SPORTS

BADMINTON



SMASHING HIS HOODOO

Shi shakes off 'choker' tag to claim maiden world championships title

By SUN XIAOCHEN
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Men's singles star Shi Yuqi's triumphant Paris return headlines Team China's medal-laden worlds campaign, as the celebrated squad vows to keep sharpening its young blades for the LA28 challenge.

With six medals — including two golds — packed in the luggage home and its players reaching finals in all five events, Team China could've left the French capital bragging about an overall success at the BWF World Championships, yet it opted to focus on the losses over the gains, as it pushes ahead with its ambition to restore its Olympic dominance at the Los Angeles Games.

Shi's career-first singles world title, secured by a comeback 2-1 win over his bitter rival Kunlavut Vitidsarn of Thailand on Sunday, helped China reclaim the men's crown 10 years after retired legend Chen Long won China's last in 2015. It was double delight for fans, adding to the gold medal won by women's pair Liu Shengshu and Tan Ning on the same night.

Some unexpected early exits of seeded contenders in Paris, though, raised concerns over the lack of consistency and poise among the team's potential medal hopefuls for the next Olympics.

The crushing second-round loss of world No 1 mixed doubles team Feng Yanzhe and Huang Dongping, China's highest-ranked women's singles ace Wang Zhiyi's third-round exit and underachieving men's world No 4 Li Shifeng's opening-round defeat were among disappointments that have given Chinese Badminton Association president Zhang Jun mixed feelings.

"It was an overall impressive collective effort, but we did suffer some unexpected setbacks here and there," Zhang said in his post-final assessment of Team China's performance.

"Some of our players didn't deliver the levels they are supposed to compete at, especially the mixed doubles pair, due to big-game nerves and issues with their preparations.

"I don't worry about the depth we have, though. We just need to re-evaluate our performances thoroughly and focus on how to keep our veterans fresh, while also nurturing our youngsters, in the buildup to the Los Angeles Olympic Games."





Above: Top seed Shi Yuqi is overcome with emotion after winning his maiden world championships' men's singles title in Paris on Sunday. **Left:** Liu Shengshu and Tan Ning win the women's doubles crown. **Right:** Injured Chen Yufei waves to the crowd after losing in the women's singles final. AGENCIES

Paris redemption

Always a superior competitor for his country at team championships, such as the Sudirman Cup and Thomas Cup, Shi's finally backed up his individual world No 1 status by claiming his maiden singles world title — and doing so, literally, with a vengeance.

The 29-year-old overcame fatigue, having battled his way to the final with a trio of three-game matches, and bitter memories from a year ago to dethrone reigning world champion Vitidsarn, who beat Shi in the quarterfinals at the 2024 Paris Olympics, in a gripping 19-21, 21-10, 21-18 win.

As the shuttlecock from a Vitidsarn return touched down on the wrong side of the line to concede the final point, Shi sank to his knees in tears. The emotion of completing the redemption arc from his runner-up finish at the 2018 worlds and avenging his Olympics loss to the same opponent at the same venue came pouring out onto the court.

"People always considered me a better player at team events. But, in individual competitions, I also always gave my utmost effort," Shi said during a mixed-zone interview after the final.

"This time, finally securing my first individual world championships title makes me so delighted, not necessarily having to prove anything to anyone. I just feel so relieved."

Once labeled by critics as a "big-time choker" for his collapse under pressure at previous high-stakes events, Shi broke his worlds hoodoo the hard way, saving two match points in his semifinal win over Canada's rising star Victor Lai, followed by an earlier, hard-fought third-round comeback win over Frenchman Christo Popov.

"I fought six matches in this tournament, each one incredibly tough. Many were matches I nearly lost, but managed to turn around. So, clinching it in the end felt incredibly rewarding," said Shi, who dictated play in the decider with his pinpoint smashes from deep to crack Vitidsarn's defense.

Shi's victory on Sunday put a Chinese name back on the men's singles honor roll, after the country had dominated the event by racking up eight straight wins from 2006-15 at the worlds, spearheaded by the legendary Lin "Super" Dan's five titles.

Standing 1.84 meters tall with long limbs and a quick footwork, Shi wields power, variety and finesse in his shots, and has been compared to the all-time greats, such as Lin and Chen, as the next leader of China's men since his international debut a decade ago.

A spell of misfortunes, including a serious left ankle injury in 2019 and two more on his right ankle and elbow, which required multiple surgeries to get him back in shape, took a heavy toll on his progression, mentally and physically.

Now, with the world title coming at a perfect time, CBA head Zhang expects greater things will come, continuing to pay back Shi's unremitting effort.

"Shi's been carrying a lot of weight and doubt all the way, even though he's done extremely well for us at all the team events," said Zhang. "Now that he's realized his dream (of winning an individual world title), I feel so happy for him, and I think we are yet to see his best."

