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9B21M030

THE QINGDAO INTERNATIONAL BEER FESTIVAL’S PANDEMIC PREDICAMENT

Su Liu and Paul Beamish wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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On June 12, 2020, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was detected on the boards used to cut imported salmon in Beijing’s Xinfadi Market, leading to China’s second COVID-19 outbreak.[[1]](#footnote-1) The first outbreak had started in Wuhan and had been effectively controlled in China. The new outbreak added to the uncertainty surrounding preparations for the 30th Qingdao International Beer Festival (QIBF). Under such conditions, the organizer of the QIBF called all the festival committee members and immediately scheduled a meeting to discuss whether the 30th QIBF could be held as planned. As expected by the QIBF organizer, it would clearly be difficult to hold a warm and friendly festival while also respecting protocols for the prevention and control of COVID-19 outbreaks during mass gatherings.

Due to COVID-19, numerous international events, such as the Tokyo Olympic Games and the UEFA Champions League (European Cup), had been delayed or even cancelled in 2020. In the first half of the year, China’s large-scale activities had largely ceased. Other world-famous beer festivals had also been cancelled. In such a situation, it would not be easy for the QIBF to hold its annual celebration as usual. However, if the QIBF could be held successfully, it might not only rebuild confidence within the festival and tourism industries but also help these industries to bounce back from the COVID-19 pandemic, benefiting global peers. On the other hand, all industries needed to act responsibly and support the prevention and control of COVID-19. Facing the second wave of COVID-19 outbreaks and the unclear tourism industry recovery policy of the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism, could this festival be held successfully? Should the organizers try to hold it?

Qingdao International Beer Festival (QIBF)

The QIBF started in 1991 and had been successfully held each August for 29 consecutive years. Initially, only Qingdao citizens participated in this festival; however, in 2019, after continuous development, a total of seven million people, including Qingdao citizens and out-of-town tourists, attended the festival. The QIBF was now a large-scale festival with international influence across various sectors, including tourism, culture, sports, the economy, and trade. As one of the longest-running festivals in China, the QIBF had received numerous honours and was ranked number one among China’s top 10 festivals.[[2]](#footnote-2)

People from around the world knew Qingdao because it was home to Tsingtao Beer. In more than a century of development since Tsingtao Beer’s birth in 1903, the city’s beer culture had become the most vivid symbol of Qingdao’s cultural traditions and lifestyle. Two factors guaranteed the success of the QIBF—the support from Qingdao citizens and the good reputation of the Tsingtao Beer brand. These two factors enabled the sustainable development and competitive ability of the QIBF. Moreover, because of nearly 30 years of synergetic development of Qingdao, Tsingtao Beer, and the QIBF, Qingdao’s beer festival stood out among numerous beer festivals domestically and around the world. The QIBF would celebrate its 30th birthday in August 2020, and the organizer was planning an even greater beer festival. However, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted these plans.

COVID-19’s Influence on China’s Festivals

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on China’s various industries was enormous, especially in the performing arts, tourism, exhibition, and sporting industries. For instance, most festivals had been delayed, cancelled, or held online. Festivals encouraged people to gather, connect, interact, eat, and drink with one another, which posed a difficult task for the organizer due to the COVID-19 infection threat.

From January to March 2020, all Chinese people were asked to quarantine at home. With COVID-19 infection prevention and control being China’s top priority, the QIBF organizer considered whether to cancel the 30th QIBF in 2020 and needed to carefully evaluate the possible negative effects. All organizing members would be upset with a cancellation decision because the negative effects would be huge. Qingdao might lose some of its attraction for international tourists, and all related commercial bodies might lose confidence in the QIBF and reduce their support for it. The QIBF would suffer great losses because of the decrease in both its popularity and its resource investment.

The festival’s activities involved a huge market chain, in which different participants from both upstream and downstream industries closely co-operated with one another. For example, before the festival, advertising and design firms would first decide on a festival theme; then news media and travel agencies, together with airline companies and food and hotel industries, would take this theme as an important selling point and undertake a marketing campaign to attract more tourists. During the festival, the participating beer and food suppliers, equipment rental providers (e.g., for lighting and audio), and performing arts companies would receive economic benefits.

At the same time, the QIBF was also an ambassador for the Qingdao people’s cultural beliefs. Generations of citizens in this maritime city loved beer and had formed a deep bond with it. Therefore, the QIBF represented not merely a confluence of economic interests that contributed to the beer industry and Qingdao’s economy. More importantly, it expressed the culture of the city. Therefore, the suspension of the beer festival, even if only for one session, would not only lead to economic disruption but could also have cultural drawbacks for Qingdao.

