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A Critical Analysis of China's Marathon Industry

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ABSTRACT

In the global wave of neoliberalism, different countries and regions have carried out different degrees of economic reform based on neoliberal thought. In this reform process, China has gradually developed a socialist market economy system through parallel market and government mechanisms. In the context of the rapid expansion of the sports market, marathon has grown into one of the largest single sports events in China. This study examines the development of Chinese marathon, analysing how the key neoliberalism concepts such as market fundamentalism and personal responsibility affect Chinese marathon industry. The research shows that, with the implementation of reform and opening-up, the relevant policy guidance for marathon is influenced by neoliberal principles such as minimum government intervention and market fundamentalism. The wave of neoliberalism also led to the rise of individualism and encouraged personal health management. The popularity of marathon among the public and the use of market-oriented policies showed huge industrial potential, which attracted many cities and enterprises to enter the marathon. All these factors contributed to the development of marathon in China. However, various problems have emerged in the meantime. Besides the lack of industry supervision, the neoliberal concept of rational egoism could be used to explain the unqualified event management by government agencies and private enterprises.

KEYWORDS

Neoliberalism; marathon;
Chinese marketization;
government intervention

Introduction

On May 22, 2021, a major marathon event was held in the Yellow River Stone Forest National Geopark in Jingtai county, Gansu Province, Northwest China. A total of 172 professional and amateur runners competed in the event, a 100 km cross country race. Unfortunately, the event turned into a disaster. Due to a sudden temperature drop, precipitation, and strong wind, twenty-one runners lost their lives and eight other participants were severely injured. The disaster was widely covered on social media, triggering extensive discussions among the public on safety issues at marathon events. Many have argued that the tragedy was primarily caused by poor management, particularly the lack of tracking mechanisms, and inadequate supplies and first aid support during the event. This disaster was a grim reminder

of similar previous tragedies. According to the official Chinese Xinhua News Agency, seventeen people lost their lives in marathon competitions held in China between 2014 and 2017.¹ At the 2019 Jingzhou International Marathon, a runner lost his life after receiving inadequate medical aid.

The Baiyin disaster exposed how the prosperous marathon industry had reached a crisis point that was costing the lives of runners. It also reflected a phenomenon often seen in the development of different industries in China after the implementation of the reform and opening-up policies – substantial improvements in the economy that were paralleled by a lack of industry regulation. The sport sector experienced the same marketisation progress and resulting effects as other industries. Policies on sport marketisation, such as the *Opinions of the National Sports Commission on Deepening the Reform of Sports* (1993) and *Certain Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption* (2014), were successively promulgated and implemented. These policies encouraged enterprises to implement commercial projects in the field of sport. For example, soccer, one of the most popular sports in China, officially began the process of professionalisation in 1994, and the soccer market has continued to grow since then.² However, in the last two decades, the poor performance of the men's national soccer team, combined with allegations of match fixing and corruption, have resulted in widespread discontent among soccer fans and the general public.

With the establishment of the market economy, China's marathon industry also experienced rapid development, in terms of both the number and scale of marathon events, their commercial value, and the gradual integration of marathon running into mass culture. The marathon has become one of the most popular single-sport events in China. However, public attention has been drawn to various problems in the industry, such as weak event service systems and poor management by operators, factors which continue to restrict the sustainable development of the marathon industry.

The commercialisation of sport in China is guided by market-oriented thinking, which in turn is deeply influenced by neoliberalism. Therefore, this study will use the theoretical framework of neoliberalism in an attempt to explain both the major reasons for the popularity of the marathon in China and the developing crisis within the Chinese marathon industry.

Running has enjoyed great popularity around the world in recent decades. The marathon is one running event that has grown exponentially in importance. Hence, many scholars have engaged in marathon research. Their studies mainly focus on the physiology of marathon athletes, although some scholars examine marathons as events. In terms of athlete's physiology, studies have mainly concentrated on the analysis of physiological and biochemical indexes of marathon athletes; marathon training and performance research; and the characteristics, prevention, and control of sports injury risk factors for marathon athletes.³ In relation to marathon events, safety risks and emergency response are the areas that researchers have focused on. Besides the risk of sports injury, external risks in events have also been analyzed. As a result of the fatal bombing of the Boston Marathon in 2013, research on event management, security, risk prevention, and risk control is gradually increasing.⁴ Additionally, some studies have examined how to achieve sustainable development

of marathon events. The promotion of the leisure and tourism industry of the host city forms most of the commercial potential of marathon events. Zouni et al. have explored the factors that attract runners or tourists to visit and revisit venues, which may help sports managers and municipal governments to analyse consumer behavior and use these results in the sustainable planning, marketing and implementation of sport event related activities.⁵ Additionally, research of scientific approach to event process management can be used to develop the necessary foundation for the sustainable development of marathon events and the wider running industry.⁶ In summary, most of the research in this field focuses on sports science, medical science, and physiology. There are also some studies examining marathons from a social and economic perspective.

Primary topics in Chinese marathon research include marathon events, mass sport and national fitness, and marathon athlete training. The influence of marathon events on society is a current issue in marathon research. Many studies have confirmed that marathon events have positive impacts on economic, social, and urban development. For example, the marathon has played a positive role in the development of many industries including catering, accommodation and transportation, health and fitness promotion at a national level, and improving urban soft power and urban development.⁷ Research on event risk management is also a significant topic. Xu and Xie summarized the risk categories of marathon events.⁸ Wu examined the problems around the arrangement and allocation of personnel and material resources for marathon events.⁹ Behind the phenomenon of the marathon's popularity, there are still some problems with marathon events in China, such as insufficient development of market potential and issues with managing events.¹⁰ Therefore, some scholars have concentrated on a series of feasibility schemes to promote the development of the marathon.¹¹ In the research of mass sport and national fitness, the potential of the marathon to develop mass sport (such as the accessibility of marathon running) is valued, and the social function of the marathon (in particular to the growing middle class) and its significance to ordinary runners are revealed.¹² In relation to marathon training, the research generally takes marathon runners as the research object with the aim of analysing how to enhance their performance.¹³ Additionally, there is research exploring effective training methods in the context of differing geographic factors.¹⁴

In summary, the majority of research carried out in the field of Chinese marathon studies has uncovered rich evidence from marathon case studies to support and explain the impact of the marathon on society and on individuals, but few scholars have considered the marathon on a conceptual level based on theoretical analysis. According to the research on the development of the marathon in China, one of the key factors driving its development has been the reform and opening up policies which encouraged neo-liberal policies of marketisation. However, there has been little research on the relationship between neoliberalism and the development of the marathon in China. Therefore, this study will explore the main factors promoting the growth of marathon running and the developing crisis in the industry.

