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WRITE TO US

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Sporting Surge

By Yan Wei

When the newly selected national futsal team convened its first training camp in Yinchuan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, in March, a quiet milestone was reached: Nine of the 18 players called up hailed from Xinjiang, a record high for the region. Xinjiang's dominance in futsal, a form of small-sided indoor soccer, is more than just a sports headline. It is a signal of a deeper transformation underway.

Xinjiang is reinventing itself through sports, and the data are compelling. According to the latest survey from the regional sports bureau, Xinjiang boasted 94,900 sports venues at the end of 2025, a net increase of 6,100 in just one year. Per-capita sports space crossed the 3-square-meter threshold for the first time, inching close to the national average of 3.11 square meters. Behind these numbers lies a well-conceived strategy: shifting from urban-centric facility distribution to a more equitable model. Venues managed by villages in rural areas and urban communities account for nearly a quarter of the region's total sports area, ensuring easy access for all residents.

What makes Xinjiang's story particularly striking, however, is not just the concrete and turf—it is the way sports have become a vehicle for social cohesion and economic vitality. The inaugural Tongxin Cup Xinjiang Super League, launched in May, exemplifies this. Tongxin literally means “of one heart,” conveying organizers' wish for people in Xinjiang to work together for a better future. The region's 14 prefectural-level administrative regions, together with Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) divisions based in their proximity, each sends a soccer team. The XPCC operates under the dual leadership of the Central Government and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region to develop and guard border areas. The 490 players come from diverse backgrounds including farmers, teachers and express couriers. Each team represents at least three ethnic groups. A total of 56 matches will be held across the region with the final scheduled to take place in Urumqi on August 9.

The economic impact of sports is becoming increasingly evident. The Xinjiang Super League is poised to play a major

role in boosting local spending and market vitality. During the tournament, spectators with match tickets can enjoy exclusive discounts at participating restaurants, hotels and shops. Major scenic destinations such as Sayram Lake and the Nalati (Narat) Grassland also offer discounted admissions, linking sports events with tourism promotion.

Sports are clearly reshaping the regional economy. Last November, the 2025 Atushi Cup Soccer Invitational Tournament—another influential event, held in Atushi (Artux), capital of Kezilesu (Kizilsu) Kirgiz Autonomous Prefecture—drew more than 190,000 visitors in just 13 days, generating over 92 million yuan (\$13 million) in direct spending.

Beyond soccer, Xinjiang's unique geography-spanning vast deserts, high mountains and expansive grasslands—gives it a natural edge in developing niche sports tourism. The Altay region, home to world-class ski destinations such as Keketuohai (Koktokay), has turned its winters into peak travel seasons. What was once seen as a harsh climate challenge has now become a valuable economic advantage, transforming snow and ice into engines of growth.

Sports enthusiasm in Xinjiang is growing from the ground up. Across the region, 959 primary and secondary schools, representing more than 20 percent of such schools, feature special soccer programs, laying a strong foundation for future talent and community engagement. Still, challenges remain. The per-capita availability of sports facilities lags behind the national average, and there are uneven infrastructure levels between north Xinjiang and the relatively underdeveloped south. Moreover, turning the momentum from hosting major events into sustainable sports industries will take long-term investment and commitment.

The progress is clear, but building a truly balanced and enduring sports ecosystem will require steady effort from every level of society. From the arid expanse of the Taklimakan, China's largest desert, to the snow-capped peaks of the Altay Mountains, sports are serving as a bridge between ethnic groups, between urban and rural areas, and between Xinjiang and its own untapped potential. The record-breaking national team callup was not a coincidence. It was a preview. **XT**

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Cover Photo: The Xiaerxili (Sharhill) Nature Reserve in Boertala (Bortala) Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture (ZHU ZUOYONG)

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China Hoje

*Xīnjiāng:
Beyond Imagination*

A large group of dancers in traditional and modern costumes performing on a stage. The background features a large, colorful mural with abstract and figurative elements, including a central figure. The dancers are in various poses, some holding circular objects like tambourines. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and shadows.

SNAPSHOTS

WHEN MUQAM MEETS BALLET



On May 9 and 10, the Shanghai International Dance Center hosted the world premiere of *Heartbeat of Muqam*, an original ballet by the Shanghai Ballet. The production, which took three years to craft, exemplifies how the Shanghai-style ballet supports the creative transformation and innovative development of China's rich traditional culture. Muqam, recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage, is a traditional Uyghur performing art blending singing, music and dance.

The ballet uses the journey of a young musician named Guli, returning to her roots, as a narrative thread, unraveling a poignant story of cultural exploration.

The Shanghai Ballet's creative team made six extensive field trips to Xinjiang. They immersed themselves in local customs and culture, drawing inspiration from the performances of veteran artists and the vibrant scenes of local villagers. **XT**

(Photos courtesy of Shanghai Ballet)



SNAPSHOTS





SNAPSHOTS





The Holiday Economy

The Corban Festival

The Corban Festival, also known as Eid al-Adha or the Festival of Sacrifice, is a public holiday in Xinjiang. The celebration of this traditional Muslim festival centers around large feasts as families slaughter livestock such as lambs and share the meat with relatives, neighbors and those in need. It is the second of the two main festivals Muslims celebrate alongside the Roza Festival, also known as Eid al-Fitr. This year, the Corban Festival holiday lasted from May 27 to 31, fueling a spending spree.