**POSSIBLE BENEFITS AT HOME AND ABROAD**

If the 30th QIBF could be held successfully in the shadow of COVID-19, it would be the first large, high-profile festival held this way and could provide a leading model for COVID-19 prevention and control for other festivals. Thus, the QIBF organizers felt they were endowed with a special mission and responsibility—to successfully hold the festival in an attempt to demonstrate China’s success in controlling COVID-19.

From a broader international perspective, due to the threat of COVID-19, all other famous beer festivals had been cancelled—including Germany’s Oktoberfest, the Great American Beer Festival in Denver, Toronto’s Festival of Beer in Canada, and Britain’s Great British Beer Festival. Although the COVID-19 pandemic had caused great difficulties for the global tourism industry, new developing opportunities had emerged, such as greater online promotions and smart tourism.

If the QIBF could be held as scheduled, it could provide evidence of China’s success in promoting the recovery of the tourism industry and could offer valuable lessons to the whole world. By successfully hosting the festival during a pandemic, the QIBF would attract even more attention than before.

The world was experiencing a great change that had not happened for a century. All countries faced unprecedented challenges, such as unilateralism, rising trade protectionism, and adverse economic currents. China, in facing the COVID-19 threat, urgently needed a better international environment for mutually beneficial development among nations. Hosting large-scale international events could be an effective way both to convey to the world China’s confidence in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and to enhance China’s co-operation with other countries.

**THE GLOBAL SITUATION**

Throughout much of the world, virtually all large-scale public events planned for mid- to late 2020, including major sporting events, festivals, and concerts, had been cancelled or postponed.[[3]](#footnote-3) Professional sporting leagues such as the National Basketball Association, the National Hockey League, and Major League Baseball had games in North America, but with reduced schedules and with no live audiences in attendance. The teams were required to isolate within bubbles (e.g., at the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando for basketball and in hotel complexes within cities such as Edmonton and Toronto for hockey).[[4]](#footnote-4) In North America and Europe, many weddings and funerals faced cancellations or severe restrictions on the number of attendees permitted.[[5]](#footnote-5) Non-essential businesses were often temporarily shuttered, and travel was discouraged. Long-term care homes were particularly vulnerable due to the higher mortality rate of elderly residents.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Various protests were some of the only large-scale gatherings taking place. The threat of the second wave of COVID-19 outbreaks loomed when school resumed after summer and lower temperatures and humidity increased the risk of COVID-19 spreading. Contact tracing was sometimes used, but in areas with huge outbreaks it was difficult to be accurate. Social gatherings were encouraged outdoors rather than indoors. The use of masks was recommended in public but not always mandated.

The main risk of large public gatherings was the occurrence of “superspreader events,” (see Exhibit 1) which contributed to the national and global transmission of COVID-19. For example, 7,000 confirmed cases had been linked to a soccer game in Milan, Italy; more than 5,000 positive cases had been linked to a religious event in South Korea; and more than 4,000 confirmed cases had been linked to glove factories in Malaysia.[[7]](#footnote-7) Ironically, a biotech meeting in February 2019 in Boston might have ultimately spread 300,000 cases around the world.[[8]](#footnote-8) One study found that a US motorcycle rally in Sturgis, South Dakota, might have caused 260,000 cases of coronavirus.[[9]](#footnote-9) Superspreader events were much likelier to occur indoors than outdoors. These events could often be predicted according to the three Vs: venue (with many people indoors), ventilation (people clustering with limited fresh air), and vocalization (people talking or shouting).[[10]](#footnote-10)

The World Health Organization had identified three main factors in assessing the risk of holding events during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) the normative and epidemiological setting in which the event occurs; (2) an evaluation of risks linked to the event; and (3) the capacity to employ disease prevention and control actions.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In contrast to the Western context, in which partial lockdowns were common but strict controls (within a country or at the border) were not, China was more assertive in using strong laws to fight COVID-19 outbreaks (e.g., laws mandating masks, temperature tests, location tracking, and health verifications).