This research does not challenge the findings established in previous studies. Rather, it builds upon and enhances the results of existing studies through theoretical analysis. It analyses the complex commercial phenomenon of the marathon in the

context of the political and economic transformation of China and illustrates the influence of neoliberalism on China's economic reform by identifying the influences of neoliberalism on the marathon through analysis of the development of and crisis in the Chinese marathon industry.

Theoretical Framework

It is generally accepted that economic policies of marketisation have played a significant role in the development of the marathon in China. In light of this, it is important to consider the influence of neoliberalism, which influences both the marketisation of the marathon and the stakeholders in the marathon industry.

Although neoliberalism should not be understood solely as an economic concept, the function and form of economic views and institutions are arguably the most discernible expressions of neoliberalism. In *Neoliberalism and Global Order*, Noam Chomsky argued that neoliberalism can be defined as a new theoretical and ideological system based on Adam Smith's classical liberalism and that this system's emphasis on market orientation is focused on the construction of global order.¹⁵ Its basic principles can be simply explained as trade liberalisation, price marketisation, and privatisation.¹⁶ This view stems from the idea that nurturing free trade and a concomitantly competitive market will lead to more innovations and higher efficiencies in the economy, as well as the consequent stimulation of the money supply.¹⁷ According to neoliberal trickle-down economic theory, rises in productivity should lead to greater living standards for everyone, from the thriving corporate capitalists to the manual workers in full employment, which means that the establishment and protection of free markets and trade can best contribute to the elimination of poverty.¹⁸

In the global wave of neoliberalism, different countries and regions have carried out different degrees of economic reform based on neoliberal thought. The western capitalist countries, including the United States and European countries, experienced a wave of privatisations in the 1980s as their economic systems came out of the crisis of recession. At the beginning of 1990s, shock therapy through economic liberalisation was launched in Russia but led to a significant decline in employment and Russia's GDP.¹⁹ Another example of the application of neoliberal economics was the economic policies implemented by Latin American countries based on the 'Washington consensus'. This achieved remarkably positive results in Latin American economic reform, but it also led to a series of serious problems, such as high financial risks.²⁰

Since 1978, China has gradually developed a socialist market economy system through parallel market and government mechanisms introduced in the process of reform and opening up. More and more industries are no longer only controlled by the government but are also driven by the mechanics of the market. Many industries have become increasingly prosperous from competition between commercial organizations. On the other hand, income inequality and a lack of social welfare policies have caused many social issues, but these problems been covered up to some extent by the speed of China's rapid economic growth.²¹ In the sports industry, the marathon grew in a relatively more market-oriented environment and tended

to follow the neoliberal economic model. It is clear that this element of market orientation has contributed to the development of the marathon in China, but the problems caused by liberalisation are also clear. Therefore, this study analyses the development and resulting problems of China's marathon industry from the perspective of neoliberalism. This analysis of the marathon in China will also show some aspects of the impact of neoliberalism on China.

In the broadest terms, neoliberalism is a complex, amorphous, and oftentimes contradictory philosophy which involves a new economic rationality, cultural notions, and the associated political logic.²² Gilbert and Grossberg demonstrated that hegemonic political formations have the power to co-opt popular cultural practices, including sport, and render them sites for the expressive re-enactment of normalized, affective, and highly politicized investments.²³ Neoliberal politics are characterized by positive affective orientations toward the expression of individualism and the free market, combined with negative affective orientations toward public institutions.²⁴

Neoliberalism can be presented as both a macro-political formation and a micro-political formation. From the macro perspective, neoliberalism emphasizes the role of the state in creating a privatized and unregulated free market.²⁵ From the micro perspective, neoliberalism can provide political rationality operating at the level of the individual human agent.²⁶ Neoliberalism considers nurturing competitive individualism as a core dimension. Specifically, the effects on social and economic advancement of nurturing the self and the individual's self-interest have been foregrounded. Therefore, in the neoliberal view, the idealized individual should be an 'entrepreneur of the self', one with determination, a sense of responsibility, rationality, and competitiveness.²⁷ In the marathon, runners often participate with the aim of improving their health and competitiveness so as to take responsibility for their self in modern society; business groups always actively compete for their interests. To sum up, from a micro perspective, neoliberal theory can be used not only to examine the motivations of government and business organizations to invest in the marathon but also to analyse the motivation of individuals to participate in the marathon.

In summary, from the macro social perspective and the micro individual perspective, neoliberalism can be encapsulated in these main principles: minimum government intervention, market fundamentalism, personal responsibility, rational egoism, and competitive individualism. Therefore, this study will use these aspects to explore the multi-dimensional impacts of neoliberalism on the market and the individual in China through the lens of the marathon industry.

