International Sports Tourism Development in China – A Race Against Time

An assessment of the most recent tourism trends in China and suggestions for a streamlined approach to meeting emerging market changes

ABSTRACT

Very currently published statistics strongly suggest China is losing a public relations battle in the U.S. and this is having a significant negative impact on China’s tourism Industry. This article examines international sports tourism development in China during recent years up to the time of writing, late August 2019. Two sports are examined, specifically Chinese Wushu and triathlon. Because of the ongoing trade war with the U.S. there has been a significant decline in tourist arrivals in China in 2019. Suggestions for systematically upgrading China’s international sports tourism industry include promoting a larger percentage of existing sporting events and training facilities in English, preparing sport event calendars earlier than usual, working with the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism in preparing English language websites listing different sport’s training facilities and events, improving hotel services for foreign guests and increasing communication with international media offices located in Beijing, This article also suggests the probability is only 50/50 the U.S. will back-off the current trade war with China under the next administration following the 2020 presidential election, and thus an upgraded approach to its international sports tourism development is suggested. The speed and aggressiveness of the current U.S. administration’s demarketing of China may have caught some Chinese government officials by surprise, and some new approaches are needed to improve its image in the international tourism industry. Some details of a reasonable plan to accomplish this goal are suggested in this article. The positive public relations effects of international sports tourism are emphasized. This article is in perfect alignment with Chairman Xi Jinping’s BRI – that is – building bridges instead of walls.

Key words: international sports tourism, tourism industry, China, trade war, demarketing, Pew Research, public relations, tourist arrivals, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 文化和旅游部, Triathlon, Wushu, Kung Fu, Olympic Committee, competition events, sports training facilities, infrastructure, communication, translation, marketing

August 26, 2019 by 石龙

**Reasonable and ridiculous criticisms of international sports tourism development in China in the mainstream international sports news**

In a recent article titled “Triathlon in China: Growing Pains and Big Potential” published on [www.triathlete.com](http://www.triathlete.com), writer Kelly O'Mara noted some weak links in the development of international sports tourism development in China. For example, pollution in Beijing, sudden cancellation and/or postponement of major international events, transportation issues, infrastructural limitations like a lack of training facilities, and information about nutrition at events, and other communication issues. (1)

Though some of these are valid observations, I don’t believe the major obstacles in the development of international sports tourism in China involve pollution or infrastructure, but rather organization and communication issues.

**China’s air quality, transportation and sports facilities**

The air quality in Beijing has significantly improved in 2018/2019 and is certainly fine in most of China virtually all the time. Likewise, China has the best transportation systems in the world from air travel to high speed railways, state of the art highways and “Didi” the Chinese version of Uber, which is now in English.

In regards to training facilities in Beijing for example the Olympic Park area has the world’s most modern sports training facilities and trainers for most (summer) Olympic sports and Beijing Shichahai Sports School is really extraordinary as well. There are two highly developed sports universities in Beijing and dozens around China. With all due respect to Ms. O’Mara she’s just completely wrong in terms of sports training facilities and transportation infrastructure development in China.

**Bottlenecks in the international marketing of Chinese sports training facilities and sports competitions**

Impediments to the international marketing of Chinese training facilities and international sports competitions obviously revolve around communication issues in my opinion.

This is something I know a lot about because I’ve been a foreign martial art participant/tourist in China for the past 10 years and a triathlon participant/tourist in China for the past seven years.

To address communication issues I built two internet sites, first [www.fightingartsasia.com](http://www.fightingartsasia.com) in which I maintain a calendar of upcoming events, links to other calendars and a directory for martial art training centers in China and around Asia.

Fortunately, the International Wushu Federation (IWUF) has radically upgraded their internet site during the past year and provides a calendar for at least some major competitions as well as training programs for international judging and coaching. <http://www.iwuf.org/calendar/>

Best of all it’s in English, however Wushu is the iconic traditional sport/art of China and thus has more resources than the average sport in China. The IWUF by the way is headquartered in Switzerland.

