

# The Perceived Impacts of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games on Tianjin Tourism Industry : A Qualitative Approach

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## Abstract

The impacts of the Olympic Games on the tourism industry of the hosting cities are far-reaching and they have often been stated in the literature. This study took a qualitative approach to the analysis of the 2008 Olympic Games' effects on the tourism industry in Tianjin, the co-hosting city. The qualitative method employed by a personal interviewing process of 60 managerial personnel from Tianjin hospitality and tourism sector. A "Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats" (SWOT) analysis was adopted as the complementary method to obtain the findings. The results revealed that the Olympic Games had the potential to renovate and improve the city's image and increase awareness of the city of Tianjin.

**Keywords :** Olympics, destination image, economic growth, policy

## Introduction

The contributions of international tourism have stimulated tremendous economic opportunities and increased tourist flows in China (Jang, Yu & Pearson, 2003). With the announcement in 2001 that China would be the site of the 2008 Olympic Games, with Beijing, the capital as host city, the tourism industry was poised to experience a historic impact generated by the Olympics. A large number of research studies have been conducted targeting the impacts on the tourism industry in the host Olympic cities in the past decades. This study involved empirical research on the impact of the Beijing Olympic Games on a co-hosting city - Tianjin. Tianjin is one of the largest coastal cities in northern China, and because of its relatively short distance from Beijing, it has a location of advantage for the Olympic Games. The city, whose name translates to "emperor's ford" - or the point

where the Son of Heaven once forded the river - also had been selected as the center for China's exponential economic growth by the Central Government in this era. Thus, this study considered whether Tianjin tourism would benefit by co-hosting the Olympic Games. Three main research purposes of this study were to: (1) investigate if Tianjin tourism and hospitality industries would experience increased tourism or general developments due to the impacts of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games; (2) determine the location of advantages and economic potentials that would make Tianjin stand out by co-hosting the Olympic Games; and (3) investigate if there was a perceived difference in the city of Tianjin's business growths among the managerial individuals and decision makers.

## **Literature Review**

### **Image Components**

Lee, Lee, & Lee (2005) stated the important roles of variety of activities on visitors' destination selections while Crompton (1979) reported that visitors were attracted to places by the image components of destinations including perceptions, impressions, and expectations. Arguments among researchers have been reported in the areas of the formations of individuals' perceptions of destination image (Gunn, 1972) and relationships between the attributes and impressions (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; 2003). While destinations do own diverse attributes and present various characteristics, many researchers (Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002; Ryan & Cave, 2005) studied what factors impacted a destination's image over the decades (Pike & Ryan, 2004).

*City Re-image.* Smith (2005a) pointed out that the enhancements in the economic, cultural, and political value of a city's image served as the core objective of a city's reimagining. Sport initiative strategies adopted in a city reimagining processes were cited as useful tools for many cities to gain favorable images to enhance their tourism development effectively (Smith, 2005b). Numerous sports events throughout a region or country provide precious opportunities for each individual city to market and brand its images from cultural perspectives (Smith, 2006). It is essential for the municipal government to recognize the specific aspects of the destination image needed to be influenced (Chalip & Green, 2001). History has shown that the benefits

of Olympics' hosting cities had achieved were rooted not only in the global city's image enhancement but also in additional international tourist's visits and investments (Whitson, 2004).

## **Olympic Impacts**

*Impacts on Host Cities.* Many hosting cities were able to obtain global position and reputation through the media exhibitions before and during the Olympic Games. The increased multi-dimensional global networking, improvement of city infrastructures (O'Brien, 2006), a greater city image (Hall, 1987), more positive tourism revenues (Chalkley & Essex, 1999; Essex & Chalkley, 1998), a recognized world tourism destination identity (Zeng & Luo, 2008), and business investment opportunities (Singh & Hu, 2008) have been categorized as significant impacts generated by the Olympic Games.