From Planned Economy to Market Economy – Neoliberalism's Influence on the Development of the Marathon in China

In dynastic China, long-distance running, similar to the modern marathon, was recorded in *Shan Hai Jing* (the encyclopedia of ancient China: the Book of the Mountains and Seas) which records a myth of Kuafu chasing the sun. In addition to myths and legends, there are descriptions of long-distance running in historical

books. For instance, according to *Sui Shu* (the Book of the Sui Dynasty) edited by Wei Zheng, some people could travel over a hundred kilometers a day and overtake horses when running.²⁸ The history of organized long-distance races can be traced back to the Yuan Dynasty. In 1287, Yuan Emperor Kublai Khan organized an imperial guard called the *Guiyouchi*.²⁹ This guard participated in a long-distance race every year. In the running events, a series of rules and a reward system had been established and the emperor would be present as a guest to watch the competitions.³⁰ Although the origin of the long-distance race can be traced back to the Yuan Dynasty, historical evidence shows that the first modern marathon in Chinese history was a long-distance race organized as part of the Nanyang Exposition in November 1910. The purpose of this marathon was to promote the sport.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the development of the marathon went through four stages. In the socialist economy era (1949–1978), the development of all industries primarily followed the government's plans rather than the market. Mass sport was promoted to train healthy and strong citizens for the purpose of socialist construction, and the sport market did not exist.³¹ The marathon was not regarded as a popular sport for the general public, so marathon competitions were mostly held at a limited number of major sporting events, such as the National Games.³²

Commercial staging of the modern marathon started to emerge during the early stage of reform and opening up (1981–1995). Although China began to implement a planned commodity economy at that time, the sport market was undeveloped. Commercial marathon events began with the 1981 Beijing Marathon, the first city marathon held in China with the permission of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF). A total of 86 male runners from 12 countries and regions participated in the event but there was no women's event.³³ This event pioneered commercial marathon running in China. In the following years, the number of participants in the Beijing Marathon rose and the women's event was included. Other major cities also began to host marathon events. For example, the first Chinese-Japanese West Lake Osmanthus Marathon (now called the Hangzhou Marathon) was held in 1987. In the same year, the first Dalian Marathon was successfully held. To summarize, in the early stage of marathon development, the market was almost unexploited, and there were just a few events of quite a small scale. Most participants were professional marathon athletes from China and abroad.

In 1992, the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China put forward the aim of establishing a socialist market economic system. Guided by this policy, the country's sport system underwent a major transformation. In 1993, the Sports Ministry issued the *Opinions of the National Sports Commission on Deepening the Reform of Sports*. In 1995, the *Outline of the National Fitness Program* was implemented. These policy documents highlighted the leverage function of sporting events in the national economy and supported the growth of the sport market. Subsequently, more and more commercial Marathon events were held across China (Figure 1).³⁴

In addition to the increase in the number of events, the event organisation also underwent a transformation. In 1996, the Beijing Marathon added a 10km event for the first time. Later, this marathon continued to expand the range of events

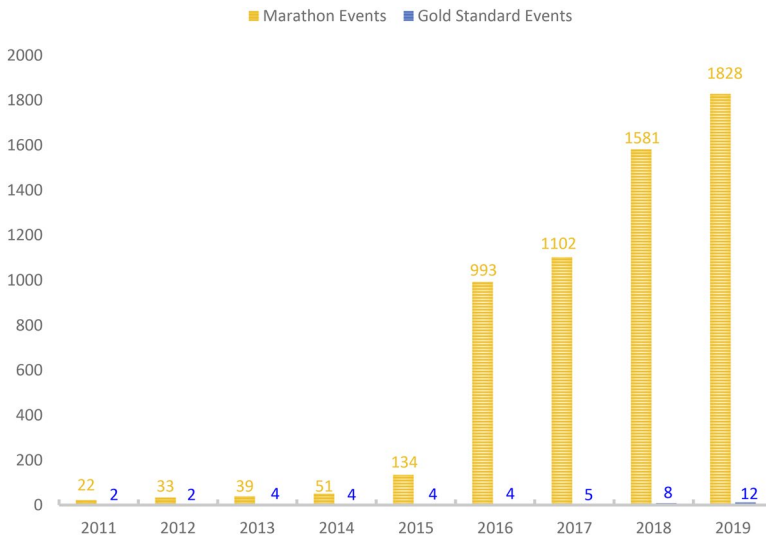


Figure 1. The Number of Chinese Marathon Events (2011–2019).³⁵

included. For more than a decade after 2001, this event maintained four competitions: a full marathon, a half marathon, a 10km race and a mini-marathon. In order to integrate with mainstream international marathon events, the 2014 Beijing Marathon only retained the full marathon and the half marathon. In terms of diversity of race organization, some marathon events increased their public attractiveness by adding entertainment events and allowing participants at different levels. That is to say, in China, there were not only events focused on high-level professional runners, but also many events that focused on mass participation. These changes accelerated the transformation and development of the marathon in China.

During the period of liberal economy with political restriction (1996–2014), although the marathon industry experienced limited market development, the event exhibited a lower entry threshold and a greater diversity of participants. As a result, more and more people began to participate in marathon running, transforming it from a competitive sport into a popular mass sport activity.

In 2014, the State Council issued a document entitled *Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption*. This document emphasized streamlining administration, decentralisation, facilitating the approval procedure of commercial as well as mass sport events, and encouraging social capital to invest in the sport industry.³⁶ It served as an effective driving force for strengthening market mechanisms in the sport industry. The document also stated that the sport industry should strive to achieve the goal of a total scale of RMB 5 trillion by 2025. This reflects how national fitness was adopted as part of the national development strategy. That is to say, the development of sport industry was seen as a key force in supporting economic transition and development and also in social transformation. Subsequently, in 2015, the Chinese Athletic Association (CAA) greatly facilitated the approval procedure of marathon events, in line with the guidance of the State Council on the development of the sport industry. With supportive government policies, the scale, inclusiveness, and entertainment potential

of marathon events enabled this sport to become one of the most effective implementations of economic development in and through sport in China.

