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The "Target Effect" in Professional Sports Mobility: A Case Study of Yang Hansen's NBA Journey Controversy

Hengyu Zhao

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Beijing Wuzi University, Beijing, China
18611371773@163.com

Abstract. Chinese basketball player Yang Hansen successfully entered the NBA in 2025, yet his journey has been accompanied by intense public criticism. This phenomenon illustrates the "target effect" faced by individuals who achieve upward mobility to elite levels. Drawing on migration and mobility theories, this study employs a case study approach to analyze the controversy surrounding Yang Hansen. Utilizing Schewel's aspiration-capability framework, Sheller and Urry's new mobilities paradigm, and Bourdieu's theory of capital, the analysis reveals that Yang's personal mobility has been burdened with collective expectations of reshaping Chinese basketball's international competitiveness. The criticism essentially reflects public anxiety about failed upward mobility and the potential freezing of group mobility opportunities. The study argues that athletic mobility must be understood through multiple dimensions including individual capacity, team needs, tactical systems, and cultural adaptation, and calls for a more inclusive perspective on athletes' transnational career development.

Keywords: target effect, social mobility, aspiration-capability framework, mobility justice, Yang Hansen

1. Introduction

Migration and mobility studies have long been dominated by a "mobility bias," which focuses on drivers of movement while neglecting the structural and personal forces that constrain or resist it [1]. Schewel's aspiration-capability framework distinguishes between migration aspirations and the capability to migrate, highlighting that involuntary immobility often results from capability constraints despite high aspirations [1]. Sheller and Urry's new mobilities paradigm emphasizes that mobility is always embedded in power relations, with uneven access to movement producing both kinetic elites and immobile populations [2,3]. Within this framework, mobility is not merely physical movement but also encompasses social and spatial dimensions that shape life chances [4]. Marzi further argues that spatial mobility significantly influences young people's aspirations and social mobility outcomes, with neighborhood contexts either enabling or constraining access to resources necessary for upward movement [4]. Bourdieu's theory of capital provides additional analytical tools, suggesting that economic, cultural, and social capital are convertible and crucial for social reproduction and mobility [5]. Carling's foundational work on involuntary immobility adds

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depth to understanding why aspirations alone are insufficient for mobility [6]. These theoretical perspectives collectively illuminate the complexity of mobility as a social phenomenon.

This study addresses two main research questions: (1) From the perspective of sociological mobility theories, why has Yang Hansen become a target of public criticism despite successfully achieving upward mobility to the NBA? (2) What reflections and recommendations can be drawn from this case for understanding athletic mobility and fostering supportive environments for athletes' transnational careers? Using a qualitative case study approach, this paper analyzes Yang Hansen's NBA journey controversy through the lens of mobility theories. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding social mobility dynamics in professional sports contexts, offering insights for cultivating high-level athletes and for developing more nuanced public discourse around athletic achievement.

2. The formation of the "target effect": multi-level analysis

2.1. Personal factors

Yang Hansen's case exemplifies several personal-level factors that contributed to the public criticism. First, he neglected the structural differences between the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) and the NBA, including pace of play, physicality, and tactical systems. As Sheller and Urry noted, mobility systems are sociotechnical assemblages that require alignment between individual capabilities and destination contexts [2]. Yang's transition from the CBA, where his high-post playmaking and deliberate pace were assets, to the NBA's extreme speed and athleticism exposed a capability mismatch. By framing his NBA entry primarily as a matter of personal effort—echoing the traditional belief that "hard work pays off"—Yang's struggles on the court appeared to contradict this deeply ingrained cultural narrative, provoking public disappointment. This reflects what Appadurai termed the "capacity to aspire": aspirations are shaped by cultural contexts, and when outcomes deviate from expected narratives, collective disillusionment emerges [4].