*Previous Olympic Games Impacts.* Because of the impacts of Olympic Games on various tourism opportunities in Seoul (Ahn & Ahmed, 1994), a series of hosting city's improvements (Essex & Chalkley, 1998) have stimulated the numbers of Korean inbound tourism and the country's outbound tourism flows. Barcelona has also been impacted positively by the Olympic Games in terms of its popularity as a favorite tourism destination regionally and globally. The event attracted three billion people globally and has provided the opportunities to transform the image of Barcelona and generate changing perceptions among its own residents (Essex & Chalkley, 1998; Zhao, 2005). In 2000, the Olympic Games has pushed Australia's tourism industry to achieve an increase in development through the dynamic city image, enormous economy enhancement, and increased visitations. (Hede, 2005; Madden, 2002; O'Brien, 2006; Waitt, 1999; Zhao, 2005; Zhang & Zhao, 2007).

## **Beyond the Cities' Stories**

While previous studies focused on the impacts of the Olympic Games on the main hosting cities, the uniqueness of this study aimed to study the impacts of the Olympic Games on Tianjin, a supportive city during the 2008 Olympic Games. Readers are referred to Yu and Chen (2010), a study that has detailed the stories of Tianjin and Beijing and investigated the relationships

and conflicts between the two cities from historical perspectives. In the following section, we would like to introduce the importance of the China's "Open-door Policy" that concentrated on foreign trade business development and foreign direct investment attractions. The coastal areas were the places that turned their goals into reality because of the preferential policy.

The preferential policies from the government and the stabilized Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) contributed to rapid economic developments in the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta in China (Zhao & Zhang, 2007). FDI served as the core mechanism for Chinese economy growth over many decades. The motivations driven by the foreign investors to invest in China were rooted in the conveniences of exporting and the manufacturing capacities. The coastal area, the Yangtze River Delta (YRD), was chosen as the first experimental zone to enjoy the beneficial policies and institutional systems from the central government which began in the late 1980's. The changes in the institutional environment drew significant foreign direct investments into this area as global investors targeted China for their business expansion. Through the last two decades of development, YRD accounted for one fifth of the national GDP of China (Tuan & Ng, 2007). The prosperous economy provided a stable platform for the sustained development of the tourism industry in that area. Another coastal area, the Bohai Rim Region, with the core city of Tianjin, was selected as the third development growth area of China's economic expansion and investment. The tourism industries of Tianjin were to be positively influenced because of the economic developing potentials. These economic developments priorities served as the governmental backdrop for urban tourism investment. Each area was prompted to fully understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of tourism as the investment have progressed.

## **Research Mehod**

### **Methodology**

Based upon the exploratory nature of the study, there were very few articles in the literature investigating the Olympics impact on Tianjin tourism industry, the qualitative method of in-depth interviews was employed in this

study. This approach works better than other methods since it is useful to discover the information under the tourism phenomenon. A semi-structure questionnaire was utilized for the interview. All the questions in the semi-structured questionnaire were designed based upon the theme of the research objectives. Comparing the structured in-depth interview and the free focus group interview, the method of semi-structured individual interview is more advantageous as it allows the investigator to obtain rich information from the interviewees during the limited time frame (Smith, 2006; May, 1997).

The questionnaire for this study was developed originally in English. Since the survey would be used in China and the participants would be Chinese, the English questionnaire was translated into Chinese by an English and Chinese language professional. In order to ensure the reliability of the survey, another expert in both languages translated the Chinese questionnaire back into English. Modifications on wording and ambiguous terms were carried out accordingly.

The survey questionnaire included five sections: (1) Tianjin city identity and tourism industries; (2) impacts of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games on Tianjin tourism industries; (3) the relationship of tourism industries in Tianjin and Beijing; (4) expectations about the future development of Tianjin tourism industries; and (5) demographic information. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted during the months of May and June 2007 in Tianjin, China. As the natural setting plays a significant role in the qualitative method of interviewing, all the interviews were carried out in the offices of the participants, who comprised the managerial staff in the tourism industries. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. The researcher of this study implemented all the sixty interviews, took the brief notes during the interview and wrote down the summarized details after the interview. All the raw data collected were in the Chinese language. Before conducting the data analysis, the researcher first transcribed the original audio data into paper notes, and the notes were translated into English. A certified Chinese-English language specialist was employed to translate the Chinese transcripts into English for equivalence proofing. When the data checking process was finished, the modified English data were ready for the further analysis.