In 2015, the number of participants in the marathon in China reached more than 1.5 million. The number of certified events was 134, the number of large-scale events for 2015 was not recorded in the available statistics. Certified events refer to events with CAA certification, and large-scale events include road events with more than 800 people and off-road events with more than 300 people. In 2016, approximately 2.8 million people participated in marathon events. 328 certified events were held with a year-on-year growth rate of 145%, while 993 large-scale events were held nationwide. In 2019, the total number of participants in marathon events exceeded 7 million.³⁷ The number of certified events reached 357 with an increasing trend of 9% over 2016. The number of large-scale events increased to 1,812, growing by 82% compared to 2016.³⁸

Compared to the growth rate of large-scale events from 2016 to 2019, the growth rate of certified events was relatively low. However, the quality of marathon events in China improved significantly during this period. Specifically, regarding the international gold, silver and copper standard races, there were four gold standard races, one silver standard race and three copper standard races in 2016, while in 2019, the number of gold, silver and copper standard races increased to twelve, two, and ten respectively. The slow growth in certified events may be related to the increasingly stringent regulations for certified events. For instance, in 2017, the CAA updated the certification standards for marathon events.

During this period (2015–), with fewer policy constraints, the marathon market developed a more market-oriented environment. An increasing number of commercial interests had invested in the market, which contributed to the considerable rise in the number of marathon events. The marathon developed into a sport with wide public popularity and also made remarkable achievements in the area of specialization.

The year 2020 is regarded as an important period in the growth of the Chinese sport industry. In 2019, the *Action Plan for Further Promoting Sports Consumption (2019–2020)* issued by the General Administration of Sport of China (GASC) in conjunction with the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) showed that Chinese governments put great expectations on and set high requirements for Chinese sport development in that period. However, the sudden spread of Covid-19 in 2019 brought new obstacles to the development of the sport industry, including the marathon market. In consideration of the requirements of epidemic prevention, control, and public safety, many marathon events were postponed or cancelled.³⁹ Considering that the market demand for the marathon has not yet been reached, the marathon and related consumption is expected to see explosive growth in the post-pandemic era. It may well lead the marathon to unprecedented levels of development.

With the further implementation of reform and opening up, as the relevant policies increasingly supported the principle of neoliberalism, such as minimum government intervention and market fundamentalism, the marathon market became more influenced by neoliberalism. Under the guidance of market-oriented mechanisms, there was considerable development of the marathon market. With this trend,

the Chinese marathon industry has achieved greater scale, diversification, and social influence.

The comparison between China's marathon and international marathon development can also provide evidence for the impact of the reform and opening up. The Boston Marathon, which began in 1897, is considered to be a key event in the early development of marathon.⁴⁰ Later, races of long-distance running and marathon were successively held in major cities in the United States, gradually forming the running craze referred to as 'marathon mania'.⁴¹ This marathon mania was also spreading around the world. For example, the Fukuoka International Marathon in Japan, started in 1947 and has developed into one of the highest level marathon events in the world.⁴² The Berlin Marathon, started in 1974 and has grown from only about 300 runners to more than 10,000 in 1985. However, the marathon races in China only started in 1981, which was significantly later than the development of the international marathon.

Naturally, the reform and opening up gave rise to marathon in China. Subsequently, China's marathon industry experienced a similar path of prosperity as the international marathon. China's major cities have been actively organising marathon races to drive the progress of urban economy and culture, and the number of marathon participants has also shown an explosive growth. However, there are also some differences between the prosperity of China's marathon and the international marathon industry, especially the marathon industry in developed capitalist countries.

To some extent, minimal government intervention in the market itself is the result of political intervention in China rather than a manifestation of governmental powerlessness in the market economy. In particular, for improving national health, Chinese governments attempted to promote the development of mass sports through marketisation which may bring rich sports products and services. For this purpose, the governments also gave strong policy and financial support to the sports industry. China's marathon development is under such a political and economic background. That is to say, at the national dimension, neoliberalism seems to be a practical tool rather than an ideology that has affected the operation mechanism of the state. Additionally, supposing the marketisation leads to crisis on the participation of mass sports (including the marathon market), the government may take strong measures to deal with the problems.

The Marathon Ecosystem

In the marathon event ecosystem, the main stakeholders are governments, commercial companies, runners, and spectators and fans. Commercial companies often act as sponsors, and more and more event operators are private companies rather than government organisations. The main motivation for runners, spectators, and fans to participate in the marathon is the perceived individual benefits, such as improved health and better leisure time. The more spectators and runners participate in the marathon events, the more benefits (including development potential in commercial and cultural dimensions) this vibrant market can provide to governments and private companies (Figure 2).