7.6%

Year-on-year holiday sales revenue increase of retail as well as food and beverage businesses surveyed by commerce bureaus

71%

Year-on-year increase of hotel and homestay bookings in Xinjiang during the holiday, according to data from e-commerce giant Meituan



43,000

The number of applications for the government's trade-in subsidies in Xinjiang on May 27-30, up 19 percent from before the holiday. The trade-in subsidy program covers consumer goods such as automobiles, home appliances, and digital and smart products

1.242 million

The number of applications for the government's trade-in subsidies in Xinjiang from January 1 to May 30, driving consumption exceeding 10 billion yuan (\$1.4 billion)

14.5 million yuan (\$2.1 million)

The value of coupons distributed by Urumqi City to stimulate consumption during the holiday

(Source: *Xinjiang Daily*)



(Left) Passengers at the Wulumuqi (Urumqi) Railway Station on May 30 (VCG)

Self-drive tourists stop to take photos along a highway connecting the Keketuohai (Koktokay) resort in Fuyun County, Altay Prefecture, with Altay City, the prefectural capital, on May 28 (VCG)

IN FOCUS

A SPORTING CHANCE

How Xinjiang turns sports into economic growth *By Zhang Yage*

C

Cheng Jinwei, a resident from Jingdezhen of Jiangxi Province, where snow is rare, traveled over 3,000 km to Xinjiang, not for sightseeing, but to compete on snow. On January 18, he stood at the starting line of the Yemili Cup Snow Fun Run in Emin County, Tacheng Prefecture. Next to him was Anubek Kuwan, a local Xinjiang runner who is used to seeing heavy snow in winter.

“The course is cold, but the passion is even hotter. Every step on the snowy track is fresh and exciting,” Anubek told media. “The scenery along the way is unforgettable.”

“The event was well-organized, the atmosphere was warm, and the snow scenery was breathtaking,” Cheng told Tianshannet news portal. “Although the course was challenging, I pushed through to enjoy every moment of it.”

The event held on that morning gathered 650 runners from



all over the country and from neighbor country Kazakhstan, who raced along a course winding from a village homestay into the Yemili Ski Area.

“The event is an important practice for Emin County to promote national fitness, develop winter sports, and deepen the integration of culture, sports and tourism,” Reshgul Jensibek, Director of the Emin County Bureau of Culture, Sports, Radio, Television and Tourism, told media. “We have successfully showcased Emin County’s high-quality winter tourism resources and improved sports infrastructure.”

In Xinjiang, snow sports have been translated into hotel stays and meal sales. From the frozen Altay Mountains to the desert

tracks of the Taklimakan, the region is betting that sports can do more than build healthy bodies. It can build an economy.

Golden gamble

Xinjiang’s ice and snow resources are no secret to the world’s ski enthusiasts. The snow of the Altay region now supports world-class resorts such as Jikepulin, Keketuohai and the Jiangjun Mountain International Ski Resort.

“Ice and snow are releasing significant ‘heat effects,’” Ye Hai, Deputy Director of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Regional Sports Bureau, said at a press conference in Urumqi on November 20, 2025. “By the end of 2024, the region had built▶



Cyclists compete in Awati (Awat) County, Aksu Prefecture, on May 28 (VCG)

Runners take part in a 13-km race in Yumin County, Tacheng Prefecture, on May 30 (VCG)



88,800 sports venues, including 118 ice and snow venues. Since the beginning of this year, the region has held 26,000 sports events at different levels, involving 2.16 million participants, effectively driving consumption growth across the entire industrial chain, including transportation, food and beverage, accommodation and entertainment.”

The appeal extends beyond casual tourists. The third Altai Mountains Winter Games, held in Altay City this January, gathered teams from Kazakhstan, Mongolia and several Chinese

provinces. For elite athletes, the region is serious training ground.

“Xinjiang is blessed with both natural endowment and policy support,” Wu Dajing, gold medalist in short track speed skating at the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics, told Tianshanet during an interview at the opening ceremony of a 2026 national winter youth sports games in Altay on January 29. “The key is giving children more opportunities to participate. When participation is widespread, talent will naturally emerge.”

Joining him was Wang Shun, gold medalist in the men’s



200-meter individual medley at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. “I saw the snow-capped Tianshan Mountains from the plane—white snow heralding a good harvest,” Wang told Tianshannet at the same event. “I hope young people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang can grow up happily through sports.”

For local athletes, hosting such a major national event carries deep pride. “Participating in an event held in my hometown brings me great honor and joy,” Bayani Jialin, gold medalist in the women’s 5-km cross-country skiing event at the 2025 Harbin

Asian Winter Games, told Tianshannet at the opening ceremony on January 29. “With young people from across the country gathering in Xinjiang for this ice and snow event, I believe this will plant seeds of winter sports in the hearts of Xinjiang’s youth.”

Grassroots frenzy

Winter sports are only one part of the picture. Across Xinjiang, a calendar of traditional ethnic sports and grassroots competitions is drawing public attention.

Take the first Daolang Cup Xinjiang Buzkashi and Speed Horse Racing Championship, held earlier this year, as an example. Seventeen teams with a total of 200 riders competed in the sport. Traditionally, riders on horseback wrestled for control of a headless goat carcass, while modern competitions often employ an imitation carcass made of leather and rope, stuffed with straw and weights to simulate real weight. The event boosted local agritourism, with specialty agricultural products selling out at adjacent market stalls.