It should be noted that there are other international Kung Fu Federations not recognized by the IWUF, for example the International Kung Fu Federation headquartered in Baku Azerbaijan <http://www.internationalkungfu.com/> however only IWUF is recognized by and integrated with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). This kind of diversity is common in other martial arts as well, for example there are several major international Taekwondo federations, however only the World Taekwondo Federation is recognized by the IOC.

To address communication issues in triathlon I built the first and only English language triathlon site for China <https://triathlonchina.weebly.com/>.

I’ve done this only as a hobby as my full-time occupation here in China has been as a teacher at a large private school in Beijing. I retired from that position this year for a variety of reasons yet still continue working on developing my Internet sites and publishing articles in American sports magazines and on sports tourism development in China, the Silk Roads and the Trans-Saharan trade routes in North Africa.

Over the years I’ve gotten hundreds of emails from people around the world asking about Wushu and Triathlon training and events in China, and I’ve done my best to be helpful.

For example, the writer Kelly O'Mara referred to above first contacted me here in Beijing for information about Triathlon development in China in December 2018 because she found my internet site the only one in English. I referred her to Ironman Triathlete Martin Lorenzo who lives in Beijing and the Shanghai Triathlon Club. Both were quoted in her article. I’ve known Martin for several years as he’s a top Ironman triathlete who lives in Beijing and has helped the expatriate Beijing triathlon community enormously. I’ve communicated with the Shanghai triathlon media person a few times and they are well organized and very active.

Ms. O’Mara however would have been wise to send a final draft of her article to me for review before she published that article. She clearly doesn’t live in China or have any idea of the excellent and extensive resources here.

At the same time there are a few significant impedances in International sports tourism development here and she is correct reporting about some major international sports events in China being mysteriously postponed. However, she may not know about the contexts in which those postponements occur.

**Mysterious Postponement of International Sports Events**

Most recently the 2019 Beijing International Triathlon (BIT) which was scheduled for September was suddenly postponed till late October. <http://www.beijinginternationaltriathlon.com/?page_id=3063>

This doesn’t fill most triathletes with joy as the water is colder and jumping on a bicycle wearing a wet triathlon outfit after a swim in cold water on a cold morning is a chilling prospect. Naturally enough a lot of people registered for the competition cancelled. The only reason cited for the postponement was a mysterious “government decision.” No other explanation has been offered. This unfortunately does hurt China’s international sporting events’ credibility.

I am a little curious if the BIT competition postponement might be due to health precautions given the outbreak of the flesh-eating bacteria Streptococcus Pyogenes in Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, both in the U.S.

These bacteria grow in warm water. Whereas the “Incredible Triathlon” was held August 24 and 25 in Beijing’s Shisanling Reservoir, that lake is very deep and colder than the BIT venue which is held in Fengtai Qinglong Lake which is much shallower and warmer. This is just my speculation but it appears reasonable compared to some other theories floating around.

Postponing the BIT till October could have been a simple and wise health precaution.

I much prefer a little colder water and air than any possibility of contracting a flesh eating bacteria(!), even though it has never been found in China before.

**A lack of English language advertisement for most Chinese sporting events**

Why are most of China’s sporting events not advertised in English?

I think part of the answer to this may be a lack of people who speak English well in some of these sporting organizations. However during the past couple of years *within* China, Triathlon organizations appear to help each other and share resources, especially human resources quite a lot. Those organizations in turn are significantly helped by local government organizations in the venues where they hold events. Naturally everyone involved wants to reap the glory associated with a successful event and so it can be a bit difficult to figure out who the major organizers really are.

For example, I recently updated my triathlon-China site and tried to identify the primary sponsors and organizers for the “Incredible Triathlon Beijing 2019” held in August in Beijing. It took me nearly two days to figure out there was a vast labyrinth of very excellent government and private organizations all working together. Not surprisingly the event was splendidly organized.

At that event (August 25, 2019) there were the usual foreign triathletes who already live in China but I didn’t see or meet any foreign people who flew in just for this event. Why not?

It took me a long time to find advertisements on the Internet for that triathlon because they were all in Chinese. I and other foreigners in China and Chinese triathletes learn about competition events through WeChat triathlon chat groups, but this obviously isn’t international marketing.

