve the ends of the military and the State.

When Mao died in 1976, his successor, Deng Xiaoping, began a series of reforms that transformed China over the next three decades. Not only did the economy begin to grow, but young Chinese could dye their hair, pierce their noses, join punk rock bands and play basketball, which became the most popular sport in China, even more than ping pong.

One problem was that the Chinese coaches



didn't understand how to develop strong players — many Chinese coaches of the time merely trained their teams by having them run drills repeatedly until their players dropped from exhaustion. This “molten-iron” training style, so deeply rooted in the Chinese sports system, provides one clue in the case of the missing point guards. The rigid Chinese training methods suppressed the very characteristics needed to produce an NBA-quality point guard: creativity, freedom, passion and leadership. Then Nike and the American National Basketball Association stepped in. The NBA had sold television rights in China, and owned corporate branding partnerships. David Stern, commissioner of the NBA, wanted to form a league in China; he attempted to import the flash and hyperbole of the NBA sports environment, with its busy running commentary, music, and exuberant cheerleaders.

But the Chinese government was not quite ready for all this. It was run by the monolithic Communist Party, which barred any opposition parties, censored the press, jailed dissidents and controlled the

Chinese Basketball Association. David Stern didn't realize it, but in attempting to import the razzle-dazzle of western sports, he was challenging the Communist Party. In Stern's favor, however, private Chinese sports entrepreneurs had begun to want control over their own teams so they could fire bad managers and weak players, and up their game. These private teams were beginning to dominate the league, especially the Shanxi Brave Dragons from Guangdong Province. Boss Wang, volatile steel magnate and ambitious owner of the ragtag Dragons, took matters into his own hands, and hired an American coach, Bob Weiss from Dallas, Texas. During Weiss's tenure in Shanxi, the basketball games that followed brought unpredictable, often outrageous outcomes, and a major culture clash.

1. Yardley, p. 11.

Yardley, Jim. *Brave Dragons: a Chinese Basketball Team, an American Coach, and Two Cultures Clashing*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2012.

## CHINA IN 1971

In June of 1971, the United States ended its trade embargo of China. The following October, the United Nations General Assembly admitted the People's Republic of China to the General Assembly. But the most surprising development came when it was announced that President Richard Nixon would visit China the following year. Since the Communists coming to power in China in 1949, Nixon had been one of the most outspoken critics of American efforts to establish diplomatic relations with the Chinese, his political reputation being based on his rigid anti-communist position.

A number of factors convinced Nixon to reverse his stance on China, first and foremost the Vietnam War. Two years after he had promised the American people “peace with honor,” Nixon was as entrenched in Vietnam as ever.<sup>1</sup> His national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, saw a possible solution to this dilemma. Since China's break with the Soviet Union in the mid 1960's, the Chinese were desperate for new allies and trade partners. Kissinger aimed to use the promise of increased trade opportunities for China as a means to put increased pressure on North Vietnam — a Chinese ally — to reach an acceptable

peace settlement. More importantly, in the long run, Kissinger believed that China might become a powerful ally with the U.S. against the Soviet Union. Kissinger called such foreign policy “realpolitik” or politics that favored dealing with other powerful nations in a practical manner rather than on the basis of political doctrine or ethics.<sup>2</sup>

Nixon undertook his historic Chinese visit in 1972, beginning a gradual process of normalizing relations between the People's Republic of China and the United States. Though his visit helped revive Nixon's waning popularity and contributed to his 1972 re-election, it did not produce the short-term results for which Kissinger had hoped with the Vietnam conflict. Nixon's visit did pave the way for future U.S. presidents to apply the principle of realpolitik to their international dealings.

