

Chinese cyclists complete marathon trek

Olympic enthusiasts ride from Beijing to London in about 5 months

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"How far is Beijing to London? Just the distance between two wheels."

So said the introduction to the four-minute video clip "2012: We cycle to London" on Youku.com, China's equivalent to YouTube. The clip had been clicked more than 13 million times before the opening of the Olympics on Friday.

The marathon trek took a team of 12 Chinese, aged between 20 and 57, more than five months and covered almost 160,000 kilometers.

The 727 Cycling Team reached London on July 23, four days ahead of its scheduled arrival date — the opening day of the Games.

The journey took them to 18 countries, ranging from western European economic powerhouses like Germany to strife-torn Pakistan.

"It was in July or August in 2009 when an online post saying '2012 let's cycle to London' caught my attention," Jiang Min, a 33-year-old from Changzhou of eastern China's Jiangsu province, recalled how the journey began.

A hardcore fan of outdoor activities and adventures, Jiang, who later became the leader of the cycling team, immediately replied to the post, as did others



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JIANG MIN
CHINESE AMATEUR CYCLIST

interested in the venture.

A group of about 40 people then met in Beijing in March 2010.

After about two years of preparation, the team completed a trial journey from Beijing to Nanjing, Jiangsu province, in July last year.

A second, longer ride from Nanjing to Kunming, in Southwest China's mountainous Yunnan province, was taken on by a select team of 11 riders in February, which formally began the five-month-long adventure to London.

"The most important thing was team spirit," Jiang said, relating how the final team was selected.

Also, all members were true cycling enthusiasts and some gave up top jobs to take part. Jiang was more fortunate as he runs a software company with some friends.

The team shared the workload with Jiang, with the most experienced in outdoor activities, leading the hardy band.

A rider from Chongqing became the team's chef and made many spicy dishes to sate the riders' appetites. A young woman from Hubei was in charge of writing a diary to record the highs and lows of the journey.

The most impressive moment, for Jiang, was the team's experience in Pakistan, where people invited them to their homes and market vendors gave them free food.

But things changed when they arrived in Quetta, near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

"The team was immediately 'invited' to the police station. The police didn't allow us to cycle on to Iran for security reasons," Jiang said. "See how many bullets holes we have on our police vehicle, the police told us."

Afghan and Western officials claim the Taliban has used Quetta, the capital of the Pakistan province of Balochistan, as a major hideout.

They stayed in the police station for a day and a half, then the police offered to drive them to the Iranian border.

But that was not the biggest difficulty they encountered. That was getting British visas, according to Jiang.

Four members were left in Paris as they were unable to acquire British visitor visas.

Han Lei, a 28-year-old from Tianjin, told China Daily they had submitted their applications on July 10 to the British Consulate in Dusseldorf, Germany.



Chinese amateur cyclists of the 727 Cycling Team pose for a photo on the London Bridge upon their arrival in the city on July 23. They spent more than five months riding all the way from Beijing to London.

"We planned to arrive in London before the Olympic Games opened, but we won't make it now because we didn't get the visa in time," he said on the phone from France in a low voice.

"Obviously, it is very disappointing to hear that group's story, because the whole idea of an exercise like that is team spirit. It is definitely a shame," said Mary Rance, chief executive of British tourism indus-

try association UKInbound. "I've also heard from people in the tourism industry that some delegations experienced visa problems. Sometimes some members of the group are not granted visas because some people make errors when they fill in their application forms. Sometimes an entire group decides not to come to London because some individual members of

the group do not receive their visas," she said.

"In general, the feedback I received from the industry is that visa processing times in China were getting better in period leading up to the Olympics. But we'd like to see this all the time, and not just before the Olympics," Rance said.

A spokesperson from UK Border Agency declined to

comment, saying that no statements can be made on individual cases.

Han said they would still cycle to London as soon as the visas were issued.

However, the stranded riders are facing a race against time as they need to return to Beijing in early August.

"We may have to leave earlier as getting the visas have cost us more than a month," Jiang said.

Politics aside, manufacturing and designing — for the Olympics, or otherwise — is now a global exercise.

Erik Nilsson unravels the intricate connections.

GET REAL, WE ARE ALL INVOLVED

The revelation that Team USA's Olympic ceremony uniforms were made in China — although designed by "all-American" brand Ralph Lauren — ignited a political firestorm Stateside.

This burning anger culminated with Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid saying: "I think they should take all the uniforms, put them in a big pile and burn them, and start all over again."

In a rare moment of bipartisanship, Reid's usual archrival, Republican House Speaker John A. Boehner, said: "You think they'd know better."

