

《科比谢幕NBA，中国球迷难说再见》

While Kobe Bryant will be sorely missed by Los Angeles Lakers fans after he ended his stellar 20-year career in the NBA, his departure will leave a gaping hole for his legions of supporters in China.

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According to the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA), 300 million people play the sport in China and for a majority of them, five-time NBA champion Bryant has become something of a cult figure.

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For Weiping Zhang, a former basketball player and coach in China who now works as a television analyst, Bryant's extraordinary popularity in his homeland comes as no surprise.

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"Lots of people around the world love Kobe and some people hate him but in China most of the people, the fans, love him," Weiping, 65, told Reuters after watching the 37-year-old Bryant play his final NBA game, against the Utah Jazz in Los Angeles."

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"They love him because of his character, his personality, his basketball skill and also because no matter how difficult things were, he always met the challenge," he added."

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"Michael Jordan is top in China for the older generation but for the younger generation Kobe is number one. They love Kobe much more than LeBron [James] in China," Weiping said.

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Asked where he would rank in popularity compared with China's best-known player, eight-time NBA All-Star Yao Ming, the ever-smiling Weiping replied: "Kobe first, then Yao Ming second.

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Weiping, who was the second-highest scorer at the 1978 FIBA World Championship as a slashing-dunking forward on the Chinese national team, also pointed to Bryant's excellent marketing skills.

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"He has learned a few words in Mandarin but it's much more than that, he uses social media networking very well," said Weiping, who has worked as a basketball commentator for China Central Television for more than two decades."

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"And even before social media, he was very popular in China because of TV. We broadcast a lot of Lakers games