1. History.com  
2. Ibid

<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/Nixon-announces-visit-to-communist-china>



# THE TIANANMEN SQUARE MASSACRE, 1989

The Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, commonly known in mainland China as the June Fourth Incident, were student-led demonstrations in Beijing, the capital of the People's Republic of China, in 1989. More broadly, it refers to the popular national movement inspired by the Beijing protests during that period, sometimes called the '89 People's Movement. The protests were forcibly suppressed after the government declared martial law. At the height of the protests, an estimated one million people assembled in the Square. In what became known in the West as the Tiananmen Square Massacre, troops with automatic rifles and tanks killed at least several hundred demonstrators trying to block the military's advance towards Tiananmen Square where the protestors were gathered. The number of civilian deaths has been estimated variously from 180 to 10,500.

Set against a backdrop of rapid economic development and social change in post-Mao China, the protests reflected anxieties about the country's future in the popular consciousness and among the political elite. The reforms of the 1980s had led to a growing market economy which benefitted some people but seriously disaffected others; the one-party political system also faced a challenge of legitimacy. Common grievances at the time included inflation, limited preparedness of graduates for the new economy, and restrictions on political participation. The students called for democracy, greater accountability, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech, though they were loosely organized and their goals varied.

As the protests swelled, the authorities veered

back and forth between conciliatory and hardline tactics for dealing with the protests, exposing deep divisions within the party leadership. By May, a student-led hunger strike galvanized support for the demonstrators around the country and the protests spread to some 400 cities. Ultimately, China's leader Deng Xiaoping and other Communist Party elders believed the protests to be a political threat, and resolved to use force. Communist Party authorities declared martial law on May 20, and mobilized an estimated 300,000 troops to Beijing, who began shooting, killing and running over the protestors.

The Chinese government was condemned internationally for the use of force against the protestors. Western countries imposed economic sanctions and arms embargoes. China's government initially condemned the protests as a counter-revolutionary riot, and criticized other nations. It made widespread arrests of protesters and their supporters, suppressed other protests around China, expelled foreign journalists, strictly controlled coverage of the events in the domestic press, strengthened the police and internal security forces, and demoted or purged officials it deemed sympathetic to the protests. More broadly, the suppression temporarily halted the Chinese policies of liberalization in the 1980s. Considered a watershed event, government reaction to the protests strictly limited political expression in China well into the 21st century. Memory of the Tiananmen Square Massacre is directly associated with questioning the legitimacy of Communist Party rule, and remains one of the most sensitive and widely censored political topics in mainland China.

## TANKMAN

Tank Man (also known as the Unknown Protester or Unknown Rebel) is the nickname of an unidentified man who stood in front of a column of tanks on June 5, 1989, the morning after the Chinese military had suppressed the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 by force. As the lead tank maneuvered to pass by the man, he repeatedly shifted his position in order to obstruct the tank's attempted path around him. Because this incident was caught on tape, it was seen worldwide.

More than 28 years after the incident, there is still no reliable information about the identity or

fate of the man; the story of what happened to the tank crew is also unknown. At least one witness has stated that "Tank Man" was not the only person who had opposed the tanks during the protest. Shao Jiang, who was a student leader, said: "I witnessed a lot of the people standing up, blocking the tanks." Tank Man is unique in that he is the only one who was photographed and recorded on video. His image has become an iconic symbol of peaceful protest against authoritarian regimes.



# BASKETBALL TERMS

**Assist** — a pass to a teammate who scores a basket immediately or after one dribble.

**Buzzer beater** — a basket in the final seconds of a game (right before the buzzer sounds) resulting in a tie or a win.

**Center** — one of the three standard player positions. Generally, the tallest member of the team, responsible for scoring, rebounding and defense near the basket.

**Dunk** — to score by putting the ball directly through the basket with one or both hands.

**Free throw** — an unopposed attempt to score a basket, worth one point from the free throw line.

**Guard** — one of the three standard player positions.

**NBA** — National Basketball Association, the largest professional league in the United States.

**NCAA** — the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the primary governing body for intercollegiate sports in the United States.

**Pick and roll** — an offensive maneuver in which a player interposes him- or herself between a teammate with the ball and a defender, then cuts quickly toward the basket for a pass from the same teammate.

