The Role of Government in Major Sport Event Planning and Organising in China: 2002 Shanghai Tennis Masters Cup as a Case

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Based on three main sources of data: in-depth interviews and informal small group talks; documentary source including government policy documents, industry source from International Sport Organizations and event companies; and media source, the present research is devoted to exploring the role of government in major sport event planning and organising in China, through an in-depth case study of The 2002 Tennis Masters Cup (TMC) staged in Shanghai.

Specifically, the following research questions are addressed: Why did the city of Shanghai go for this event and what is the decision making process behind the bid for this event? What is the government role in the sport event market in China? And implications of this case for both sport events theory and practice in emerging market like China with its unique political, cultural and economic context will also be discussed.

Bunce (1995, cf. Emery 2001) summarised the motives behind public sector involvement into six categories: economic development, tourism development, city profile, public health and fitness, facility, and sport promotion. Emery (2001) found that sport promotion and heightening area profile are the most important reasons cited.

Despite various claims made by the public sector and summarised by some authors, few have studied the actual reasons and decision-making process behind the bidding of a major event. A few authors have pointed to the fact that the decision to bid for and host a global hallmark event is a political one most often made by an incumbent government (Gamage and Higgs, 1997; Forster and Pope 2004). A number of authors (e.g. Getz, 1997; Shone and Parry, 2004; Pruess, 2004; Masterman 2004) stressed the importance of feasibility study and planning based on rational choice approach, and proposed that the event planning is a staged process. But there is research suggesting that this rational choice approach is rarely followed in practice by event planners and decision-makers.

From the present study, it can be argued that the government is playing a dominant role in the whole process from bidding to operating in China. This is largely due to the fact that China is still in a state of powerful government and weak society.

Though a number of authors (e.g. Bunce, 1995; Emery, 2001)) summarised the various motives behind public sector involvement in major sports event such as economic development, tourism, and sport promotion, the goal of 2002 TMC is simple and straightforward: to help secure the bid for another mega-event by increasing host city visibility and attracting worldwide attention.

Despite the importance attached by many authors to comprehensive planning based on rational-choice approach in event selecting and bidding, the selecting and planning of 2002 TMC can hardly be argued as such a case. Many of the issues arose only after entering the bid and important decisions such as the venue selecting were made on an ad hoc basis and more often than not relying on political determination and will. This may suggest that the major sport event is too complicated to be approached on any absolute rational planning.