Buzkashi, or *diaoyang* in standard Chinese, is not merely a sport. For Xinjiang’s Kazak and Kirgiz communities, it is a display of skill passed down through generations. By packaging such events for outside visitors, local governments are finding that tradition can be both preserved and monetized.

Yet the most explosive growth has come from sports that require nothing more than a ball and an open field.

In Yining County, the Village Super League (Cun Chao) has become a new summer ritual. In 2024, all 20 townships and communities in the county fielded soccer teams. According to statistics from the Yining Government’s official website, live attendance exceeded 100,000, while online viewership surpassed 323,000. The event was recognized nationally as a quality mass sport event, alongside the famed Cun Chao of Rongjiang, Guizhou Province.

In Atushi (Artux), a city with a century-old soccer tradition preserved in a local museum, the Atushi Cup Xinjiang soccer tournament drew about 191,000 tourists from inside and outside the region in 13 days, directly driving 92.17 million yuan (\$13.62 million) in consumption across sectors including food and beverage, and accommodation.

The passion extends to the women’s game as well. In 2024, the Kashi (Kashgar) Prefecture women’s soccer team won the autonomous region’s Three Balls (soccer, basketball and volleyball) league championship. It was the first time the region had organized an adult women’s 11-a-side soccer competition.

“I hope our win will encourage more girls to play soccer,” team member Subinur Osman told Xinhua News Agency. “I hope Xinjiang can host more women’s matches in the future.”

“Soccer has a broad base in Xinjiang and is very popular. ▶

The rich and varied soccer events and activities promote sports at the grassroots level as well as help related grassroots organizations improve, continuously expanding the soccer population and spreading the sport's culture. It enhances people's psychological and physical health," Shang Hongbo, Deputy Director of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Regional Sports Bureau, told media in February 2025.

"We must fully revitalize Three Balls sports. We should build a Three Balls competition system with nationwide influence and establish a three-tier youth training system for Three Balls that connects the regional, prefectural and county levels," Shang added.

Infrastructure backbone

None of this would be possible without the physical transformation of Xinjiang's sports landscape.

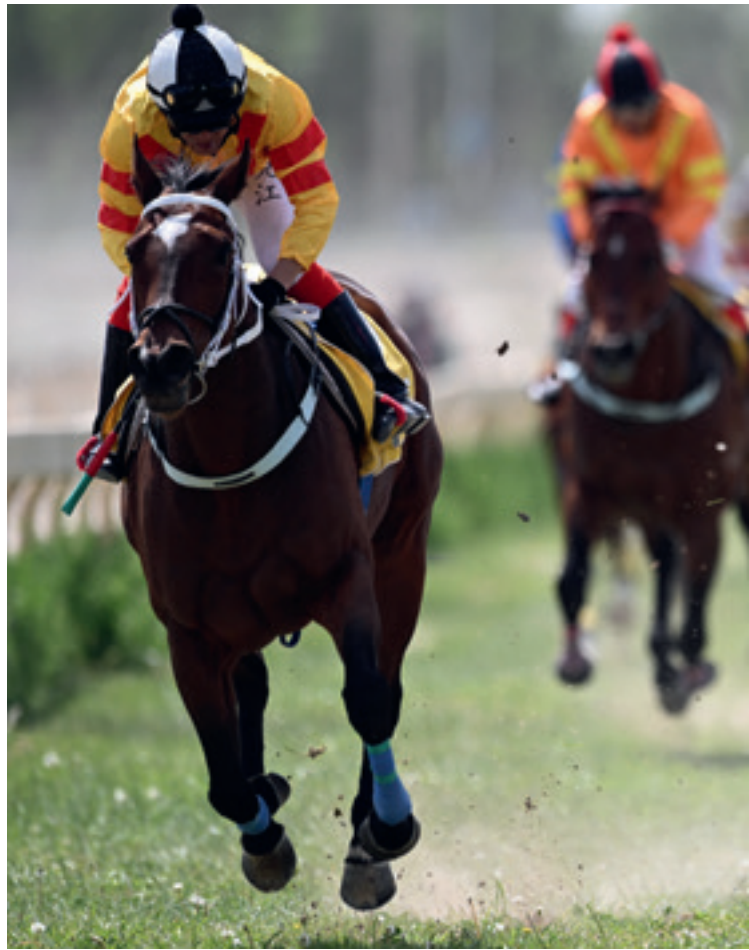
In 1955, the entire region had just 425 sports facilities. That number had surged to 94,900 as of late 2025. Per-capita sports venue area crossed the 3-square-meter threshold for the first time, hitting 3.01 square meters—a leap from 2.88 in the previous year and now closely approaching the national average of 3.11.

The distribution of these facilities has shifted decisively toward grassroots access. Of the new venues added in 2025, "fitness paths," outdoor exercise equipment in neighborhoods and villages, showed the largest increase, from 16,500 to 18,200. Facilities managed directly by village committees and residential committees now account for nearly a quarter of all sports venue area in the region, a deliberate reversal of the previous urban-centric model.

Soccer infrastructure, in particular, has seen dramatic growth: 4,936 soccer fields cover 16.65 million square meters in total, ranking the region among the highest in the nation for soccer pitches per 10,000 people

For Jia Juanfeng, a 51-year-old soccer enthusiast and member of the Wujiaqu 1995 team in the Xinjiang Corps Soccer Super League, the explosion of local infrastructure has transformed daily life.