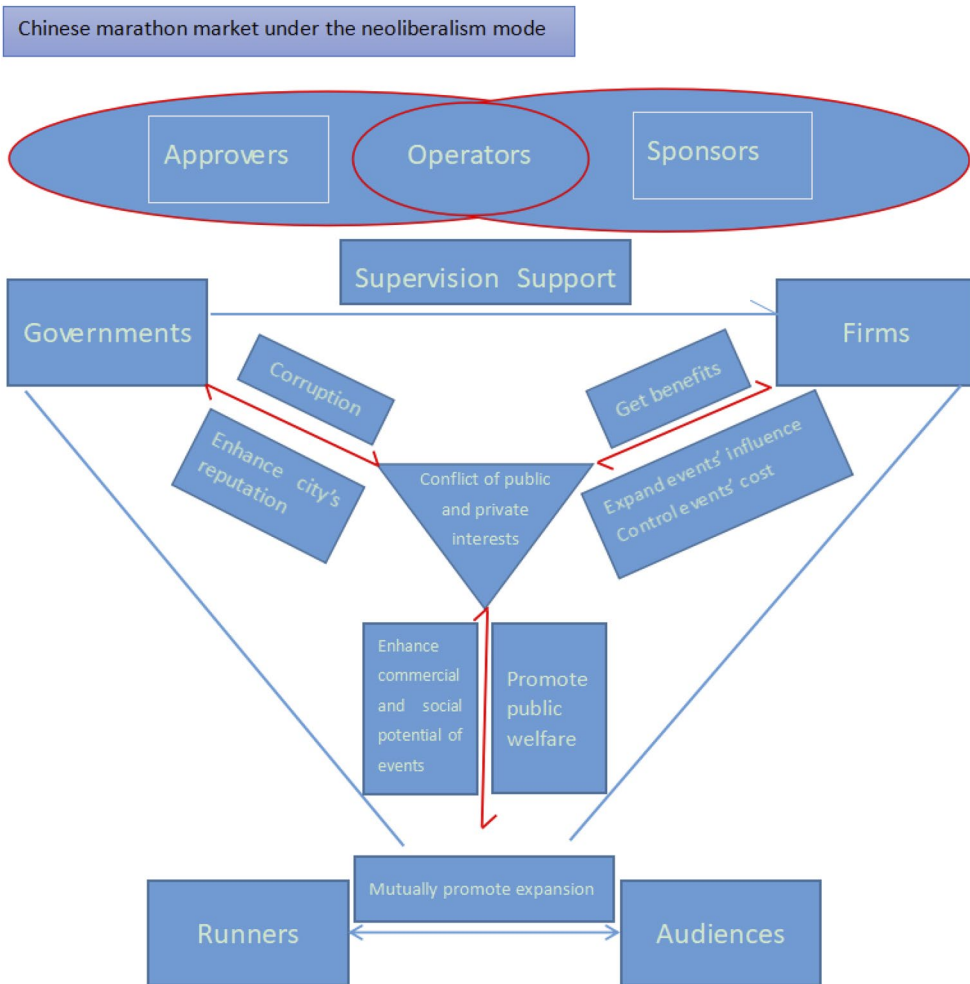


Figure 2. Chinese Marathon Market Eco-map.

Runners, Spectators, and Fans

The marathon is an accessible way for individuals to achieve self-realisation in modern society. It enables those individuals who conform to the neoliberal view of 'individualised survival' to gain social significance. The marathon can help individuals meet the social demand for personal health management under the neoliberal model. Individuals can project their personality and obtain more social capital, in the sense of conforming to social norms, to improve their personal competitiveness through participating in the marathon. As a platform, the marathon allows individuals to display personal characteristics and is fit for large-scale public interaction and participation. Hence, the marathon attracts not only runners but also spectators. These benefits also help foster a fanbase for marathon events.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, under the influence of neoliberalism, the concept of individual responsibility for health has emerged. The notion that 'individuals should be the main responsible person for their own health' has become

common. The Lalonde Report in Canada, the origin of this new trend of thought, argued that national health is not determined unilaterally by medical services but is also affected by biology, environment, lifestyle, and habits.⁴³ Hence, the individual's control of their own body is considered a key factor in maintaining national health. With the growing popularity of this policy, public attention to health began to turn to individual healthy lifestyles and methods to prevent diseases. The emergence of the new self-care consciousness was related to the social environment at the time. From the 1960s onwards, western capitalist countries began to suffer successive social and economic crises. As a result, governments were unable to continue to support massive medical expenditure. Under the influence of neoliberalism and economic crises, governments began to change the direction of their public health policies, withdrawing to different degrees from the field of public health and transferring responsibility for it to the market and individuals.⁴⁴ China is a developing country with a huge population. The size of the population, combined with current economic capacity, is such that fully assuming the responsibility for national health is an enormous burden on China's public health system. Therefore, there is a need for a significant spread in the adoption of self-care consciousness in the social environment. Chinese society needs individuals to accept personal responsibility for their own health and wellbeing.

Under the increasing importance of neoliberalism, individuals tend to take responsibility for their health, and physical exercise, like running, which can be used as an effective 'self-technology'.⁴⁵ The Risk Society refers to many uncertain factors affecting health in daily life.⁴⁶ Many explanations about health deal only in relevance but not in clear causal explanations. This requires people to actively perform self-management and continuously pay attention to their health. Running, such as for the marathon, is an effective means to reduce health risks and maintain a healthy life. Running is not only beneficial to physical health but can also alleviate the problems brought about by mental illness.⁴⁷ In addition, in a developing country such as China, the low barrier to entry makes running, including marathon running, accessible to a potentially large market.

Neoliberalism focuses on strengthening the individual's sense of self. Modern society highly advocates rules and regulations, which can make it difficult for people to confirm their own sense of individual existence. As a sport challenging personal limits, the marathon can make participants feel unique. In running, people can better realise themselves through body concretisation and physical practice, so as to have a more concrete sense of the self. Through high intensity running in the marathon, people can better deal with the relationship between their self and their body, achieve the goal of 'living for themselves', and obtain feelings of empowerment from the experience of pushing beyond their limits.⁴⁸ This sense of empowerment enables people to feel that as long as they work hard enough, they can subvert the existing social hierarchy.⁴⁹ At the same time, marathons do not subvert social rules. On the contrary, running helps the individual gain a better sense of emotion and morality through self-control and breaking previous limits. Such controlled catharsis satisfies the need for self-expression and escape from the social framework but does not affect public order or bring unreasonable risk to the individual. Admittedly, these requirements for people's behavior in modern society are paradoxical.

Specifically, independence means an increase in the scope of individual freedom, while the subjectivation and standardisation of behavior also strengthens self-reflection and external control.⁵⁰ However, as a way of life, marathon enables runners to coordinate, to some extent, these connotations of norms, ideals, health, and self-performance in the modern sense of self.

