

Research on Urban Marathon Development Path from "Sports + Tourism" Perspective: A Case Study of China

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ABSTRACT

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As the synergy between sports and tourism intensifies, urban marathon-related events have become a significant channel in terms of advancing tourism growth in the city and promoting urban brands. The booming dissemination of marathon events in China has created the fresh prospects of the coordinated growth of sports and tourism sector, as well as the question of sustainability, integration of the resources, and the off-season functioning of the events. This research is intended to address the formation processes of urban marathon events in the perspectives of the idea of Sports + Tourism by studying the development stage of the current urban marathons and detection of models of effective integration. The qualitative research design that was embraced was through literature review, policy analysis, and a series of case studies. Three symbolic marathon events in 2024, which included the Shanghai Marathon, the Qinhuangdao Marathon, and the Huanghai Forest Half Marathon were sampled out and compared through purposive sampling. The academic literature, official policy documents, and information related to events publicly available served as a source of secondary data. The results show that urban marathon activities in China have increased in impressive proportions and geographical reach with evident regional discrepancies in the reach of developments. More specifically, event positioning and local cultural embedding are the two factors, which differentiate success in tourism and make it attractive. The results have useful information to policy makers and event organizers who may want to facilitate sustainable and coordinated growth of urban marathon events.

1. Introduction

With the rise of global health awareness and the booming sports industry, the integration of sports and tourism has become an important driving force for urban economic and social development. In China, particularly, with the continuous advancement of the "Sports Power" and "Cultural Power" strategies, the cross-border integration of sports and tourism has brought new opportunities and challenges to urban development. In this context, urban marathon events, as sports activities that combine competitiveness, entertainment, and social participation, have gradually evolved from traditional sports events into multi-functional activity platforms that integrate urban brand building, cultural communication, and tourism promotion (Yi Tao, 2025).

In recent years, urban marathon events have not only become a symbol of national fitness but also an important engine for promoting urban image construction and stimulating local economic growth (Jian Wu, 2025). Hosting such events can effectively attract large numbers of sports enthusiasts and tourists while driving the development of related industries such as accommodation, dining, and transportation, promoting the development of tourism resources and the dissemination of urban culture. Therefore, how to further explore the potential of urban marathon events through effective planning and operation has become a key concern for many local governments and event organizers.

This paper, from the perspective of "Sports + Tourism" integration, analyzes the development status of urban marathon events in China, explores ways to integrate event and cultural-tourism resources, and proposes three major development paths: enhancing event brand building, promoting industrial ecosystem construction, and achieving digital transformation (Wenxin Gong, 2025). By combining theoretical analysis with case studies, this paper aims to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the high-quality development of urban marathon events, and explore a sustainable development path for the deep integration of sports and tourism.

1.1. Research Objects

This study, from the perspective of "Sports + Tourism" integration, deeply explores the high-quality development paths of urban marathon events. The specific objectives include: First, analyzing the current status and issues of urban marathon events, systematically reviewing the integration of event resources and cultural-tourism resources, and revealing the bottlenecks and challenges in the current event development; Second, constructing a theoretical framework for the integrated development of urban marathon events, providing new theoretical support for the deep integration of marathon events and urban tourism through industrial connection theory, experience economy theory, and symbiosis theory (Honghua Shi, 2025); Next, proposing innovative event development paths, focusing on brand building, multi-level industrial ecosystem development, and digital transformation, filling the gap in existing literature regarding specific practical pathways for the development of urban marathon events; Finally, providing practical guidance for governments and event operators, offering feasible operational solutions through the analysis of successful cases, and promoting the transformation of urban marathon events from a simple sporting activity to a comprehensive urban development platform, contributing to the enhancement of urban image, tourism consumption upgrading, and cultural soft power (Yue Yang, 2025).

Through the above research, this paper aims to fill the gaps in existing literature on the practical pathways, theoretical framework, and operational models of sports and tourism integration, and provide new perspectives and theoretical foundations for the sustainable high-quality development of urban marathon events.

2. Literature Review

The concept of national fitness has deeply resonated with the public, and urban marathon events have become not only an important form of sports participation for all but also an effective means of urban marketing, tourism promotion, and economic development. Scholars have extensively discussed the multiple functions of urban marathons, focusing on their impact on tourism development, participant behavior, and the relationship between the events and urban economies.

In terms of the mechanism by which urban marathons promote tourism development, ZangYu et al. (2025) noted that urban marathons, as an important carrier of sports and tourism integration, mainly contribute to event brand communication, urban image shaping, and attracting tourists. Online and offline promotion has garnered widespread public attention for marathons, with large crowds during the event not only directly driving tourism industry chains such as accommodation, dining, and transportation but also promoting the redevelopment and integration of urban tourism resources.

