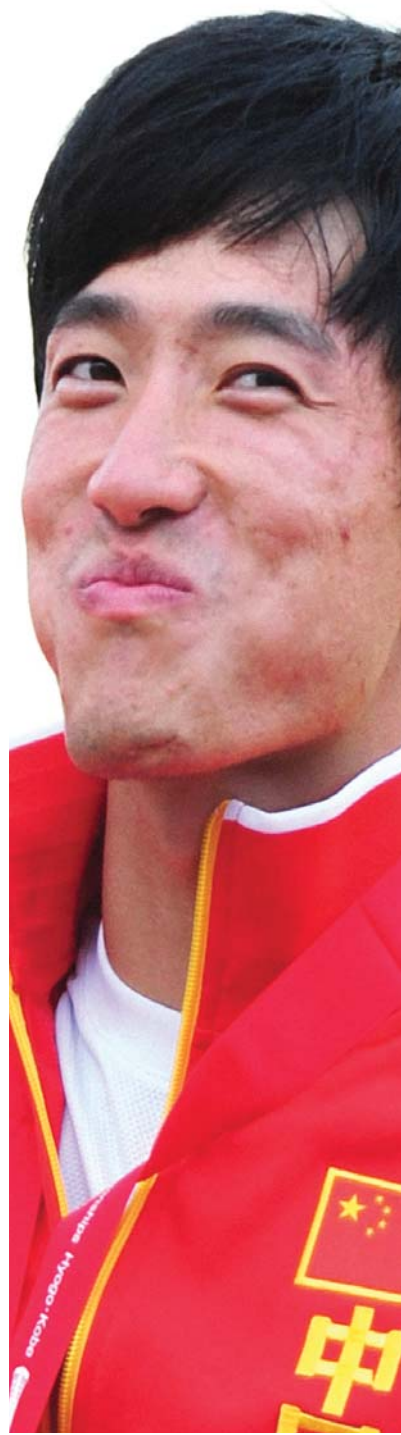


## RED STARS OVER CHINA

Chinese star power on the courts, pool and track is making the world sit up and applaud. These modern-day sports celebrities are not afraid to show off their individuality compared to their determinedly anonymous predecessors of a couple of decades ago. **Sun Xiaochen** and **Yu Yilei** put this new phenomenon under the microscope.

LIU XIANG

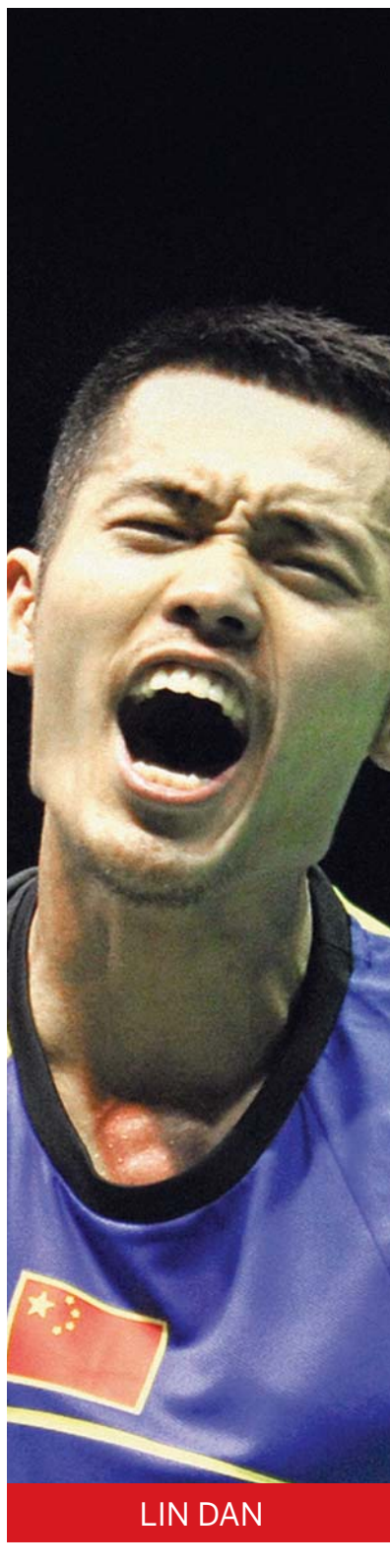


DING JUNHUI

LI NA



LIN DAN



YAO MING



When Li Na took the microphone from Jean Gachassin, president of the French Open, during the award ceremony, the newly crowned French Open winner and China's first Grand Slam champion to speak, expecting one of her colorful and sometimes unexpected spiels. Fresh from her epic victory over defending champion Francesca Schiavone of Italy, Li Na delivered. She thanked the sponsors, tournament director, linemen, chair umpire and her team in English and even added a birthday greeting in the Wuhan dialect for a friend sitting in the stands with her husband.

She wrapped it up by thanking her growing legion of fans, which drew the loudest applause from the international crowd.

It seemed like a flawless victory speech, but it was what she did not say that caused an unexpected stir back in China.

"She did not thank the Chinese Tennis Association (CTA)," a fan fumed on an Internet forum while reminding everyone that CTA chief Sun Jinfang had been sitting right beside the Chinese ambassador to Paris, Kong Quan, in the stands.

"She did not even thank China and the Chinese people!" the fan ranted.

It was a decided departure from what Chinese supporters expected in the past. It would have been unimaginable for an athlete from China on the winner's podium not to start a speech with a litany of gratitude for coaches, club and country — if, indeed, they spoke at all.

Chinese sportsmen were as much known for their reticence in facing the media and the public as their athletic prowess. They were individually colorless, looked the same, dressed the same and blended into a background of collective solidarity.