"Back in 1996, when I first came to teach in Wujiaqu, the campus soccer field was just a crude limesoil patch," Jia told *Bingtuan Daily* on August 20, 2025. "There were no proper pitches and not enough players. A single match was hard to organize." For years, local soccer lovers relied on word of mouth and text messages to coordinate games on whatever open ground they could find. That changed with the completion of the Wujiaqu City Sports Park in April 2025, a 100,000-square-meter facility featuring professional-grade pitches, running tracks, and leisure spaces. "Now, you walk a few more steps and there's a pitch," Jia said. "We can organize a match anytime. Achieving



sports freedom at the doorstep is truly satisfying."

Getting spectators to these venues is equally important.

"High-grade highways now cover more than 95 percent of all 3A-rated scenic spots and above," Zhao Liangbo, an official at the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Regional Department of Transportation, said at a press conference on November 20, 2025. "We are continuing to strengthen the brand influence of six iconic scenic highways."

Traffic and growth

The infrastructure is only half the equation. The other half is converting spectators into spenders.

This year, Xinjiang has effectively driven consumption growth across the entire industrial chain, including transportation, food and beverage, accommodation, and entertainment, Ye said.

The China Ta Rally offers the most dramatic example. The desert endurance race grew from just 42 vehicles in 2005 to 128 in 2025, covering 5,000 km of brutal terrain. In 2025, the



A horse race in Kuerle (Korla), Bayingolin Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture, on May 2 (VCG)

event attracted 4.11 million tourists to regions of Kashi, Hetian (Hotan) and Aksu, generating 2.94 billion yuan (\$434.5 million) in tourism revenue. The rally has been formally integrated into the FIA's official calendar, giving Xinjiang's desertscapes global exposure.

The integration of sports with cultural tourism is also creating new opportunities for cultural preservation.

"Scenic areas and neighborhoods such as Kashi Old City, Kanas and Liuxing Street have attracted large numbers of visitors from outside Xinjiang who have become 'creators,' living together with local people of all ethnic groups," Gulijam Abliyim told the November 20 press conference. "More and more people are choosing to 'take culture home'—traditional clay pottery, Atlas silk and mulberry paper are being integrated into modern life through tourism."

The transformation from sporting backwater to regional powerhouse is also empowered by strong policy catalyst.

"We must adhere to the principle of open-door sports and sports development with open arms," Shang wrote in newspa-

per *China Sports Daily* on February 28, 2025. "We must shift from a government-only driving force to a four-wheel drive model involving government, society, the market and individuals."

"We will focus on competitive sports, sports livelihood projects, sports consumption, the integration of sports and education, and sports culture," he said.

The Following Events to Travel concept is being systematized across multiple government departments.

"We have launched special IP (intellectual property) activities such as Following Performances, Events, Films and Cuisine to Travel in Xinjiang, rolling out more than 380 'eat, stay, travel, buy, entertain' discount packages," Zhu Hexiang, an official at the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Regional Department of Commerce, told the November 20 press conference in Urumqi. "We are accelerating the construction of new business models, new formats and new consumption scenarios, introducing more than 30 brands into Xinjiang."

Physical education is also being systematized. Under a plan to boost soccer on campus in Xinjiang, issued by seven departments including the regional Department of Education, schools are required to ensure students receive two hours of physical activity daily and hold one to two sports meets per year. The region has established 959 national and autonomous regional-level soccer specialty schools, accounting for over 20 percent of all primary and secondary schools. Yili (Ili) and Kashi have been designated as pilot areas for a policy allowing outstanding young soccer talents to transfer between schools within counties and prefectures with their teams—a structural innovation designed to keep talent pipelines flowing.

"Soccer cannot be separated from education, and the sport itself is also a form of education," Xu Ming, Chairman of the Xinjiang Soccer Association, told newspaper *Global Times* on January 2, 2025. "The development of soccer in Xinjiang must be rooted in local communities. The focus should be on developing amateur and youth soccer through community-based amateur clubs, thereby building a solid foundation for the future."

Xu also emphasized the role of talent cultivation. The successful experience of China's eastern provinces has been drawn to develop Xinjiang players, Xu said.

As of November 2025, 15 players from six national teams that cover different age groups and 25 players across 11 Chinese Super League teams come from Xinjiang, a testament to the effectiveness of these pathways. **XT**



IN FOCUS

A LEAGUE BUILT FROM PASSION

The Xinjiang Super League is bringing communities together through the shared language of soccer

By Liang Xiao



The Bayingolin Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture team takes on the Kashi (Kashgar) Prefecture team during the 2026 Tongxin Cup Xinjiang Super League in Kuerle (Korla), Bayingolin, on May 23 (VCG)

M

More than 5,500 spectators in Atushi (Artux), a city in Kezilesu (Kizilsu) Kirgiz Autonomous Prefecture, watched a match on May 17 that would enter Xinjiang Super League history. Just two minutes after kick-off, 22-year-old Kezilesu player Ruzeaji Aierken unleashed a sensational long-range strike from near the center circle, a “worldie” that brought the crowd to its feet. Goals of that quality are rare even in China’s professional leagues. Members of the visiting Hami City team kept their composure, but Kezilesu converted a second-half penalty to seal a home victory and a winning start to the 2026 Tongxin Cup Xinjiang Super League.

The highlights soon went viral on Chinese social media, but the match’s significance went beyond the scoreline.