From the perspective of participants' willingness to revisit, Xie Huanxue and Zheng Zudie (2025) argued that event experience quality, emotional identification, and urban satisfaction all comprehensively influence participants' willingness to return. Their research pointed out that high-quality event organization and humanized services greatly enhance participants' favorability toward the city, increasing their intention to revisit in the future.

The trend of mass participation in urban marathons has emerged in the historical evolution of these events. Zhao Jin et al. (2024) pointed out that marathons, once an Olympic event centered around competition, have now evolved into urban activities that everyone can participate in, with commercial and cultural functions. This change is closely related to policy support, expanding social demand, and local government development strategies.

In exploring the impact of urban marathons on economic vitality, Zhan Xinyu et al. (2023) found that the effects of marathons on urban economies vary significantly due to differences in cities' economic foundations, supporting infrastructure, and management levels. Liu Chao and Chen Linxiang (2023) discovered that when a city's reputation is enhanced, tourism infrastructure is optimized, and tourist participation increases, the event impacts tourism by driving growth. The stronger the event's influence and the longer its duration, the more significant its contribution to tourism growth.

The multi-dimensional value of urban marathons in promoting tourism and economic development is widely recognized in existing research, but it has also been pointed out that continuous optimization is needed in areas such as policy support, urban strategic positioning, and service system construction. Future research should further explore participant behavior data and investigate sustainable development paths for urban marathons to achieve a synergistic win-win for sports, tourism, and urban brand building.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This research follows the qualitative research design that discusses the development courses of urban marathon events in the prism of Sports + Tourism. Qualitative research is appropriate in the current study as policy coordination, institutional arrangement, resource integration and urban branding strategies that are inherent in integration of sports events and tourism development are complex and situational in nature. The aim of this research is to interpret the processes of development and derive practical models, as opposed to testing a statistical relationship, by using an in-depth analysis of the policy texts and the representative cases.

3.2. Research Location

The study is carried out in China and presents a case of the city marathons in China which is highly involved in the integration of sports events with the strategy of tourism development. China offers a good research subject because it has seen a high growth in the number of marathons, much government intervention in incorporating sports and tourism activities, and various patterns of urban development. In this national context, the paper is specifically focused on analyzing marathon events in Shanghai, Qinhuangdao, and Yancheng because they represent various level of urbanities, tourism endowments as well as developmental orientation.

3.3. Case Selection and Study Objects

This paper will use the three marathon events of 2024 as the main research objects: Shanghai Marathon 2024, Qinhuangdao Marathon 2024 and Huanghai Forest Half Marathon 2024 in Yancheng. These are the cases that were selected, as they reflect the different directions of development of the "Sports + Tourism" model, such as development based on international city branding, integration of tourism with coastal tourism, as well as the development of the ecological tourism-based events. By concentrating on such common cases, a comparative study can be conducted on how the urban marathon events help in tourism development in various circumstances of different urban and environmental settings.

3.4. Sampling Method

The sampling method used to select the case studies used purposive sampling. Such a sampling methodology is suitable with a qualitative study, since the method focuses on the sampling of rich information cases that can reveal in-depth details about the research phenomenon. The chosen marathon events fit in a number of requirements, such as the official status of the sports officials, direct connection with the tourism promotion policies, and the presence of policy documents and publicly accessible information about the event. Taking into account the purposive sampling, the research makes its cases representative of the main patterns of development and not statistically representative.

3.6. Data Collection

The research is grounded in a secondary qualitative data that presents data gathered too many different sources. They are those in academic journal articles and books on sports tourism, event economics and urban development, and national and local policy documents on sports and tourism integration. Moreover, official websites of marathon events, reports provided by the organizing committees, government press releases, and professional media coverage were studied in search of the detailed data on the organization and tourism links practices. The primary data utilized are numerous and improves the competence and integrity of the report.

3.6. Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis and comparative case analysis were applied in analyzing the data. Review of policy documents and academic literature was initially done through thematic coding directed by the main analysis dimensions which included tourism linkage strategies, resource integration models, sustainability consideration and governance mechanisms (Ting Chen, 2025). The three marathon cases were then used comparatively to understand their developmental patterns that were similar and different. This comparative study will permit to draw transferable developmental models and other practical implications of city marathon development.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

No human subjects is involved in the study, no interviews will be conducted, no personal data will be collected. All the research materials were gathered in the publicly accessible ones such as scholarly publications, official policy documents, and the information released publicly about the events. Thus, there was no need to have formal ethical approval. The research follows general academic ethical conducts because it is properly cited, gives proper mention to the references, and interprets the facts objectively.