Restarting the Festival Plan

China had contained the spread of COVID-19 by quickly implementing resolute prevention and control measures. By the end of March 2020, COVID-19’s spread in China had been effectively controlled.[[12]](#footnote-12) At the same time, governments at all levels had started to fully support and promote the resumption of work of all enterprises and markets affected by the pandemic. Qingdao tourist attractions, which had been closed due to the pandemic, would also be open by April 2020,[[13]](#footnote-13) which was undoubtedly good news for the organizer of the QIBF. With less than four months until the 30th QIBF in August, the organizer felt confident the festival could proceed as scheduled.

Thus, the QIBF organizer decided in April 2020 to restart planning for the festival and immediately revised the 30th QIBF organizing plan based on the COVID-19 prevention and control work. He then applied for the Qingdao government’s approval to organize the festival, aiming to hold it in August, as usual. Because Qingdao was a tourist city, the Qingdao government was actively exploring various measures to promote the tourism industry’s recovery. The plan to hold the 30th QIBF had attracted great attention for the Qingdao government, which immediately organized a meeting to discuss in detail (1) whether the QIBF could be held in August; (2) how the QIBF could be properly planned under pandemic conditions; and (3) whether the organizer could safely control the potential risk of a COVID-19 outbreak. People attending the meeting strongly disagreed about these issues.

The issues that the organizers were debating and concerned with were unsurprising. During a beer festival, people would drink together and socialize, making it difficult to keep the necessary distance to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Moreover, in addition to drinking, food was an important part of the beer festival—especially seafood items, such as fried clams, grilled oysters, and prawns[[14]](#footnote-14)—which added extra difficulties in terms of COVID-19 prevention and control.

The Organizer’s 30th QIBF Plan

“Online and Offline” Mode

The organizer estimated that the number of foreign and non-local tourists who would visit Qingdao to participate in the QIBF in the summer of 2020 might be greatly reduced due to the COVID-10 pandemic. Meanwhile, based on the principle of maintaining a certain social distance between people, the organizer also planned not to allow as many attendees as before. As such, the decrease in the number of participants could harm the QIBF’s popularity.

Although many people would be unable to attend the QIBF due to the pandemic, they were yearning for it. If the QIBF was offered online, interaction with these eager beer fans could be realized, which could potentially attract and cultivate more participants. Although some had not previously attended the QIBF, they could access an online live webcast. Despite attracting fewer participants, the festival could still be fun and successful, which would give the online audience a good impression and might lead them to participate in the on-site QIBF in the future.

Based on the need for pandemic prevention and control, the organizer thus thought it was necessary to simultaneously hold an online QIBF festival to develop new consumption scenarios. Therefore, the QIBF organizer adopted an innovative “online and offline” festival mode. This novel mode of holding a festival could potentially help to overcome temporal and geographical boundaries and effectively present the QIBF.

Accordingly, the organizer considered adjusting the promotional budget. Compared with previous years, he planned to significantly reduce the on-site reception areas and the promotional fees paid to traditional print media. Instead, more funds would be spent on various online live webcasts and promotions. If the QIBF received enough attention and clicks online, the organizer could meet his goal of maintaining or even increasing the QIBF’s popularity.

The first online QIBF would strategically co-operate with Youku, a well-known Chinese video-hosting website. Online promotions would include activities in a beer hall living room, sightseeing along the western coast of Qingdao, and exploration of the QIBF. The organizers would invite 43 groups of guests to the QIBF’s live broadcast room and open an online Taobao store called “the QIBF Mall.” This would be a unified display and sales platform for Qingdao’s famous products, and many online fashion icons would be invited to help sell them. All these online activities might improve the QIBF’s profile and boost Qingdao’s economic recovery.

the qibf’s COVID-19 Prevention and Control Measures

Unlike in previous years, the top priority and the key performance indicator of this year’s QIBF was to thoroughly prevent and control the COVID-19 pandemic. The QIBF organizer thus set up a special virus control department and designed a whole “sponsor–organizer–executive–co-organizer” mechanism targeted at COVID-19 control. Moreover, the organizer also prepared a handbook on COVID-19 prevention and control for the QIBF operators and asked them to strictly execute and obey its regulations (see Exhibit 2). These top-level designs and measures were intended to guarantee control of the COVID-19 pandemic by specifying each person’s responsibility to minimize the risk.

The QIBF organizer created detailed COVID-19 prevention and control guidelines for specific scenarios regarding visitor entrances to the QIBF, the beer tent, the opening and closing ceremonies, and so on. The guidelines also included key places including office buildings, hotels, shopping malls and supermarkets, banks, restaurants, barber shops, farmers’ markets, tourist attractions, theatres, convention centres, exhibition halls, museums, art galleries, dance halls, and medical institutions. For each different scenario, the organizer prepared and reserved epidemic prevention and control supplies, including masks, soap, and disinfectant; set up emergency treatment areas; assigned responsibility to each unit; and enhanced staff training for healthy practices.

