

The Evolution of China's Sports Tourism Policies: Historical Trajectory, Internal Logic, and Future Prospects

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Abstract: Sports tourism policies act as a vital institutional guarantee for improving the sports industry system and advancing the development of China as a leading nation in both sports and tourism. Through content analysis, this study examines the evolutionary trajectory, internal logic, and future trends of national-level sports tourism policies issued between 1978 and 2025. The findings indicate that the evolution of sports tourism policies has undergone three distinct phases: the embryonic stage (1978–2007), when the integrated development of sports and tourism initially proposed; the rapid development stage (2008–2015), driven by event-led acceleration of sports tourism; and the comprehensive deepening stage (2016–2025), characterized by the continuous emergence of new models in sports tourism. The internal logic of these policies is reflected in three aspects: strategic adaptation logic, marked by a shift from “economic supporting” to “national strategic embedding”; industrial integration logic, evolving from “superficial overlap” to “full-chain synergy”; and demand response logic, transitioning from “mass popularization” to “individualized segmentation” in supply optimization. To overcome the limitations of current policies, future strategies must target on three critical dimensions: precision, institutionalization, and value diversification, thereby unlocking the industry’s full social and economic potential.

1. Introduction

As public health consciousness grows and the desire for participatory, experiential tourism increases, sports tourism has not only gained popularity but also made its broad socio-economic impact ever more pronounced recent years [1]. As an emerging sector integrating tourism and sports, the development of sports tourism holds significant strategic importance, which serves to enrich the tourism product system, broaden the scope of tourism consumption, promote the deep integration of national fitness and public health, facilitate the transformation and upgrading of the sports industry, foster new drivers for economic development as well as expand new areas of economic growth [2]. In July 2021, the State Council issued “National Fitness Plan (2021-2025)”, which explicitly mandates the integrated development of sports and tourism. It calls for enriching the supply of

related products and services and creating a number of premium sports tourism routes with significant influence [3]. Academic research on sports tourism has yielded substantial insights, which can be divided into three categories. The first category focuses on the conceptualization and characteristics of sports tourism. For instance, Cao Dixun explored the concept and pathways for developing sports tourism by examining its three core components: resources, facilities, and services [4]. Similarly, Chen Tao investigated its conceptual definition, underlying psychological motivations, distinctive features, and classification systems [5]. The second centers on resource development and strategic recommendations. Liu Jian, Wu Qingfeng and Hu Biao employed field surveys and logical analysis to study the development of leisure sports tourism resources on uninhabited islands in China, identifying challenges in their utilization and proposing corresponding development strategies [6]. Through documentary analysis, Zhao Gaowei summarized the status of rural sports tourism resource development in China and suggested appropriate countermeasures [7]. The third category mainly addresses issues of industrial integration and high-quality development. Wang *et al.*, considering the ambiguous understanding of “sports-culture-tourism” integration, deconstructed and reconstructed existing concepts via systematic and dialectical thinking. This approach created a conceptual model and an analytical framework for integrated development [8]. Huang Quan, Zhang Yong, and Zhou Daoping carried out literature review and field research to examine the internal logic, practical challenges, and promotion pathways for high-quality development of China’s sports tourism demonstration bases [9].

In summary, current research on sports tourism policies remains relatively limited and often lacks a historical perspective particularly when examining its evolution trajectory and underlying logic. Therefore, this research aims to clarify the historical development of China’s sports tourism policies, analyze its evolutionary stages and internal logic, aiming to provide historical insights for future policy-making and its implementation.

2. Research Methodology and Data Sources

2.1 Research Method

Content analysis, an empirical research method integrating both qualitative and quantitative approach, holds a significant position in social science research due to its rigorous framework and reliable consistency. This study, using sports tourism policy texts as research materials, entails a systematic collection and review of relevant documents. It conducts an in-depth policy analysis to clarify their evolutionary trajectory and internal logic, and subsequently proposes future policy directions.