4. Research Results and Analysis

4.1. Development Status of Urban Marathon Events

4.1.1. Overall Situation

As the Chinese promote the concept of advancing fitness in the country via the National Fitness strategy, there has been a dramatic growth of urban marathons with regards to their magnitude and social involvement. As per the official statistics, 6634 road running events would be conducted in the country in 2024 with about 6.3079 million people participating. This important growth is not just in terms of the increased popularity of marathon running by the masses but also the enhancing importance of marathon events as a significant channel through which sports and tourism development could be integrally carried out (Rong Shuainan, 2024).

Marathon events also exhibited a nationwide diffusion pattern in terms of spatial distribution, in 31 administrative regions of China, all were provincial-level. Nevertheless, the concentration of events is still more intense in the eastern coast, and it has a close connection with more developed urban infrastructure, the economic basis, and the attractiveness of their tourism. Meanwhile, marathon activities in central west

regions have exhibited a positive but significant growth. This shift means that the model of the Sports + Tourism integration is slowly spreading away out of the traditionally economically developed regions, thus making sports and tourism sectors become more evenly developed in the region (Duo Dai, 2024).

Local imbalances in the distribution of marathons also give the idea of diversified development pattern. They have a huge quantity of high-profile events that have a significant scale and strong brand presence in first-tier cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou (Shuai Guo, 2024). The events are frequently well interwoven with urban cultural attributes and tourism assets, creating developed model event-tourism interconnection models. Conversely, even though the total count of events in the central and western areas is comparatively lower, such cities as Chengdu and Chongqing have turned to marathon events as means of strategic resources to boost tourism expenditures in the area and more prominently place the cities on the tourism map.

The fluctuation in national marathon road running events and runners between 2020 and 2025. It is possible to conclude as indicated in the figure that although there have been ups and downs with the external factors over the previous years, the number of events and people strongly showed a positive growth and recovery trend following the year 2023. Specifically, 2024 became a new high-level participation record, which means that marathon events have become socially popular and able to drive tourism again. The ever-growing amateurs' participation and recreation-focused participants mean that marathons are no longer competitive sports events but rather holistic urban entertainment with fitness, leisure, and tourism fun and enjoyment (Wang & Yin, 2025).

Table 1 contains the comprehensive information on the number of national marathon road running events and runners, between 2020 and 2024, which once again confirms the trend of fast growth of the marathon industry in China.

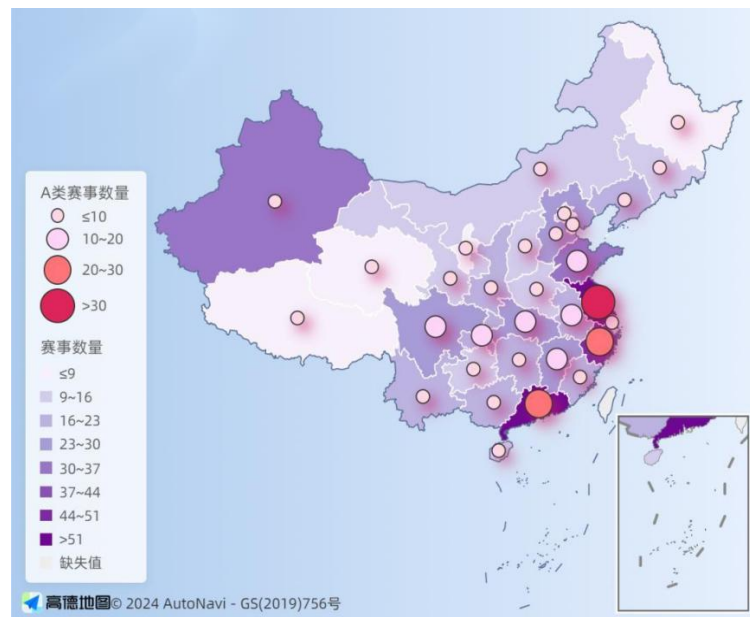
Table 1: National Marathon Road Running Events and Participants from 2020 to 2024

Year	National Road Running Events(Number)	Total Participants(Ten Thousand)
2020	442	126.23
2021	348	123.36
2022	58	39.12
2023	699	418.42
2024	634	630.79

Figure 1 also indicates local distribution of the marathon activities in China in the year 2024. According to the figure, the concentration of the events is still the greatest in the eastern coastal megacities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. In the meantime, more and more events are being held in the central and western cities (Xi'an, Lanzhou, and Guiyang). Such a trend has been driven by the fact that these cities are increasingly able to organize large scale sports events as well as the increased integration of marathon events in new tourism development plans in the region.

