

Beyond Visibility: Institutional Absorption and Commercialization Pathways for Ultimate in China

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Abstract. This paper examines how Ultimate's grassroots presence and platform visibility might support sustainable development in China. It develops a possible framework for understanding Chinese Ultimate's next development stage. Ultimate already appears in many high schools, universities, clubs, and social-media contexts in urban China, but the management problem remains weak institutional absorption. Attention and informal participation are not systematically connected to pathways, athlete narratives, events, data systems, and commercial products. This paper uses a comparative case study with embedded practitioner background from Ultimate promotion, drawing on skateboarding, sport climbing, snooker, professional road cycling, basketball, and diving. It suggests that commercialization requires commercial market depth, including durable participation, spectatorship, commercial relationships, and identity attachment. The analysis therefore treats commercialization as repeated relationships among participants, audiences, organizations, and media rather than as exposure alone. Self-officiation and Spirit of the Game, which are distinctive features of Ultimate, are also treated as a governance tension for formalization.

Keywords: Ultimate, Sport Management, Commercialization, Emerging Sport, China

1. Introduction

Ultimate still lacks stable recognition as a sport. The prior strategy was therefore to expose it to the public, introduce its rules, and make the sport more recognizable. Although in China it has visibility among school clubs and city clubs, it still has many management problems related to tournaments, athlete narratives, and commercial products. This paper uses institutional absorption to describe the process through which scattered attention and grassroots interest are received by organizations, event pathways, data systems, and ways of creating sustainable sport development.

The author's promotion work on Ultimate began from the belief that the sport lacked exposure. This work therefore aimed to reach audiences beyond the existing community. But reach did not show whether viewers found beginner sessions, joined clubs, watched full matches, followed teams, or became returning participants. The author's direct school promotion work through BYFF (Beijing Youth Frisbee Federation) also suggested limited grassroots presence in urban and international-school settings, indicating that the presence of the sport and awareness did not create regular

coaching or durable pathways. It did not lead the sport toward a more systematic or widely recognized development pathway.

Although in China, tournament matches between clubs and student-led school clubs are arranged regularly, the development of the sport remains highly restricted. This makes Ultimate a useful case for investigating emerging sport commercialization. The issue is not whether a sport can produce occasional events, popular clips, or enthusiastic participants, but whether those forms connect into repeatable relationships and deeper market depth. A beginner needs somewhere to continue, an organizer needs a calendar and records, and an athlete needs a pathway. In Ultimate, at least in China, there are few pathways for involvement in Ultimate's market.

The question is therefore not how to attract attention, but what institutional, narrative, and commercial infrastructures are needed to turn attention into practice. It does not necessarily need a regular major league or a state-led medal system. It needs credible next steps and repeatable events that are more stable, in forms of value that can persist beyond a single post or weekend. Although some of these already exist in Chinese Ultimate, the sport needs a more systematic way and a turning point to become a well-recognized sport in China.

2. Analytical framework

Professionalization is broader than solely paying athletes. Dowling et al. distinguish systemic, organizational, and occupational change [1]: common standards and relationships across a field, formal governance and staffing within organizations, and recognized expertise or paid roles. Green and Sotiriadou et al. add a development lens of recruitment, retention, and transition [2, 3]. For Ultimate, the question is that people do not recognize it not because they do not know the sport, but because the value the sport can create is still limited. It does not currently work like an NCAA sport that can help students earn school opportunities, or like a job that can provide enough income for living. More importantly, too few people watch it, so the market value related to it is limited, and thus it cannot thrive.

In China, Ultimate still needs stronger professionalization and commercialization structures. It becomes meaningful when standards, organizations, occupations, and pathways make participation and viewing repeatable.

The current Ultimate system can already connect some curious viewers to clubs, improvement processes, and the whole community. Audiences may find schedules for games, clips and videos related to the sport, and sponsor exposure around tournaments. But the sport still needs something beyond this to become a sport that can create value for more people.

Narrative infrastructure can create practical improvement. It supplies the continuity of relationships behind games: named athletes, recorded results, rivalries, archives, and consequences over time. O'Brien and Gleeson show how long-term match records can support analysis of professional snooker careers [4]; the broader lesson is that recorded results, rankings, rosters, and histories make sporting consequences followable. A sport may produce impressive highlights yet still lack public career memory if athletes, teams, events, and seasons do not remain identifiable over time. In the case of Ultimate, it needs more trackable and direct information around matches.

Commercial infrastructure includes instruction, membership, events, facilities, equipment, media products, and recurring brand relationships [5, 6]. Commercial market depth refers to repeated participation, spectatorship, commercial relationships, and identity attachment over time. As the article previously mentioned, Ultimate does have these elements in tournaments or matches. However, hosts of games and practitioners of this sport should put more energy into it. They should focus on whether these activities can generate durable relationships among players, audiences,

organizers, sponsors, and media producers. Only when this is prioritized can commercial market depth be strengthened.

3. Method

The paper uses a comparative case-study design with embedded practitioner background. Ultimate in China is the primary case. Practitioner material from youth-led promotion and school outreach is used as situated context for problems of market depth.