The advertisement I first found for the Incredible Triathlon events held August 24th and 25th in Changping District of Beijing was on a site hosted by “Runnar Cloud Smart Event Management System,” <https://www.runnar.com/#en> though later I found one on the real organizer’s website, [www.iptri.com](http://www.iptri.com).

Both advertisements were in Chinese. The “#en” at the end of Runnar corporation’s URL might lead one to think that page is in English, but it’s in Chinese language.

IPTRI wasn’t mentioned on any of the other advertisements for the event as an organizer, however the August “Incredible Triathlons” held in Changping District were part of a four-city annual triathlon competition event series they host. Naturally enough IPTRI’s site is only in Chinese language also.

The evening of that competition I read a well-written article posted on WeChat (in Chinese) expressing well deserved praise for the event. However, there was one slightly deceptive sentence:

“There are more than 800 athletes from more than 20 countries and regions participating in the competition.”

Yes, that may be true, but the foreign triathletes that I met at that event all live and work in Beijing or at least somewhere in China. Maybe there were others that flew in from overseas for the event, but I didn’t see or meet any of them. In regards to “international sports tourism” – that is people who travel for the purpose of attending a sports event, it appears more work needs to be done.

The only Triathlon competition in Beijing that brings foreign triathletes into China for Triathlons is the Beijing International Triathlon (BIT), which is sponsored by IMG Sports in the U.S.

In my opinion a competition such as the “Incredible Triathlon Series” however doesn’t need to bring in famous foreign triathletes. That seems unnecessary.

It would however be profitable to market to regular aspiring triathletes from all over the world who might be on vacation or just want to travel and are looking for a good excuse to travel. The potential revenue would be huge. The positive public relations would be huge also.

Thus, international promotion of many really excellent sport competitions in China is nonexistent.

Yes, Martin Lorenzo and others have done and are doing a great job of bringing the foreign community already living in Beijing into triathlon using WeChat groups.

But somewhere between little and no effort is being made to bring the larger foreign community into most Chinese sporting events; except for some very high profile events like the 2008 Olympics, World Cups, FIFA, Grand Prix, the Asian Championships, a few marathons and so on.

Though that may sound like a lot, it only represents at most three to five percent of the quality competitive sports events in China.

**How to streamline and otherwise enhance marketing of Chinese sporting facilities and events**

Though the International Wushu Federation’s Internet site is excellent, it doesn’t provide information about training facilities around China, for example around the Shaolin Monastery or Wudangshan or any other training facilities. Their Internet site great, but it’s limited to major IWUF events.

No doubt “big data” can easily be collected, e.g. databases of major Wushu and triathlon training facilities and competition events here in China, and clubs and schools all around the world. There could be a truly integrated and proactive international marketing approach for Chinese Wushu, Triathlon and other sports. But that’s useless unless the tourism industry here in China becomes a lot more “English language friendly” and service oriented.

Certainly, the Chinese government could hold big meetings and spend several million dollars to plan and implement an organized international sports tourism promotion plan. This probably would take a year or two or more to coordinate. That is the way they usually operate, but may not be the most time effective approach at this time for a variety of reasons.

**Public perception and some negative effects of the American driven trade war against China**

One negative byproduct of the trade war against China launched by President Trump has been a shift in many Americans attitudes towards China.

“Sixty percent of US citizens now hold generally unfavorable view of China,” according to a survey published in August 2019 by the Pew Research Center.

“This is up from 47% in 2018 and at the highest level since Pew Research Center began asking the question.” (2)

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/08/13/u-s-views-of-china-turn-sharply-negative-amid-trade-tensions/>

That’s a 13% increase in Americans with negative attitudes towards China in one year.

Pew Research is the oldest and most quoted research organization in the world regarding global attitudes & trends.

China was ranked 15th in the world in regards to world tourism destinations according to the World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2017 edition.