In general, the growth of marathon events during first-tier cities to the second and third ones proves the inclusiveness and sustainability of urban marathon building. This pattern of diffusion is a good basis of integrating sports events and tourism into various urban settings in the long term.

Figure 1: Distribution of Marathon Event Numbers in China in 2024



Judging by the analysis of the distribution of events and the variations in the number of participants, one can observe that the marathon events are not only taking an important role in the first-tier cities but also gradually entering the second- and third-tier cities and providing a strong foundation of the sustainable development of the events.

4.1.2 Analysis of Typical Event Cases

a) 2024 Huanghai Forest Half Marathon

The Huanghai Forest Half Marathon took place on March 31, 2024, in the Huanghai Forest Ecotourism Resort, Dongtai, Jiangsu Province. Being a national forest health base, where the forest coverage rate is 66.6 percent and ecological forest land is 4, 156.93 hectares, the venue was a unique ecological environment to hold the event. The race track was such that the path traversed forest strips, marshy sceneries and the wellness themed zones, thereby forming a running experience involving interpretation of ecological immersion and environmental beauty (Zhao & Li, 2025). The design has managed to market the event as being one of the most picturesque marathon courses in Jiangsu, which enhanced its tourism value.

Although the event had positive aspects, the issue of maintaining the balance between the scale of the event and the environmentally protective side existed. The control of the flow of participants and maintaining the sustainability of the environment turned out to be an important issue. As a solution to this problem, the organizing committee focused on this issue at the planning phase, such as carbon emission control, the popularization of the so-called Zero Carbon Sports Park concept, and environmentally friendly materials to be used to build and install the event infrastructure. Traffic management was also brought to the best through collaboration with local authorities to reduce

ecological disturbance. These actions demonstrate how marathon sports events in ecologies are able to reconcile the development of sports and sustainable tourism.

b) 2024 Shanghai Marathon

Shanghai marathon is a renowned worldwide large scale event, which begins in Bund and traverses a variety of memorable metropolitan sites. Since the event has been very successful in incorporating international sporting traditions and the local culture, the event has drawn a high number of both the domestic and international runners and spectators. The marathon has helped in the development of tourism in the city and the re-enforcement of the Shanghai image as an international metropolis, through its integration.

Among the key problems of the Shanghai Marathon is how to increase the number of people who have participated in the event on a long-term basis and the development of the event in the long-term. To solve this, the culture interaction has been incorporated in the entire process of the event. Community cheering acts up to the level of citizens as participants during the festival at major checkpoints or search points local citizens actively contribute to the creation of a festive city environment (Xie & Shen, 2021). The marathon is turned into a city-wide celebration with the help of the volunteer services, neighborhood performances, and community-based cultural displays. Moreover, digital transformation has also been embraced as a significant strategy. Online registration services, virtual race experiences and electronic medals have provided additional channels of participation especially with young population thus making engagement and interaction a solid aspect of the Sports + Tourism model.

c) 2024 Qinhuangdao Marathon

Qinhuangdao Marathon of May 12, 2024 is an experimental step towards a model of a Zero Carbon Marathon in Hebei Province. Since the first phase of planning, the event planned to develop green was its central goal. Reforms like low-carbon transport arrangements, single-use plastic usage reduction, and supply of environmentally friendly equipment were implemented to reduce the environmental impact of the event. Together with the scenic marine scenery of Qinhuangdao, the beaches and sea-side roads offered a unique ecological sports tourism brand (Huang et al., 2025).

The most prevalent problem facing Qinhuangdao Marathon is its inability to build sustainability principles into the whole lifecycle of the event. In response to this, the organizing committee would engage with organizations and green technology enterprises to develop an overall environmental management strategy. Environmental concerns were incorporated in the selection of material, logistics and services of participants. Meanwhile, the event was strong-enforcing the multitasking collaboration with the local tourism attractions that stimulated the coordination of marathon events and coastal ecological tourism development. The case shows how the green event concepts can be applied in the model of Sports + Tourism development.

4.2. Path Exploration for the Development of Urban Marathon Events in the Direction of "Sports + Tourism" Integration

4.2.1. Enhancing Event Appeal and Influence through Brand Building

In the integration of "Sports + Tourism," the construction of an urban marathon event brand is key to enhancing its core competitiveness and appeal. To avoid high levels of event homogeneity, it is essential to leverage the city's unique cultural heritage and natural resource endowments to create a distinct event brand. Events such as the "Ancient Capital Marathon" focusing on historical culture, the "Vibrant Coastal Run" highlighting seaside scenery, and the "Pastoral Scenic Route Race" emphasizing ecological leisure can serve as differentiated brand positioning entry points. By shaping the brand from the city's temperament, the event can enhance emotional identification and provide visitors with immersive experiences marked with the city's identity, thereby contributing to the dissemination of urban culture through sports events (Leou et al., 2022).

