



China Case Study: Building National Tourism Brands Through Adventure and Sport

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The Rugby World Cup as seen through Xiaohongshu

A small but bitter conflict has broken out on Xiaohongshu in the aftermath of the Rugby World Cup finals. “Congratulations to South Africa for getting Wayne Barnes to hand them the trophy,” writes Xiaohongshu user Yuanyuan, born in Hunan, New Zealand resident for 8 years. “I guess jealousy makes you nasty, buddy!” counters Feizhou Wo Zui Bai from Cape Town, South Africa. Another poster, whose username translates to “A Raging Kiwi”, writes that 29 October was “the most emo day” since they started watching rugby in 2014. Where recent Chinese public opinion on South Africa has often been tainted by news around corruption and crime, the South African brand scored a few points in China’s imagination over the weekend under Xiaohongshu’s rugby (橄榄球) tag, which has racked up 160 million views to date.



The All Blacks’ Haka, as posted from one of Xiaohongshu’s many rugby fan accounts



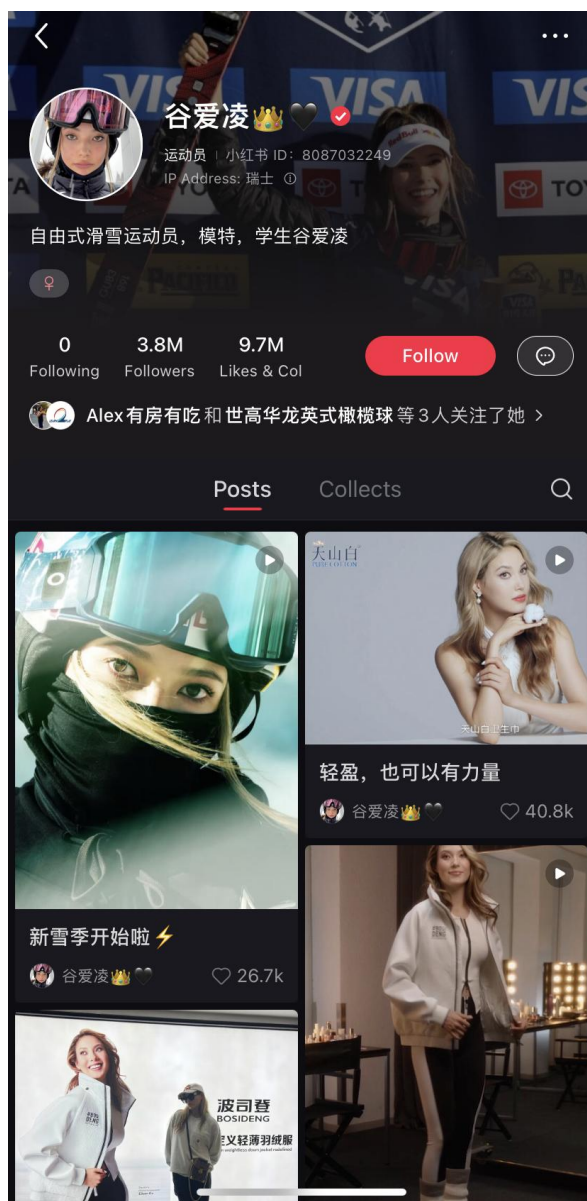
In China, rugby is still a niche sport, like most team sports excepting soccer in the country. The Chinese Rugby Football Association has around 76,000 registered players compared to South Africa's 651,000. In terms of viewership, however, World Rugby data shows that China and the United States both take the top spot as countries with the most people (30 million each) who show strong interest in the game. This puts them well ahead of highly-engaged viewerships in countries like India (25 million) and Japan (15 million). China's long and abiding enthusiasm around the Olympics has also plugged the country's viewers into sevens rugby, with a reported 44 million Chinese viewers watching sevens at the Rio Olympics.

The Chinese diaspora in rugby-dominant nations, numbering close to 3 million people between Australia, France, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK and Italy, are another major constituent of Chinese rugby interest. Particularly more recent, wealthier migrants who relocated from Mainland China under skilled visa or investment programmes are likely the demographic where South Africa has scored the most branding points. Wealthier immigrants, as research on the topic has shown, cite securing a better education for their children as one of their main motivations to emigrate, alongside considerations like personal wealth security. Their children's integration into their country of choice, school sports and cultural participation arguably sits top-of-mind for these parents. At least in Australia and New Zealand, this ties these new citizens in closely with a budding rugby awareness.



Xiaohongshu's vibrant rugby newsfeed

The Chinese sport market is a dynamic space for national brands to promote unique experiences in the world's largest tourism market. As Eileen Gu's freestyle skiing success has had a knock-on effect on Chinese domestic interest in snowsports and related destinations, similar dynamics are playing out with surfing, scuba diving, hiking and other adventure sports in China. Looking at Xiaohongshu's platform analytics, the 冲浪 (surfing) tag has gauged over 926 million views to date, with China's southern island province of Hainan dominating the content feed alongside destinations such as Tahiti and Hawaii. The snowsports (滑雪) tag has racked up over 1.7 billion views to date, with British Columbia's Whistler ranked first among related tags. Also well over the 1 billion views mark, diving (潜水) gives priority to Bali, the shores of Thailand and the Maldives.



Eileen Gu's official Xiaohongshu account



Key to success in China outbound tourism marketing is taking effective, niche approaches to reaching wealthy, internationally mobile demographics. Four per cent of Xiaohongshu users earn in excess of RMB 20,000 a month (US\$2,730), which puts most Chinese diaspora users squarely in the platform's top income bracket, together with their far greater awareness of Rugby World Cup victories than the average Mainland Chinese consumer. Destinations such as South Africa, which offer world-class adventure experiences in surfing, hiking and diving, can capitalise off growing awareness and interest in sports and adventure among China's wealthier consumers with Xiaohongshu strategy that places these experiences front and centre. With appetites for long-haul adventure tourism returning, and with sports and fitness recapturing popular imaginations in China, platforms like Xiaohongshu will offer destinations across Africa and Latin America an invaluable channel to build China market share.

(Create Consulting is a Beijing-headquartered sales and marketing agency with a footprint across Greater China. We specialise in Xiaohongshu analytics and strategy, alongside traditional PR and sales engagement.)