2.2 Data Sources

To ensure the authenticity, comprehensiveness, and representativeness of policy samples, this study employed a three-step data screening process. First, the “Peking University Law Database” and official ministry websites were searched, using core keywords such as “sports tourism”. Second, adhering to the principle of direct relevance, documents with explicitly related titles or core content were retained, while non-policy documents such as notices and reports were excluded. Ultimately, 96 policy texts issued between 1978 and 2025 were obtained, spanning the national, ministerial, and local levels.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 The Historical Trajectory of Policy Evolution

3.1.1 Embryonic Stage (1978–2007): Initial Proposal of Sports-Tourism Integration

In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CCCPC established the fundamental national policy of Reform and Opening-up, providing a favorable macro-environment for the development of sports industry. In May 1993, the former State Physical Culture and Sports Commission promulgated “Opinions on Deepening Sports Reform”, which for the first time proposed integrating sports centered on training, fitness and recreation, competitions, and information services with industries such as economy and trade, culture, and tourism. This marked the initial conceptualization of sports-tourism integration within the sports policy itself [10]. Concurrently, “Opinions on Cultivating the Sports Market and Accelerating Sports Industrialization” was issued, emphasizing the need to cultivate and develop sports market. It aimed to create foundational conditions and environment for sports operations within the economic system and comprehensively expand sports-related markets including equipment, advertising, sponsorship, lottery, tourism, sports rehabilitation, healthcare, arts, publications, books, and audio-visual products, thereby promoting the sustainable development of sports industry and meeting the material and cultural needs of the people [11].

In 2001, as China actively prepared for the Olympic Games, the National Tourism Administration designated the annual tourism theme as “China Sports and Fitness Tourism Year” and launched 60 local characteristic sports events and 80 specialized sports tourism products and routes across 11 categories. This initiative effectively promoted the industrial integration of sports and tourism, and significantly enhanced the social recognition and influence of sports tourism. In 2006, the General Administration of Sport of China issued “Implementation Opinions on the ‘National Fitness with the Olympics’ Campaign”, clearly focusing on key activities such as “National New Year Climbing for Fitness”, “Fitness Activities for Five Hundred Million People”, “National Fitness Week”, and “National Fitness with the Olympics-Community Tour”. This policy called for innovation in event formats and the planning and hosting of a series of widely influential, highly participatory national fitness events, including a total of 65 activities related to sports tourism [12].

This period represents the embryonic stage of sports tourism policies in China, characterized by the absence of a systematic and targeted policy framework, and a lack of distinct defining features. In terms of policy content, relevant references were sporadically distributed within individual policies pertaining either to sports or tourism, with no dedicated policy documents issued specifically addressing “sports tourism” as an independent subject. Regarding policy objectives, the primary focus was on promoting a superficial linkage between sports and tourism. Initiatives such as “China Sports and Fitness Tourism” theme year aimed to attract public attention, while regulations like “Domestic Mountaineering Management Measures” sought to standardize individual sports tourism activities. These efforts had not yet advanced to the level of industrial planning or the establishment of integrated development mechanisms.

3.1.2 Rapid Development Stage (2008–2015): Event-Driven Acceleration of Sports Tourism

The year 2008 marked China’s first hosting the Summer Olympic Games. The National Tourism Administration designated the annual theme as “China Olympic Tourism Year”, stirring up a wave of tourism events. In 2009, the General Administration of Sport of China and the National Tourism Administration jointly held “2009 China Sports Tourism Development Summit” in Harbin. The

