

LV vs Molly Tea PR Nightmare | Sports Marketing Revolution | Shanghai Retail Field Notes | The Hot Pot Table Podcast

Topic 1: Beyond the Pitch: New Sports Marketing Playbook in China

Jonathan: The World Cup has officially wrapped up, but looking back at how it played out in China, one thing is abundantly clear: if you evaluated the tournament through a traditional sports marketing lens—sweat, national pride, and final scorelines—you missed the real show. Traditional sports marketing built on classic brand formulas is losing resonance with Gen Z. Today, sports in China are treated as cultural entertainment and social currency. Around 80% of Chinese sports consumers identify as casual fans rather than diehard supporters. The human stories, referee personalities, and lore surrounding players carry far more commercial weight than who actually lifted the trophy. Fan, let's unpack a phrase that defined this tournament: *“Meiyou guozu Zhongguo de kanqiu wenhua”* (没有国足中国的看球文化)—the culture of watching a World Cup when your national team isn't participating. How did the absence of the Chinese national team give consumers more freedom in how they engaged?

Fan: It gives fans total freedom to put their focus wherever they want. Football is a massive culture in China, but unlike in England or Argentina, the time difference means games air past midnight or at 5:00 AM. It naturally integrates with nightlife, barbecue culture, and emerging subcultures. Because we don't have a national team in the tournament that is *“nadechushou”* (拿得出手)—presentable on the world stage—consumers have the luxury of choosing who to root for based on personal aesthetics, player charisma, or social currency.

What really changed the game this year was Rednote (Xiaohongshu). They acquired the official live-streaming license and leaned heavily into the social and lifestyle side of the tournament. Traditionally, sports broadcasting lived on CCTV-5, Migu, or Hupu—very traditional, male-dominated environments. Rednote took a massive gamble by pushing football content to a platform where 70% of users are female and interested in lifestyle, pets, and humour. And they won that gamble.

Jonathan: How did Xiaohongshu connect non-traditional sports fans like yourself to individual players like Erling Haaland?

Fan: Through community-driven memes and humanized storytelling. The algorithm didn't push tactical analysis or Dortmund statistics to casual users. Instead, it pushed funny clips contrasting the ideal 195cm blonde European archetype (like David Beckham) with Haaland's quirky, hilarious, and relatable moments on the pitch— bouncers off players' faces, his family background, his rowing routines, and his personality.

Once that social traction hit critical mass, brands capitalised immediately:

- Wanglaoji (Walovi): Released a viral, surreal campaign featuring Haaland and his team singing in the dressing room.
- Nike (Wieden+Kennedy): Dropped high-production Haaland features.
- Doubao AI: Signed Haaland for localised AI campaigns.

We saw a similar phenomenon with Chinese referee Ma Ning. Fans dubbed him “*Kapai Dashi*” (卡牌大师 - Card Master), referencing the League of Legends champion Twisted Fortune who deals cards. A viral line exploded online: “*Wode qiudui ni zhaobudao, wode guojia ni rebuqi*” (“You can't find my team in the tournament, and you don't dare mess with my country”). Yili instantly signed Ma Ning for airport security-themed commercial spots where his card case turns out to be packed with milk.

Jonathan: Those campaigns were almost completely unhinged creatively, which is why they worked. In a world flooded with vanilla advertising, capturing a megastar at the peak of their pop-culture relevance and doing something surreal breaks through the noise.

However, for Chinese brands expanding internationally—like Wanglaoji with their English rebranding to Walovi—awareness is only step one. A cooling herbal tea backed by Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is a fantastic proposition for hot summers globally, but brands must follow up surreal awareness campaigns with educational messaging around use cases to turn raw attention into product trial and long-term brand equity.

Topic 2: Winning in Court, Losing in PR: Why LV's Global Legal Playbook Is Backfiring in China

Jonathan: Louis Vuitton recently won a 10.3 million RMB trademark infringement ruling against domestic tea chain Molly Tea (茉莉奶白). Legally, LV secured a clear victory. On the Chinese internet, however, it triggered a netizen revolt against perceived Western "cultural monopoly."

Defenders of Molly Tea pointed out that its four-petal motif traces directly back to Tang Dynasty heritage patterns like the *Baoxianghua* (宝相花). Beyond the legal technicalities, how did a legally sound trademark enforcement turn into a public relations headache for a global luxury giant?

Fan: It is a classic case of legal victory versus public sentiment. From a capitalist legal framework, whoever holds the prior registered trademark owns the mark. Molly Tea was not an innocent bystander—they applied for the four-petal trademark in March 2024, and the CNIPA explicitly rejected it due to similarity with LV's prior registration. Molly Tea used the visual language anyway to anchor itself to "accessible luxury" (*qingshe* / 轻奢) positioning.