The emphasis on individual existence can be gained not only by self-realisation, but also by demonstrating a degree of self-uniqueness to the outside world. Marathon events are usually held outdoors, so they have wide public coverage. This enables people to achieve better social expression than many other sports. Marathon events are mainly held in cities, and often span most of the main areas of the host city. Hence, the marathon is undoubtedly a good public platform for the individual to showcase their ideal body to larger audiences, while they also achieve large-scale public interaction. Certainly, at least some of the people participating in the marathon are less interested in the marathon than in the opportunity for ostentatious display. Furthermore, these characteristics of the marathon enable spectators to gain more multi-dimensional and interesting experiences than spectators of other sports, thereby increasing fans interest in and attention to the marathon. Because of the low threshold for both attending and participating in the marathon, spectators and fans can easily progress into participants, making the marathon more attractive for spectators and fans. This creates a virtuous cycle of marathon development.

In addition, marathon events allow large-scale participation, which is also conducive to group displays. People with the same life philosophy collectively emphasize group identity and display group image to reinforce their sense of identity, belonging, and the perceived superiority of their group. Groups who undergo systematic training and diet for a marathon as a lifestyle choice are able to show self-discipline, strength, and a self-improving lifestyle through the experience of the marathon.⁵¹ It also allows them to feel different and superior to other classes or groups. With the general spread of neoliberalism in modern Chinese culture, it is increasingly attractive for people to try and express their lifestyle as that of a relatively superior group or class.

The sensory identity developed through lifestyle pursuits helps the body become a form of capital. Human identity is closely related to the social value of physical appearance.⁵² In the western mass media, a slim or muscular physique is constituted as the ideal figure for women and men in modern society. This ideal is also becoming increasingly popular in Chinese media. The marathon can help participants shape a slim and muscular body image that is recognized and prized by society. In effect, through participating in the marathon, runners can maintain their health and enhance their social recognition, so as to increase their physical and social capital.

Governmental Instrumentalities and Commercial Establishments

Neoliberalism emphasizes that individuals and organisations are driven by self-interest. Generally, the interests focused on by neoliberalism are related to the economy. For local governments and private companies, the most common motivation to participate in the marathon is its potential for economic benefits. In addition, for local

governments and business groups tied to geographic regions, any regional advances promoted by the marathon will have a positive benefit on their competitiveness.

In recent years, the marathon has become an important public platform to foster national fitness and sports culture. It fulfills the growing demands from Chinese sports consumers for fitness, leisure, and entertainment. According to *The Marathon Development Plan*, the marathon in China has the potential to drive more than 83.5 million people to participate in national fitness activities. In 2018, the annual value of Chinese marathons exceeded RMB 17.7 billion, driving the total value of related industries to RMB 28.8 billion. The total value of the marathon in China in 2018 reached RMB 74.6 billion, with an increase of 6% over the same period in 2019.⁵³ The marathon plays an important role in promoting the Chinese sports product manufacturing industry. According to the data from the *Marathon Future Development Forecast Report (2018–2025)*, China's marathon events are responsible for at least 7.8% of the added value of this manufacturing industry every year. These huge figures indicate significant business opportunities, which attract governments agencies and private enterprises to the marathon market.

The positive impact of marathon events on the urban economy reveals more directly the motivation of government agencies in supporting the marathon. This public promotion is mainly reflected in the economic field of relevant industrial chains and, particularly, in the promotion of sport tourism. Sport tourism has become one of the most dynamic emerging industries in the Chinese urban economy. This industry mainly creates economic opportunities by providing services to sport tourists during sporting events and activities. Sport tourism consists of five fields: the catering and accommodation industry; the transportation and communication industry; the travel business; stadium tour operation; and destination tourism.⁵⁴ This shows how the marathon can create economic benefits for the host city in many ways. In relation to the economic data, the *2018 Chinese Consumer Development Report* and the *Big Data of Chinese Runners* revealed that the total per capita running consumption in China was RMB 12,287, of which 41% (RMB 5,037) was used for sport tourism. Based on the average participation in marathon events, an urban marathon has the potential to create more than RMB 60.452 million in sport tourism revenue.⁵⁵

In addition to the economy, a basic aim of the government is to improve people's living standards. In recent years, with the improvement in living standards, public health issues have gradually become a national focus. Since 2014, China has launched a series of policy documents including the *Outline of the 'Healthy China 2030' Plan* and the *National Fitness Plan (2016–2020)*. These all emphasize the need to 'carry out national fitness activities' for the achievement of 'national fitness' and a 'healthy China'.⁵⁶ The marathon is one of the major sports events that is most involved in public life. Holding a marathon enables a city to actively respond to the guidance of national policies. Certainly, the motivation for holding marathon events comes not only from policy requirements but also from citizens' demands. Nowadays, fast-paced lifestyles and unhealthy eating habits have resulted in lower health for many, and people have begun to be more concerned about their health. In addition, growing material affluence encourages people to participate in leisure and entertainment activities. The marathon, as an important industry in the field of fitness

and leisure industry, is an excellent way to regulate the psychological and physical health of participants. Individual participation in long-distance running has a wide range of entry costs. The basic cost requirements are low, but participants need to invest a considerable amount of financial capital and time in endurance training to complete the marathon distance goal. Runners in marathons improve their physical fitness and get a form of relaxation, while audiences can relax through events.

Furthermore, the promotion of public fitness through the marathon can also help cities project a healthy and energetic urban image to society. One of the main factors in the success of marathon events is the demand for Chinese urban development. The marathon can have a function in shaping a healthy city image and promoting orderly urban development. At the 9th Global Conference on Health Promotion, Shanghai 2016, the concept of the healthy city was emphasized. This notion advocates a harmonious and positive urban lifestyle and social environment that integrates public health.⁵⁷ The marathon fulfils the fitness needs of the masses and breathes life into the host city.⁵⁸ In addition, when the marathon enhances the influence and image of the host city, it has a positive impact on the investment environment for related enterprises.

