SPORTS

YEARENDER - TENNIS

Looking to make a powerful return

After an injury plagued year, China's aces are ready to swing back into action



From left: As they return to full fitness, China's injury plagued aces Zheng Qinwen, Zhang Zhizhen and Shang Juncheng will be looking to swing off the season strongly from January. XINHUA

By SUN XIAOCHEN
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The cruel nature of competitive sports put China's tennis boom on pause in a year of misfortune that left the country's injury plagued aces licking their wounds in the offseason, raring to bounce back in 2026.

Right after a milestone season in 2024, marked by historic successes at the Olympics and on the professional stage, Chinese tennis has signed off 2025 with injury woes slowing down the progress of its top players, leaving them ruing a barren season without any singles titles won on either the men's, or the women's, pro circuits.

It's the first time since 2021 that no Chinese player won a tour-level tournament, whereas, in 2024, the Chinese contingent had collectively claimed four singles titles to go with Zheng Qinwen's historic women's Olympic gold in Paris.

Altogether, in 2025, Chinese players won just 10 singles main draw matches across the four Grand Slams, far fewer than the combined total of 37 wins across the majors in 2024, and even shy of Zheng's individual tally of 12.

None of the Chinese men had managed to finish the season within the top 100 on the ATP rankings, while only three Chinese women, Zheng, Wang Xinyu (No 57) and veteran Zhang Shuai (No 81), stayed within the WTA's top 100.

At the end of 2024, three Chinese men and five women were ranked top-100 in the world.

Injuries, unfortunately an integral part of the business, took a heavy toll on almost everyone in 2025 — from Zheng's right elbow pain and men's ace Zhang Zhizhen's worn-out right shoulder, to rising star Shang Juncheng's foot bone fracture — forcing them to go under the knife, stop for long rehabs and take nosedives in the rankings.

And those who rushed their comeback had, apparently, learned their lessons.

Queen's restoration

After a two-month rehab following an arthroscopic surgery in July, Zheng, world No 4 in June, tried to return at her home WTA1000 tournament in Beijing at the end of September, yet had to retire in just her second outing, against Czech ace Linda Noskova, following an opening win over Colombia's Emiliana Arango, due to the remaining discomfort in her elbow.

The home favorite, anointed "Queen Wen" by her fans, admitted that she'd perhaps been too hasty.

"The 2025 season didn't go the way I'd expected," Zheng, who is now ranked 24th in the world, told media during a fashion event at the House of Dior in Beijing on Dec 11.

"It took me longer than expected to recover from the surgery, and it's been the first time in my career that I've missed so many competitions," said the 23-year-old, who's won five singles titles on the WTA Tour.

"I had some breakthroughs as well this year, but it's not enough. My goal for next year is to stay healthy, complete a full season and do better at the WTA1000 tournaments and the Slams.

"I will take it easy, though.

"To start it all over again after such a long break will be challenging for sure."

The progression of Zheng's game, as long as she's healthy, shouldn't be overlooked, though.

During a high-energy spring stretch, Zheng fought into back-to-back WTA1000 quarterfinals at Indian Wells and Miami, pulled off her career-first win against bitter rival Aryna Sabalenka en route to reaching the semis in Rome, followed by her first quarterfinal berth at Roland Garros that propelled her to the highest ranking of No 4, before the elbow pain put her season on hold after an opening loss at Wimbledon.

Zheng was still voted as the WTA's Singles Fan Favorite of the Year in 2025, and finished as the fifth highest-paid female athlete in the world, earning $1.6 million from prize money and $21 million from endorsement deals, according to Forbes.

Men power back

Similarly, China's surging men's players, following a breakout season in 2024, also had to learn the hard way that growing from pain is part of the elite game.

China's highest-ever ranked man Zhang Zhizhen, who was at world No 31 in July 2024, has fallen back to 415th this month, after a nagging right shoulder injury, which did not require surgery but took long break to heal from, had him grounded for six months since Indian Wells in March.

The 31-year-old conceded three losses from four matches in Hangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai after returning to action during the China Swing, realizing that only a solid offseason training program could help him regain his intensity and pace.

"Maybe I was in too much of a rush to play (in Hangzhou). I wouldn't have returned if it were not for the home events," Zhang said at his winter camp this month in Dongguan, Guangdong province.

"Now I am picking up the intensity in training and getting into my rhythm again. My team has faith in me, and I am confident as well (for a better season in 2026)."

Also recharging for a strong comeback in 2026 is promising men's ace Shang, whose meteoric rise on the ATP Tour was derailed by a right foot bone fracture he sustained at the Australian Open, which needed surgery in March and required six months in recovery.