**Point Guard** — Point guards are expected to run the team's offense by controlling the ball and making sure that it gets to the right players at the right time.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/glossary\\_of\\_basketball\\_terms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/glossary_of_basketball_terms).



# STUDY QUESTIONS

## Pre-Performance Questions

1. What does the term “American Dream” mean to you? Has the American Dream changed from generation to generation or is it still the same today as it was in the 1970s and 1980s? Why or why not is the American Dream possible to achieve?
2. If you could travel back in time to visit and observe a historical person make history, who would you visit and what would you hope to learn? Is there someone or a significant event in your own family line you would be interested in traveling back in time for?

## Post-Performance Questions

1. How do the scenic elements of set design, costuming, lighting, and sound help tell the story? Which were the most effective for you and why?
2. Why is setting so important to the story?
3. How does Manford convince Saul to let him play for the University of San Francisco?
4. How would you describe the relationship between Manford and Connie? What do we learn about their “family?”
5. How would you describe Manford? What is Manford searching for in the play — is it the same thing(s) as what he finds?
6. The fifth character is Manford’s mother. How is her presence felt and how is her part of the story told?
7. How do the different coaches’ attitudes towards playing basketball also reflect their respective cultures?
8. How would you describe Wen Chang? What does he learn about himself in the story?
9. How does Connie relay her experience of visiting China to Manford? Why is she nervous but supportive of Manford’s choice?
10. To paraphrase Saul, “Who do you want to be in eighteen years?”



# ACTIVITIES

## Perspective Writing – Character Narrative

1. Have students select an important moment from *The Great Leap*. This should be a moment that has more than one character. For example, the first meeting between Saul and Wen Chang or an exchange between Manford and Connie. For best results, students should work in pairs or small groups representative of the numbers of characters involved.
2. From this moment, students pick one of the characters and, in the student's own words (paraphrase), provide the character's perspective and attitude of what transpired. Emotions, behavior, and how the moment affected the character should be reflected in the writing akin to a diary or journal entry.
3. From this writing, each student will then expand their writing into the form of a short monologue for the character to speak describing the moment from the character's perspective of what they experienced.
4. Within the pair or small group, have each student read his/her monologue aloud and then compare their monologues. Discuss the similarities and differences. Was there general agreement of what happened in the moment or marked differences? How and why was the moment remembered in ways similar or different? Were their subtle or obvious variations on how the moment was recalled? Did everyone involved in the writing agree on what was important to include and why? If not, how did the elimination of some elements change the way the moment was understood or remembered by the character?

**Writing PG:** Articulate the position of self and others using experiential and material logic.

**Writing PG:** Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.



# *The Great Leap*

## ACTIVITIES

### Historic Timeline

1. Ask students to research significant 20<sup>th</sup> Century events impacting both the United States and China leading up to, during, and following the events of the play, *The Great Leap*.
2. Place the events in chronological order, creating a timeline.
3. Discussion Questions: What changes or innovations were happening during these times? How was the world changing? How are these historical events included in the play, *The Great Leap*? In what ways did these events affect the characters in the play? Do you think there was an event found in your research that should have been mentioned in the play? Why/why not?

### Character Timeline

1. In this activity, students will imagine and write character histories before and after the events of the play, *The Great Leap*.
2. Ask students to choose one of the characters from the play and, using the timeline created above, have them create and note significant moments of the character's life based on these events.

This activity invites students to incorporate their own imagining of this character's life through inference and knowledge of the events on the timeline and also their recall of the impact of the play's events on the character.

3. Discussion Questions: Why did you choose the events you did? How do you believe these events impacted or shaped the character's life experience? Based on this, what would you have added (or eliminated) from the play to support your reasoning for including the historical events that you did?

**History PG:** Develop an understanding of how people view, construct, and interpret history.

**History PG:** Analyze key historical periods and patterns of change over time within and across nations and cultures.



# PERSPECTIVES

**Make your experience unforgettable when you join us for one of these insightful, educational events:**

## Creative Team Perspectives

**Feb 2 | 6:00pm | The Jones**

Get an exclusive insider's perspective before the show when you join us for a free, professionally-moderated discussion with the creative team.