<http://reports.weforum.org/travel-and-tourism-competitiveness-report-2017/country-profiles/#economy=CHN>

However due to the trade war the percentages in 2019 are significantly lower:

**Statistics of Beijing Inbound Tourism by Travel Agencies in the First Quarter 2019**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Statistics | Increasing Rate over the Same Time Period of 2018 (%) |
| Total Inbound Tourist Arrivals | 136,324 | -18.1 |
| Foreign Tourists | 119,780 | -18.3 |
| From Hong Kong  | 8,211 | -18.3 |
| From Macau | 1,189 | 34.4 |
| From Taiwan | 7,144  | -20 |

 <https://www.travelchinaguide.com/tourism/2019statistics/> (3)

The Chinese government can be optimistic and hope the next American president halts the China-bashing tendencies of the current American administration. Unfortunately that’s a 50/50 bet at best. This trade war is only one aspect of the entire “Pivot to Asia” policy launched during the Obama administration and largely drafted by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Most people in China are justifiably upset about the illegal trade practices designed to crush Huawei, but nobody seems to notice the broader effects of this trade war in other industries including tourism.

During the last 47 years since President Nixon’s visit to China the vast majority of Chinese have had very positive attitudes towards the U.S.

However the sudden extremely aggressive China bashing policy by the President Trump administration strengthened by the major American mainstream media has shocked and appears cruel to most Chinese people.

 There is no doubt many Chinese people feel they have been betrayed by their American friends.

This however is no reason to close doors in my opinion. Just the opposite approach is best. Open the doors wider. This is a public relations battle, and one wins by being more open and friendly. Build bridges not walls. The troublemakers want to divide everyone. They want to make everyone angry and afraid. Don’t let them win.

**Public Relations and Sports Tourism**

At the “Incredible Kids Triathlon” held in Changping District of Beijing August 24th I asked one of the organizers, the only one I knew that spoke English, if they’d invited the major world broadcast media, like BBC, TimeWarner (CNN), COMCAST (NBC), Disney, Viacom, CBS, and Sky plcm, (Europe’s biggest and leading media company) to cover the event.

I believe most of the major world broadcast media have offices in Beijing.

Apparently, the answer was “No” as he didn’t answer the question.

I believe China has enormous potential to promote sports tourism and simultaneously win a public relations battle. But some effort must be made.

The “Incredible Kids Triathlon” was absolutely the cutest thing I ever saw in my life. The 127 children performed incredibly well. The 150-meter swim, two-kilometer bike ride and 1.5-kilometer run seemed to fit their ability levels quite well. They all seemed to really enjoy it. It was great!

In my opinion the potential international public relations benefits from an event like that are priceless. But they did not invite the international media. The Changping District TV station could have prepared a one-minute English language feature story to send to the international media in downtown Beijing. But, none of that happened.

Why not? Probably the usual answers. Institutional inertia. Also everyone has to ask permission of their boss, and every boss has a higher boss, and it could take a month to make a decision like that.

**The need for speed in planning and implementation of international sports tourism projects in China**

The speed, aggression and effectiveness of demarketing China in the U.S. has probably surprised some policy makers here in China.

Policy makers in China are responding on a political level (via public statements) however are not accelerating basic international public relations.

It appears they are only responding. They don’t appear to be willing to take the initiative to win at the grass-roots level. This means winning the hearts and minds of the people in the U.S and Europe.

China’s public relations could easily be accelerated enormously. For example sharing feature news stories like the Incredible Kids Triathlon. Those kids were amazing!

World peace through sports? Why not?

World peace through appreciation of some cute kids doing sports? Why not?

Unfortunately, there may not be years to develop an integrated international sports tourism industry here following the standard procedures. Those standard procedures include nominating experts, forming committees, holding large time-consuming meetings, formulating mutually agreed upon development goals and plans, delegating responsibilities to people who are mostly already overworked already and mostly don’t speak English, and so on.

Billions of Yuan can be spent on big fancy expensive Internet sites, but the problem with the ones I’ve seen is they usually don’t contain much information, are usually only in Chinese and only focus on one event at a time. And every city, province and sport have their own special interest in mind. It’s feudalism plain and simple.