The study population included managerial personnel engaged in the institutions of tourism authorities, hotel and lodging companies, restaurants, travel agencies, and visitor attractions in Tianjin. Managerial officers were invited to participate in this study because they had sufficient field experiences, insightful outlooks on the trends of the tourism business, and held decision-making roles in the tourism industry. Their perspectives were vital for the investigators to obtain a better overview of the interactions between the Olympics and the Tianjin tourism industry. Two officers from the Tianjin tourism management bureau were invited to participate in the study since the tourism industry in China was characterized as a government-oriented business. The final sample comprised 60 individuals, including policy decision makers, managers, and directors from hotels (21.7 percent), restaurants (10 percent), tour companies (23.3 percent), tourism authorities (3.3 percent) and attractions (41.7 percent).

## **Results and Findings**

The mean age of the sample was 36.3 years old with the range from 21 to 60. Fifty-five percent of the participants were male. The respondents had working experiences in their particular fields for 11 years on average and the mean of the time they hold the current positions was 5.5 years.

### **Tianjin Images**

The respondents had difficulty when they were asked to define the city image of Tianjin. Most held blurry holistic images varying from "seaport city" to "light industrial city" or "synthesized city". Some indicated that the city image of Tianjin was related to the characterized local folklores, famous local snacks, and the Haihe River. Interviewee 23 better explained Tianjin's image attributes compared with other two municipalities of China: Beijing and Shanghai.

*"The city image of Beijing combined the elements of the Great Wall and the global city Shanghai delivered the image of the Bond and*

*the world economic center, and Tianjin's image was mainly based on the folklores (plebeian) and the light industrial city. However, the people's awareness of Tianjin was far behind the other two cities."*

Nearly all the managerial interviewees concluded that an increase of city awareness would be grounded in the dynamic strategies of city positioning and marketing from the government. Most interviewees showed positive attitudes towards Tianjin's current image positioning plan mapped out by the China Central Government: Tianjin would be a city with the image of *"international seaport city, economic center of north China and ecological city."* The dynamic positioning appropriately combined the strengths and opportunities of Tianjin, which was strongly supported by the participants. The interviewees also indicated that Tianjin had not been recognized as a tourism destination in China (76 percent of respondents) indicated this response or in the world (97 percent of respondents). Tianjin's city image was typically based on the industrial or commercial constituents without the consideration of tourism. Sixty percent of the respondents from travel companies indicated that Tianjin should not be regarded as a destination for inbound tourism, but a destination for outbound tourism. The awareness of Tianjin was rather low on the minds of the national and world tourists. Nevertheless, half of the respondents expressed their confidence that Tianjin was a city at the cutting edge of experiencing robust economic changes and would transform into a tourism destination fostered by its evolving potential.

## **The Olympics Impact on Tianjin Tourism Industry**

In this study, 95 percent of the respondents indicated that the 2008 Beijing Olympics would have favorable impacts on the Tianjin tourism industries. Listed below are perceptions expressed by managers from the fields of catering, lodging, travel agencies, and attractions.

*Catering.* The Olympics would significantly increase the Tianjin catering industry with improvement of the sanitation situation and an increase in

selling prices of catering services. The Olympic Games had been perceived to bring positive influences to the tourism industry since the city's in-process constructions of tourism attractions would drive more visitors into Tianjin.

*Hotel/lodging.* Managers from the hotel/lodging industry unanimously showed positive attitudes toward the Olympics' impacts on the Tianjin's tourism industry. Their concerns were concentrated on the reception capacities and capabilities expansion when Tianjin held the mega-events related to the Olympic Games. The respondents indicated their belief that they also felt hotel/lodging business would experience a surge during the Olympics. The Olympics would train and equip Tianjin tourism stakeholders to be familiar with the experiences of hosting mega-events and give Tianjin the capability to successfully bid other mega-events. The Olympics would push tourism practitioners to improve their service quality because of the severe competition generated from the markets and increased governmental pressures from administrations. Eventually respondents believe that visitors and perceived repeat visitors would come back to Tianjin as a result of the Olympic effect. Although pleased by the perceived business boom, the managers were concerned about the direction of the hotel/lodging business after the Olympics. The great increase in new hotels spurred by the Games would make the market competition more intensified afterward.