The six comparison cases, which are former minor sports that became visible and well recognized by the public, were selected for theoretical variation. Skateboarding and sport climbing clarify contested institutionalization, facilities, certification, and formalization; snooker and cycling clarify rankings, event identity, media products, and career continuity; basketball and diving provide contrast cases for legible athlete pathways and state-led elite legitimacy. The analysis identifies transferable mechanisms and boundary conditions rather than success models to copy.

The evidence used for the comparative cases is secondary: academic literature, sport-management theory, historical accounts, and selected media or industry sources already cited in the paper. The analysis asks how each sport made participation, competition, athletes, events, or commercial relationships more durable, stable, and deep over time. It does not claim that any comparison case is fully similar to Ultimate in China. The comparison cases are not treated as success models. Each isolates one development mechanism that is useful for Ultimate only with boundary conditions. This matters because Ultimate differs from individual lifestyle sports, and it is self-officiated. This paper asks which pieces of infrastructure made each sport legible to participants, audiences, institutions, or commercial partners, and then considers whether a smaller and culturally appropriate version of that function could clarify Ultimate's development problem.

Table 1. Comparative sports selection logic

Case	Why included	Main mechanism	Transferable lesson	Boundary condition
Skateboarding	Formerly stigmatized lifestyle activity.	Contested institutionalization and athlete-media-brand networks.	Coordinate institutions without erasing credible athlete culture.	Individual trick culture differs from Ultimate.
Sport climbing	Facility-based route to formal participation.	Facilities, certification, safety, standardization.	Access and coaching can turn interest into repeat participation.	Gyms monetize more easily than fields.
Snooker	Trackable niche media product.	Rankings, tour, broadcast, career continuity.	Archives and recurring events make stakes followable.	Indoor two-player format differs.
Road cycling	Durable event identity despite changing teams.	Event IP, routes, sponsors, media narrative.	Build recurring event names, records, and sponsor inventory.	Sponsor/equipment economy differs.
Basketball	Legible participation-to-star pathway.	School-club-league-star system.	Link schools, clubs, named competitions, and athlete stories.	Scale cannot be reproduced.

Table 1. (continued)

Diving	State-led elite legitimacy.	Medals, national narrative, disciplined athlete stories.	Narrate selection, training, and achievement.	State-led medal Pathway is not transferable.
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Table 1 summarizes the case-selection logic, the mechanism each comparison isolates, and the boundary condition that limits direct transfer to Ultimate.

4. Ultimate in China: presence, legitimacy, and governance

Chinese Ultimate already contains clubs, tournaments, school sessions, informal teams, creator networks, training, and some commercial activity. The difficulty is that these forms do not yet combine into a widely legible sport system with stable entry points, regular progression, and recognizable athletes. Liu et al. show that football-field conflict also involves space, identity, and generational sport culture, making legitimacy a management condition as well as a communication issue [7].

Self-officiation is part of this condition. WFDF rules describe Ultimate as a self-officiated sport governed through Spirit of the Game [8]. This supports trust, fairness, and player responsibility, but complicates external legibility in settings accustomed to referees. The issue is not that Spirit of the Game prevents development or that referees would solve commercialization. It is a governance tension: formalization may aid recognition while also threatening values that participants regard as distinctive [9, 10].

A school may have students and teachers who know the sport, a club running training, and a tournament that occurs annually. But the system could still pose challenges for newcomers, spectators, sponsors, or media producers to follow. Thus, institutional absorption is the process of making the scattered forms legible and connected. This is because these assets often remain fragmented. Another point to focus on is a deeper analysis of the system and management of Ultimate.

5. Comparative pathways

Skateboarding demonstrates that a stigmatized sport can gain institutional recognition through events, athlete media networks, brands, and inclusion in the Olympics, while still remaining controversial in terms of culture and representation [11, 12]. Sport climbing, on the other hand, highlights the importance of facilities, safety, certification, and standardized competitions, and its Olympic form raises concerns that formality should not be regarded as neutral [13]. These cases indicate that what is ultimately needed is a credible coordination mechanism and participation infrastructure, but Ultimate cannot simply replicate the facility or clothing economic models of individual sports.

Both skateboarding and sport climbing show that recognition can create new resources and also change the culture of participation. For example, coach training, safer campus promotion, grading standards, and clearer competition rules help solve practical coordination problems. These factors should not be seen as reasons to eliminate self-officiation, mixed-gender participation, or community governance.

Snooker and cycling demonstrate how continuity can transform events into media and commercial assets. Snooker's rankings and records make careers, status, and consequences traceable; O'Brien and Gleeson demonstrated the value of long-term competition archives [4].

