

# Preliminary discussion on the current status of city marathons in China

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**Abstract:** In recent years, city marathons in China have shown a significant upward trend, spreading across the country. The more recognized city marathons are, the more they reflect their endless charm and powerful functions. By consulting a large amount of literature, conducting discussions with numerous marathon experts and participants, and visiting marathon events on site in various locations, the author has concluded that in addition to the often-mentioned role as a city's calling card, there are many "functions" that organizers need to explore and many details that require improvement. Furthermore, city marathons have become a necessary choice for people to alleviate life pressures, reduce status anxiety, and achieve a strong physique, a perfect personality, and a healthy lifestyle.

**Keywords:** China, Marathon, Status Anxiety, Urban Development

## 1. Introduction

Haruki Murakami, a Japanese author, is not only a writer but also a long-distance running enthusiast. He started running in 1982, adhering to a daily routine, and has participated in a full marathon every year, completing over 30 marathons to date. Through his continuous running, he has felt his body and spirit strengthening in a positive direction. When Murakami discusses his running or his marathon experiences, city marathons in China did not seem to be a popular sport; people were more enthusiastic about indoor activities such as badminton, billiards, yoga, and bowling. However, in just a few short years, marathon running has become a favorite form of exercise and fitness among urban residents in China. Now, city marathons in China each year bloom like vibrant rapeseed flowers, spreading from south to north across the country with the arrival of spring, becoming a particularly eye-catching spectacle in various regions. This article analyzes and studies the development and current state of city marathons in China, aiming to explore the benefits of these events for urban development and daily life, and hoping to provide new ideas for event organizers.

## 2. Research methods

### 2.1. Literature review method

The author has reviewed domestic and international literature from the past 30 years, organizing the history of marathon events in China and analyzing the current situation.

### 2.2. Expert interview method

The author has conducted multiple discussions with various event supervisors from the Marathon Office of the General Administration of Sport of China, heads of local sports bureaus' marathon offices, marathon referees, teachers from professional institutions, and persons in charge of marathon event organizing companies. These discussions have focused on the key points and challenges associated with hosting city marathons in China.

### 2.3. On-site observation method

Over the past five years, the author has attended multiple marathon events, participating in preparation meetings, referees' meetings, and conducting on-site inspections of the competition venues. This has allowed the author to gather a wealth of firsthand materials.

## 3. The history and current status of marathons in China

### 3.1. The history of marathons in China

During the Republic of China era, due to the poor physical fitness of the Chinese population and the country's recent "internationalization," there were no marathons held. Only a few individuals participated in races, such as Wang Zheng Lin, who competed in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Marathon. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, small-scale formal marathons began to be organized, but records are highly inconsistent. According to "Track and Field History" edited by Li Lao min, the first marathon record in new China was set by Xia Qi Yu in 1957[1]. "Advanced Track and Field Course" records that the best national performance in the 1950s was achieved by Zheng Zhao Xin [2]. Textbooks on track and field from institutions of higher education state that marathon running was widely carried out after the liberation, and a miner from Anhui set the best marathon time that year in 1957[3]. These records give an unclear impression and indicate that marathon sports were not highly regarded at the time, and the management did not place much emphasis on this competition.

Following the reform and opening up, as various endeavors in China aimed to integrate with the international community, the sports sector took the lead, promoting the fine tradition of "small ball moves big ball." Consequently, the Beijing International Marathon was inaugurated in the fall of 1981, which was the first marathon in the country named after a city. At that time, only 86 runners from 12 countries and regions registered to participate, making it a small-scale event. However, the participants were very professional, and the event held greater symbolic significance. Later, Beijing also hosted the China-Japan Friendship Marathon Relay in the spring, which became an important event and a significant political occasion in Beijing during the spring and autumn seasons. Entering the 1990s, other cities in China began to hold marathons with their own unique characteristics. Running became a simple and effective method for urban residents to exercise, and more long-distance running clubs emerged as a result.

### 3.2. The current status of urban marathons

In the past five years, marathons have suddenly become carnivals and city calling cards in cities large and small across China, and have also become a popular sports event among urban residents. In 2015, domestic media used the term "explosion" to describe the phenomenon of the sudden increase in the number of marathons. That year, there were as many as 51 races registered with the China Athletics Association, but the actual number of events held by various provinces and cities far exceeded this figure (see Figure 1). There are various forms of half marathons, full marathons, and ultra-marathons held, some on city streets, some in the Gobi Desert, and others on mountain trails. Chinese city marathons are not only numerous but also of high quality. Currently, the Beijing Marathon, Xiamen International Marathon, Shanghai International Marathon, and Yangzhou Jian Zhen International Half Marathon are gold-label events; the Hong Kong Marathon by Standard Chartered and Lanzhou International Marathon are silver and bronze events, respectively.

