

China – the new frontier

Ross Perrett



GIVEN the global downturn in the development of new golf courses, China is now the focus of golf course architects from Europe, The United States and Australia. Whilst the China market is very buoyant relative to other countries, the number of courses being built each year is small compared to the boom times of recent decades—where in the USA alone some 6000 courses were built over a 15 year period. That's an average of at least one new course opening every day. Even though China has a population upwards of 1.3 billion, it can only boast about 500 completed courses with a similar number being planned or currently under construction.

Australian golf architects are playing a leading role in the development of golf in China with Thomson Perrett, Greg Norman, Tony Cashmore, Shearer Davey, Ted Parslow and Pacific Coast Design all busy with new projects. Leading international companies/architects including Jack Nicklaus, Robert Trent Jones II, Gary Player, Nick Faldo, Golf Plan and IMG are also active and ensure that the competition for projects is hot and the standards are constantly improving. China has demonstrated its brilliance in many fields of endeavour for centuries, but is always looking to improve and is embracing the world's best practice and setting new benchmarks. Inevitably China will soon have golf courses that equal anything on the planet.

As clients, the Chinese have become more informed and demanding over the past 20 years in parallel with the growth in their economy as a result of their increased mobility and exposure to the world's best courses. The growth in the middle class has created a demand for golf as a lifestyle activity for the Chinese people. In contrast the early courses were built to cater for Japanese, Taiwan and Korean business interests who helped establish China as the 'factory' of the world. Whereas the early courses were created to attract and entertain the early foreign investors, China now has a rapidly growing domestic demand for golf. Golf Tourism is also a burgeoning industry and is further fueling this demand and increasing the awareness of China's golfing facilities worldwide. Mission Hills in Shenzhen is currently the world's largest golfing facility with 12 golf courses.

Despite China's huge population, land is plentiful due the high density of their cities



The beautiful Thomson-Perrett-designed Tianjin Fortune Lakes links course in Tianjin, Northern China

and the compactness and intensity of their farming activities. China offers a diversity of landform and vegetation which will ensure that their golf courses will demonstrate a rich variety of character ranging from coastal links to mountain courses.

The Central Government is yet to officially embrace golf, even despite golf's recent elevation to an official Olympic sport. Feeding its population is the top priority on their hierarchy of needs. Consequently building courses on arable land is prohibited. Therefore available golf course sites are restricted but can include reclaimed land from sea or lakes, unproductive mountainous sites, restored tips, landfills and abandoned fish farms. This all adds to the creative challenge of making something out of nothing which can be a most satisfying architectural experience.

Working 'cross culture' is another enjoyable aspect of traveling around the globe designing golf courses. China is an ancient civilization with a depth of history and culture second to

none. Despite modern China's rapid embrace of western habits, old habits die hard and will always be part of the China's psyche. For example, last month over half the population made a pilgrimage home to be with family to celebrate the Chinese New Year. The logistics of successfully moving 670 million people across China over a two week period highlights China's irrepressible organizational skills and work ethic. The brilliance of the opening ceremony and cutting-edge design of the buildings at the 2008 Beijing Olympics was very symbolic for the country and demonstrated to the world a confidence regained after a century of struggle.

China is destined to be the world's largest economy by 2030 and along with India, Brazil and Indonesia will be a major player in a new world order. To be a bit player and an observer in this historical evolution of the world's most populous country is fascinating, challenging and rewarding.

Creating a locally-bred champion is the next step in the evolution of golf in China. Whilst

local hero Johnny Wei has made it to The US Masters at Augusta, China is yet to produce an international champion. Neighbours Korea, Taiwan and Japan are producing world-class golfers and it is only a matter of time before China follows suit. The prospect of participation in the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro may be enough to inspire the emerging generation of golfers to greatness. This process will be fast-tracked if participation rates increase and international teaching facilities are established.

Another challenge is to address the image that golf is an elitist game only played by the rich. It would be a great fill up for the industry if some public access golf facilities could be built which would increase accessibility and provide pathways for beginners to develop their game. China's leaders need to acknowledge the popularity of golf and recognize that there are many positive economic, social and environmental outcomes that golf can offer.

Golf in China will continue to prosper and will become a must-do destination for all golfers. ◀



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