summit brought together representatives from sports, tourism, and other relevant departments for in-depth discussions on deeper integration and development of sports tourism, signifying its entry into a new developmental phase. In 2010, the State Council issued “Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry”, which explicitly called for promoting the development of sports tourism [13]. In 2011, the General Administration of Sport of China and the National Tourism Administration jointly issued “Letter on Conducting a National Special Survey on Sports Tourism”, aiming to further study and define the fundamental approach, working framework, and policy measures for jointly advancing sports tourism development, thereby providing foundational material for the two administrations to formulate implementation documents on accelerating the sports tourism industry [14]. In 2013, the General Office of the State Council promulgated “Notice on Issuing the National Tourism and Leisure Outline (2013–2020)”. This outline included provisions for strengthening the development of sports tourism products and advancing the construction of sports tourism venues and facilities [15]. In 2014, the State Council issued “Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption” and “Several Opinions on Promoting the Reform and Development of Tourism”, which explicitly advocated for the integrated development of sports and tourism. These documents called for hosting sports tourism expos, actively promoting sports tourism, enhancing the integration of competitive performances, fitness, and leisure with tourism activities, as well as supporting and guiding qualified sports venues to provide sports tourism services to visitors [16].

During this stage, sports tourism policies were driven by hosting the Olympic Games and enjoyed a rapid development. The global attention brought by the big event further broke down industrial barriers and promoted the upgrade of “sports + tourism” model towards diversification and premiumization. At policy level, efforts were made not only to encourage the development of traditional “event-viewing tourism” but also to support innovative formats derived from Olympic venues and culture. For instance, policies were introduced to guide the repurposing of Olympic venues into sports tourism complexes and developing products such as “venue tours + sports experiences + educational tourism”.

3.1.3 Comprehensive Deepening Stage (2016–2025): Continuous Enrichment of New Models in Sports Tourism

In August 2016, the General Administration of Sport of China promulgated “Cooperation Agreement on Promoting the Integrated Development of Sports and Tourism”, which proposed continuously improving sports tourism infrastructure and supporting service facilities, further optimizing the development environment, and initially establishing a sports tourism industry system. Key targets were set, such as sports tourists shall account for 10% of total tourist numbers and a total sports tourism consumption scale of 500 billion yuan by 2020 to be achieved. The agreement planned to establish a number of national and provincial-level sports tourism demonstration bases, cultivate sports tourism enterprises and brands with international recognition and market competitiveness, and also defined eight key development tasks [17]. In December of the same year, the National Tourism Administration and the General Administration of Sport of China jointly issued “Guiding Opinions on Vigorously Developing Sports Tourism”. This was the first policy document directly including “sports tourism” in its title and systematically defined the concept of sports tourism while elaborating on key future tasks and the development framework. Since its promulgation, sports tourism has gained widespread social attention, with inter-departmental collaborative mechanisms continuously established and improved, ushering in an unprecedented surge of interest [18]. In 2017, the General Administration of Sport of China and the National Tourism Administration jointly released “Action Plan for Sports Tourism Development under the Belt and Road Initiative”. This plan designated 20 key action areas, aiming to leverage the Belt and

Road construction as an opportunity to accelerate the sports tourism industry in regions along the routes within China and promote in-depth cooperation with partner countries, holding significant strategic importance for achieving cross-regional industrial synergy [19]. In 2018, the General Office of the State Council issued “Guiding Opinions on Promoting All-for-One Tourism Development”, explicitly advocating for the vigorous development of new models in sports tourism such as ice and snow sports and mountain outdoor activities. It also encouraged the transformation of large urban shopping malls, qualified scenic spots, and sports venues into sports tourism complexes. In addition, this document formally introduced the concept of “sports tourism complex” for the first time [20]. In November of 2018, the General Administration of Sport of China issued “Notice on Promoting the Healthy Development of Sports and Leisure Characteristic Towns”, which has established an integration-oriented development approach aimed at building a comprehensive sports industry chain, actively fostering formats such as “sports + tourism” and “sports + wellness”, and ultimately forming comprehensive industrial clusters centered around sports [21]. In 2019, the General Office of the CCCPC and the General Office of the State Council issued “Opinions on Vigorously Developing Ice and Snow Sports Taking the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics as an Opportunity”, calling for the construction of sports tourism bases and the integrated development of ice and snow sports tourism. Consequently, policies related to ice and snow sports tourism gradually increased [22]. In 2021, the General Administration of Sport of China and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism jointly issued a special notice, officially launching the application process for national sports tourism demonstration bases of the year. To date, the selection and certification of these national demonstration bases have been successfully completed in three batches [23]. In 2022, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and 14 other departments jointly issued “Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Healthy and Orderly Development of Camping Tourism and Leisure”, further enriching new integrated formats for sports tourism [24]. In 2023, the General Administration of Sport of China, along with 11 other departments, jointly issued “Guiding Opinions on Promoting Sports to Assist Rural Revitalization”. The document mandates the integrated development of sports, tourism, culture, commerce, and agriculture to inject new momentum into rural revitalization [25]. In 2025, the General Office of the State Council issued “Opinions on Releasing the Potential of Sports Consumption and Further Promoting the High-Quality Development of the Sports Industry”, mentioning new products such as “sports + low-altitude” tourism [26].