Looking at the distribution of cities hosting marathons, China has formed a very distinctive race city route. One route follows the Yellow River: Lhasa - Lanzhou - Wu Zhong - Ordos - Taiyuan - Zhengzhou (Kaifeng) - Luo he (Half Marathon) - Dong ying (Yellow River Delta International Marathon). Another route follows the Yangtze River: Lhasa - Liu pan shui - An shun - Qian dong nan Prefecture - Kunming - Chongqing - Yangzhou - Suzhou - Wuxi - Shanghai. Another route follows the Pearl River: Guilin - Guangzhou - Zhuhai. Others are distributed in the three northeastern provinces of China, Hainan Province, and Hebei Province, among other places.

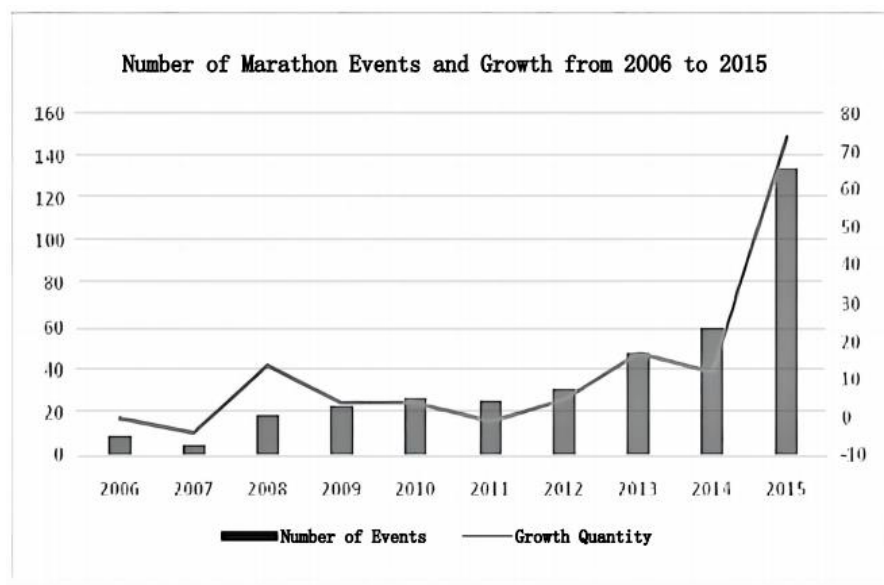


Figure 1: Chart of the Growth in the Number of City Marathons in China Over the Past 10 Years

From the current situation, it is evident that the number of cities applying to host marathons remains very high, with no signs of waning enthusiasm. The public's passion for participating in these events is also very strong, and sometimes they have to find alternative ways to register for the races. In 2015, the Beijing International Marathon, for the first time, was limited to the full marathon event with a cap of 30,000 participants. However, the final number of registered runners exceeded this limit, reaching as many as 35,000.

## 4. Analysis and discussion

### 4.1. The economic and urban population development in China in recent years

Hosting sports competitions can stimulate local economic development. For example, the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games in the United States set a precedent for making a significant profit from hosting sports events, provided that there is a certain level of economic strength as a precursor.

After the reform and opening up, China's economy has grown rapidly (see Figure 2), with its GDP surpassing Japan's for the first time in 2010, making it the world's second-largest economy [4]. In recent years, the growth rate has remained around 7% (the economic total for 2015 in Figure 2 is for the first three quarters), which has laid a solid foundation for cities to host various sports competitions. From Figure 2, it is evident that the growth of China's economy corresponds with the increase in the number of marathon events, and a strong economic foundation has greatly facilitated the organization of sports competitions.

With economic growth, China's urban population has surged, reaching 749.16 million permanent urban residents by the end of 2014[5]. According to U.S. reports, Chinese tourists spent \$215 billion abroad in 2015. David Scowsill, President and CEO of the World Travel & Tourism Council, noted that the growth in the number of Chinese citizens traveling abroad is astonishing, primarily due to the increase in the middle class [6]. Urban residents have regular work and relatively stable incomes, and a "leisure class" has emerged, which is characterized by a strong interest in sports competitions [7]. These three factors provide a large pool of potential participants for marathons.

