

# Research on China's marathon tourism development under belt and road

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of China's "Belt and Road" strategy and the rapid development of marathon events in the country, the direction and pathways for integrating marathons with other industries have become a topic worthy of study. Using methods such as literature review, expert discussions, and field research, this paper investigates and analyzes the current state and existing issues in China's marathon event tourism industry. Building on this analysis and in conjunction with China's "Belt and Road" strategic deployment, suggestions are proposed to accelerate the development of marathon event tourism under the new circumstances: enhancing the understanding of marathon development trends and formulating policies to promote event tourism; establishing a domestic multi-party coordination mechanism to jointly advance marathon event tourism; strengthening planning guidance and developing specialized "Belt and Road" regional marathon event tourism plans; creating high-quality marathons with "Belt and Road" characteristics and enriching the tourism product system related to events; standardizing the operational and management regulations for event tourism companies; and leveraging the role of new media to expand promotional approaches for marathon event tourism.

**Keywords:** event tourism, marathon, "Belt and Road" strategy, countermeasures

## 1. Introduction

As an open and comprehensive industry, tourism holds the unique advantage of "connectivity, with tourism leading the way" in the national "Belt and Road" strategy. With the increase in sporting events and the continuous improvement of people's living standards, sports tourism is developing rapidly and has increasingly become an important part of tourism activities. Therefore, China's sports tourism industry should also seize the opportunity presented by the "Belt and Road" initiative to actively explore the tourism functions of sporting events.

In recent years, the number and scale of marathon events in China have experienced explosive growth. Their event characteristics and advantages provide practical possibilities for cultivating new business models in "Belt and Road" event tourism, making it one of the most promising projects for development in sports tourism. However, the integration of marathon events with tourism in China has largely remained in a spontaneous state, and the industrialization of marathon event tourism has not yet received sufficient attention.

Table 1: Registration and Participation Numbers of Major Domestic Marathon Events in 2015

Event Name	Number of Registrations	Number of Actual Participants	Participating Countries/Regions
Beijing Marathon	65930	30987	52
Shanghai Marathon	96800	35000	58
Xiamen Marathon	103500	79896	45
Haikou Marathon	27900	10100	37

Guangzhou Marathon	78038	30000	46
Yangzhou Jianzhen Half Marathon	49000	35000	37

This study investigates and analyzes the current state of marathon event tourism in China through methods such as literature review, expert discussions, and field research. It further explores the pathways for the industrialization of marathon event tourism under the new context, in alignment with China's "Belt and Road" strategic framework.

## 2. Development of marathon tourism under the belt and road strategy

### 2.1. Current state of marathon events in China

According to statistics, in 2015 alone, 1.5 million participants took part in marathon events in China, including long-distance running enthusiasts from nearly 90 countries and regions worldwide, spanning various professions. As of April 18 of this year, the number of marathon events registered with the Chinese Athletics Association reached 189, more than three times the number recorded in 2014. In terms of regional coverage, 84% of China's provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities now host one or more marathon events, spanning 79 cities across 4 municipalities directly under the central government and 23 provinces and autonomous regions. Overall, marathon events in China have seen significant growth in terms of quantity, scale, and geographic coverage. Nevertheless, the demand for marathon events in China continues to outstrip supply. Most high-quality marathons in the country now rely on a lottery system to select participants, as illustrated in Table 1, which shows the registration and participant numbers for major domestic marathon events in 2015. Thus, with the rapid development of marathon events and the maturation of their market-driven operations, the market potential of marathon events is immeasurable.

### 2.2. Development advantages of the marathon event tourism industry

The commercialization and industrialization of sports events are inevitable choices in social development. The General Office of the State Council's "Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry" emphasizes the need to coordinate and promote the interactive development of the sports industry with related industries, particularly highlighting the integrated operation of the sports and tourism industries. Event tourism reflects people's pursuit of healthy and fashionable lifestyles, representing an elevation in consumption values, aesthetic tastes, and choices for fitness and leisure activities.