*Travel company/agent.* The respondents from this group of professionals indicated the following. The Tianjin tourism industry would experience great favorable impacts from the Olympic Games. This mega-event would be a great impetus for Tianjin to enhance the city image, attract potential visitors, and improve the civic quality. When the respondents in tour companies were asked the perceptions of the Olympics' impacts on their businesses, 21 percent of these interviewees said there would be no significant benefits from the Olympics, especially during the Olympics period. Possible reasons for the response included their attention to the institutional management from the government. The central and local governments would stipulate a series of temporary supervising policies on the businesses of hotels, catering, and transportation during the Olympics, which would greatly



influence and / or restrict the performance of tour companies in the normal business deployment. They emphasized that hotel and catering industries would experience a surge during the Games.

*Visitor attractions.* Interviewees in this sector considered the city image and identity improvements as the most favorable impacts resulting from the Olympics. The Olympics would generate an opportunity for Tianjin to promote its city identity and rebuild the city image. Seventy-seven percent of the interviewees working in visitor attraction fields identified positive attitudes toward the outcomes of the Tianjin tourism industry after the Olympics. Other interviewees kept conservative perceptions in the evaluation of the Olympics' impacts on the Tianjin tourism industry. The policy support from the Tianjin Government and tourism authorities was the first priority they emphasized, while future developments of the Tianjin tourism industry were considered. As interviewee 38 mentioned: *"The flow-in population and the cash flow will reach to the climax during the Olympics with the powerful 'explosion.' However, the aftermath impacts on the tourism would depend on the government planning and support."* Interviewee 58 said: *"Till now, the effective marketing and promotion strategies from the government had not been perceived on the market yet and the conservative attitudes toward the perceived positive impacts from the Olympics on the Tianjin tourism should be taken as well."*

## **Relationship on Tourism Industry between Tianjin and Beijing**

Daniels (2007) pointed out that the periphery cities or places of the mega sports events should establish a close "partner" relationship with the hosting city by strategically combining the resources, funds, and opportunities in achieving the goals of increment or benefits from the events. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents mentioned that the location affinity between Tianjin and Beijing was an advantage for Tianjin tourism developments and only 13.3 percent of the interviewees regarded it as a disadvantage. A complementary relationship based on the advantages was mentioned by 95

percent of the interviewees when they were asked to predict the relationship between Tianjin and Beijing after the Olympics in terms of tourism importance. Tianjin and Beijing were perceived to develop a closer relationship in the tourism industry. The information obtained from the officer (interviewee 41) of the Tianjin Tourism Bureau gave a clear scenario in summarizing the relationship of Tianjin and Beijing in terms of the Olympic effects. He said: "Tianjin was the largest and nearest city to Beijing. *The convenient and well-developed transportation system made Tianjin and Beijing depend on each other more than before by taking advantages of their strengths mutually during the Olympics. Beijing would rely on Tianjin's facilities of hotel, catering, and transportation for releasing the capacity pressure, and Tianjin would employ the Olympics as an opportunity in targeting Beijing tourists to market Tianjin tourism. The future relationship between the two cities would be strengthened with complementation on advantages. The future positioning of Beijing differentiated from that of Tianjin since Beijing would focus on the political and cultural characteristics and Tianjin would mainly concentrate on the economic developments. There would be few opportunities for the two cities to face the competition situation.*"