The rapid economic development in China has enabled hundreds of millions of Chinese people to live prosperous lives. However, along with economic prosperity, problems that have plagued the Western world for centuries have also affected the Chinese, namely, status anxiety [8]. Status anxiety is the source of all pressures felt in life and work, and one of the ways to address this anxiety is through a "Bohemian" lifestyle [9]. Ordinary people who participate in marathons today embody this Bohemian style, with their unique

clothing, extremely professional "gear enthusiasm," and distinctive teams. These undoubtedly give people a sense of romance and confidence, greatly alleviating the pressures and anxieties of life and work.

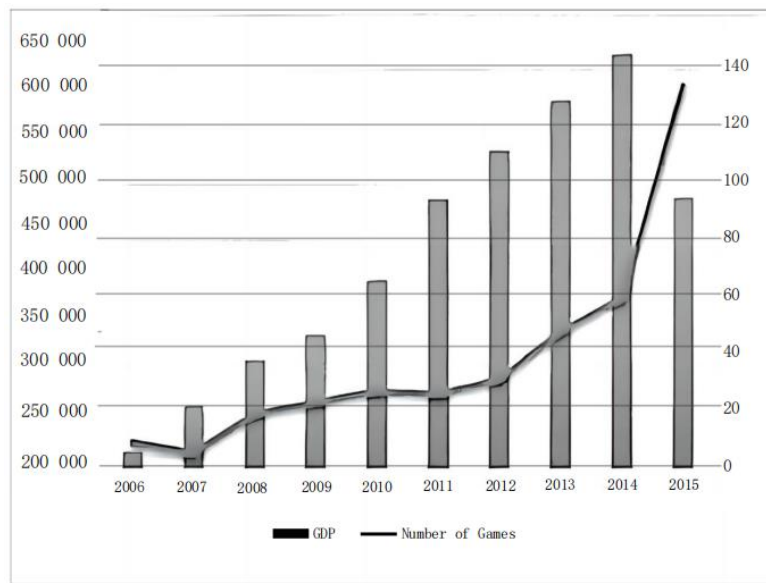


Figure 2: Growth Chart of China's Economic Development and the Number of Marathon Races Over the Past 10 Years

Case 1: Mr. Li, 50 years old, from Hubei, CEO of a company, participates in 10-15 full marathons each year. When traveling across the country to participate in marathons, he establishes good interactive relationships with his business school classmates. In addition to his business success, he also reduces work stress and gains more respect from his classmates and peers.

Case 2: Mr. Zhang, 52 years old, from Shandong, a former amateur sports school athlete and a freelancer. At the 2016 Chongqing Marathon, he achieved a personal best time of 2 hours, 55 minutes, which brought him great satisfaction and considerable admiration within his social circle.

Case 3: Mr. Zhang, 22 years old, from Beijing, a student, participates in 2-3 full marathons each year, with a personal best of 3 hours, 40 minutes. He has become a sports star at his school and an idol pursued by many.

Case 4: Mr. Liu, 44 years old, from Hebei, a chef, has completed two full Beijing Marathons, with his best time being 4 hours, 50 minutes. He has become a fitness influencer in his entire hotel. In addition to his enviable culinary skills, he now has another impressive attribute that commands respect from his peers.

While these four cases may not represent the feelings of all ordinary people who participate in marathons, they do illustrate that participating in marathons can indeed enhance a person's sense of identity, stimulate enthusiasm for life, and lead to a healthier and happier lifestyle.

#### 4.2. Promote rapid urban development

Xiamen is already an internationally renowned beautiful coastal city. However, in order to achieve a new leap and enhancement in terms of characteristics, image, and spirit, the city has chosen marathon races as the optimal option among various choices for creating a new urban image. Table 1 outlines the methods and measures adopted by Xiamen to shape its new city image through marathon races [10][11].

In addition to the aforementioned measures, during the marathon, Xiamen TV also broadcasts four distinctive promotional shorts: "Modern Xiamen," "Folklore Xiamen," "Brand Xiamen," and "Cultural Xiamen," showcasing the city's profound culture and beautiful scenery from multiple perspectives. The marathon has also stimulated Xiamen's tourism industry, bringing in 70 million RMB in its inaugural year and now reaching 200 million RMB annually, with a total revenue of approximately 1.56 billion RMB over 12 years [12]. According to a survey by the Xiamen Municipal Bureau of Statistics, athletes and staff who

participated in the 2006 event stayed in Xiamen for an average of 3.66 days, with an average expenditure of 4227.27 RMB per person [13].