The period since 2016 represents the comprehensive deepening stage in the development of China’s sports tourism policies. During this stage, policy supply in the sports tourism sector has shown significant growth, marked not only by a substantial increase in the number of policy documents compared to previous stages but also by an expansion in policy types. It has evolved from early macro-level guidance and framework establishment to a systematic policy system encompassing multiple dimensions such as standards and regulations, business format cultivation, infrastructure development, market supervision, and regional coordination. A core characteristic of policies in this stage is the profound integration between “sports” and “tourism” industries at implementation level. Policy formulation has moved beyond a single-industry perspective, and adopted instead an industrial synergy-oriented approach. Through targeted support measures, innovative pilot mechanisms, and optimized resource allocation, policies have driven the deep alignment of sports resources with tourism elements.

3.2 Evolutionary Logic of China's Sports Tourism Policies

3.2.1 Strategic Adaptation Logic: The Elevated Position from “Economic Supporting” to “National Strategic Embedding”

Policies have consistently aligned with national macro-strategies. With their position gradually elevated along with adjustments in national development priorities, they ultimately become a crucial tool serving national strategies. During the embryonic stage, the policy position was “economic supporting”, serving the economic development and industrial cultivation during the early reform and opening-up period. The 1993 “Opinions on Deepening Sports Reform” by the former State Physical Culture and Sports Commission first proposed “integration of sports with industries like tourism”, primarily aiming to cultivate new growth points for the sports industry by leveraging the tourism market. The 2001 “China Sports and Fitness Tourism Year” initiative by the National Tourism Administration essentially applied sports elements to enrich tourism products and aid tourism market expansion, acting as measures supporting economic development. In the rapid development stage, policies became embedded in the preliminary practice of building “A Leading Nation in Sports”, and major events were connected with national image building project. The 2008 “China Olympic Tourism Year” by the National Tourism Administration integrated the Beijing Olympics with tourism, leveraging the event’s popularity to enhance the country’s tourism profile. The State Council’s 2014 “Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry and Promoting Sports Consumption” listed sports tourism as a key industry focus for the first time, marking a shift in policy position from “economic supporting” to “coordinated advancement of national image and industrial development”. In the comprehensive deepening stage, relevant policies have been further integrated into top-level strategies such as building “A Leading Nation in Sports” and “A Healthy China”. For instance, in 2019, documents issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council deeply coupled ice and snow sports tourism with the goal of “300 Million People Participating in Winter Sports”. The 2023 guiding opinions from the General Administration of Sport of China and 11 other departments explicitly empowered rural revitalization through “integration of sports, tourism, culture, commerce, and agriculture”. Thus, sports tourism policies has now become a core vehicle for implementing multiple national strategies.