The US Olympic committee's CEO Scott Blackmun responded: "With athletes having already arrived in London, and the apparel distribution process beginning this weekend, we are unfortunately not able to make a change for London."

Then American Apparel's CEO Dov Charney fanned the flames by declaring: "American Apparel could start working on uniforms today and have them in London within seven days." His offer was published 11 days before the Games.

Ralph Lauren has pledged to manufacture the 2014 Winter Games' uniforms in the US.

But history and the realities outside the country show these flames of outrage are actually just smoke and mirrors. The real inferno is the election.

The Democratic camp hopes to highlight GOP presidential hopeful Mitt Romney's history of outsourcing and offshoring. The Republican camp, as a whole, can't afford right now to be seen as unsympathetic to the hundreds of thousands of garment workers who lost their jobs in the Great Recession.

But Romney, who has promised to "get tough on China," can't afford to say much, except: "The Olympic Games are about

the athletes ... and these other matters are extraneous, I think."

The incident is also an opportunity for Democrats to remind voters that Romney, at the helm of the US committee of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, outsourced the manufacture of torchbearer uniforms to "Burma".

When more than 1,000 activists e-mailed the Salt Lake Organizing Committee's media relations department, while torchbearers also publicly voiced disgust, the committee released a statement: "The torch relay clothes were NOT made in Burma. They were manufactured in Myanmar. In fact, they were made in the exact same factory that produces clothes for GAP, North Face and other major clothing labels."

When activists pointed out Burma and Myanmar are two names for the same country, the committee apologized for "misinformation". Funnily enough, the uniforms' tags were printed with: "Made in Burma (Myanmar)".

It is noteworthy that in the last Summer Olympics (2008) and in many previous Games, Team USA's uniforms were also made in China, but no uproar is as loud as in this election year.

Most of China's team uniforms are designed by the US company Nike — rather than premium domestic sportswear company Li-Ning. The Chinese company even takes its name from the Olympic gymnastics champion who made the country proud by snapping up six medals in the first Summer Games his homeland fully joined in 1984.

The story becomes clearer, yet more complex, when you consider Li-Ning was overlooked by its home country but is designing this year for the US diving team; Argentine's basketball team; Spain's basketball team; Jamaica 100m sprinter Asafa Powell; Russian

pole vaulter Yelena Isinbayeva; and Norwegian javelin thrower Andreas Thorkildsen.

And if not Li-Ning, China could have gone with Peak, which is creating for seven countries — New Zealand, Slovenia, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Cyprus — and three foreign athletes. Peak has more sponsorships in London than any other company after Nike and adidas.

There are several other Chinese companies that are creating for other countries but not their homeland, including Qiaodan, Erke, 361 and Xtep.

And there has been no discernible outcry in China — a country that has taken special pride in its Olympic legacy since it hosted the 2008 Games.