A detailed technical plan for disinfection and three commonly used disinfectants were provided for the festival. The QIBF made detailed plans about how to ventilate and disinfect particular items (e.g., discarded masks, garbage cans, temporary storage places, public toilets, beer glasses, tableware, cold chain food, and cleaning supplies) and major areas where people grouped together (e.g., beer tents, indoor gardens and other dining areas, kitchens, amusement facilities, and storage and transportation areas). For the preparation and use of each disinfectant, the QIBF provided various types of personal protective equipment, including masks, hats, gloves, and work clothes, as well as effective disinfection time.

The staff was divided into categories including salespersons, security guards, sanitation workers, cleaners, waiters, food sellers, and servers. For each category, the organizer provided specific detailed guidelines for daily self-health monitoring and self-protection. From the beginning to the end, all the work staff, including service staff, event performers, and volunteers, were required to verify their identities, health conditions, and recent movements (i.e., places they had been to). The QIBF COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control headquarters planned to conduct COVID-19 screening 17 days in advance, in an attempt to ensure that all staff were healthy and free from COVID-19.

For all food supplied to the QIBF, the organizers developed a detailed COVID-19 nucleic acid sample collection and test process. Firstly, all the operators at the QIBF were required to report their imported beer and related commodities to the market supervision department in advance. Then, the market supervision department would inform the disease control department to do sampling and testing. All imported food, beer, beer containers, and related items needed to be tested, and only items with negative nucleic acid tests could be used by the QIBF.

In addition, the QIBF had prepared abundant personal protective equipment and related items for tourists, such as masks, disposable gloves, and disinfection supplies. Moreover, the organizer planned to set up stand-by medical facilities and medical service stations with on-call medical personnel and emergency vehicles to deal with emergency situations in a timely fashion.

COVID-19 Prevention and Control Requirements for Visitors

For visitors, COVID-19 prevention and control would start from the moment of entering the QIBF Park, and the number of visitors would be limited. The QIBF organizer would require the visitors to review the QIBF instructions in advance and follow them exactly, including the policy of staggered shifts for guests, which would allow the organizer to monitor the number of visitors in real time. Public security, traffic police, and other departments would be ready to regulate traffic and to control the number of tourists.

Visitors to the QIBF needed to wear masks and show their health codes to the staff. Then, the staff would use infrared imaging devices to confirm each visitor’s temperature was below 37.3°C. Only after passing these tests could the visitors enter the QIBF Park. Moreover, the visitors would have their temperatures tested again before they entered each beer tent, where the number of tables was limited to ensure tables were separated by more than one metre. In the performance area, the space between each audience member was also ensured to be more than one metre by lines drawn on the ground to illustrate the required safe distance. Inside QIBF Park, the organizer planned to use signs and volunteer guides to ensure that visitors maintained a safe physical distance and avoided excessive crowding.

The Organizer’s Anxieties

The 30th QIBF’s organizer felt much more anxious during the 2020 preparations than he had for past festivals. As of March 28, 2020, with the Chinese government’s extensive and stringent control measures and Chinese people’s active co-operation, the spread of COVID-19, which originated in Wuhan, had been basically halted in China. China’s industries, enterprises, and normal life were recovering quickly. By then, almost 99 per cent of China’s industrial enterprises of a designated size had resumed production, and almost 90 per cent of China’s employees at industrial enterprises had returned to work.[[15]](#footnote-15) With the positive trend of COVID-19 prevention and control in China, both the QIBF organizer and the Qingdao government were becoming more confident about holding the 30th QIBF.

However, another COVID-19 outbreak in Beijing on June 12, 2020, had sounded the alarm to maintain COVID-19 prevention and control. Beijing was approximately 700 kilometres from Qingdao, and Beijing citizens represented a key demographic for the QIBF organizer to attract to the festival. This situation brought more concern to the QIBF organizer. Meanwhile, news about domestic and foreign festival delays and cancellations continued one by one, which brought more pressure to the QIBF organizer. For instance, on March 30, 2020, the Tokyo Olympic organizing committee announced the postponement of the Olympic Games to 2021.[[16]](#footnote-16) As of March 15, 2020, the five European soccer leagues had cancelled all their games; all Champions League and European Cup games had also been postponed.[[17]](#footnote-17) On March 17, 2020, the European Union of Football Associations decided to postpone its games for one year.