Wann et al. (1995) proposed a relatively comprehensive and systematic theory of sports fan motivation, suggesting that the motivations driving individuals to participate in sports events mainly include inspiration, self-esteem, escapism, entertainment, aesthetic pursuit, economic incentives, sense of group belonging, and family. Based on this, it can be argued that marathons cater to the needs of sports enthusiasts in many aspects, which is the fundamental internal driver of the global marathon boom. Marathons require prolonged physical exertion, stimulating people's vitality. Under the motivational influence of inspiration, runners can fully immerse themselves in the excitement of the race, fostering a forward-driving spiritual momentum. When runners surpass their limits or achieve victory, they experience a unique sense of accomplishment. Participating in a marathon is an enjoyable process. To improve their running and prepare better, runners often form small groups, creating a strong sense of belonging that effectively releases stress and alleviates negative emotions. More importantly, the low entry barrier of marathons makes them the most economical and accessible sports activity for the general public. Marathon routes are typically designed to pass through the most iconic scenic spots of host cities, effectively satisfying participants' needs for entertainment and aesthetic appreciation. These characteristics of marathons align with the needs of the general public, naturally giving rise to the marathon boom and stimulating the socio-economic impact of marathons. This, in turn, facilitates the coordinated development of marathons with related industries, particularly the integrated growth of the tourism industry.

In recent years, the hosting of marathon events has brought positive impacts to host cities, with their social value and economic benefits becoming increasingly evident. As experience in organizing events accumulates, marathon event organizers have also been innovating, emphasizing the integration of

entertainment with green, healthy sports and combining public welfare with national fitness initiatives. The incorporation of new design concepts into marathons has made them increasingly popular among the public, with each event attracting tens of thousands of participants. This fully demonstrates the immense potential of the marathon event tourism industry. For example, since the first Xiamen International Marathon in 2003, the number of inbound tourists in Xiamen grew from 768,000 in 2005 to 1.8 million in 2010, with an average annual growth rate of 17.3%, making it a major driver of urban tourism.

### **2.3. Development of China's marathon tourism under belt and road**

The global marathon boom continues to gain momentum, and it is essential to carefully consider how it can penetrate and integrate with various industries. By deeply integrating marathon events into the tourism sector and emphasizing extensive marathon event tourism exchanges with regions along the "Belt and Road," the multiplier effect of marathon events can be most effectively demonstrated. Under the national "Belt and Road" strategy, the development of marathon event tourism in China presents the following opportunities:

#### *2.3.1. Strong support from the state and government*

According to the National Tourism Administration, during the 13th Five-Year Plan period, China is expected to send 150 million tourists to countries along the "Belt and Road," generating approximately 200 billion in tourism consumption. Simultaneously, China aims to attract 85 million tourists from these countries, stimulating about 110 billion in tourism spending. In this favorable development environment, marathon events are poised to leverage their advantages, achieve integrated development both internally and externally, and play a significant role in the "Belt and Road" tourism industry plan.

#### *2.3.2. Natural resource advantages of the "Belt and Road" regions*

Many areas along China's "Belt and Road" route are renowned for their scenic beauty, long history, and rich cultural heritage, embodying distinctive Chinese characteristics. These align with the fundamental philosophy of marathon events, which is to allow every runner to fully enjoy nature while competing. Therefore, integrating the tourism industry with marathon events in the "Belt and Road" regions holds great promise. It is certain to create highly attractive marathon events that will draw running enthusiasts and tourists from around the world.

#### *2.3.3. Demographic advantages and huge consumer market of "Belt and Road" countries*

The "Belt and Road" initiative involves 65 countries, including Central Asia, ASEAN, South Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, West Asia, and North Africa, with a combined population of 4.4 billion and an economic output of approximately \$21 trillion, accounting for 63% and 29% of the global totals, respectively. The "Belt and Road" not only connects the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa but also opens up China's vast inland regions to new frontiers, offering significant development potential and space. The large population base is conducive to the smooth advancement of marathon events and also serves as a source of tourists for marathon event tourism. By integrating with the tourism industry, this initiative can achieve a multiplier effect.