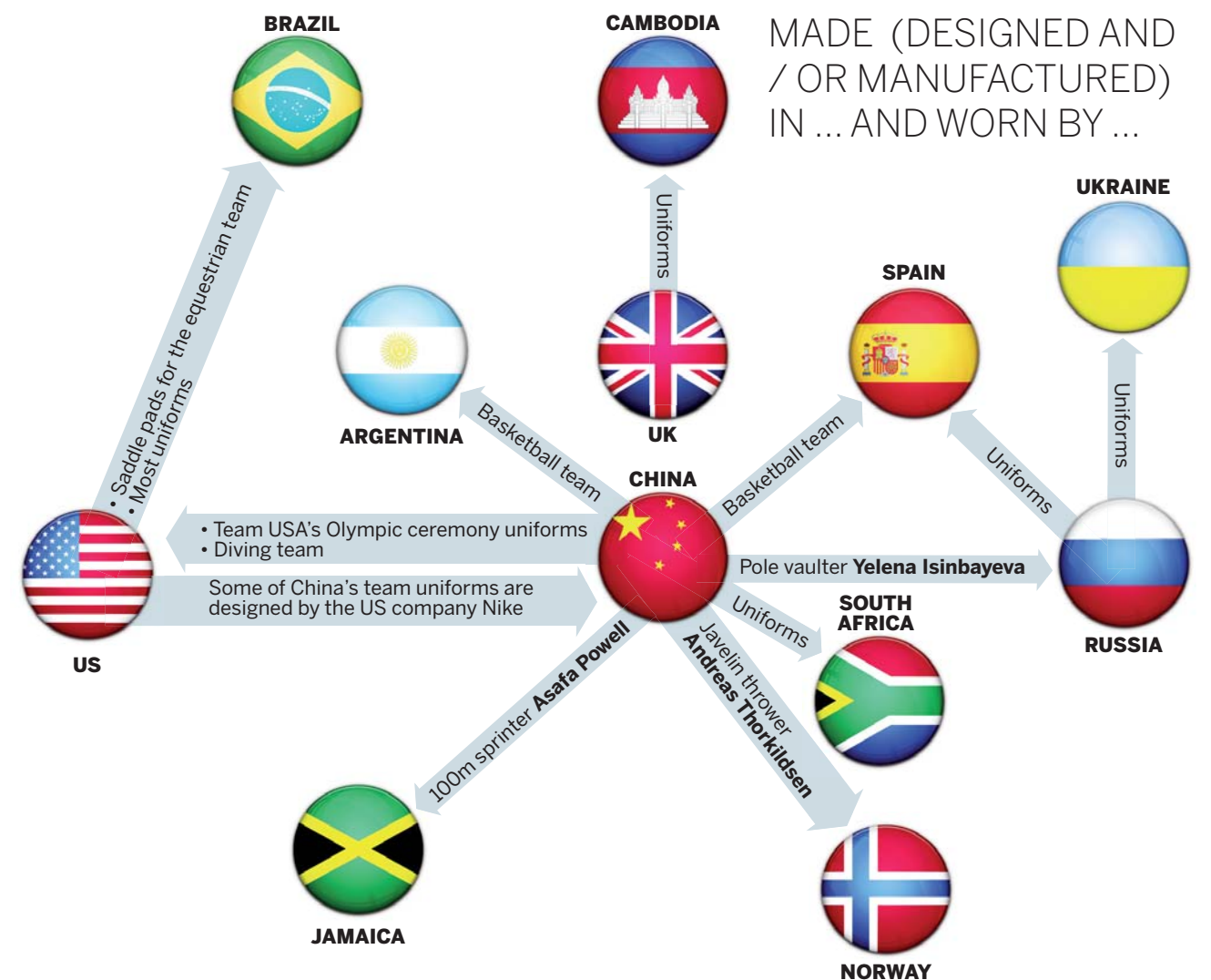
Even this year's host country has not escaped controversy. Its uniforms were made in Cambodian factories.

However, the UK debate isn't about whether producing the uniforms overseas hurts the British garment-making industry — rather, it's centered on the working conditions in the Cambodian plants.

The point the US debate misses is that the result of economic globalization — the free trade paradigm the US spearheaded and successfully fought to implement as the world's economic system — is that we're all designing and manufacturing each other's stuff.

Custom Horse Products in the US is producing the saddle pads for the Brazilian Olympic equestrian team. Nike is designing most of Brazil's uniforms. Russia's Bosco Sports designed Spain's and Ukraine's 2012 uniforms — and its homeland's.

American Apparel's CEO told media his company was in talks to produce Russia's 2014 gear. But the Russian Olympic committee clarified, saying that Bosco Sport is its exclusive sponsor until 2016



DESIGNED BY CHINESE BRANDS

 QIAODAN Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Mongolia	 ERKE Iran, South Africa, Uzbekistan	 LI-NING USA diving team, Argentine basketball team, Spanish basketball team, Asafa Powell (Jamaica 100m sprinter), Yelena Isinbayeva (Russian pole vaulter), Andreas Thorkildsen (Norway javelin thrower)	 XTEP Justin Gatlin (USA 100m sprinter)	 PEAK New Zealand, Slovenia, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Cyprus. Tennis players: Olga Govortsova (Belarus), Galina Voskoboeva (Russian), Klaudia Jans-Ignacik (Poland)	 361° DPRK, Belarus, Steven Hooker (Australian pole vaulter)
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and manufactured this year's gear in Europe and Asia.

South Africa's uniforms are designed domestically and produced in China. When the South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union complained, the country's Olympic committee president, Gideon Sam, responded by saying Erke, the Chinese producer, offered a \$4 million sponsorship, which no domestic company had done.

Olympic committees, like a microcosm of our globalized world, pick who they believe is

best to make what they want, and when and how they want it. They invest more thought in these practical concerns than to political borders.

Madagascar is virtually alone in designing and manufacturing its own uniforms this year.

But it's not just uniforms. The London Games official pins are designed and manufactured by Chinese company Honav Co Ltd because of the capabilities it displayed during the Beijing Games.

China is also making almost all of the flags that will fly in

London. Kings Industrial's factory in Wuyi county, Zhejiang province, will make 40 million flags for the London Olympics.

In today's globalized world, who makes what in what country and for whom are political — but impractical — questions.

A better question might be why the Ralph Lauren Big Pony on Team USA's uniform dwarfs the US flag.

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