### **Policy Importance on the Development of Tianjin Tourism Industry**

China's central government confirmed that the country's third economic exponential growth, following the Peal River Delta (PRD) and the Yangtz River Delta (YRD), would be in the Bohai Rim Region (BRR) that is concentrated in the Tianjin Binhai New Area. All but one of the respondents held expectations about Tianjin's future economic development and tourism growth. The preferential policy would bring positive publicity and foreign direct investments to Tianjin, and more business tourists would be driven to Tianjin by the economic growth as well. When the interviewees answered the question about how they would anticipate the future development of Tianjin tourism, most indicated that future development of the Tianjin tourism industry would be based mainly on the policy supports from the government and tourism authorities. Without the policy supports and robust planning strategies, it would be difficult for Tianjin tourism to

achieve sustainable development after the Olympics. The interview with the officer of Tianjin authority bureau (interviewee 41) gave an informative outlook regarding the concerns of the managerial personnel engaged in Tianjin tourism industries.

*"The Tianjin Government and Tianjin Tourism Bureau had realized the importance of tourism industry and began to pay great attention to the tourism management and development. Tianjin would seize the opportunities of the Olympics to market and promote Tianjin in achieving the enhanced city awareness. Strategic plans on promoting Tianjin tourism industry in the Olympics period had been worked out. The slogan that Tianjin Tourism Bureau made out for branding Tianjin tourism was: 'Want to know more about the modern time history? Tianjin is the valuable destination for you to go!' The Tianjin Tourism Bureau motivated and supported Tianjin tourism stakeholders to collaborate with Beijing tourism practitioners. The cooperation scope covered Beijing, Hebei Province, and Shandong Province. Tianjin Government and tourism authorities were actively making good use of the Olympics for improving Tianjin tourism industry. The visitors to Tianjin before and during the Olympics periods may be less than the aftermath of the event due to the transportation restrictions during the game period. However, the Tianjin Government anticipated that after the Olympics, in 2010, the inbound tourists would reach 85 million; the tourism industry would cover 6 percent of the total GDP of Tianjin, and the direct income generated from the tourism industry would amount to 240 million US dollars."*

## **SWOT Analysis**

A SWOT analysis had been adopted as an effective tool for strategic planning in business management due to its characteristics of user familiarity, ease of use, and handy accessibility. The SWOT approach has aided organizations in distinguishing internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) of their business operations and helped them delineate practical strategies (Beebo & Prentice, 1997). SWOT also was categorized into favorable factors (strengths and opportunities) as well as the unfavorable factors (weaknesses and threats)

by Valentin (2001). Although SWOT analysis had been employed widely in business because of its qualitative characteristics, it had the practical applications and implementation in public administration and development in city and region strategic planning including the application in tourism setting (Bryson & Einsweiler, 1988; Kotler, 1988; Bryson & Roaring, 1987).

The SWOT method normally targets the holistic analysis of the products; it has been criticized because of its probable non-objectivity (Beebo & Prentice, 1997). Despite the criticism, SWOT analysis can still work as a dynamic instrument in strategic planning, and what it delivered was far beyond making a simple checklist. For example, SWOT analysis results have helped develop insightful perceptions when items are weighted and valuable factors included within the checklist format (Wheelen & Hunger, 1995; Weirich, 1982; Hill & Westbrook, 1997). The strategic planning obtained from the SWOT analysis led to actions for maintaining the strengths, clearing up the weaknesses, developing the opportunities, and alleviating the threats after utilizing the SWOT analysis approach in selected settings (Dealtry, 1992).

Tianjin shows great strength because of its closeness to the sea as well as the capital of China. Compatibility serves as the main theme for typifying Tianjin culture, such as Western and Chinese culture combined relics and North and South China merged customs. Tianjin possesses shaped tourism products; however, Tianjin's relevant stakeholders are weak in the marketing concepts and skills of turning the tourism products into tourism commodities. The blurry city image of Tianjin can be ascribed to a great paucity in dynamic city positioning strategies from relevant departments. The current operation mechanism of the Tianjin tourism industry makes it difficult for Tianjin to meet the fast changing market impacts of tourism. However, since the initial stage that Tianjin currently is in, there is potential for the promising development of Tianjin's tourism industries. Since the fundamental infrastructure of tourism in Tianjin has been well established, the tourism industry can make the city an attractive destination, and tourism marketers and investors can expand their business into the Northern China (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
**Reported Top 5 Factors of SWOT Analysis**