**The details of a nation-wide integrated international sports tourism promotion program**

Instead I humbly propose getting cooperation of the newly formed (2018) Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism (<https://www.mct.gov.cn/>), and one or two representatives of each of the major sports federations. Then, have one meeting, hire enough translators and researchers, prepare calendars for sports events earlier than other countries, build (“big”) data bases of training facilities for each sport around China along with nearby hotels, restaurants, etc. and then build very simple English language Internet sites for each sport that all link to each other with one major front door Internet site that uses key words for all the sports.

Those sites should advertise not only competition events in the specific sports but also the very large number of training facilities, programs, nearby hotels, cultural/historical sites and other vital travel resources around China.

Why many Internet sites? Many reasons. Site ranking on the major international browsers count the number of hyperlinks on each Internet site as a major criterion for ranking high on their browsers. Linking them all together means having a lot of hyperlinks.

Also, those sites need to be updated often, which is another major criterion in the ranking of sites on the Internet. “Web crawlers” search the Internet 24 hours a day evaluating and ranking sites according to the formulas specified by the major browsers.

Most importantly the sites need to be information rich with competition event calendars, training facilities all around China, submenus providing information about nearby hotels, restaurants, grocery stores, trains, subways and busses with links to the appropriate internet sites.

Communication and transportation information should also be provided like how to download and use WeChat and “滴滴出行.” In addition, hyperlinks to nearby cultural/historical attractions should be available along with maps.

Foreign athletes attending competition events should be cordially invited to stay in the city or town after the competitions, know where to stay, what natural/cultural/historical sites are worth seeing, how to get there, and what kind of foods they can get.

Hotels need to offer maps to the local areas around them where visitors can find stores (both small and large grocery stores) and offer something better than junk food at the hotel after the hotel restaurant closes. For athletes quality food is especially important.

This is important because most foreigners are going to have iPhones or Samsungs and may not be able to access some of the new APPs that will evolve from Huawei’s new Map Kit to be released in October 2019. <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201908/13/WS5d5214b9a310cf3e35565685.html> (4)

Their google maps won’t work in China unless they have VPN which most visitors won’t have. Thus, Internet sites are the most reliable medium of communication at this time.

The importance of food to athletes cannot be underestimated. The Internet sites also need to provide feedback avenues for foreign visitors to China.

The Beijing International Triathlon is a case in point. Two years ago, at the Riverside Hotel, the official headquarter hotel for the event, I paid 80 Yuan for a “take-away” breakfast very early in the morning before the competition. The morning of the competition I received a paper bag with one hard-boiled egg and two pieces of stale white bread with a tiny bit of strawberry jam between them. There was also a small yogurt. That probably cost the hotel owners about five Yuan. I ate the hard-boiled egg but couldn’t eat the stale crunchy dry white bread as it was so dry it made me choke. I ended up competing hungry and not entirely happy.

Thus, it seems reasonable that the sport-specific international tourism promotion Internet sites should have feedback mechanisms so that international visitors can help upgrade the entire industry.

It’s amazing how many hotels that are licensed to accept foreign visitors don’t have anyone at those hotels that can speak English.

Event holders and/or hotels can help coordinate culture/history tours after the competition very cheaply because they already have local resources and knowledge.

To build basic information rich Internet sites the Olympic sports federations have to be willing to help find and share lists of available training facilities with current contact information. They need to be translated into English and event organizers will need translators. They will also need someone to upload the information to the sport specific Internet sites and keep those Internet sites up-to-date.

This is not really a complex task. But it will require a cooperative effort like the employees of Huawei have had to make.

Problems could occur however if event promoters and/or hotels try to include “kickback” schemes into their local area maps that direct tourists towards destinations owned by their friends. This would result in tourists not having a fair sample of existing resources in regards to restaurants, entertainment, stores, etc.

Having been an international traveler for most of the past 57 years or so I’ve seen almost every kickback scheme imaginable and I don’t like them. I’ve also stayed in regular hotels that give tourists fair local resource maps that really are very helpful. In any case paper maps won’t be necessary when all that information is available on the sport specific internet sites. This whole plan could be fully operational in one year or less with government support.