In deepening brand development, urban marathon events should move towards IP-based operations. They should not merely be running events but should be transformed into sustainable, communicable, and consumable cultural products. The development of derivative content such as commemorative badges, themed merchandise, digital medals, and AR interactive tracks can expand the brand's reach in the digital and cultural creative fields (Fang et al., 2025). Films, publications, or city tourism programs can be authorized to create content around the event, further extending the boundaries of its influence. In terms of communication strategy, event promotion should be integrated into the city's overall cultural and tourism marketing system, with deep collaboration among cultural and tourism departments, OTA platforms, and social media. By narrating through a "sports event + city" approach, the event can be precisely communicated globally, enhancing its international reputation and the city's soft power, thus achieving the "one event driving one city" brand effect.

4.2.2. Building a Multi-Level Industrial Ecosystem to Promote the Deep Integration of Sports and Tourism

The deep integration of urban marathon events and the tourism industry requires the support of a sound policy coordination mechanism. A regular coordination mechanism should be established, involving multiple departments such as sports, culture and tourism, development and reform, transportation, and foreign affairs, to unify planning, provide supporting policies, and share information. This will break down departmental barriers, creating a policy environment that promotes the coordinated development of events and the tourism industry. Cross-departmental cooperation can optimize resource allocation, ensuring efficient connection between event services and tourism support, and providing participants and visitors with a convenient and high-quality experience, helping cities build internationally competitive sports tourism brands (Zhao et al., 2024).

The deep collaboration of market entities is critical. Event operators need to work closely with travel agencies, hotel groups, scenic areas, and transportation service providers. Together, they can develop "runner-exclusive" travel packages that integrate race registration, accommodation, sightseeing, local cuisine, and cultural experiences to enhance overall satisfaction and consumer experience. By building a multi-level product chain and value chain around the event, marathons can become "traffic magnets" that

drive the development of pre-race training camp tourism, in-race sightseeing tours, and post-race recovery vacation tourism, thus extending visitor stay time, increasing per capita spending, and fostering positive interaction and collaborative value creation between the sports event and tourism industries, achieving both economic and social benefits.

4.2.3. Driving Digital Transformation to Optimize Event Experience and Operational Efficiency

The key driving force behind enhancing the urban marathon event experience and operational efficiency is digital transformation. By creating an intelligent management platform (APP or mini-program) that integrates functions such as event registration, athlete services, result inquiries, accommodation and transportation bookings, electronic guides, and electronic payments, the event can achieve full-process digital service (Zhao & Li, 2025; Zhao et al., 2024). This not only greatly enhances the experience for participants and spectators but also improves the intelligence of event management. The "one-stop" platform simplifies event operations and provides a foundation for data collection and analysis, offering technical support for precise services and personalized experiences.

The application of big data analysis in event operations provides scientific support for decision-making. After deeply exploring participants' behavioral characteristics, preferences, and spending capabilities, event organizers can push personalized services, develop customized products, and engage in precision marketing, thus achieving efficient resource allocation and maximizing value. Real-time consultation services through AI assistants, virtual site visits using VR/AR technology, landscape commentary during the race, and exciting post-race replays continue to enrich the immersive experience for runners, enhancing the technological and participatory feel of the event. In terms of supply chain management, digital methods optimize key processes such as material procurement, logistics, personnel allocation, and security, enabling efficient control and rapid response to various aspects of the event, ensuring smooth and safe event processes, and pushing urban marathons toward a new phase of intelligent and refined operations.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the development trends of the urban marathon events in China through the lens of Sports + Tourism, the general development situation, and general practices of the events. The research, based on qualitative research on policy documents, the literature currently available, and the case studies of marathons, identifies how the role of marathon events as integrative platforms combining sports participation, consumption of tourism, and the urban branding is changing.

As per the analysis, the events of urban marathons in China have been transformed into multi-purpose instead of a single-purpose sporting event, which has a high degree of tourism and cultural importance. The main characteristics of successful development paths include the establishment of an effective position of the events, the effective working of the local tourism resources and the rising demand to the ecological sustainability and the technological innovation. Simultaneously, the regional differences show that a city should develop various approaches to its economic situation, tourism resources, and developmental objectives.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (RECUKM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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