#### *2.3.4. Clear development direction*

China's marathon industry is a sports sector with enormous social benefits and market value. Its scientific, rational, orderly, and effective development and operation can create health wealth for the general public and generate considerable economic income for cities and society. Marathon events and the tourism industry should form an organic, mutually reinforcing multi-win system.

Under the national "Belt and Road" strategy, the direction for developing China's marathon event tourism is relatively clear: deepen cooperation with countries along the route in marathon event tourism, expand cultural and economic exchanges between regions, enrich the marathon event tourism industry chain by establishing complementary relationships as destinations, transit points, and extensions, reduce operational costs, mitigate risks, and promote the prosperous development of marathon event tourism among participating regions. Establish a "Belt and Road" marathon event tourism alliance, integrate Chinese marathon event tourism culture into the Silk Road route, and jointly create marathon tourism brand routes and products with Chinese characteristics by leveraging the strengths of various regions.

### **3. Analysis of the development status of China's marathon event tourism industry**

The value of the marathon event tourism industry is beginning to emerge in China's economic and social landscape. Hosting such events effectively drives urban service sectors such as accommodation, transportation, and catering, significantly promoting economic development and increasing social employment. A preliminary system of supporting products for marathon event tourism has been established, attracting marathon enthusiasts from around the world to participate and engage in sightseeing. Currently, China's marathon event tourism primarily relies on domestic tourists, supplemented by international visitors, with outbound tourists playing a minor role. According to research, registered marathon events under the Chinese Athletics Association generally attract a small number of inbound tourists, estimated at around 5% on average. For high-quality events such as the Beijing Marathon, Shanghai Marathon, and Xiamen Marathon, inbound tourists account for nearly 10%. In recent years, the global marathon boom and the growing global tourism industry have spurred the emergence of numerous sports tourism enterprises, such as China Sports Competition, China International Sports Tourism Company, and China Travel Sports Travel Agency. These companies have played a role in coordinating with government and sports departments in organizing event tourism.

However, as an emerging industry, the integration of marathon events with tourism has largely remained in a spontaneous state. The industrialization of event tourism has not received sufficient attention, leaving the opportunities and potential of marathon events underutilized. Overall, the following main issues exist:

#### **3.1. Lack of government guidance and coordination mechanisms**

Marathon event tourism is a highly comprehensive industry that requires a multi-stakeholder coordination and management mechanism among various government departments. Due to the imperfect coordination mechanism, resources have not been effectively integrated, which, to some extent, dampens the enthusiasm of marathon event tourism enterprises. Additionally, the market-oriented mechanism for marathon event tourism is underdeveloped, and the non-cooperative game among most marathon event tourism providers makes it difficult to achieve equilibrium, resulting in a mismatch between supply and demand.

#### **3.2. Inadequate organization of marathon events**

There is an imbalance between the quantity and quality of marathon events. The quality of many events is inconsistent, with shortcomings in operational aspects such as irregular competition organization, low market-oriented operation levels, and insufficient service awareness. The cultural content of events is also relatively low, failing to fully reflect the unique culture of the host cities. Homogenization is a significant issue, with a lack of "high-quality" and "specialized" events.

Infrastructure for marathon event tourism is insufficient. Field research indicates that, apart from a few major metropolitan areas, cities in China that have launched marathon tourism projects generally face weaknesses in urban transportation infrastructure. Tourist hubs, public restrooms, signage, parking lots, and public tourism information systems in urban tourist areas are often inadequate or substandard.

#### **3.3. Lack of standardized guidance for marathon event tourism**

Planning for marathon event tourism plays a leading role in its development, contributing to the systematic formation of marathon event tourism from a strategic perspective. However, China currently lacks specialized tourism planning for marathon events, which is inconsistent with the significant increase in the number of such events. This has resulted in unclear market positioning and poor operational efficiency for marathon event tourism in a considerable number of cities.