The 20-year-old left fans convinced that none of the setbacks would wear him down by stunning world No 10 Karen Khachanov in the second round at the Shanghai Masters in October to notch his first win over a top-10 opponent, while reaching the third round at an ATP1000 event for the first time at just his third tournament since coming back.

Should his speed and agility return to his prime during an ongoing offseason camp at the IMG Academy in Florida, Shang will remain a serious contender at his season opener, the 2026 Hong Kong Open, which swings off main draw action on Jan 5.

"I will approach the 2026 season as a reboot, and take one step at a time. My focus during the offseason is to get my technique, strength and fitness back to the best possible level and open the new season fully healthy," said Shang, a world No 47 in October 2024, who's now fighting back at 253rd.

With the men's and women's tours resuming right after the New Year break, all of China's returning aces seem ready to swing back into action, and are already preparing to start the climb back to their best at the season's opening major, the Australian Open in Melbourne.

'China Swing' proves to be an economic grand slam

By SUN XIAOCHEN

No shining home stars, no problem — China's thriving tennis market has capped off a strong year of business, with tournament revenue and the sport's popularity scaling new heights in 2025.

Despite the country's top aces' injury plagued campaigns on the professional tours, tennis fever ignited by the Olympic success in 2024 has kept burning hot over the past season, propelling public consumption in businesses around tournament operation, training and tourism to record numbers throughout the past year.

From September to November, nine tour-level tournaments on the men's and women's pro circuits had been held across China, highlighted by the top-flight WTA1000 China Open in Beijing and equivalent ATP Masters event in Shanghai, drawing a massive fan following, media exposure and sponsorship interest during the autumn "China Swing".

Combined revenues of the nine tournaments have exceeded 1 billion yuan ($142.5 million) this year, with total ticket revenue setting a new record of 250 million yuan, according to figures released on Dec 18 by the tennis administrative center under the General Administration of Sport of China.

Drawn by a glittering cast of international stars, the two biggest tournaments, the China Open and Rolex Shanghai Masters, each registered all-time-high spectator attendances at 360,000 and 250,000, respectively, with surging visitor flows during the weeklong National Day and Mid-Autumn Festival holidays turning the two events into hot tourism destinations.





This year's China Open and Rolex Shanghai Masters each registered respective all-time-high spectator attendances of 360,000 and 250,000, according to figures released by China's tennis administrative center. XINHUA AND WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY

"The tournament has emerged as a huge contributor to the holiday economy in Shanghai, which has more than met our expectations and goals," said Yang Yibin, chairman of Juss Sports, the organizing and promoting company of the Shanghai Masters.

Collectively, the nine tournaments contributed to a total tourism revenue of 16 billion yuan across their host cities, paying dividends for businesses around catering, accommodation, sightseeing, exhibitions and souvenir sales, according to the tennis center.

"To promote the 'China Swing' brand, with all tournaments included in the package, has proved an important and successful initiative," Ding Xianghua, a deputy director of the center, said during a season review meeting last week.

"The stats and analysis have told the story, proving the strong momentum of the China Swing and its beneficial impact on opening up more growth opportunities for relevant businesses."

According to data released in April, China's tennis-playing population has surpassed 25 million, up 28 percent from 2021, while the total number of courts has increased to nearly 54,000.

The growing interest at the grassroots level has resulted in quality young talent emerging in greater quantities, underlined by Chinese prodigies' impressive performances at two recent international junior events held in Florida — the Orange Bowl tournament and the IMG Academy championships.

In the U18 girls category, 15-year-old Sun Xinran won China's first singles title at the Orange Bowl, a renowned cradle for future major champions, on Dec 14, after her younger counterparts He Rui and Zou Fangqiao captured the boys' and girls' titles, respectively, in the U12 group at the IMG Academy tournament a week earlier.

Eight of 25 juniors representing the Chinese Tennis Association at the two tournaments advanced into their respective singles finals, serving up a convincing testament to the country's productive youth cultivation in recent years, according to Bai Xilin, director of the tennis administrative center.

"This is a vivid snapshot of the scale of our reserve talent. The depth of our youth ranks is continuing to grow," Bai told Xinhua.

To better tap into the sport's potential, both from the talent development standpoint and business aspect, the WTA has added five new 125-category, entry-level tournaments in China this year, lowering the threshold for more young players to turn pro and more marketing opportunities for potential business partners.

"We hope to build a stage for all the up-and-coming players to launch the pursuit of their professional dreams," Helene He, WTA Asia-Pacific director of operations, said in September. "We'd like to also develop it into a sports entertainment event that will benefit local tourism and cultural promotion."