

Perpetual pace

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In China, everything is busy, busy, busy. Industrialisation and development have gathered pace incessantly for years. With the Olympics just around the corner specifically sporting activity is even more frenetic.

Even in a place like Xiamen, traditionally a town of repose, you can feel the pace pulsing all around you. Xiamen's has a reputation within China as a laid-back seaside resort. Located on an island in the South China Sea, but connected to the mainland by two road bridges and one railway bridge, Xiamen looks out over the straight towards Taiwan and beyond.



Previously known to the western world as Amoy, Xiamen was frequented by a host of foreigners seeking trading opportunities, from Portuguese and Dutch to British and French. They were met with restrictions that gradually tightened, so that Amoy was declared closed in 1760 and foreign trade handled exclusively through Canton, 500km further west – and even there, restrictions still applied.

It seemed like a bureaucratic wall had been erected along the South China Coast, which for a while was just as effective as the physical bulk of the Great Wall in keeping undesirables out. But trade, like water, finds its own level. As the British (and American) taste for tea developed, so too did their trade deficits with the Chinese Empire. To redress the balance Britain in particular encouraged a parallel addiction of Chinese nationals to Indian-grown opium – assiduously sponsored by the British East India Company.

By 1830 Chinese consumption of opium was rapidly increasing. Despite prohibition, foreign traders found ways to infiltrate. There was no way to negotiate out of the impasse, and in the 1839-42 Opium War a flotilla of 38 British gunboats were sent to forcibly open the town up to foreign trade.

Xiamen was originally a reluctant trader – and given the nature of the trade that was not surprising – but in recent times the town has seized every opportunity to project itself to the outside world. The marathon is one means through which this has been achieved.

That's partly what inspired the organisers of the Xiamen International Marathon, first held



in 2003, to travel to Scotland three years ago to observe the Edinburgh Marathon, and to Spain back in February 2005 in order to bid to host the 16th World Congress of AIMS (in which effort they succeeded – hosting Congresses is another means by which the town projects its image overseas). And to Vancouver this year.

It is a perpetual quest. "Faster, higher, stronger" may be the Olympic motto, but the Xiamen Marathon organisers have made it their own. Faster runners, higher numbers of participants, stronger race organisation – these are relentlessly pursued by all available means.

In this year's fifth edition of the race a combined field of 25,000 took 20 minutes to clear the start line outside the Xiamen Convention Centre. The elite runners of the marathon and joggers in the half marathon finally gave way to large fancy-dressed groups who walked for much of the 10km and 5km events.

The lead group in the marathon set out along the corniche road which rings Xiamen Island towards the centre of the city. They began at 2:09 tempo, but soon decided it

was a pace that could not be perpetuated, and started to slow. After 16km the course turns away from the coast for a loop around the centre of the city, where dense crowds of spectators lined the streets.

Amid the attractive colonial buildings that line leafy streets in the central area, a latter-day battle was fought out against foreign domination. A significant group of Kenyans had been recruited through European agents (still keen to trade, after all these years). Kenyans had won previous editions, but always had to contend with stiff home opposition. In this year's race it took the form of Zhi Hong Li who, perhaps lifted by the cheers of the crowd went ahead of the group, along with a pacemaker, and led by some 20m at halfway.

After circling the city centre, runners completed a short out-and-back section before turning to take the long and winding road back towards the finish line at the Xiamen Convention Centre. The view continually changes along the scenic coastline, starting with that across the inlet to the small island of Gulang Yu. This is where foreign traders lived in the nineteenth century, and today a population of



| | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|------------|----------------|
| MEN: | | | |
| 1 | Zhu Hong LI | CHN | 2:13:17 |
| 2 | Haron TOROITICH | KEN | 2:13:25 |
| 3 | Meshak KIRWA | KEN | 2:15:47 |
| 4 | Julius SUGUT | KEN | 2:16:37 |
| 5 | Yun Shan ZHEN | CHN | 2:18:15 |
| 6 | Robert MANGIUSHO | KEN | 2:19:08 |
| 7 | Long Yun REN | CHN | 2:19:14 |
| 8 | Philip BIRECH | KEN | 2:19:45 |
| WOMEN: | | | |
| 1 | Xiao Lin ZHU | CHN | 2:26:07 |
| 2 | Wei Wei SUN | CHN | 2:29:27 |
| 3 | Shu Jin ZHENG | CHN | 2:31:14 |
| 4 | Yin Yin ZHENG | CHN | 2:36:52 |
| 5 | Shawuti NUERGULI | CHN | 2:37:53 |
| 6 | Yin Yin ZHU | CHN | 2:38:16 |
| 7 | Wen Qin SUN | CHN | 2:39:50 |
| 8 | Emily SAMOIE | KEN | 2:40:18 |
| HALF MARATHON | | | |
| MEN: | | | |
| 1 | Fu Liang WANG | CHN | 1:10:18 |
| 2 | Lei FEN | CHN | 1:11:26 |
| 3 | Zhen LIN | CHN | 1:14:51 |
| WOMEN: | | | |
| 1 | Xue Xia HUNG | CHN | 1:17:27 |
| 2 | Gi LI | CHN | 1:22:18 |
| 3 | Xiao Qin WU | CHN | 1:25:33 |



16,000 people inhabit an area of less than two square kilometres, amid the colonial architecture and cultivated gardens that cluster around Sunlight Rock, Xiamen's highest peak.

With Gulang Yu behind him, race leader Li was caught at 24km and soon fell back. At the 08.00 start it had already been 20°C, and the temperature rose steadily while humidity was over 80%. These untypically oppressive conditions now started to make themselves felt. The lead pair of Kenyans slowed and Li found himself back alongside them. For the last few kilometres of the race Li repeatedly tried to surge but he could not shake Haron Toroitich off.

As they passed 40km they ran alongside the sculpture "perpetual pace" - a succession of 99 bronzes depicting figures engaged in a race. IOC President Jacques Rogge liked them so much that the 100th figure of the collection now stands outside the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. Just beyond these, and only a kilometre from the finish line, lies another monument - a huge metal sculpture commemorating the 16th World Congress of AIMS in Xiamen that had ended just the day before the race, and on which the

names of all AIMS member events are inscribed.

Turning away from the coast into the final winding 800m stretch, it looked like Toroitich was waiting his moment to strike. But the vociferous crowd roused Li's competitive spirit and he charged past Toroitich to win by some 50m. In the women's race Xiao Lin Zhu ran solo from gun to tape to record an extremely impressive time under the torrid conditions. Even in the Olympic build-up, home victories like these cannot be made to order - but the Xiamen Marathon itself is a winning event.



RACE CONTACT DETAILS

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Full race contact listings start on page 70