**Cleaning up cyberspace junk**

Another impediment to promoting international sports tourism development in China is that most major sports association sites are out of date. They should be updated or taken down as they are annoying. Those out of date Internet sites are like space junk floating around in cyberspace They slow down and discourage anyone looking for sports events coming in the future. When I do research for upcoming sports events most of what I find is cyber-space junk.

**Cost Estimates and keeping it low-tech**

I pay about $100 a year to host my [www.fightingartsasia.com](http://www.fightingartsasia.com) site, and my <https://triathlonchina.weebly.com> site is free because it’s posted on a weebly.com sub-domain.

I mostly use <https://fanyi.baidu.com/> for translations. And, I’ve had no help. Thus, China doesn’t really have to spend a lot of money to develop its international sports tourism industry. Each of the sports federations already has translators and media people. They just need to coordinate their efforts with the new Ministry of Culture and Tourism, hire a few researchers, translators and site design people. Preset template webhosts like Weebly offers makes it very fast and easy to update and change internet sites. Software programmers are not necessary.

I started writing HTML in the late 1990s and taught web-design at my high school in Beijing. As a sports person I’m not interested in witnessing incredible technical wizardry. I just want to know where and when competition events and training schools are, how to register and get a nearby hotel and make sure I can eat well. That’s all.

Most of the out of date Internet sites I see were expensive to build. The companies or organizations spent a lot of money to get high price programmers to make fancy sites. And, most program writers I know put tricky little things into their source code to make sure they keep their jobs. Then, for whatever reason they leave their companies or organizations and it’s difficult or impossible for other people to update their sites. Thus, keeping it low tech has huge advantages.

Personally, I don’t like Internet sites with blinking lights and a lot of meaningless moving things. I’m looking for specific information and low-tech sites with easy to understand menus help that enormously. With simple template designs anyone with the password can update the Internet sites easily. Most templates these days really do allow for a lot of creativity if someone has the time for such endeavors.

But, when the Chinese government does something it likes to do it in a big way. Unfortunately, it’s a race against time in the international public relations arena and following the usual procedures may be just too slow. Thus lower tech and higher information content is the most efficient way forward in my opinion. Regular people, working people, sports people and middle-class people aren’t so easily seduced by high-tech lofty Madison Avenue style advertising. In fact, I think most of us don’t like it. “Keep it simple,” is a good motto for winning the hearts and minds of the working people that support this world and vote politicians in and out of office in western democracies.

**Conclusions**

I don’t see Beijing’s air pollution or a “lack of infrastructure” as the major impediments to international sports tourism development in China (as stated by Kelly O'Mara in her article cited above). Instead I see very simple challenges regarding integrated tourism industry marketing and English language translation.

On the bright side, it appears this trade war may be a blessing in disguise for China. It offers the opportunity for Chinese sports and other International tourism industry sectors to streamline and upgrade their marketing very rapidly rather than follow the traditional complex time-consuming and more expensive pathways.

As a concluding comment I’d like to add this need for streamlined integrated system-wide international marketing strategies also applies to Silk Road tourism promotion in general. When nations work together on common goals they rise together. When they ruthlessly compete against each other they don’t do as well.

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**About the Author**

石龙 is the penname of Gregory Brundage, a retired freelance writer and teacher currently living in Beijing. He has lived in and traveled through some 38 countries since 1963 and is author of the ongoing “Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour”

<http://www.silkroadvirtualuniversity.org/kf-friendship-tour-ch.html>

series of articles and the “Rebuilding the North Shaolin Monastery” Series of articles both published in Kung Fu Magazine in the U.S.

<http://www.kungfumagazine.com/>

He is also the author of "Thematic Tourist Promotion of Trans-Saharan Trade Route & Niche Market Tourism Database for Five North African Nations," published in the *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, Volume 7 (2) - (2018) ISSN: 2223-814X

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And numerous other publications.

<http://www.silkroadvirtualuniversity.org/publications-by-gcb.html>

He is keenly interested in tourism planning, promotion and education as methods to build bridges between people of different cultures and nations while improving the economies of all destination countries primarily in Asia and North Africa.

Mr. Brundage currently lives in Beijing however continues to travel extensively around China, Asia and North Africa.