<b>Strengths</b>
The location
Affinity location with Beijing
Traditional & localized Tianjin food (snacks & sea food)
Ample traditional Tianjin folklores
Human landscapes (typical multi-country stylish architectures)
<b>Weaknesses</b>
Shortage in historical relics and natural resources
Great lacks in tourism resources integration and stakeholders' collaboration
Low city awareness
Shortage in tourism resource's development
Sluggish economic development in the past 2 decades and tourism industry was neglected by the previous city administration
<b>Opportunities</b>
The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games
The economy beneficial policy from China central government on Tianjin Binhai New Area (BHNA)
The overall service quality will be greatly improved due the effects of the Games
Quick developments of city construction and transportation facilities (airport & railway station)
The limited accommodating capacity of Beijing
<b>Threats</b>
Inconsistent supports from the government to tourism industry in terms of policy planning, implementing and marketing
Perceptions and attitudes of the authorities toward the long-term development of tourism industry
No-robust correlation between tourism practitioners and catering industry
No beneficial strategies from lodging or catering sectors targeting the tour companies which barriers the tourism industry
Severe competition between national and international tour operating companies (the perceived business acquisition)

## Conclusions and Implications

The result of the study showed that stakeholders engaged in the tourism industry fall far short of collaboration amongst each other. No robust mechanism exists among catering, lodging, and tour companies, which severely limits the development of the Tianjin tourism industry. The government or authorities should develop strategic plans to supervise and

motivate tourism practitioners to achieve a "double-win" result. Tourism stakeholders or practitioners should be directed by the city government or tourism authorities to develop new business fields, consolidating complimentary resources and obtaining the collective benefits (Sheehan, Ritchie, & Hudson, 2007). The over-dispersed visitor attractions present another barrier for Tianjin tourism industry development. Tourism authorities or tourism marketers should develop travel tours by considering complete resource integration. Effective master planning plays a critical role in tourism management and development since it would cover the segments of tourist attractions, infrastructure, service facilities, promotion and marketing, human resources management, and environment management (Lai, Li, & Feng, 2006). An effective communication system between the tourism authorities and the practitioners should be developed in tourism planning. A significant gap perceived from the study is that tourism practitioners have no clear idea what are the proactive strategies and goals made by the relevant tourism authorities. The government should create more types of channels (communication) to have their plans known by the tourism business practitioners as well as the local residents.

The relationship between Tianjin and Beijing is an interesting topic for further research. Beijing, as the capital of China, has enjoyed being recognized with city awareness nationally and internationally. The Olympic Games were another stimulant to the strengthening of Beijing's city image globally. Historically treated as the back garden of Beijing, Tianjin is the prior day-trip destination for Beijing residents to shop, dine, and travel. Beijing tourists account for the dominant share of tourists of Tianjin. The Beijing tourism market also tends to be at a mature stage, while Tianjin is just in the initial stage for tourism development and potential growth. It will take time for Tianjin to compete with Beijing in terms of tourism power. In the current situation, the positioning of Tianjin as a complementary and corporative partner with Beijing would be a wise choice. According to the Chinese central government's positioning of Beijing and Tianjin, Tianjin will be developed into an economic center in northern China and Beijing will continue to be the political and cultural center, based on the city's functionalities and strengths.

This study provides sound information for Tianjin tourism authorities

and tourism strategist when they establish policies or plans for the future development of the Tianjin tourism industry. A potential market is available for business investors and tourism developers who plan to seek business expansions in China. The Olympic Games were perceived to greatly impact Tianjin tourism and the city's enhancement, foreign investment increase, and economic developments. The positioning of tourism in the economy as a growth engine and the government revenue attracted from this sector has brought more governmental attention to the importance of tourism. By observing the actions the Tianjin Government took and the tourism industry progress achieved during the past several years, the Tianjin tourism industry is perceived to have a sustainable and promising growth in the future.

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