Nearly 1,800 km separate Hami, on Xinjiang’s eastern edge, from Atushi in the west. Hami is famous for its namesake melons, while Atushi is known for figs, so the match quickly became nicknamed as the Fruit Bowl. The Hami team may have lost, but their traveling fans received a warm welcome from Kezilesu locals. “We were the visiting fans, but Kezilesu made us feel right at home,” Hami supporter Maimaiti Simayi told Kezilesu media after the match. “I hope we keep this going—more matches, more connection between our two places. Figs and Hami melons are sweet on their own, but even sweeter together. That’s the kind of friendship I hope we can share for a long, long time.”

Scenes like this have been unfolding across Xinjiang since May 16. That, in essence, is what the Tongxin Cup is about.

“Tongxin,” meaning “of one heart,” speaks to the unity of Xinjiang’s 26 million people across its various ethnic communities. The league’s players come from 13 ethnic groups, and every squad includes members from at least three ethnic groups. On the pitch, they compete side by side, united by a purpose beyond victory. In the stands, fans from every background wave flags and cheer for their hometown teams. That shared passion transcends sport, strengthening community ties and giving Xinjiang’s people another reason to build a future together.

A league of Xinjiang’s own

The template was set last year, when the Jiangsu City Soccer League, better known as the Su Super League, burst into the national spotlight. The model quickly spread, with more than a dozen provinces, including Sichuan, Hunan, Yunnan and Jiangxi, launching intercity soccer leagues of their own. In Xinjiang, though, it found especially fertile ground. Soccer has long been woven into everyday life here: The region has more than 1,100 schools with specialized soccer programs, and about 580,000 young people compete year-round. That passion is also feeding into the professional game. In the 2026 season, 28 players from Xinjiang were registered with 13 Chinese Super League clubs, China’s top flight, while national teams at different age levels have seen a growing number of Xinjiang players, including Baihelamu Abuduwalli.

Against this backdrop, Xinjiang’s own soccer league was launched. “This is Xinjiang’s first league of its kind and the region’s highest-level mass-participation soccer event,” Kang Yongxin, Deputy Director of Xinjiang’s sports bureau, said at the April 29 press conference. “It is also a stage for people of all ethnic groups to take part and showcase their talent and spirit.”

Kang said the league is built around two ideas: reaching every corner of Xinjiang and bringing ordinary people into the game. The region’s 14 prefectures and prefecture-level cities, along with cities of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, ▶



Residents in Urumqi experience intangible cultural heritage products on May 19 on the sidelines of the Tongxin Cup Xinjiang Super League (VCG)

have formed 14 teams. They are playing a 56-match season. The 490 players, aged 16 to 39, come from all walks of life, including farmers and herders, workers, students and delivery couriers. Matches are held on weekends. Tickets are priced at a uniform 9.9 yuan (\$1.4), making it easy for local residents to get involved. In and around the stadiums, the league has turned soccer into a lively stage where people of all ethnic groups meet and mingle.

Behind the scenes, the league has been run to the standards of a national competition. Match venues and backup sites have been assessed, procedures standardized, and leading specialists brought in to train staff through workshops and live drills. The result is a league with the warmth of community soccer and the discipline of the professional game.

A stage for soccer dreams

Ruzeaji, whose spectacular strike lit up the opening round, is an Atushi native. Soccer runs in the family: His father is a coach, and Ruzeaji enrolled at a specialist soccer academy at 13 before going on to represent Xinjiang at China's 14th National Games. But his path to the professional ranks was anything but straightforward. Trials and brief spells with clubs in Henan, Yunnan

and elsewhere never produced a stable contract, and at one point he came close to giving up on his soccer dream. Then came the Xinjiang Super League, giving players like Ruzeaji a stage to prove themselves.

His wonder goal soon went viral across China. After the match, the 22-year-old, following four unsettled years away from home, watched the replay again and again. "As long as I've got a pitch and a ball, I've got a chance to prove myself," he said. "All those years of grinding weren't for nothing."

Another fan favorite is Kaisaier Hasimujiang, a forward from Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture. The 21-year-old lost his left arm in an accident when he was 18 months old. His father once placed a soccer in front of him and said, "If others can do it, you can too." On a makeshift pitch in his village, Kaisaier built goalposts out of bricks. Playing with one arm, he often had difficulty maintaining balance. He fell countless times and got up just as many. If others practiced a move once, he did it 10 times until it became natural to him. He twice led his team to the city-level high school league and was named top scorer. In 2024, he helped his team finish runner-up at the National Eight-a-Side Soccer Finals and won high-jump gold at the autonomous region's



Fans cheer during Kezilesu's 2-1 home win over Hami in Atushi, Kezilesu Kirgiz Autonomous Prefecture, on May 17 (VCG)

Games for Persons With Disabilities. "I love soccer, so I train even harder," Kaisaier said. "I hope everyone who loves the game keeps pushing, gives it everything they have, and leaves no regrets."

During Changji's match against Yili (Ili) Kazak Autonomous Prefecture on May 23, Yili's No.2, Yashengjiang Shamaitjiang, fell to the ground with a cramp in his leg. Kaisaier stopped immediately, went over and stretched his opponent's leg to ease the pain. "I've played against him before," Yashengjiang said after the match. "He's a well-rounded player. I'm grateful he helped me right there on the pitch. It meant a lot. He's an opponent everyone should respect."

Beyond the pitch

The league is also helping to bring Xinjiang's commerce, sports, culture and tourism sectors closer together. Authorities have collaborated to build a match economy in which a game ticket also unlocks local deals: Fans, players, coaches and officials can use ticket stubs to claim discounts at participating restaurants, hotels, salons and other businesses.