#### **3.4. Unreasonable allocation of tourism industry elements related to marathon events**

The allocation of elements such as accommodation, entertainment, and shopping significantly impacts marathon event tourism. Currently, China faces dual challenges of government inefficiency and corporate absence in this regard, resulting in a disconnect between the supply of marathon tourism and market demand. This failure to generate effective demand is a major cause of the misallocation of industry elements in

marathon event tourism, directly leading to insufficient growth in both tourist numbers and overall consumption, as well as a diminished multiplier effect.

### **3.5. Lagging institutional development related to marathon event tourism**

Marathon events place high demands on both physical fitness and willpower, classifying them as a "high-risk" sport with inherent dangers. To ensure the healthy development of marathon events, it is essential to establish standards for risk warning and rescue, safety of facilities along the route, and technical standards for medical and professional personnel. Simultaneously, the regulatory and evaluation systems for tourism enterprises associated with marathons remain inadequate. Regulation is a necessary means to maintain the marathon tourism market, while grading evaluations are crucial for incentivizing the standardization and normative development of marathon tourism enterprises. However, progress in these areas remains notably weak.

## **4. Development strategies for China's marathon tourism under belt and road**

### **4.1. Strengthening government coordination and guidance**

Establish a national joint working system for the development of the sports industry to collectively formulate and implement policies for the sports tourism sector, prioritizing marathon event tourism as a key project for coordinated advancement. Integrate the marathon event tourism industry into national and provincial policy frameworks supporting cultural industries and emerging service sectors. Incorporate marathon event marketing into urban branding and tourism development efforts, aligning them with China's overall "Belt and Road" tourism plan. Additionally, form dedicated marketing teams for events during the preparation, execution, and follow-up stages. Simultaneously, enhance the evaluation and selection mechanisms for marathon event tourism projects and establish a comprehensive statistical and monitoring system for the industry.

### **4.2. Clarifying strategic objectives of marathon tourism under belt and road**

Centered on the "Belt and Road" Initiative, scientifically plan the strategic layout of tourism resources in China and the countries and regions along the route. Further develop marathon event tourism routes and products with distinctive Chinese characteristics. For example, the Dunhuang Silk Road International Friendship Marathon, which made its debut in 2105, features a unique route that runs through the desert—a first in China. The entire course integrates Dunhuang's millennia of historical civilization and natural landscapes into the marathon experience, attracting tens of thousands of participants in its inaugural edition to experience the grandeur of a northwest China marathon. Therefore, based on a comprehensive analysis of the natural resources and financial conditions of cities along the "Belt and Road," we should establish clear strategic goals for event tourism and implement targeted marketing strategies accordingly.

### **4.3. Improve the development mechanism for marathon event tourism**

To address the current low level of industrialization in marathon event tourism and fundamentally resolve the supply-demand imbalance, it is essential to establish and refine the development mechanism for marathon event tourism. Specific measures include: establishing a property rights system for marathon resources, creating a coordinated development mechanism for marathon event tourism, designing a stakeholder distribution mechanism, developing incentive mechanisms, and fostering innovation in marathon event souvenirs. By transforming government functions and leveraging market allocation, the integration of marathons and tourism can be strengthened. The productization and marketization of marathon tourism resources will enable leading tourism enterprises and business operators to participate and choose, offering additional supporting activities and tourism leisure products for marathon events, thereby enhancing the institutional environment for the industrialization of marathon event tourism.

The integration of operational models for marathon event tourism is inevitable. Although China's marathon tourism has not yet been included in regional integration cooperation at the governmental or policy levels, the "radiation effect" of marathon event tourism in regional tourism integration is becoming

increasingly evident. Integrated operations will become an inevitable choice for the growing number of sports tourism enterprises and a necessary requirement for their expansion and strengthening.

