

# WEI YIDONG

He is one of Beijing's top sports presenters, but Wei Yidong spent six months studying sports journalism in the UK this year. He tells **Ann Morgan** how living in the country that started his love affair with football meant he not only improved his knowledge, but also got to see some great matches

When you go to study on the other side of the world, you don't expect to see a national superstar sitting at the desk next to you. But that's exactly what happened to Chinese students on Sheffield Hallam University's MA Sports Journalism and English language courses in January 2012. They found themselves sharing classes with leading Beijing TV (BTV) sports presenter, Wei Yidong. 'At first they didn't think it was me,' says the 36-year-old, when Club UK catches up with him before a Chelsea-Tottenham game at Stamford Bridge a few months before the London 2012 Olympics. 'It took two or three classes for them to be sure it was me. Then they asked for my autograph.'

It's no wonder Wei's classmates were surprised to see him in their lectures. Broadcasting regularly to audiences of more than 60 million people, Wei has built up a massive fanbase over his 14 years as a sports presenter and football commentator. So why would someone who has already achieved a high level of success feel the need to come to the UK to study his specialism?

'Every field in China is making huge progress now, including television broadcasting,' says Wei. 'We want to follow this trend in Chinese sports programmes. I mainly cover Premier League matches so, when I had a plan to study overseas, the UK was my only choice. My second reason for studying here was that English journalism is really good. The sports media and agents have a long history and really good traditions.'

Wei's love of UK Premier League football goes back to his childhood. A committed Liverpool fan, he developed his passion for the beautiful game watching matches on TV back home. 'Liverpool was the first football club I knew about when I was very, very young,' he says. 'I grew up knowing the names Rush, Dalglish and Barnes.'

## Olympic dream

It was another international sporting event, however, that encouraged Wei to pursue a career in sports commentating. His 18th birthday coincided with the day the International Olympic Committee announced that Beijing had narrowly lost out to Sydney in the race to host the 2000 Olympic Games. It was a decisive moment.

'I said to myself: "I have to major in sports journalism and do something in this career";' says Wei. 'It was the first step.'

A degree at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute (now known as the Communication University of China) followed, during which Wei made contacts at BTV and Chinese network broadcaster CCTV. These links meant that he was able to get a job quickly when he graduated. After a short stint doing voiceovers and interviews, Wei was hosting sports programmes and commentating on around 100 Chinese league, English Premier League and international football matches every year.

Then, in 2008, an encounter at the Beijing Olympics provided a signpost for his next career move.

'I was working in Beijing and I met some people from Sheffield Hallam University who were volunteering at the stadium,' he says. 'Three years later when I decided to study in the UK, I found that university's name again. That's why I chose it.'





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Wei Yidong at Sheffield  
Wednesday Football Club's  
Hillsborough Stadium



Despite his extensive experience in China, Wei was keen to use his six-month stay in the UK to gain first-hand knowledge of British sports journalism. Alongside his studies, he has used his time to make contact with Premier League clubs and British broadcasters such as the BBC, with whom he hopes to do an internship. He has also commentated on several Premier League matches, including Manchester United's memorable 8-2 defeat of rivals Arsenal.

'It was one of the most exciting games this season,' he says with a grin at his friend, and translator for the day, *Titan Sports* newspaper journalist Chaun Liu, an Arsenal fan.

Wei has been particularly impressed with the good relationship between Premier League clubs and the media, which he says has made the challenge of commentating with a new production team much easier than it would otherwise have been. 'What surprised me was that the Premier League has a team to support overseas commentators,' he says. 'They will provide a cameraman and ask you about your ideas. It's really professional.'

In addition, Wei has been struck by the good relationships between many football clubs and their fans. During his time as a visiting student, he has been carrying out research at Sheffield Wednesday and Sheffield United football clubs, and comparing his findings with the practices of the Chinese superleague clubs.

'The biggest difference is the relationship between the football club and the supporters,' he says. 'In China, the clubs and the fans don't have an official method of communication. Here, they're really close. The fans even travel in buses provided by the club. Chinese clubs should learn this culture.'

### Local rivalries

As well as commentating on several matches, Wei has watched some of the best Premier League and FA Cup games from the stands. However, his favourite game so far might come as a surprise to some football fans.

'The Sheffield derby [match between two local teams] made me feel really excited because it was the first real city derby I'd watched in England,' he says. 'The whole city was talking about it. It was a really impressive day. In the park, in the bus, in the train, everywhere, the only topic was football and the derby.'

Wei may be working hard, but he also finds time to play hard too. When he isn't studying, commentating or going to matches, he can often be found having a kickabout with students and university staff. 'It's tough,' he says with a smile. 'They're really fast and strong.'

Wei's other leisure activities include socialising and going to restaurants. Although he found English food took a bit of getting used to, he has been impressed by the standard of Chinese



Beijing's National Stadium  
Above: the Sheffield derby;  
Wei Yidong on Beijing TV

restaurants in the UK. 'Chinese restaurants in London, Manchester and Sheffield are the best in Europe,' he says.

He was also very pleased with the warm welcome he received, particularly as he had to leave his family at home in China. 'I was really lucky to find a kindly and friendly landlord,' he says. 'He and his friends have organised various charitable ventures to help Chinese students adapt to life in the UK.'

Sheffield gave Wei a secure base from which to build the contacts and knowledge he needed to develop his next project for BTV. This will be a weekly discussion programme focused on top-level football leagues around the world such as the Premier League and Spain's La Liga. It has already drawn considerable interest from sponsors.

'It will be similar to *Match of the Day* [a UK TV programme], he says, 'but there will be more discussions. BTV has a long history of showing Premier League games. Before, it was just the game itself. This time, BTV and I want to make something new.'

And for aspiring sports journalists, colleagues and people back home, he has just one piece of advice: 'Come to the UK to experience this and learn something you cannot learn in China,' he says. 'When you look at the situation in China, you can see it's time to go out and look around the world and get the international view. That's really important for [all] Chinese people, not just sports journalists.' ■