However, Molly Tea executed a masterclass in PR strategy:

1. Elevating to Cultural Sovereignty: They framed the dispute as a battle between traditional Chinese cultural heritage and Western corporate capitalism.
2. Highlighting Over-Enforcement: Netizens pointed out that LV routinely files legal notices against micro-enterprises in China, including local home textile and curtain merchants for using similar historical geometric patterns.
3. Capitalising on Media Evolution: Traditional PR relied on elite gatekeepers. Today's social media PR operates on a decentralised, bottom-up explosion where netizens independently pull ancient architectural blueprints to compare pattern histories.

While LV holds a valid trademark, the narrative shifted to a global conglomerate "bullying" a domestic brand leveraging local heritage. Molly Tea received millions of RMB worth of free viral exposure, drove massive foot traffic from consumers "voting with their wallets," and successfully elevated and sustained its brand standing.

Jonathan: This connects directly to how domestic brands borrow and localise global design cues. Look at Chagee (霸王茶姬). Some may argue that their logo adapted Starbucks' visual framework for tea, swapping the green siren for a Peking opera silhouette, using rich red and navy tones, and printing tote patterns inspired by luxury fashion houses like Dior. They didn't infringe on specific IP, but they adopted the visual language of luxury to build a massive footprint.

For global brands operating in Asia, the takeaway is clear:

- IP Enforcement Needs PR Oversight: You cannot evaluate legal action in a silo. You must calculate the public opinion balance sheet alongside the legal balance sheet before filing a lawsuit.
- First-to-File System: China is a first-to-file jurisdiction. Brands must secure comprehensive trademark coverage across all current and adjacent product categories early to protect brand equity cleanly from day one.

Topic 3 Shanghai Field Notes

Jonathan: The Hot Pot team recently spent time on the ground in Shanghai auditing retail executions. Several clear themes emerged around unpretentious pricing, community-led narratives, and spatial theatre.

First, I visited the store for Pane, a domestic sneaker brand founded around 2022. Pane captures a global aesthetic—specifically anchored in the German Army Trainer (德训鞋) silhouette popularised historically by Adidas and Maison Margiela—while remaining proudly local.

What makes Pane stand out:

- Fair, Uniform Pricing: Most footwear sits right at the 800 RMB (~\$110 USD) price point—delivering high craftsmanship without luxury markups.

- Unpretentious Retail Design: Clean, curated, and open, housing around 30 distinct SKUs without feeling like an intimidating showroom or a cluttered warehouse.
- The "Shanghai Souvenir" Status: It has organically become a gifting item and souvenir for tourists visiting Shanghai who want to take home a stylish, locally crafted product.

Fan: Pane represents a massive shift away from the old *guochao* (国潮) playbook. Historically, brands like Feiyue or Huili represented cheap, industrial nostalgia. Pane offers a genuine, high-quality, universally appealing product backed by a beautifully designed retail space that feels far more premium than its price tag. They didn't rely on massive paid performance marketing; they built the product, physical space, and organic community first.

Jonathan: Another standout example in Shanghai is Songmont (山下有松). Songmont is currently one of the top domestic premium-to-luxury handbag brands in China, catching the attention of global executives across Paris and Shanghai. Fan, how is Songmont rewriting the luxury retail experience?

Fan: Songmont excels by creating a complete brand universe built on subtle cultural resonance and human warmth rather than aggressive sales tactics:

1. Podcast-Led Thought Leadership: Founded by a former Googler, Songmont built its audience through podcasts rather than superficial social ads. Their podcast has over 2 million followers, featuring deep, intellectual conversations around life, art, and female empowerment.
2. Accessible Luxury Positioning: Priced between €200 and €800, they sit in an achievable sweet spot above mass-market brands, offering luxury-grade design and materials.
3. Human-Centric Service: In luxury retail, consumers often face snobbish sales associates focused strictly on commissions. At Songmont's Shanghai store, guests are immediately handed cold water upon entering during extreme heat—no pressure, no aggressive pitching, just genuine hospitality.

Jonathan: We saw a similar commitment to spatial theatre when visiting pop-culture and anime retail spaces in Shanghai, such as the Shōnen Jump takeover. In Western markets, stores like London's Forbidden Planet often function like organised warehouses—holding great inventory, but offering little environmental experience.

In Shanghai, even pop-culture retail is engineered as a fully immersive experience with dedicated lighting, themed cafes, exclusive regional merchandise, and curated exhibition zones.