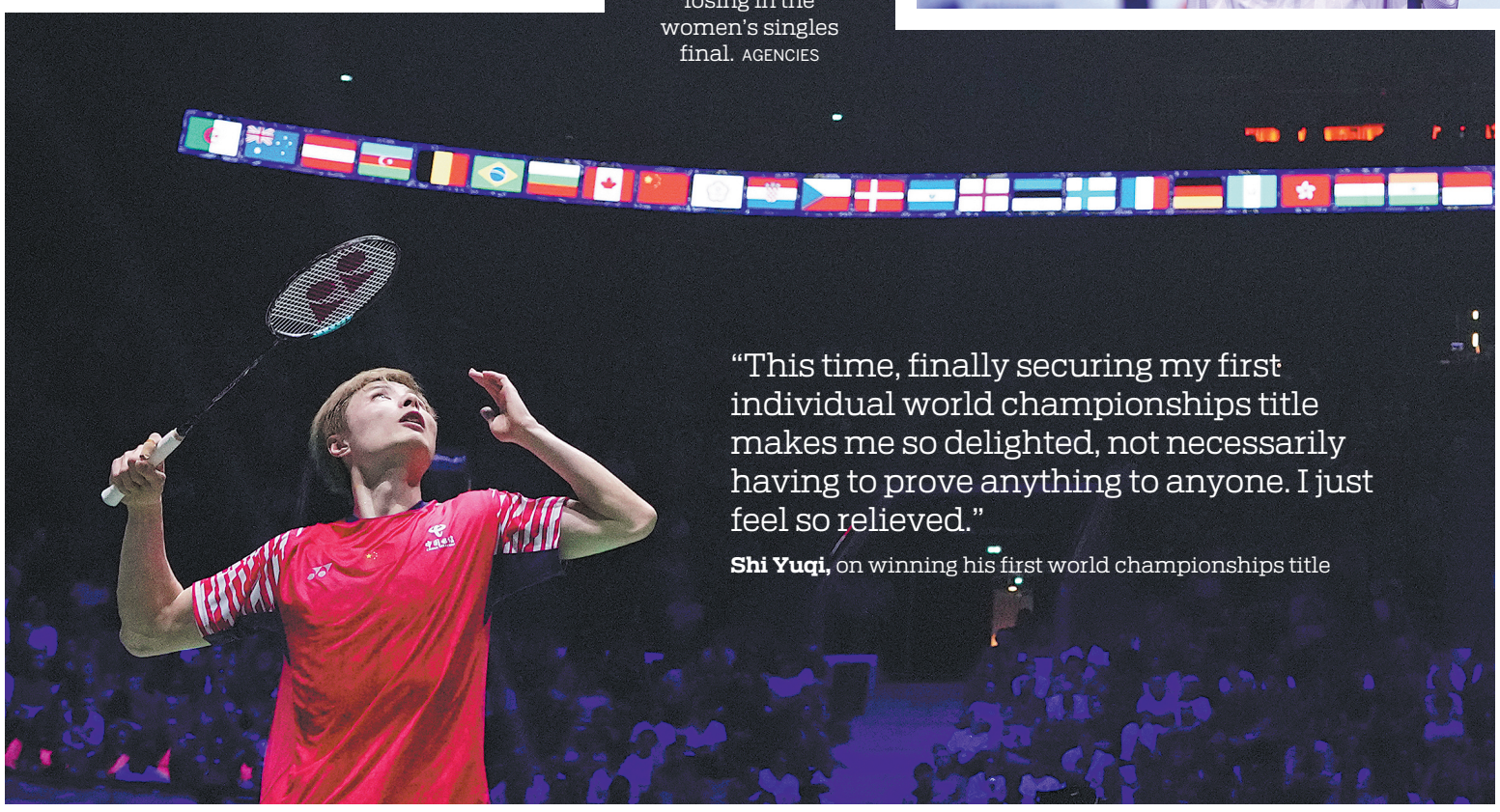
Earlier in the women's final, Japan's fifth seed Akane Yamaguchi took just 37 minutes to beat China's injured former world No 1 Chen Yufei 21-9, 21-13 to add a third singles world title to her golds from 2021 and 2022.

Chen, women's singles champion at Tokyo 2020, battled past top seed and reigning champion An Se-young of South Korea in a semifinal win marred by a nasty-looking ankle twist early in the second game.

In the final, Chen appeared hampered in her movement and Yamaguchi took full advantage to close out a comfortable straight-games victory.

"Since last night I've been undergoing treatment. Before taking to the podium just now (to receive her medal), I'd already taken eight painkillers," said Chen.

Malaysian fourth seeds Chen Tang Jie and Toh Ee Wei claimed a dominant 21-15, 21-14 victory over second-seeded Chinese pair Jiang Zhenbang and Wei Yaxin in the mixed doubles final. The men's doubles crown went to Korean top seeds Kim Won-ho and Seo Seung-jae after their 21-17, 21-12 victory over China's Chen Boyang and Liu Yi.