Create a favorable operational and developmental environment with sound regulations, standards, and policies. Sports and tourism departments should collaborate to develop relevant standards and jointly carry out market regulation efforts. Guide and cultivate the growth of cross-industry market players and social organizations, and support a group of high-growth sports economy and sports tourism enterprises.

#### **4.4. Enrich the "Belt and Road" product system for marathon event tourism**

Through market segmentation and precise positioning, integrate local cultures of the "Belt and Road" regions to design tourism products that meet the needs of target consumer groups. Transition from spectator-based marathon tourism to experiential, leisure-oriented, culturally immersive, and exhibition-based tourism products centered on marathons. Marathon exhibition tourism products should focus on hosting sports industry-related conferences, forums, exhibitions, and events before and after the marathon, extending the marathon event tourism industry. Based on research along the "Belt and Road," fully leverage the respective advantages to develop the marathon event tourism industry in terms of brand identity, promotion, maintenance, management, and extension.

#### **4.5. Strengthen marathon event tourism cooperation in regions along the "Belt and Road"**

Du Zhaocai, Director of the Athletics Management Center of China's General Administration of Sports, stated at the 2015 Marathon Sports Annual Conference: "Closely focus on domestic and international cities related to China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative, innovate event organization models, promote the international development of China's marathon industry, and use marathons to expand China's influence in international cities along the 'Belt and Road'." Guided by the national "Belt and Road" strategic concept and with strong government support, we should closely align with this overarching theme, effectively integrate marathon event tourism, and promote and disseminate an integrated brand domestically and internationally. This will drive cultural and economic exchanges in regions and countries along the "Belt and Road." However, while emphasizing event standardization, the unique characteristics of China's marathon culture must be highlighted. Therefore, while developing marathons with Chinese characteristics, we should also actively identify high-quality marathon events in countries along the "Belt and Road." Through collaborative partnerships, promote the globalization of high-quality alliance events and drive the international development of marathon event tourism, achieving the spatial expansion of marathon international tourism networks.

#### **4.6. Innovate marketing and promotion methods for marathon event tourism**

Actively promote an integrated tourism marketing strategy of "regional collaboration, departmental synergy, and corporate partnership," and establish a sports tourism promotion system that combines overall government image promotion with destination product marketing. Make comprehensive use of media such as radio, film, television, the internet, and newspapers, as well as platforms like promotional events and exhibitions, to carry out targeted marketing activities for key source markets. Holistic marketing emphasizes the interconnection between marathon events and the tourism public service system, providing marathon tourists with satisfactory services such as travel consultation, ticket booking, and tourism assistance. Sports departments at all levels should gradually increase publicity on the public welfare and educational aspects of sports tourism, utilizing diverse promotion methods such as free experiences, community outreach, book giveaways, and organized viewings to expand coverage and influence, broaden the public base of sports tourism, and vigorously cultivate its potential market.

#### **4.7. Improve marathon event organization**

Drawing on the experience of international marathon events, comprehensively enhance the overall level of event organization by considering aspects such as route selection and design, service quality, safety assurance, innovation, and technological application. This will improve athlete satisfaction, boost social participation, and fundamentally elevate the operational standards of events, positioning China's marathon races as world-class competitions.

## 5. Conclusion

The "Belt and Road" Initiative provides unprecedented development opportunities for marathon event tourism and opens up broad prospects for the innovative integration of "sports + tourism." By strengthening policy support, optimizing resource allocation, and deepening regional collaboration, marathon event tourism in China can not only serve as a key driver for the development of the sports industry but also play an active role in promoting cultural exchange, invigorating urban vitality, and contributing to the "Belt and Road" Initiative. In the future, a systematic approach should be adopted to build the ecosystem of marathon event tourism, enrich the product system with distinctive features, and expand cooperation networks with an international perspective, allowing the footsteps of runners to weave together the stories of more cities and letting the spirit of sports illuminate the path of cultural exchange along the "Belt and Road."

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