3.2.2 Industrial Integration Logic: Deepening from “Superficial Overlay” to “Whole-Chain Synergy”

Policy guidance for the integration of “sports + tourism” has undergone an evolutionary process from “formal combination” to “business linkage” and finally to “system construction”, progressively breaking down industrial barriers and achieving synergy across all elements. In the early development stage, policies focused on “simple combination of sports activities and tourism scenarios”, without forming an integration design at the industrial level. For example, the 65 sports tourism activities planned according to “Implementation Opinions on the ‘National Fitness with the Olympics’ Campaign Series” issued by the General Administration of Sport of China in 2006 were merely a formal overlay of “sports events + tourism sightseeing”. Similarly, “Domestic Mountaineering Management Measures” only regulated a single sports tourism project and did not address industrial synergy mechanisms. During the rapid development stage, event-driven business linkage emerged, with policies promoting business-level integration of “sports events and tourism consumption”. The State Council’s 2010 “Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Sports Industry” explicitly advocated “promote the development of sports tourism”, marking the first integration of sports and tourism at industrial planning level. The 2013 “National Tourism and

Leisure Outline (2013–2020)” proposed “strengthening the development of sports tourism products and the construction of venues and facilities”, which promoted functional linkage between event venues and tourism facilities, and preliminarily formed a business chain of “spectating + sightseeing + consumption”. In the comprehensive deepening stage, whole-chain systematic integration took shape, with policies constructing an industrial system for “all-element, whole-process synergy between sports and tourism”. The 2016 “Guiding Opinions on Vigorously Developing Sports Tourism” jointly issued by the National Tourism Administration and the General Administration of Sport of China defined the concept of sports tourism the first time and systematically elaborated on whole-chain tasks such as “business format cultivation, facility construction, and market supervision”. The 2018 “Guiding Opinions on Promoting All-for-One Tourism Development” by the General Office of the State Council introduced the concept of “sports tourism complexes”, promoting the deep integration of resources such as sports venues, scenic areas, and commercial districts. The State Council’s 2025 “Opinions on Releasing the Potential of Sports Consumption and Further Promoting the High-Quality Development of the Sports Industry” explored “sports + low-altitude tourism”, signifying the extension of industrial integration from “traditional formats” to “new scenarios and new drivers”, and the ultimate goal of building a systematic integration framework.

3.2.3 Demand Response Logic: Supply Optimization from “Mass Popularization” to “Individualized Segmentation”

Policies have consistently responded to public demand and upgraded its supply structure accordingly. This approach achieves a dynamic equilibrium where “demand drives supply, and supply creates new demand”. In the early stages, policies focused on meeting basic participation needs and popularizing sports tourism among the general public through simple activities. For instance, the 2001 “China Sports and Fitness Tourism Year” launched 80 specialized sports tourism products, and the 2006 “National Fitness with the Olympics” campaign series reached nationwide. The core objective was to lower the participation threshold and introduce sports tourism to the public. Subsequently, policies transitioned to address experiential demands and optimize product supply to meet public needs for “event experiences and in-depth participation”. The State Council’s “Several Opinions on Promoting the Reform and Development of Tourism” in 2014 proposed “supporting sports venues in providing services to tourists”, such as opening Olympic venues for tours and experiential programs. The 2011 “Letter on Conducting a National Special Survey on Sports Tourism” jointly issued by the General Administration of Sport of China and the National Tourism Administration aimed to accurately identify public demand for “spectating + experiences” through research and provided a basis for policy adjustments. This policy introduced diversified products tailored to segmented demands, covering various demographic groups and scenarios, with the primary goal of meeting individualized and high-quality needs. The 2022 “Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Healthy and Orderly Development of Camping Tourism and Leisure” issued by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and 14 other departments addressed the public’s demand for “outdoor leisure”. The 2019 “Opinions on Vigorously Developing Ice and Snow Sports Taking the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics as an Opportunity” focused on “ice and snow tourism”, catering to winter demands in northern regions. The 2025 “sports + low-altitude tourism” policy targeted at high-end experiential demands in the aim of forming a supply system that balances “mass demand and individualized needs”.

