



Yanks sign two with approval from CBA

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By Lauren Kobylarz / MLB.com

NEW YORK -- The Yankees family grew a little bit bigger on Friday, as the team formally introduced two new Minor League additions from the People's Republic of China.

Left-hander Kai Liu and catcher Zhenwang Zhang, both 19, are the first players from China to sign with a Major League team with approval from the Chinese Baseball Association. Yankees representatives saw both Liu and Zhang in international tournaments and games in China before inking the pair on June 18.

Yankees general manager Brian Cashman said Zhang was noticed for his mind-set as a defensive catcher, and Liu for his already-solid breaking ball and developmental potential. The young pitcher quickly bent the brim of his new Yankees cap as Cashman and CBA chairman Hu Jiango helped the pair into Yankees jackets, marking the first of many interactions between the Yankees and the CBA.

The players, who will now join other Yankees Minor Leaguers in Tampa, are only the beginning of the Yankees' new relationship with the CBA. In January, the Yankees reached an unprecedented agreement with the organization to develop baseball as a sport in China. They've started out their commitment to the CBA by bringing in Liu and Zhang.

"Two good things can come out of this endeavor," Cashman said. "Hopefully, these players eventually become Major League Baseball players here in the United States, and be successful at it, or they will learn a great deal about this game and be able to share that and return to China and help it as a growing game."

Increased Chinese interest in baseball has also spurred the Yankees' deal with the Yili Group, China's largest dairy company that signed as a Yankees sponsor on June 25. Yili, an Olympic sponsor, is now also the first Chinese-based sponsor in Major League Baseball, and will advertise at Yankee Stadium and in Yankees Magazine.

Baseball is on the rise in China, and the Yankees, along with the CBA, are making sure that Chinese baseball programs, now in the infancy stages, continue to, well, grow up.

"Chinese baseball is like a young baby," chairman Jiango said. "You have to hold its hand before it can walk."

As part of their newly formed relationship with the CBA, the Yankees will sponsor and fund a player development camp in China for 12 to 16-year-olds. They have also purchased a video pitching machine -- the same model used by the Yankees teams -- as a gift to the CBA. Both initiatives will work at the grassroots level to promote baseball as a sport in China.

"Everybody recognizes over time that when China shows an interest in a specific sport, historically, they usually become very good at that sport," Cashman said. "There's an interest level in baseball growth in China, and we're going to take advantage in that, and assist in that process because our business is baseball. It's as simple as that."

After visiting China for the first time recently, Cashman said he saw several Yankees caps in the streets of Beijing. He wasn't sure if that meant there were plenty of Chinese Yankees fans, but he could tell that the popularity of baseball -- or at least the Yankees brand -- reaches around the globe.

"It seems like anywhere you go in the world, you can see a Yankee cap," Cashman said. "That's something that has taken a great deal of time and effort over the years by a lot of different people. It's a brand itself, it's right up there with Pepsi, Coca-Cola, and some of the greatest business brands in the world. It's recognizable everywhere you go."

This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.