Cycling shows that repetitive events can maintain their identity through routes, history, point charts, host locations, and broadcast narratives, even as teams and sponsors change [14, 15]. For Ultimate, transferable functions include the identity of repetitive events, basic archives, participant lists, competition results, and stories that link one competition to the next. This is particularly important for a team-based sport, as highlights often take athletes away from their specific context. A spectacular score may be widely publicized, but no one informs the audience who participated in the competition, which event it was, what the subsequent results were, or why this game was important. Snooker and cycling demonstrate that when isolated performances are linked to long-term traceable factors such as rankings, schedules, history, and consequences, their commercial value increases. Basketball demonstrates the mutually reinforcing effect among schools, clubs, leagues, stars, and the media, jointly making athletes' careers more clearly defined [16, 17]. Diving showcases the legitimacy created by national institutions, elite achievements, and national narratives, but this approach ultimately cannot be replicated by Ultimate [18, 19]. In the six cases, the common mechanisms include coordination, visible progress, traceable consequences, and repeatable products.

The comparison does not point to a single model. Skateboarding and sport climbing highlight controversial institutionalization; snooker and cycling emphasize records, event identity, and media continuity; basketball and diving showcase clear paths and the power of institutional recognition. For Ultimate, the relevant experience lies in functionality rather than imitation: without erasing cultural characteristics, it needs to construct smaller versions of coordination, progress, athlete memory, and repeatable products, which are precisely the key elements that make the sport meaningful to participants.

The reason why this comprehensive analysis is important is that Ultimate exists between multiple categories. It is both a team-based competitive event and a sport that conveys alternative-sport values through self-officiation and community governance. It can be used for leisure, competition, socializing, and school activities. Therefore, choosing only one comparative case cannot solve its development problems. It requires a multi-level infrastructure that can support participation, retention, watching, and commercial cooperation at different levels.

6. Discussion and implications

Visibility should always be regarded as a recruitment channel, rather than being mistaken for a development system. This visibility truly functions when institutions provide continuous support: school connections, beginner groups, regular activities, clubs, event arrangements, athlete stories, and communities that persist even after video clips disappear. Recruitment should facilitate retention and transition, rather than a series of intermittent introductions.

This changes the way promotion is evaluated. The number of views and likes remain valid engagement indicators, but they cannot be considered effective measures of growth unless they are combined with actions such as consultation, trial training registration, community joining, event viewing, repeated participation, or transfer to school, club, or city events. The key lies not in denying online visibility, but in connecting it with traceable continuity.

Commercialization requires narrative infrastructure as well as organizational support. When viewers can identify the team, the opponents, the selection process, the season, and the next game, player profiles become particularly important. Records, lineups, event histories, and archival materials provide media producers, schools, and sponsors with more enduring content resources than one-off spectacular highlights. Flexible team formation helps encourage participation, but when viewers cannot establish a connection with stable team names, records, opponents, or careers, it will

undermine commercial continuity. This is not a defect but a trade-off: flexibility promotes participation, while stability helps with audience retention and commercialization.

The key factor lies in commercial market depth. Although existing events, live broadcasts, training camps, clubs, creator content, and school or community activities demonstrate activity levels, they often remain participant-centered or biased toward internal groups. Ultimate may perform well as a participation sport, but it has not yet developed into a spectator-oriented sport. Live broadcasts solve the problem of dissemination, but they fail to address demand: viewers need teams, athletes, competitive confrontations, stakes, and consequences to make the broadcast provide a continuous viewing experience. Persistence alone cannot create market depth; if a sport is repeated year after year but lacks external audiences, stable identities, viewer data, or sponsorship relationships, its commercial value will be difficult to sustain.

Based on the above analysis, the actual priorities become clear: activities for schools and beginner groups need to determine the next course of action. Local competitions need to have a fixed schedule and make a transition with clubs or university/community teams; media need the continuity of athletes and teams; activities need names, archives, registration and audience data, as well as feasible sponsorship resources. The deeper market should not only support athletes, but also cover coaches, youth-program operators, organizers, media producers, data workers, club managers, and roles for sponsors. The sequence of this process is: visibility, institutional absorption, continuity, commercial market depth, and sustained commercialization.

Therefore, commercialization should be understood as a recurring relationship, rather than a single sponsor logo or live streaming link. Sponsors establish relationships with events, teams, audiences, venues, athletes, or communities, and these entities must maintain continuity in order to maintain value. The depth of professionalism also depends on repetition: only when sports have a continuous demand for related positions will roles such as coaches, media production, data analysis, event operations, and club management gain credibility.

The implication is clear: entry programs should not be limited to the initial presentation; competition should not be confined to isolated events; and media should not be restricted to sporadic highlights. Commercial cooperation should not end with one-time sponsorship. Each activity requires the next connection point to convert exposure into institutional absorption, absorption into sustainability, sustainability into a deeper market, and deeper relationships into more durable commercialization.

7. Conclusion

The bottleneck of Ultimate in China does not lie in the lack of exposure, but rather in the weak absorption capacity of institutions and the limited depth of the commercial market. Comparative cases indicate that only when attention is combined with event pathways, event records, athlete narratives, and repeatable linkage mechanisms does it truly have development significance. The next challenge is not merely to add more commercial forms, but to deepen those relationships that can continue to matter for events, teams, athletes, audiences, and professional roles.

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