The autonomous region's culture and tourism authorities have also rolled out a travel package built around the Xinjiang Super League, working with all 14 prefectures and prefecture-level cities and 18 of Xinjiang's 5A scenic areas, the highest grade among China's scenic areas. Ticket-stub holders can enjoy discounted or free admission and reduced hotel rates. Attractions such as Sayram Lake and Tianchi

Lake, also known as Heavenly Lake, are offering 20 to 50 percent off admission, while some are admitting them for free. Across Xinjiang, 55 star-rated hotels are offering 15 percent discounts, and selected boutique homestays are cutting rates by as much as 30 percent. Local authorities have curated 203 league-themed travel routes and planned more than 260 related events, from food fairs and intangible cultural heritage showcases to folk-culture experiences, creating a seamless mix of sport, travel and local spending.

"Xinjiang's culture and tourism sector will use this year's Xinjiang Super League as a catalyst to raise standards across the board by broadening the range of quality tourism offerings, improving public services, strengthening market oversight and fostering a more consumer-friendly environment across the region," Zhang Liying, Deputy Director of Xinjiang's Department of Culture and Tourism, told *Xinjiang Today*. "The goal is to further strengthen Xinjiang's reputation as a premier travel destination."

On the league's opening weekend, the Urumqi venue drew a crowd of 30,208, helping boost sales in nearby commercial areas by more than 4.5 million yuan (\$665,000). At the opening, sitting in the stands was Alipu Maimaiti, a deputy to the regional people's congress, who was moved to tears. "From submitting the proposal to seeing the league kick off today, I have watched my proposal truly come to life," he said. In January, Alipu submitted an outline to launch a Xinjiang super league at the annual session of the regional legislature. Now, that proposal had gone from paper to the pitch. "I hope the Xinjiang Super League can bring together soccer competitions and related resources across the region's prefectures and cities, expanding youth development pathways at every level and encouraging more children to fall in love with soccer and take part in sport." This is Alipu's hope—and the hope of Xinjiang soccer as a whole. **XT**

IN FOCUS

SOCCER DREAM

From Kashi to Hunan: a Xinjiang girl's journey *By Qian Zhen & Zhang Hongling*

I

In February 2025, the Third Huozhou New Year Cup Xinjiang Youth Soccer Invitational Tournament in Tulufan (Turpan) brought together more than 130 youth teams from across Xinjiang. Huozhou, or Fire Prefecture, is a nickname for Tulufan, a city known for its searing summer heat. Among the standout players was 13-year-old Maidiye Maihemutijiang from Kashi (Kashgar).

Wearing the number 10 jersey, Maidiye led her team with speed, determination and an eye for goal. In one match, she raced onto a through ball, broke past defenders and calmly finished past the goalkeeper. Throughout the tournament, she delivered one impressive performance after another, helping her team claim the championship and finishing as the tournament's top scorer.

Watching her dominate on the field, few would have guessed that her soccer journey began outside her father's electric bike repair shop.



Maidiye Maihemutijiang at the Dingnan National Youth Soccer Training Base in Jiangxi Province in August 2025 (COURTESY PHOTO)

A childhood aspiration

Born in Kashi in 2012, Maidiye grew up in a family facing significant challenges. Her parents and both brothers suffer from health issues, and the family's financial situation has long been difficult.

Her love for soccer began at the age of 3. While her father worked at his repair shop, Maidiye spent hours kicking a ball around the open space in front of it. Whenever he had time, her



Maidiye Maihemutijiang participates in a national training camp for young soccer players in Beijing in August 2025 (COURTESY PHOTO)

father joined her, teaching basic skills such as passing and controlling the ball.

What started as a simple pastime gradually became a dream.

In 2018, Maidiye enrolled in the Central Primary School in Xiamalebage Town in Kashi. During a school-wide soccer try-out, physical education teacher Maimaitijiang Mahemuti selected her as one of only 60 players out of more than 1,000 applicants.

He still remembers their first meeting. Shy and quiet, Maidiye could barely explain why she wanted to play soccer. Yet her excitement after making the team revealed how much the opportunity meant to her.

From that moment on, soccer filled her free time.

She arrived at school an hour early every morning to practice running, dribbling and shooting. After classes ended, she stayed behind for additional training. Whether in summer heat or winter cold, she rarely missed a session.

When she struggled to master a skill, she worried about dis-

appointing her coach. She repeatedly asked for extra practice opportunities and even requested a ball to train with at home. Lacking professional gear, she practiced in regular sneakers. When falls left her knees scraped and bleeding, she wiped away tears and continued training.

Her efforts paid off. As her pace, vision and self-belief improved, goals became a regular occurrence. She quickly became the driving force behind her school team's local tournament wins and earned top-scorer accolades.

The first guiding light

Behind Maidiye's success stands her first coach, Maimaitijiang, whose dedication has paved the way for countless children in Kashi to pursue their soccer dreams.

After graduating from Xinjiang University in 1995, Maimaitijiang returned to his hometown and became a physical education teacher. He quickly noticed Kashi's deep-rooted soc- ▶



Soccer players from the Central Primary School in Xiamalebage Town in Kashi show off their new boots on February 24, 2025 (COURTESY PHOTO)

cer culture. Children played everywhere—in alleys, on dirt lots and along dry riverbeds. A single ball was enough to gather dozens of eager players.

Determined to nurture that passion, he established a soccer club at the Central Primary School in Xiamalebage.