3.3 Future Prospects for China's Sports Tourism Policies

3.3.1 Policy Precision: Targeted Measures Focusing on “Sector Segmentation and Regional Differentiation”

Although existing policies have already covered diverse business formats, standards and support measures for specific sub-sectors still require refinement and regional resource disparities have not been sufficiently addressed. Firstly, specialized regulations should be formulated for niche sectors such as ice and snow tourism, low-altitude tourism, and camping tourism. For instance, with reference to the 2019 ice and snow sports policy, safety standards and support measures for year-round operation of ice and snow tourism should be further clarified. In terms of the 2025 “sports + low-altitude tourism” initiative, detailed procedures for airspace opening, approval mechanisms, and safety supervision protocols should be established to avoid a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Secondly, differentiated policies should be developed based on regional resource variations. For snow-rich northern regions (e.g., Northeast China), increased subsidies for ice and snow tourism infrastructure is to be provided. For southern regions abundant in mountain outdoor resources (e.g., Yunnan, Guizhou), support shall be equipped towards integrated products combining “mountain sports + ethnic culture”. For western rural areas, cultivating “Village Super League” style rural sports tourism IPs should be encouraged to achieve “unique characteristics for each region” in line with sports-assisted rural revitalization policies introduced in 2023.

3.3.2 Institutional Innovation: Building an Implementation System of “Cross-Department Coordination + Market-Oriented Activation”

While existing policies have established a multi-department joint issuance mechanism, there remains room for improvement in both coordination efficiency and market vitality. At first, resources from departments concerning development and reform, culture and tourism, sports, and transportation should be integrated to bridge the “last mile” of policy implementation. For example, application standards and dynamic management mechanisms for sports tourism demonstration bases need to be unified to avoid conflicting standards across departments. Secondly, it is essential to deepen “streamlining administration, delegating power, improving regulation, and upgrading services” by clearly defining pathways for social capital participation within policies. For instance, enterprises engaging in sports venue operations (referencing post-Olympic venue utilization policies) and event IP developing shall be encouraged. Simultaneously, industry supervision needs to be enhanced in order to balance “market vitality” and “regulated development”, thereby cultivating a group of internationally competitive sports tourism enterprises.

3.3.3 Value Extension: Promoting the Synergistic Realization of “Industrial Value + Social Value + Ecological Value”

Existing policies are primarily oriented towards economic and industrial value, offering limited consideration of their social and ecological impacts. Future policy initiatives shall aim to incorporate these broader value dimensions. Specifically, at the social dimension, sports tourism is to be integrated with public services. Following the guidance of 2022 “Opinions on Building a Higher-Level National Fitness Public Service System”, policies should extend sports tourism products into communities and towards elderly populations. This can be achieved by developing initiatives such as “Community Sports Tourism Activity Centers” and “Senior-Friendly Sports Travel and Residency Products”, thereby contributing to the enhancement of the national fitness public service system. At the ecological dimension, policies need to strengthen the “green development” orientation by embedding ecological protection requirements into sports tourism

resource development. For events like mountain outdoor tourism and water sports tourism, comprehensive regulations covering the entire process: “pre-development ecological assessment-ecological monitoring during operation-post-event ecological restoration” is to be established, which will prevent resource waste and environmental damage, and substantiate the concept of “Lucid Waters and Lush Mountains are Invaluable Assets”.

4. Conclusion

This study categorizes China’s sports tourism policies (1978-2025) into three stages and elaborates on their features and internal logic respectively. Sports tourism emerges as a natural result of rising health awareness and evolving cultural and tourism consumption, reflecting the deep integration of sports and tourism. It not only allows people to enhance physical fitness and reduce stress through exercise and travel but also revitalizes sports and local cultures through interaction, promoting a lifestyle of “loving sports, enjoying travel, and promoting health”.

At this new stage, the development of sports tourism should remain people-centered and uphold sustainability by balancing growth with ecological and cultural preservation, which positions sports tourism as a vital link bridging national strategies such as “Healthy China”, cultural development, and rural revitalization. By fostering personal well-being, boosting industrial vitality, and preserving heritage, sports tourism is set to open a new chapter in the integrated development of culture and tourism.

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