Second, his private behaviors, such as dining with his girlfriend after games, were amplified by media and fans as evidence of insufficient dedication. This phenomenon aligns with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital: athletes are expected to embody the ascetic discipline associated with upward mobility, and any perceived deviation threatens the symbolic value of their achievement [5]. The amplification of private conduct reflects a broader tendency to moralize mobility opportunities and to interpret any deviation from perceived "proper" conduct as a waste of scarce upward mobility chances. As Marzi's research on young people's aspirations demonstrates, social judgments about "deservingness" often shape public reactions to mobility outcomes [4].

Third, questions arose about the mismatch between his capabilities and positional fit: despite performing well in the G League, his struggles in NBA games raised doubts about his ability to translate skills across different competitive environments. This illustrates Carling's distinction between aspiration and capability: Yang possessed the aspiration (and initial capability) to enter the NBA, but sustaining mobility requires ongoing alignment with evolving structural conditions [6]. The G League-NBA gap highlights how capability is not static but fluctuates with context—a point emphasized by De Haas's development of the capability approach within migration studies [1].

2.2. Social factors

At the social level, the global basketball landscape is characterized by a center-periphery structure, with the NBA as the undisputed center. Players from "peripheral" basketball nations like China face

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higher entry barriers and heightened scrutiny upon arrival [3]. Sheller argued that mobility regimes create uneven access to movement, with kinetic elites enjoying smoother passages while others encounter friction [3]. Yang's experience exemplifies this friction: despite his draft status, he faced greater skepticism than domestic players or those from traditional basketball powers. This reflects what Glick Schiller and Salazar termed "regimes of mobility," where movement is normalized for some while others are contained [1].

The Portland Trail Blazers' tactical system—emphasizing extreme pace and frequent switching—conflicted with Yang's technical characteristics as a high-post playmaker with relatively slow lateral movement. This systemic mismatch constrained his ability to integrate successfully into the team's rotation. As Kaufmann et al. argued, motility (potential for movement) depends on access to appropriate infrastructures and networks [4]. Yang's motility was undermined by the team's tactical configuration, illustrating that mobility success depends not only on individual capability but also on alignment with destination contexts [1]. Roster congestion with four centers on the team further limited his playing opportunities, demonstrating what Van Hear describes as "stuckness" in transit: even after achieving entry, migrants may find themselves immobilized within destination structures [1].

Furthermore, the fear of downward mobility looms large: if Yang fails in the NBA and returns to the CBA, it could be perceived as confirming the inferiority of Chinese basketball. This anxiety reflects what Schewel terms "acquiescent immobility"—the acceptance of constraints when mobility seems impossible [1]. However, in Yang's case, the fear is of forced immobility (failure to sustain presence) leading to downward social mobility. This dynamic resonates with Bauman's observation that mobility had become a stratifying factor, with the ability to move freely conferring status, while immobility signals disadvantage [2].

2.3. National/collective factors

Yang Hansen is not an ordinary player; he represents Chinese basketball's upward mobility aspirations. Since Yao Ming's era, Chinese men's basketball has experienced a prolonged decline in international competitiveness. As Marzi noted, aspirations are shaped by place-based habitus and collective narratives [4]. Yang's NBA entry was thus implicitly burdened with the mission of "reshaping Chinese basketball's mobility"—a collective expectation that transcends his individual career. This phenomenon echoes Bourdieu's concept of social capital concentrated in delegated representatives: Yang, as the sole Chinese player in the NBA, became the embodiment of the group's aspirations, and his performance directly affected the group's symbolic capital [5].

Fans' criticism targets not merely his on-court performance but the perceived waste of a rare opportunity for group advancement. In the logic of social mobility, his struggles signify a missed chance for collective upward movement, reinforcing anxieties about the potential freezing of Chinese players' access to the NBA's elite stratum [5]. This reflects what Bourdieu terms the reproduction of social hierarchies: when official transmission of capital (here, international basketball success) is hindered, the effects of clandestine circulation of capital (cultural capital embodied in players) become increasingly determinant in social reproduction [5]. The collective fear is that if this mobility attempt fails, the group may become trapped in involuntary immobility, with future generations finding it even harder to break through.

