

Interview With Xu Jicheng, Director General of the Media Operation Department, Beijing 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games

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Xu Jicheng, nicknamed Big Xu, received his bachelor's degree in English from Shandong University (Shandong, China) and played basketball during his university time. For over two decades, he has been a senior reporter in sport department of Xinhua News Agency and a color commentator for basketball games affiliated with Fédération Internationale de Basketball World Cup, National Basketball Association (NBA), and Chinese Basketball Association and broadcast on China Central Television (CCTV) Sports (the national and dominant sports media in China). He was deputy director general of the media operation department of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and now takes on the director general role for the 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games hosted by Beijing. Jicheng has extensive experience in sports media operation and news coverage.

Shang: How do your sports journalist and color commentator's experiences impact your work for the Beijing 2022?

Xu: There are two key words.

The first key word is “window.” This refers to the window between China and the rest of the world. Jacques Rogge, the former president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), made a very important remark at the closing ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games: “Through the Games, China learned more about the world, and the world learned more about China.” I started my sports journalist career in 1986 in Xinhua News Agency and covered my first Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea, in 1988. For sports journalists, there are two differences between China and the West: the languages and the philosophies. So, the focus is different as well. The West media focused more on personalities and personal efforts, while China emphasized the contributions an athlete can make to his or her country.

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The authors (left and center) with Xu Jicheng (right), Director General of the Media Operation Department, Beijing 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

The second key word is “pioneer.” I served as a color commentator of basketball in 1994. That was quite a new job in China then. A basketball color commentator should be professional and have played a certain level of pro basketball. I played basketball for 10 years before going to the university. In my role as a broadcaster, I could interview the foreign players and coaches and read all the information and games notes. I was the one they (e.g., media leaders, readers, viewers) can find in Xinhua News Agency and CCTV to accomplish this requirement.

Actually, before that, I could never imagine that I would get the chance to be a color commentator on the national TV station. In China, the population of the sport audience is around 300 million. The first live broadcast of NBA basketball in China was in February 1994. That was the NBA All-Star Game. NBA told CCTV, live broadcasting on games was about 3 hr. And the games notes the NBA gave us were very thin.

I worked with Sun Zhengping, one of the most respected play-by-play announcers in CCTV. He said the game was the 48 min, so we prepared 48 questions for the first NBA game to be broadcast live in China. The questions came from the Chinese fans who had watched the highlights of the NBA before. Zhengping said, “well, I will ask you questions for the fans, and you just give the explanations.” That went well. I had no idea about live broadcasting before, and some at CCTV worried about my Mandarin, my expressions, and even my language style. But the fans liked my style as it was like a friend sitting there beside the court and talking. The fans made the phone calls during the half-time to encourage me. These details told me that you should just stand on with the fans and sit on same bench with them. When you do the commentating, you are not to showcase yourself. You are one of the fans. You just tell them the answers and address the concerns that they are thinking about. So, in this regard, I was a pioneer.