"I cannot visualize what would have happened if Li gave the same speech back in the 1980s," said Yang Xinwei, a veteran sports reporter with China Daily who has been catering China's athletes for the past 27 years.

"At that time, Chinese athletes were kept aloof. They did not want to talk to the media and the public, and avoided every opportunity to do so."

Yang recalled his first overseas assignment in 1987 to cover the World Gymnastics Championship in the Netherlands, where China ranked third in the medal tally with two golds and two silvers.

"Even I did not get a chance to talk with the Chinese athletes apart from at the press conference," he said.

In probably the most extreme example, four-time Olympic winner and diving diva Fu Mingxia answered all media questions with an "I don't know" in Chinese — even when she was asked: "How old are you?"

The 10-year-old had just won the women's platform title at the 1990 World Goodwill Games in Seattle and had been primed by team leaders worried she was too young to handle media queries.

Li Na, once known as a maverick because of her outspoken ways and frequent dust-ups with the CTA, has effectively broken the stereotype of the strong but silent Chinese athlete, emphasizing a phenomenon she did not start but probably best represents.

She has tattoos on her chest and lower back that boldly declare her affection for her husband. She dyes her hair different shades, and she's not afraid to speak out — like when she directed a furious "Shut up!" to the crowds when they became too noisy between points at the Beijing Olympics tournament.

But it was during her court performance at the Australian Open this year that she charmed the world with her humor and wit. While fielding questions after her games, she showed off her unflappable sportsmanship when she joked about her husband on court in English.

"I will always admire her tennis first. But it was her charming personality that made us want to sign her," said Max Eisenbud, vice-president of tennis at the sports marketing giant International Management Group (IMG). The company sealed the deal with Li Na in 2009.

"She is now experienced with media inter-

views. She is funny, open and very smart. She really captured the hearts of everyone watching her. She is now more comfortable and relaxed and able to handle the spotlight. And, for sure, this will lift her popularity and commercial value worldwide," said Eisenbud, who also nurtured Maria Sharapova from novice to tennis great.

Li, dubbed "International Li" by fans, is seen as the paragon of a new, improved breed of Chinese athletes who are not afraid to let their personalities shine through.

They are more able to express themselves, and add a human face to their achievements and performances.



**She is now experienced with media interviews. She is funny, open and very smart. She really captured the hearts of everyone watching her. She is now more comfortable and relaxed and able to handle the spotlight."**

MAX EISENBUD  
VICE-PRESIDENT, IMG TENNIS

Among them, Olympic champion shuttler Lin Dan and hurdler Liu Xiang were among the first to show more expressive personalities.

Lin is famous for his shirt-ripping and military salute after every victory. He once kissed his girlfriend Xie Xingfang, also a top-ranked badminton player, during the 2007 All-England Championships to the delight of the cheering crowd.

The world will also remember Liu Xiang's exuberant leap onto the winner's podium after his dramatic victory of the men's 110m hurdles race at the 2004 Athens Olympics.

But, before Li Na burst onto the scene, no one embodied the image of the Chinese sportsman abroad more than NBA All-Star center Yao Ming.

He single-handedly changed the image of Chinese athletes abroad with his humility, modesty, social responsibility and smart thinking coupled with his stellar performances on the court. He became an unofficial ambassador for China and did much to promote Sino-American cultural exchange.

"Yao has such a huge impact because he is so real. He has truly shown what he is, both on and off the court. That had made the Americans accept him," said Lu Hao, Yao's agent.

It was not always so. Individualism was frowned upon in the days when patriotic solidarity was venerated above all else. There were no stars, only team players.

Lu, who also manages the sports agency Starz International Sports, remembers when he himself was a young basketball player.

"At that time, athletes were more like State symbols. They were careful to appear the same off the court. They wore the same uniforms, had the same hairstyles and even uniform answers to media questions," Lu told China Daily. "Self-expression was the last thing that was encouraged."

Lu attributed this to the immaturity of sports in the country then, and also limited international exposure.

"Life was simple, and knowledge was limited. Players were not willing to express their opinions because they had little to say," he said.

"But we are in the information age. With modern media outlets, athletes have more access to better understand the world and to enrich their personalities. Frequent international exchanges have made them more open," said Lu, whose company also manages China snooker sensation Ding Junhui.

Aware of the potency of star power, Lu's company has tried hard to help its sports celebrities manage public attention better.

"We arrange for them to take lessons on how to handle media interviews. We also try to influence them indirectly by building up their personalities," Lu said, citing Ding's success as an example.

The 24-year-old snooker champion used to be a quiet person who was too shy to talk with strangers when he claimed the 2002 World Under-21 Championship at 15, the youngest winner ever.

Starz organized visits and tours to the United Kingdom for him, where he trained and improved his general knowledge. The company also introduced him to a wider social circle, including dinner parties with celebrities, so the young man could improve his social skills.

The results speak for themselves. Last year, Ding was part of a team of four international Chinese sports personalities, including Yao, who took part in an image branding film for China that was telecast by CNN and shown in Times Square in New York.

"We would like our athletes to shine, to draw more eyeballs and help us in our marketing," Lu said.

Inspired by Li Na and other sports stars, Chinese athletes are making the effort to improve their image even as officials mull over how to help them.

Members of the Chinese national table tennis team have started to learn English after witnessing Li's speech at Roland Garros. It is an important step forward.

In spite of dominating the sport, China's paddlers have been criticized for their gruff manners, their refusal to sign autographs for fans and their dodging of the media.

"This is excellent news," International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) President Adham Sharara said in a statement. "It shows the progressive attitude of the Chinese Table Tennis Association and their understanding that the players must be able to communicate with everyone."

"If they communicate in English then the entire world will listen. It's an exceptionally positive step that adds an extra dimension to the global appeal of our sport."