This dynamic is not unique to basketball. Gough's research on youth mobility in Lusaka shows how individual mobility attempts are often laden with collective expectations, and how failure can reinforce stereotypes about entire communities [4]. Similarly, Yang's situation reflects what Skelton termed the "power geometry" of mobility: those who achieve upward movement become symbols of

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possibility for their group, but also bear the weight of collective disappointment when expectations are unmet [4].

3. Reflections and recommendations

3.1. Rethinking mobility success

Success in transnational athletic mobility should not be narrowly defined by playing time or statistical performance. Drawing on the aspiration-capability framework, mobility outcomes must be understood as processes involving adaptation, learning, and cultural exchange [1]. Yang's NBA experience contributes to his development regardless of immediate on-court results, and this broader definition of success should inform public discourse. As Sen's capability approach emphasized, well-being derives from the freedom to choose the lives people value, not merely from achieved outcomes [1]. Yang's exercise of his capability to move—even if temporarily—enhances his overall well-being and career development. Furthermore, as Mata-Codesal's research on "ways of staying put" suggested, mobility and immobility are not binary opposites but coexist in complex ways; Yang's experience of partial integration (playing in the G League, training with the team) represents a form of "staying in motion" that should be valued [1].

3.2. Beyond individual responsibility

The neo-liberal discourse of individual responsibility, which places the burden of upward mobility solely on the individual, fails to account for structural constraints [4]. Athletic mobility is shaped by multiple factors: personal capability, team needs, tactical systems, cultural adaptation, and institutional support. National pride should not be excessively loaded onto individual athletes' shoulders; instead, collective responsibility for creating enabling environments must be acknowledged. As Sheller argued, mobility justice requires addressing systemic inequalities in access to movement and the infrastructures that support it [3]. For Chinese basketball, this means investing in development systems that prepare players for transnational careers, rather than placing the entire burden on individual pioneers like Yang.

3.3. Cultivating a supportive environment

Public and media discourse should adopt a more patient and inclusive perspective toward athletes' transnational careers. Mobility justice entails not only the right to move but also the right to dwell and develop in destination contexts [3]. Building a supportive environment requires recognizing the uncertainties inherent in mobility processes and valuing the learning experiences gained regardless of immediate outcomes. As Marzi's research on young people's navigational capacity shown, the ability to adjust aspirations in response to changing circumstances is itself a valuable skill [4]. Yang's adaptation journey—navigating a new country, language, culture, and basketball system—demonstrates this capacity, and should be celebrated rather than criticized.

Moreover, fostering a culture that tolerates failure as part of the mobility process is essential. As Carling noted, involuntary immobility is widespread, and even successful migrants often face periods of "stuckness" [6]. Recognizing this normalizes the challenges Yang faces and reduces the pressure on him to perform instantly. Ultimately, a supportive environment benefits not only individual athletes but also the collective by encouraging future generations to aspire and attempt mobility without fear of public shaming.

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4. Conclusion

This study has examined the controversy surrounding Yang Hansen's NBA journey through the lens of mobility theories, revealing that his personal upward mobility became a target of collective anxiety about Chinese basketball's international standing. The criticism reflects deep-seated fears of failed group mobility and the potential freezing of future opportunities. The analysis demonstrates that athletic mobility must be understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon shaped by individual, social, and national factors, and cannot be reduced to individual effort alone. Yang's case illustrates the "target effect": when individuals from marginalized groups achieve upward mobility to elite levels, they become symbols of collective aspiration and bear disproportionate scrutiny.

The study's limitations include its focus on a single case in basketball, which may limit generalizability to other sports or contexts. Future research could compare athletes from different sports and countries to explore variations in the "target effect" across different mobility regimes. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking athletes' adaptation processes over time would enrich understanding of mobility as a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a binary outcome. Comparative analysis of athletes from other "peripheral" basketball nations (e.g., Spain, Argentina, Australia) could reveal how different national contexts shape public expectations and support systems for athletes' transnational careers. Ultimately, fostering mobility justice in professional sports requires collective efforts to recognize the complexity of transnational careers and to cultivate supportive environments that value both movement and the right to stay and grow.

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