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Shi Yuqi, on winning his first world championships title

BASKETBALL

An end to the 'Linsanity' as curtain falls on storied career

By SUN XIAOCHEN

Although never the tallest or the strongest among his peers, Asian-American hoops star Jeremy Lin has secured his legacy as a larger-than-life global influencer after he called time on a 15-year professional career.

Lin, a point guard born in California to parents both with Chinese heritage, announced on Saturday his retirement from professional competition in a social media post, capping a storied career that spanned nine seasons in the NBA, three years in the Chinese mainland's CBA and short stints in Taiwan's TPBL.

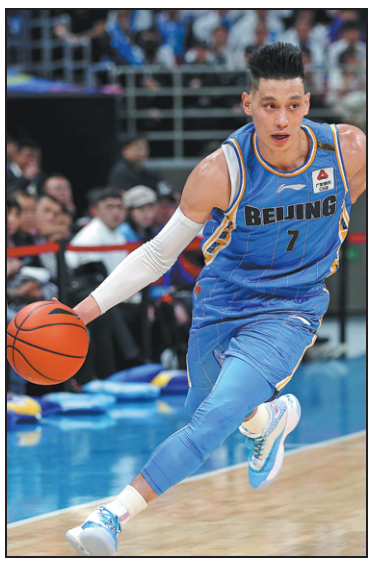
Despite a serious knee injury, suffered in October 2017, cutting short his prime in the NBA, Lin said he could leave the court without regret, knowing that he's done everything his worn-out body would allow.

"As athletes, we are always aware that the possibility of retirement is never far away. I've spent my 15-year career knowing that, one day, I would have to walk away, and yet, actually saying goodbye to basketball today has been the hardest decision I've ever made," the 37-year-old posted on Instagram.

"I've lived out my wildest childhood dreams to play in front of fans all around the world. I will forever be the kid who felt fully alive every time I touched a basketball.

"Thank you all for believing in me, for walking with me, for celebrating my highs and picking me up in my lows. This is a ride I never wanted to end, but I know it's time. I will forever miss playing basketball in front of you all, but our time will go beyond just playing."

Lin's retirement left his legion of millions of fans in China lamenting the departure of a role model for all Asian players, with the hashtag "Jeremy Lin retires" trending on Weibo, accumulating over 43 million views on the platform — where Lin has 7.5 million followers — as of Monday afternoon.



Jeremy Lin, pictured in action for the Beijing Ducks during the 2019-20 season, announced his retirement from professional basketball on social media on Saturday. ZHANG WEI / CHINA DAILY

Playing as point guard throughout the majority of his career, Lin averaged 11.6 points and 4.3 assists in 480 games across nine NBA seasons for eight franchises, notably with the New York Knicks, Houston Rockets, Los Angeles Lakers and Charlotte Hornets. He was on the Toronto Raptors' NBA championship team in the 2018-19 season, his final year in the North American league.

Entering the league as an underrated graduate from Harvard — known better for nurturing Nobel Prize winners than NBA prospects, Lin rose to international stardom in early 2012 after helping the then beleaguered Knicks start a winning surge with a series of explosive individual performances off the bench, inspiring the "Linsanity" fad that immediately took the basketball world by storm.

One of the highlights of "Linsanity", during which Lin scored at least 20 points in nine of 10 games, was a 38-point, seven-assist effort in a win over the Los Angeles Lakers, as he outscored the late Kobe Bryant in front of a roaring crowd at Madison Square Garden.

After being asked what advice he had for Lin after the game, Bryant joked: "What can I say when he scores nearly 40 points?"

Standing 1.9 meters tall and weighing 90 kilograms, Lin's strong presence with a slender build in the brutally competitive NBA has resonated with ordinary fans from Asia, motivating them to chase their own hoops dreams, regardless of stature, and has broken stereotypes that Asian guards could never thrive in the fast-pace, high-intensity NBA game.

After capping off his NBA adventure, Lin took his talent to the CBA by signing with the Beijing Ducks for two seasons, helping the capital team to reach playoff semifinals in the 2019-20 season.

In his final active season as a player, he led the New Taipei Kings to defend its TPBL championship in June and was named the league's Finals MVP for his average of 22.4 points, 5.4 rebounds and six assists in the club's 4-3 series win over Kaohsiung Aquas.

After hanging up his impressive collection of jerseys, Lin's impact is expected to continue off the court, as he passes on his skills and experience to young hoops hopefuls via his JLin NextGen Camp in his hometown of Palo Alto, California.

"I think Asian basketball still has a lot to improve in the areas of elite training. I am excited for the opportunity to share my years of understanding and knowledge," he said.

Yang Hanchu contributed to this story.