Resources were scarce in the early days. Lacking proper goalposts, he dismantled part of his own grape trellis to create makeshift goals for his students.

His unwavering persistence eventually drew much-needed support. In 2013, the school built its first artificial-turf soccer field. The improvement transformed training conditions and encouraged more students to participate.

As national support for youth soccer expanded, the school's program flourished. Soccer became part of the curriculum, and the number of teams and players grew steadily. Several graduates have since advanced to elite national youth training programs.

Among all the players he coached, Maimaitijiang recognized something special in Maidiye: an exceptional mix of raw athletic talent and fierce determination.

"She's fast, hardworking and highly focused," he said.

He also credits her family. While some parents remain hesitant about girls participating in competitive sports, Maidiye's parents consistently encouraged her. Her father often emphasized that despite his own disability, he wanted his daughter to seize every opportunity that came her way.

Soccer transformed Maidiye in many ways. It bolstered her self-esteem, honed her academic discipline, made her more outgoing and nurtured her sense of responsibility.

Most importantly, it paved a way for her to venture far beyond her hometown.

A new beginning

Shortly after her success at the Huozhou New Year Cup tournament, Maidiye received an opportunity that would change her life: an invitation to join the Hunan Xiangcheng Soccer Club.

The club was founded by brothers Huang Jian and Huang Junjie, entrepreneurs from Hunan Province who believe soccer has the power to empower vulnerable children and open up new worlds for them.

Their commitment began years earlier when they spon-



Members of the soccer team of the Central Primary School in Xiamalebage Town in Kashi and their coach pose for a group photo on February 20, 2025 (COURTESY PHOTO)

sored two girls from a remote mountainous region in Sichuan Province. Inspired by those experiences, they decided to provide more than just financial assistance. They wanted to create opportunities through sport.

The brothers recruited children from underserved communities and put together several teams. What started as a small experiment quickly produced results. The children cultivated discipline, confidence and a strong sense of teamwork while achieving success in local competitions.

The club regularly shared training videos online. One day, Maidiye's father came across those posts and left a message, hoping that his daughter might be granted a similar opportunity.

The brothers investigated her situation and were deeply moved by her family's circumstances and her dedication to soccer. They decided to invite her to join the club.

For Maidiye, it meant leaving home for the first time and traveling thousands of kilometers across China.

The transition was not easy. The academic workload was heavier and the soccer training was far more intense than anything she had experienced before. In the beginning, she

struggled to keep up.

Yet she tackled the challenges just as she had in Kashi—with unwavering persistence.

Supported by teachers and coaches, she gradually adapted to her new environment. Her academic performance improved and she earned a regular place in the team's lineup.

Coaches describe her as exceptionally hardworking. Her pace and fighting spirit continue to set her apart on the field, while her eagerness to learn has fueled her growth both as an athlete and as a student.

A growing soccer culture

As Maidiye's story gains traction, more people begin paying attention to the emergence of soccer prodigies across Xinjiang.

In recent years, Kashi has built a complete youth soccer network bridging primary schools, secondary schools and higher education institutions. Local competitions have multiplied, creating more opportunities for young players to train and compete.

In 2024, Kashi launched the Kashi Cup International Youth Soccer Invitational Tournament, further raising its profile in youth soccer.

The rapid progress reflects broader changes taking place across Xinjiang. As educational resources, infrastructure and public services continue to improve, today's children have access to opportunities that previous generations could scarcely imagine.

Soccer has become one of the most visible symbols of that transformation.

For young players, the sport offers more than just trophies and medals. It instills discipline, teamwork, perseverance and resilience, empowering them to unlock their true potential and envision a future that transcends the boundaries of their immediate surroundings.

Maidiye's journey is still unfolding.

The little girl who once kicked a ball outside an electric bike repair shop now trains hundreds of miles from home, pursuing bigger dreams on larger stages.

Along the way, she has been supported by devoted parents, a dedicated teacher in Xinjiang and coaches in Hunan who see her true potential. Together, they have helped transform a childhood passion into an opportunity for a different future.

From Kashi to Hunan, Maidiye's path reflects not only personal determination but also the growing opportunities available to promising young soccer players across Xinjiang.

And she continues to run forward—one goal, one match and one dream at a time. **XT**

IN FOCUS

UNITED BY BASKETBALL

An American journalist, a Uyghur basketball star and a slam-dunk friendship *By Liang Xiao*

D

Danny Haiphong is an American independent journalist and geopolitical commentator born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1990. His YouTube channel, Geopolitics with Danny Haiphong, has more than 655,000 subscribers and has produced over 1,000 episodes—spanning in-depth interviews and geopolitical analysis—with videos averaging more than 200,000 views each.

Abudushalamu Abudurexiti, born in 1996 in Altay Prefecture, is a professional basketball player and captain of the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA)'s Xinjiang Flying Tigers. A two-time CBA regular season Most Valuable Player (MVP) (2018-19 and 2023-24), he has also been named an All-Star multiple times and represented the Chinese men's national team in numerous international competitions. His defining moment came at the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta: With China trailing Iran by 16 points in the final, Abudushalamu stepped up, scoring 20 points and grabbing six rebounds in just 23 minutes to lead his

team to a dramatic comeback victory and the gold medal. He is one of China's most beloved basketball stars.

These two young men have made their marks in different arenas, yet basketball has brought them together, forging a friendship that transcends borders.