Hosting marathons has also significantly advanced the construction and rejuvenation of other cities. For instance, Heng shui City expanded five five-star hotels to meet the demands of the event and constructed a Marathon Square. Xi Chang City invested billions to develop a road around Qiong Hai Lake for the marathon. Lanzhou City spent 400 million RMB on the construction of Marathon Avenue, presenting a new image of the city to the world through television broadcasts [14].

Table 1: Measures Taken by Xiamen to Shape Its City Image

broadcast media	sports content	Event Sponsorship	Race Course Design	Event Safety
CCTV-4 CCTV-5 Xiamen TV Station Xiamen Satellite TV China Taiwan Network Malaysia Home Entertainment Channel	Xiamen International Marathon National Marathon Championships National College Students' Marathon Invitational Cross-Strait Marathon City Invitational Wheelchair Half Marathon 10KM Inline Skating Race	Title Sponsor Strategic Partner Bronze Sponsor	Passing through the Eight Scenic Spots of Xiamen and Zhongshan Road	Opening and Closing Ceremony Safety Competition Public and Spectator Safety Safety of Other Activities

#### 4.3. The optimal integration point of public fitness and competitive sports

As people's material living standards improve rapidly, their pursuit of physical health is also growing. "Winning glory at the Olympics" and "National Fitness" have always been the guiding principles for sports administrators and are also the criteria for measuring whether a country is a sports powerhouse. The Olympic Glory Program has yielded fruitful results through the 27th, 28th, and 29th Summer Olympics, and the successful bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics. However, the National Fitness Program has not had a good quantitative indicator to show improvement or a qualitative leap. Using financial investment as a standard is obviously biased, and using the number of participants as a standard is difficult to measure the extent of people's physical fitness improvement. Taking square dancing as an example, the number of participants and the extensive coverage in both urban and rural areas are unprecedented. However, apart from indicating people's enthusiasm and strong awareness of fitness, authoritative departments find it hard to provide scientific physical test results.

Marathons, however, perfectly combine the two. Marathons registered with the sports bureau often invite high-level domestic and international athletes to participate, enhancing the level, appeal, and influence of the competition. They also mobilize local residents and students to join in half marathons, 5km, and 10km races, giving the event a considerable scale. In this way, competitive sports and national fitness are organically integrated. Additionally, every competitor who completes the race has a very precise time, which corresponds to standards such as third-grade, second-grade, first-grade, and elite levels. The General Administration of Sport of China's Marathon Office is currently preparing to set new standards for marathon runners, based on data from 340,000 participants who completed full marathons over two years from 2014 to 2015. This will provide a tangible data point for the standard of national fitness.

More and more people are making physical exercise a part of their lives and paying more attention to their health. The significance of regular exercise, in terms of health, implies an optimistic attitude towards life and the foundation for creating happiness. With this foundation, future lifestyle patterns can be diverse and exciting [15]. It is for this reason that sports authorities should provide more organized competitions, allowing those who enjoy exercising to enjoy the joy of competition and encouraging those who have not yet developed good exercise habits to join the fitness ranks sooner.

#### 4.4. The convenient path for small and medium-sized cities to host international events

Hosting large-scale sports events typically requires significant considerations such as preparation, hospitality, and competition venues, which is why they are usually held in major cities or through a collaboration of large and medium-sized cities. National Games are generally held in provincial capitals. The 1990 Beijing Asian Games marked the beginning of China's path to hosting comprehensive international competitions, and the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and the 2015 World Athletics Championships have signified that China has developed into a major country capable of hosting top-tier international events. For a small or medium-sized city to host a high-level international sports competition, the difficulty is considerable, and the likelihood of being able to bid for such an event is quite low. However, hosting an international marathon is quite feasible. This is because the marathon course is the city's own roads, and the event typically lasts 6 hours, even if extended by an hour on either side, it can be completed within a single day. From hospitality to conclusion, it takes only 3 to 4 days (referring to the competition time, not including preparation), so the pressure on the city is relatively low. The only condition is to invite high-level international athletes, which is well-supported by African countries as long as the prize money is attractive.

Looking at the marathon events held domestically, they have been undoubtedly successful, with 33 events in 2015 alone being named after various international marathons. Second and third-tier cities like Xiamen, Suzhou, Yangzhou, Zhenjiang, and Bei Dai he, which already have a good reputation, benefit greatly from hosting marathons, adding to their prestige. Cities such as Dong ying, Heng shui, Kang bao, Fu shui, and Dali, which are neither historically famous nor tourist destinations, may not become instantly renowned overnight by hosting a marathon, but it definitely has a multiplied effect on promoting their city's visibility.