Before the second COVID-19 outbreak in Beijing, the Qingdao Pandemic Prevention and Control Office had not officially approved the QIBF organizer’s application to hold the beer festival. But some news media and travel agencies had already started to advertise and promote the 30th QIBF. The Shandong COVID-19 prevention and control office immediately called for a halt to the advertising and asked the media to wait for the latest decision. Moreover, China’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism had not issued a formal notice to allow cross-provincial travel. Although the ministry officially announced that it was okay to reopen tourist attractions, visitors were limited to 30 per cent of attractions’ maximum capacity.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The Chinese government had exercised a high level of responsibility for COVID-19 prevention and control to protect Chinese lives and safety. With safety in mind, the QIBF organizer needed to carefully consider how to manage the festival and how to design emergency treatment strategies scientifically and effectively to ensure that all attendees would be well protected. Organizers of the QIBF felt a Damocles sword hanging over their heads.[[19]](#footnote-19) In such a difficult situation, the highest level of preparations would be required in order for the organizer to hold the 30th QIBF successfully while preventing and controlling COVID-19. Holding the QIBF would require courage and wisdom, yet would also present real risks.

Facing multiple domestic and international concerns and unfavourable circumstances, the QIBF organizer anxiously awaited official approval to hold the festival as he busily prepared. Could this special QIBF be held successfully? Should it be allowed to proceed?

The authors would like to thank Lin Xingyu for his careful guidance and help in writing this case.

**EXHIBIT 1: TOP 10 GLOBAL SUPERSPREADER EVENTS AND LOCATIONS**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Location** | **Event/Location** | **Number of Infections** |
| 1. | Milan, Italy | Soccer game | 7,000 |
| 2. | Daegu, South Korea | Religious event | 5,016 |
| 3. | Klang, Malaysia | Glove factories | 4,036 |
| 4. | Delhi, India | Religious events | 4,000 |
| 5. | Avenal, California | Prison | 3,336 |
| 6. | San Quentin, California | Prison | 3,213 |
| 7. | Chennai, India | Vegetable market | 2,544 |
| 8. | Corcoran, California | Substance abuse treatment facility and prison | 2,544 |
| 9. | Mulhouse, France | Religious event | 2,500 |
| 10. | Marion, Ohio | Prison | 2,469 |

Source: Koen Swinkels, “SARS-CoV-2 Superspreading Events around the World” [Google Sheet], accessed December 19, 2020, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1c9jwMyT1lw2P0d6SDTno6nHLGMtpheO9xJyGHgdBoco/edit#gid=1812932356.

Exhibit 2: Qingdao Beer festival’s COVID-19 response plan

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Main Considerations** | **Qingdao Beer Festival Organizer’s Response Plan** |
| Personnel (skills, experience, and abilities in COVID-19 control) | * Select personnel with professional skills. * Master knowledge of new coronavirus. * Ensure that personnel have experience using personal protective equipment. * Prepare a strong emotional response to the pandemic. |
| Required resources | * Pandemic prevention materials * Medical staff and first-aid service * Trained staff * Support from government leaders and departments |
| Virus risk management process, methods, and tools | * Adopt both online and offline festival modes. * Strictly follow the pandemic prevention and control manual. * Develop detailed disinfection plans. * Monitor personnel’s recent movements in a timely manner. * Collect nucleic acid testing samples from imported beer and food. * Strictly control the number of visitors. * Keep a safe distance of more than one metre at all times. * Show your personal health code. * Wear protective equipment. |
| Information management system | * Staff information: * Pre-screen staff regarding identity, health status, and recent locations. * Report staff members’ health status every day during the festival. * Food information:   + Report information on safety and origins in advance, before food enters the festival.   + Perform nucleic acid testing before food enters the festival. * Tourist information:   + Monitor movement tracking through big data. * – Issue personal health pass code. |
| Training scheme | * Train personnel on the following: * precautions for special groups * preparations for emergency measures * basic knowledge of coronavirus symptoms and prevention * implementation of specific processes and precautions during festival * temperature detection, health scanning, mask inspection, social distancing, and other specific matters * use of disinfectants |

Source: Summarized from the Qingdao International Beer Festival Office’s handbook on COVID-19 prevention and control, which is available only to the festival staff.

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