

With Grand Slam breakthrough, emerging Zheng leads charge in China's collective tennis chapter

After Li Na's historic title-winning at Melbourne Park, it took a decade for another Chinese player to appear in a Grand Slam singles final. Then 11-year-old Zheng Qinwen was glued to her television and beamed when Li lifted the Australian Open trophy.

As China's top-ranked singles elite, Zheng demonstrated by reaching the 2024 Australian Open final that she can not only blueprint a promising future for herself, but also herald a new chapter in Chinese tennis, alongside peers like Shang Juncheng and Zhang Zhizhen.



Li Na holds the trophy after winning the final at the Australian Open on January 25, 2014.



Zheng looks on during the awarding ceremony for the women's singles final at the Australian Open.

Bright future ahead

It was not the best tennis she had hoped for in her maiden Grand Slam final, but 21-year-old Zheng battled to the end in a 6-3, 6-2 mauling by the formidable reigning champion Aryna Sabalenka.

On Saturday night, the disappointment of not lifting the Daphne Akhurst Memorial Cup was visible on Zheng's face during the award ceremony.

With her reddened eyes lingering on the trophy close at hand, the Chinese newcomer held back "complicated" feelings and congratulated Sabalenka on a wonderful match.

"It's my first final, and I'm feeling a little bit pity. But this is an experience for me," said Zheng. "I really enjoyed playing in this Australian Open. That was an amazing memory for me. I'm sure there is going to be more and better in the future."

Sabalenka added that Zheng would have a bright future in the game.

"I know this feeling is really tough to lose in the final but you are such an incredible player, such a young girl. You're going to be in many more finals. You're going to get it. I want to congratulate you and your team on the incredible job you have done," said the Belarusian champion.

Zheng's father Zheng Jianping shared

Sabalenka's view on her daughter's potential.

"She will have a long career, and her peak has yet to come," he said.

As her coach Pere Riba said, Zheng is evolving and still has a big margin to improve in her tennis. Lessons must be taken from this top-tier showdown and a final appearance will also inspire the young Chinese to stay hungry in her fledgling career.

Only in her third WTA tour season, Zheng made her top 10 debut yesterday when the WTA rankings were updated.

Already with two WTA singles titles in hand, Zheng is now only the second Chinese player to play in a Grand Slam singles final after Li Na.

"In Grand Slams, everyone must work hard to make breakthroughs, and there will definitely be various opportunities," said Zheng. "My breakthrough here came slower than I expected, but I still want to say that I am very proud of myself. I want to take my time and enjoy the process."

At 6 years old, Zheng picked up a racquet after being intrigued by tennis at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

Traveling from Shiyan City in Hubei to the province's capital Wuhan, Zheng stayed far away from home to live her tennis dream.

"Independent, confident and disciplined" is how her father, a former track and field athlete, described her.

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out four years ago, Zheng remained in Spain for training. Under strict protocols, Zheng woke up at 4:30am to practice before the court was closed at 7am. She stuck to this schedule for four months.

"She always is ready for practice, a really hard worker," her coach Riba said.

"Sometimes we get angry, because she wants to do it more and I have to stop her. Then you can imagine the dreams that Qinwen has, that she really wants to be there at the top."

Zheng's long-term efforts have been gradually paying off. In 2022, she progressed through to the round of 16 at Roland-Garros in a career first.

Matthew Futterman, a US journalist with over 20-year experience of writing sports news, said Zheng had caught his eye in the 2022 French Open, where

he thought "she was going to beat Iga Swiatek."

"I made a mental note to keep an eye on this young woman because she was going places," he said.

Following that, a breakout 2023 yielded Zheng two WTA titles, an Asian Games gold medal and a spectacular quarterfinal run at the US Open.

Without laying her eyes on rankings but instead focusing on each match, Zheng took Li Na's advice of "keep it simple" to heart, taking solid steps toward her goal of breaking into the top 10.

Zheng not alone

In 2014, Li stormed to her women's singles title at Rod Laver Arena, becoming the first Asian player to lift the Australian Open trophy. Rohit Brijnath, a veteran sports journalist, was there to witness the moment.

"When Li Na came, I thought it was a very big moment because as Asian person, we know that Asians do extremely well in badminton and in table tennis. But you don't have such a great history in tennis," said Brijnath.