#### 4.5. The hidden worry of safety accidents among participants

In 660 BC, on the plains of Marathon in Greece, there was a battle where the Greek army, despite being outnumbered, triumphed over the mighty Persian forces. The Persian army was in disarray, with countless casualties, while the Greek forces managed to protect their city from destruction. To announce the victory, a runner named Pheidippides was sent from the plains of Marathon to the center of Athens. Horses were extremely valuable and scarce at the time, and since cavalymen had to provide their own horses, weapons, armor, and feed, it was not feasible for an ordinary soldier to own one. Thus, Pheidippides ran to deliver the news, which he did before collapsing and dying. While the exact cause of his death cannot be determined precisely, it serves as a stark reminder of the potential fatal consequences of long-distance running, a notion we might refer to as the original sin brought by Pheidippides.

According to Tencent News, during the 2016 Malta Marathon in the UK, a 55-year-old British participant collapsed just 45 meters from the finish line and died despite rescue efforts. This marks the second consecutive year that the "Great North Run," a renowned half-marathon event attracting over 50,000 participants annually, has experienced a sudden death. The prominence of the event makes such tragedies more alarming.

This popular sport, while known for its benefits in physical fitness and mental strength, can also lead to injuries, extreme fatigue, and even sudden death. Despite the advancements in medical science, as shown in Table 2, such tragedies have occurred in domestic marathon events over the past decade. The inherent risk of sudden death remains, highlighting the importance of safety measures in these events.

Table 2: Number of Sudden Deaths in Domestic Marathon Races Over the Past 10 Years

year	Location	Number of Deaths
2004	Beijing	1
2005	Beijing	1
2008	Shanghai	1
2012	Hong Kong, Guangzhou	3
2014	Multiple Locations	5
2015	Multiple Locations	5

Sudden deaths during marathons often occur among males, predominantly in their prime, with the majority of these fatalities attributed to cardiac arrest [16]. According to statistics from the British media, the probability of a participant suffering a sudden death during a marathon is 0.8 per 100,000 people, which is significantly lower than the mortality rates of 0.003% for diabetes and 0.001% for traffic accidents [17]. However, since marathons are organized mass events, each case of death draws particular attention, serving as a constant reminder to participants that accidents can happen under any circumstances. Sociologists have noted that a significant number of individuals have a strong psychological tendency to follow the crowd [18]. As marathons have become a fashionable sport, more and more people are joining in, which inevitably increases the risks associated with the event, as they may not be aware of their bodies' ability to withstand the stress responses to long-distance running.

This necessitates that event management provides essential ambulances, equipment, and professional medical staff, even highly trained event volunteers, to offer timely and effective assistance to participants in danger when issues arise.

In the 2016 Guangdong Qingyuan Marathon, a significant safety incident occurred where 12,000 participants required medical treatment, and three individuals were admitted to the ICU. Although this was due to participants mistakenly consuming soap distributed by the event, it underscores the importance of continuous vigilance and enhanced safety awareness for event organizers, who cannot afford to be complacent or dismiss such incidents with a simple excuse of "good intentions leading to bad outcomes."

## 5. Conclusion

After more than 30 years of development, city marathons in China have not only gained recognition from the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) and high priority from urban management departments, but have also been widely accepted and pursued by the general public, creating an unprecedented positive situation. Marathons have provided new investment opportunities for urban development, where "small events" promote significant urban growth, a phenomenon that can be described as leveraging a small force to move a great weight. This has led to a refreshed appearance of cities that have hosted marathons, with a rapid increase in their influence and visibility both domestically and internationally, making them more livable.

Of course, the threat to the health and life safety of participants in marathons is ever-present, constantly reminding event organizers and participants to strengthen their focus on human health and safety. It also emphasizes the need to fully express the eternal theme of modern sports, which is humanitarianism. As Sartre said, "existence precedes essence." This is not only a famous quote in the modern era but also a philosophical proposition that modern people cannot avoid. Humans exist by pursuing transcendent purposes. Since humans transcend themselves and only grasp objects in terms of their self-transcendence, they are the center of their own transcendence.

Marathon sports offer modern people a healthy, noble, and positive option and provide an effective vehicle for continuously surpassing oneself. It offers a practical and effective method for shaping modern personality and reducing identity anxiety in life. Therefore, marathon sports will surely become a favorite choice for people seeking a healthy lifestyle in the future.

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