In some areas, the government has used the marathon as a means to publicize the city's regional cultural heritage. Some Chinese cities closely integrate the city's history and culture with the marathon to activate urban marathon development and effectively disseminate the city's culture. The organisers try to incorporate sites with historical and cultural heritage into the design of the race and related events. For example, some organisers will exploit a region's historic culture in the design of business cards, activities, competition clothing and signage to highlight the culture of the host city.⁵⁹ During events, the regional culture can be displayed directly. Participants and visitors can experience the regional culture, and the audience can be further expanded through social media, webcasts, and TV broadcasting.

These advantages benefit governments and private companies in different ways. For sports government agencies, the effects of the marathon on mass fitness and the wider sport economy attract them to approve and promote marathons. Regional government also actively promotes marathons because of the benefits for mass fitness, economic progress, and urban development. Commercial companies are mainly motivated by the economic factor. Registration fees, government allocations, sponsorship fees, and peripheral products are the main sources of revenue for the operator companies, while sponsors expect to gain more profits through effective marketing. Features like the potential for scale expansion, high regional coverage, and high participation in events help sport operator and sponsor companies efficiently profit from their involvement in the marathon. Other commercial organisations involved in the sport economy are also willing to support marathon events due to the expansion of the consumer market and consumers' demands through marathon.

In summary, the significance of holding a marathon goes far beyond the traditional scope of sport; the marathon has great economic potential. Additionally, marathon events can encourage host cities' development in many other areas, such as cultural construction and branding of the host city. The marathon is a sunrise industry with many development opportunities in China, so the behaviour of government organisations and private companies in supporting the marathon can be

explained from a neoliberal view of their self-interest and competitiveness to some extent.

Obstacles and Challenges

Although the development of the marathon has helped to promote national fitness in China, some problems have emerged. One that should be considered is the improper design of some competition routes. For urban publicity, marathon event organisers often set routes on main roads that pass landmark buildings. This can lead to serious negative effects on traffic control for residents traveling during the event. In the case of the Haikou marathon, the main roads were closed, resulting in traffic paralysis for up to 9 hours.⁶⁰ In addition, many villages and towns with underdeveloped infrastructure also hold small-scale events following the popularity of the urban marathon, which may bring disastrous results to township traffic.⁶¹

Generally, marathon routes cover a wide area, involve a wide range of departments, have a large scale and complex distribution of athletes, and need a wide range of services. For these reasons, marathon management is the most difficult of all single sport events.⁶² For example, insufficient training and management of volunteers led to the uneven quality and distribution of volunteer resources. Moreover, management failings in event registration cannot be ignored. According to the CAA provisions, athletes must submit relevant physical examination certificates to the organisers before participation, but the submission of certificates does not necessarily prove the health of athletes. Many experienced marathon runners have disclosed that there are non-compliant or illegal ways to get the physical examination certificate and that the event organisers do not always do detailed inspection or verification of the certificates.⁶³ In addition, there has been a problematic phenomenon of fraudulent substitution of runners in the event, which seriously affects the fairness of competition. In the Zhangjiakou marathon, the runner who suffered a sudden death had used another runner's ID to register. Even in famous international events such as the Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou marathons, there have been instances of runners using other runners' ID to enter.

In terms of health and safety guarantees for participants, the *China Marathon Management Document* issued by the CAA stipulated the basic standard of service in the provision of water supply, public toilets, and medical facilities for marathon events. However, it only identified the minimum standard for events.⁶⁴ Many events have shown that this standard cannot guarantee the necessary level of services. There have been problems of insufficient quantities and quality in the setting of public toilets. For example, the 'fig leaf' toilets appeared at the 2017 Hangzhou Marathon. During the 2014 Beijing Marathon, the runners had to solve toilet issues during the race themselves. These cases show how there were not enough public toilets provided along the way. In the same way, insufficient supplies of drinking water were seen in the 2018 Changchun International Marathon. This problem also occurred in the Kunming marathon. Moreover, preventive measures to help avoid the risks of contestant injury and death need to be improved to avoid the reoccurrence of incidents like the Baiyin disaster. To sum up, the preparation in many events has been shown to be insufficient. The organiser's prediction and analysis of

the safety risks were seriously deficient, and many events lacked proper emergency planning.

In the past few years, much private capital has poured into the marathon. As a result, the market developed rapidly. Meanwhile, many complex problems emerged in the marathon market. From a macro perspective, this reveals that the corresponding industry management norms and practices have not been comprehensively established in the process of opening and developing the marathon market. It has been a common problem in the development of China's market economy. With rapid development, there has been a lack of supervision and regulation in many industries in China. At the level of individual organisation, these harmful phenomena can be regarded as the result of the 'rational choice' to some extent. Self-interest leads organisations to make rational choices to maximize their interests. Proper competition design, effective risk management and excellent event service require considerable financial investment and resources. With the absence of industry regulation, only meeting the minimum industry standards, or even violating the regulations, may bring higher profits. Therefore, according to the neoliberal concept of rational egoism, it could be argued that their behaviour is reasonable. Overall, with the advocacy of the neoliberal view of self-interest, the constraints of moral norms on behaviour are threatened by the relatively high benefits and profits that may come from breaching them.

The Baiyin marathon disaster was a result of these negative effects. Notably, the event was held for commercial purposes rather than public welfare. The institution in charge of the event was Gansu Shengjing Sports Culture Development Company Ltd. According to the accident report, the event organizers did not take effective countermeasures after receiving a special meteorological report warning of strong winds.⁶⁵ The failure to prepare adequate windproof and thermal insulation equipment and to set up appropriate medical assistance sites led to this tragedy.

The positive influence of the marathon on the growth of business value and political performance had encouraged local government and private business organisations to hold the event. However, due to an excess of self-interest and the lack of supervision, it seems that they were unwilling to cover the costs needed to implement safety measures that might have prevented or alleviated the tragedy. Overall, the Baiyin disaster shows the significant disadvantages of the neoliberal economic model.