## Colorado New Play Summit

**Feb 17 - 18 & 23 - 25**

*The Great Leap* is a part of the 13th Annual Colorado New Play Summit, a two-weekend celebration and showcase of new plays and playwrights. To learn more about the Summit's four new play readings, three world premieres, Playwrights' Slam and other events, visit [denvercenter.org/summit](http://denvercenter.org/summit). Reading tickets start at just \$10 and discounted all-inclusive packages are available.

## Cast Perspectives

**Mar 1 | 6:30pm**

Join a fun and engaging discussion with the actors after the performance.

## Perspectives: Higher Education Advisory Council

**Mar 4 | 1:30pm**

Participate in a topical discussion led by members of our academic community after the performance.

## Perspectives: Theatre & Theology

**Mar 6 | 6:30pm**

Join Pastor Dan Bollman of the Rocky Mountain Evangelical Lutheran Synod after the performance to examine each show through a theological lens.



# WANT TO KNOW MORE?

## The Denver Public Library recommends: Read!

*Brave Dragons: A Chinese Basketball Team, An American Coach, and Two Cultures Clashing*  
by Jim Yardley

China has been playing basketball since 1895, and the game is the same, except when it's not. Teams like the Monkey Kings go up against the Flying Tigers; players range from Chinese locals groomed from childhood by the State, to a rotating cast of NBA has-beens, and the odd international hopeful. *Brave Dragons* is a great introduction to the world of professional Chinese basketball: a familiar but very alternate reality. Yardley's book focuses on the Shanxi Brave Dragons, their eccentric owner Boss Wang, and the 2008 season when former NBA coach Bob Weiss was hired to make the Dragons into champions. This is a pro-sports drama about the love of the game uniting us, with a heavy dose of cultural divides and more than a few personal fouls.

## Watch!

*Invictus* (2010)

South Africa was a country still divided by the scars of apartheid when President Nelson Mandela took charge. Multiple cultural differences, including sports, existed between black South Africans and white South Africans. In fact, sports was described by one politician as apartheid in a tracksuit. Black South Africans used to cheer for anyone other than the country's rugby team, the Springboks. However, Mandela believes that sports can unite people, making it possible to forgive hurts of the past. Everyone is a fan when you have a winning team to cheer, so Mandela supports the Springboks when they are the underdog for the 1995 World Cup. Game by game, the team progresses further than expected and the country begins to bridge the cultural divide.

## Listen!

*This Book Has Balls* by Michael Rapaport (Book on CD)

Michael Rapaport, actor, filmmaker, and trash talking sports fanatic, is now an author and audiobook voice actor too! The only thing this guy doesn't do is play for the Knicks, those dreams were dashed before he was out of high school. *This Book has Balls* collects Rapaport's rants on sports and sport celebrity, ranging from urging Tiger Woods to return to bad behavior, shaming Floyd Mayweather on losing at life, and confessing his boyhood crush on Mary Lou Retton. Rapaport saves his best potty-mouthed insight for the game of basketball, and the likes of LeBron James, Magic Johnson, and LaVar Ball, sparing nothing. If Coach Saul inspired you to bring up your swearing game, on and off the court, Rapaport's book is a good start. Short on time? Start with the index to find the right F-word combination!

## Download!

*Can I Keep My Jersey? 11 Teams, 5 Countries and 4 Years in My Life as a Basketball Vagabond*  
by Paul Shirley (eBook)

Love of the game has taken pro-baller Paul Shirley to all corners of the globe. From the Chicago Bulls to the Russian Super League, the Greek A1 League to the Spanish ACB League, Shirley played power forward for thirteen different professional teams around the world. In this hilariously honest autobiography, Shirley puts pen to paper and shares all about his life crossing oceans, crossing cultures, and crossing the court.



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