Basketball builds bridges

Haiphong's channel first attracted attention in China in July 2020, when he interviewed David West, a U.S. basketball star and former power forward known off the court for his intellectual depth and critical thinking. West offered an in-depth analysis of China-U.S. relations, Hong Kong, bias in the American media, and China's poverty alleviation efforts and response to COVID-19. The interview gained little traction in the United States, drawing just 28,000 views in its first month. In China, however, it was shared by major media outlets including China Media Group (CMG), *People's Daily* and *China Daily*, and garnered more than 180 million views across Chinese social media platforms.

The interview also introduced Haiphong to a wider audience in China. As his profile grew, he was invited to visit the country on several occasions. A die-hard basketball fan, Haiphong was eager to interview a Chinese basketball player when he returned to China in August 2024. As it happened, the MVP of the recently concluded 2023-24 CBA season was none other than Abudushalamu, and the two met in Urumqi.

After joining Abudushalamu for a warm-up and training session, Haiphong sat down with him for an exclusive interview. Abudushalamu spoke about his upbringing, his love of basketball, the influence that fellow Xinjiang players such as Xiralijan Muhtar had had on his career, and his experience of traveling to the United States to pursue his basketball dream. He also shared stories about the Xinjiang Flying Tigers, a team comprising foreign players and Chinese players from different ethnic groups.



Abudushalamu Abudurexiti (left) competes against Japanese player Hirotaka Yoshii during the FIBA Asia Cup 2025 Qualifiers held in Tokyo, Japan, on February 25, 2024 (VCG)

The Flying Tigers had reached the CBA Finals that season but ultimately lost to Liaoning. As team captain, Abudushalamu said that his greatest ambition is to help Xinjiang win another championship.

At the time, hit television drama *To the Wonder* was being aired in China. Born and raised in Altay, Abudushalamu also spoke warmly about the show. He told Haiphong that he was returning to his hometown as soon as the interview wrapped up, and he invited Haiphong to visit Altay. He described Xinjiang's scenery as beyond words and encouraged visitors from around the world to experience the region's natural beauty, local culture, and way of life for themselves.

A friendship that endures

Back in the United States, Haiphong continued to follow Abudushalamu and the Flying Tigers. When pushing back

against allegations about Xinjiang fabricated by anti-China forces, he often cited his own experience: He had visited the region twice, engaged in extensive conversations with local residents, and formed friendships with many of them. He could say with conviction that the claims were simply untrue.

Fast forward to 2026. The Flying Tigers were struggling that season, as coaching changes, poor performances of some players, and frequent injuries to key players all took their toll. Abudushalamu remained the team's most reliable scorer and its heart and soul, but he could not carry the squad alone. While the team was still fighting to keep its playoff hopes alive, Abudushalamu learned that Haiphong would be visiting China again in April. He prepared an autographed jersey for his American friend and recorded a video message for him.

"Hey Danny, long time no see. Do you remember this arena? ►

This is where we first met. I hear you'll be coming to China soon. I hope you'll have time to visit Xinjiang and stop by our club. I'm looking forward to seeing you again! I've got a signed jersey for you—signed by myself—and I really hope I can give it to you in person." The whole thing was kept under wraps as a surprise.

Unfortunately, Abudushalamu was injured in a game that very evening, shortly after recording the video. Haiphong immediately reached out with a message of support.

A week later, in Hangzhou, an eastern Chinese city, Haiphong sat down for an interview with a reporter from the Xinjiang International Communication Center. During the interview, he was presented with Abudushalamu's signed jersey and shown his video message.

"I love basketball. I played basketball as a kid and in high school. I had dreams of playing professionally. But now I've met someone who is doing it. He comes from Xinjiang, he's a Uyghur, and he's renowned all across China. He represents, I think, a lot of what we don't really understand in the United States: Uyghur people in Xinjiang are doing incredible things in China. They are really blazing a trail to build understanding, and I'm glad to be part of it," Haiphong said.

During the interview with the Xinjiang International Communication Center, Haiphong wished Abudushalamu a speedy recovery and hoped to see him continue to shine on the court. He also said he was eager to return to Xinjiang, noting that the local cuisine, folk traditions, music and dance, and diverse ethnic cultures had captivated him. The world has yet to

Abudushalamu Abudurexiti signs a jersey for Danny Haiphong at the Xinjiang Flying Tigers training arena on April 7
(COURTESY PHOTO)



hear the full story of Xinjiang, he said, and he looked forward to returning to uncover and share more authentic stories from the region.

“It means a whole lot to me. The whole reason why I do what I do is to foster friendship and bonds between people. I’m from the United States, and he lives in Xinjiang. There has been a lot of misunderstanding in the United States about Xinjiang. To be able to meet someone who has accomplished so, so much, and for him to feel that it was worth spending his time with me to help further this cause, as well as simply to spend some time together, is something I deeply cherish,” Haiphong said.

“I hope people in the West can understand that Uygurs, Kazaks, and people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang have the

opportunity not only to play professional basketball, but also to live the lives they want, to live decently, and to have their cultures respected. How to achieve this is really a matter for the people of China, the Chinese Government, and society to work out together. I’m glad I have been able to witness it for myself and see just how much misunderstanding there is, and how much work we can do to promote greater understanding,” Haiphong said. **XT**

Scan the QR code to watch an
interview with Danny Haiphong



Comments to liangxiao@cicgamerica.com

Danny Haiphong receives the signed jersey from Abudushalamu Abudurexiti at Hangzhou Olympic Sports Center Gymnasium in Zhejiang Province on April 19 (COURTESY PHOTO)