Recognising these problems and finding reasonable solutions (such as measures to enhance supervision) is of vital importance to the development of marathon in China. Many people believed that hosting a marathon will always have a positive impact on urban development, mass sport and public health. However, this view is rarely questioned due to the modern worship of sport myths and the ambition for economic increase. The benefits of sport projects to host cities, regions, and countries are widely publicized, regardless of whether there is any reliable empirical evidence to support such claims.⁶⁶ Some Chinese cities seem to have gained negative benefits from hosting marathons (see the previous paragraphs in this section). This may be the result of both mistakes in the event management and an overreliance on the myth of sport as always being positive.

Another situation might be that in the case of weak supervision, where some cities spent relatively small amounts on marathon management. The cities got short-term and obvious benefits. However, as the organisation and supervision of marathon events becomes more comprehensive and stricter, operators must put in a lot more money, resources, and personnel to manage the event to the required standard. Will the benefits brought by the marathon to the city (and the main operators) match or exceed the project cost? The healthy and sustainable development of the Chinese marathon is inseparable from strict, scientific, and comprehensive event management and supervision. For long-term growth, management and supervision must be increasingly strict. More exacting requirements for events cause higher project costs. Furthermore, under the liberalized competition mechanism of neoliberalism, the fact that the market is increasingly saturated also needs to be taken into consideration by various cities and relevant enterprises. Local governments and enterprises need to be vigilant against simplistic sport myths. They need to analyse the current and future costs according to the geographical, economic, and social conditions of the city itself and consider whether the introduction of marathon events will bring net benefits in the long term.

According to many of the negative presses of marathon, there are risks and loopholes in China's marathon events, which may damage the public interest. Most Chinese marathon studies seem to believe that the positive effects of the marathon will be recognized after these problems have been solved through reasonable management. Any suspicions will be cleared up, and then the positive effects of the marathon on public welfare will work effectively again. However, drawing on the essence of neoliberalism, the situation does not seem to be as optimistic as some might hope. Neoliberalism protects the interests of private business groups, not the public interests. A contradiction of neoliberal economics is that sport-focused development initiatives routinely pivot on the formation of public-private partnerships (PPP), whereby public funds are used to fund the event projects. PPP can be seen as a form of collusion between public and private interests; they are a core part of neoliberal strategies of urban development, which provide private investors with a relatively low risk in their pursuit of potentially high returns.⁶⁷ One controversial aspect of these partnerships is that sport events may bring about the transfer of large amounts of public funds from basic public services (such as education, policing, and health) to private individuals. Overall, it seems that in PPP the public undertakes risks while the private companies receive rewards.

In China, with the promotion of marketisation in the sport industry, the operators of the marathon project are no longer just government organisations and cooperation between government and private capital has become increasingly common. Therefore, local governments should be vigilant against any structural imbalance in the distribution of public and private interests under the neoliberal model. Even if the marathon developed normally, the public welfare would not be greatly improved if the impact of neoliberalism on society continues to grow. Besides these problems, the loss of public interests may be hidden behind the positive economic data related to the marathon project. This positive economic data may mean rising profits for private organisations, not for the public. The public entertainment brought by the marathon can hide the theft of public interests by private companies. Under the

condition of normalisation of the neoliberal order, the government may tend to cultivate a legal, economic, and regulatory environment conducive to the benefits of private companies.⁶⁸ This can result in government agencies and policies being unable to detect and correct situations where business organisations are making profits but the public are taking on the undue risks.

Conclusion

All economic actors are governed by the neoliberal model. Neoliberalism is not only tied to states and economies but also to individuals.⁶⁹ Overall, neoliberalism has mainly emphasized minimal government intervention, market fundamentalism, personal responsibility, rational egoism, and competitive individualism. In the market-oriented processes underlying much of the Chinese marathon industry, we can see the influences of various neoliberal concepts on many phenomena and behaviours. This study has demonstrated the complexities of the relationships between the market environment and stakeholders. Admittedly, neoliberalism has not dominated the Chinese sport market (including marathon market). In addition to the stimulation of the market mechanism, some government measures, such as the favourable policies and government funding for mass sports and fitness development, also positively affected the development of marathon in China. Overall, the improvement of national health is an important goal of the Chinese government, so beneficial government intervention can be recognized as one of the key measures to promote mass sports.

In the industrial dimension, with the further implementation of reform and opening up, the relevant policy guidance for the marathon is influenced by neoliberal principles such as minimum government intervention and market fundamentalism. Such policies have also popularized neoliberalism in Chinese public life. In this way, the wave of neoliberalism has encouraged personal health management and competitive individualism, which stimulated the popularity of marathon among the public. The main reason for this is that the marathon can help individuals achieve an element of self-regulation and self-realisation as well as providing an opportunity for self-display. Overall, since the implementation of the reform and opening up policy, few moral criticisms of pursuing individual interests have facilitated the development of marathon. More importantly, the economic potential brought by the market-oriented policy, the marathon's characteristics of spectacle and inclusiveness, and its attraction for individuals have attracted many cities and enterprises to enter the marathon. For local governments and business groups with a geographic dependence, regional progress brought by marathon is positively related to their competitiveness. These factors have led to the upsurge in the popularity of the marathon in the past decades.

However, various problems, including the risks of fatal accidents have emerged. In addition to the lack of industry supervision, the neoliberal concept of rational egoism helps explain the issues with unqualified event management by both government agencies and private enterprises. Strengthening management and supervision to alleviate such problems is essential. Under strict supervision and appropriate

penalties, operators, as rational organisations, will naturally invest in controlling risks rather than face the increasing cost of failing to do so. Some cities and private companies may need to consider withdrawing from marathon organisation. In deciding to host a marathon, cities and private companies should be vigilant against popular sport myths, and at the governmental level should be vigilant against the deep-rooted defects of neoliberalism, in particular the erosion of public welfare to benefit private interests.

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