

Alibaba shopping sites appear to have de-listed Houston Rockets products in China

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China's largest online shopping sites owned by giants [Alibaba](#) and [JD.com](#) appear to have removed items related to the Houston Rockets after the NBA team's general manager [tweeted support for the Hong Kong anti-government protestors](#) which drew strong criticism in the world's second-largest economy.

Searches in Chinese for "Houston Rockets" and "Rockets" on Alibaba-owned Taobao and Tmall and its rival JD.com yielded no results, highlighting the potential financial fallout the Rockets could face.

Representatives for Alibaba and JD.com were not immediately available for comment when contacted by CNBC.

It comes after Rockets general manager Daryl Morey tweeted the slogan "Fight for freedom, stand with Hong Kong," which is being used by pro-democracy protestors in the Chinese territory. The tweet was quickly deleted and Morey sent a follow-up tweet attempting to diffuse the situation.

Still, it drew sharp criticism from the [Chinese Consulate-General in Houston](#) and the Chinese Basketball Association.

The CBA said it is was suspending cooperation with the team. The association is chaired by Yao Ming, a Chinese NBA star who was formerly with the Rockets, who is credited with helping the franchise grow its fan base in China. CBA also canceled four games scheduled for 19-20 October in Suzhou, China, which included some Rockets matches.

Alibaba co-founder weighs in

Joseph Tsai, the [owner of the Brooklyn Nets NBA team](#) as well as a co-founder at e-commerce giant Alibaba, also slammed Morey. In an open letter posted on his [personal Facebook account](#), he ran through episodes in history to explain why the "Chinese psyche has heavy baggage when it comes to any threat, foreign or domestic, to carve up Chinese territories."

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Certain topics "are third-rail issues," Tsai said, adding that one of those is supporting what he dubbed a "separatist movement in a Chinese territory."

"By now I hope you can begin to understand why the Daryl Morey tweet is so damaging to the relationship with our fans in China. I don't know Daryl personally. I am sure he's a fine NBA general manager, and I will take at face value his subsequent apology that he was not as well informed as he should have been," Tsai said. "But the hurt that this incident has caused will take a long time to repair."

Broadcasters, retailers cut ties

Chinese tech giant [Tencent](#), which owns the digital rights to NBA games in China, said it would stop showing Rockets matches and news related to the team.

Tencent has been the digital media partner of the NBA in China since 2009. The two sides just announced an extension of their deal to the 2024-2025 season, that's reportedly worth \$1.5 billion.

Chinese state broadcaster CCTV also said it would stop showing Houston Rockets games.

James Harden of the Houston Rockets shoots the ball against the Golden State Warriors during Game Six of the Western Conference Semifinals of the 2019 NBA Playoffs on May 10, 2019 at the Toyota Center in Houston, Texas.

Andrew D. Bernstein | National Basketball Association | Getty Images

Meanwhile, Chinese sports retailer [Li-Ning](#) announced in an [official post](#) on the Twitter-like Weibo service that it was suspending co-operation with the Rockets following Morey's comments.

NBA under fire

After Morey's tweet, the NBA put out its own statement: one in English and one in Chinese.

"We recognize that the views expressed by Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey have offended so many of our friends and fans in China, which is regrettable," the English statement began.

"We are extremely disappointed by the inappropriate remarks made by Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey, who has undoubtedly seriously hurt the feelings of our Chinese fans," according to a CNBC translation of the Chinese version, which appears to be more strongly worded.

However, an NBA spokesperson said "there should be no discrepancy" between the statements. "We have seen various interpretations of the translation of the Mandarin version, but our statement in English is the league's official statement," the spokesperson said.

Still, [American lawmakers](#) criticized the NBA, accusing the league of putting money above human rights.

Senator Marco Rubio, R-Fla., accused the basketball league of throwing Rockets general manager Morey "under the bus" to "please" the Chinese Communist government.

Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., also slammed the NBA.