NATION

Ning skates to Olympic gold, setting record

Chinese speed skater achieves dream results at the 2026 Winter Games

By SUN XIAOCHEN in Milan
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Nearly an hour after leaving the crowd in awe and opponents stunned, Chinese speed skater Ning Zhongyan still couldn't take in the magnitude of his achievement — pulling off what is arguably the race of his life that many have hailed as a game changer in the sport.

By circling three laps around the oval-shaped track and crossing the finish line in 1 min and 41.98 sec on Thursday, Ning reset the 1,500m Olympic record, won his first Olympic gold medal at the Milano-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics, and to his biggest surprise, beat the event's favorite medal contender Jordan Stolz of the United States.

"I still can't believe I did it. That I've climbed over the mountain, which seemed insurmountable for so long," said an emotional Ning after lengthy celebrations with his coaches and teammates before taking interviews.

Stolz, the event's two-time world champion, was the mountain-like hurdle that Ning had trained and worked hard to overcome but came up short during previous competitions — until Thursday.

Racing in pair 13 alongside legendary skater Kjeld Nuis of the Netherlands, Ning got off to a flying start and pushed hard with each stroke while gliding through the curves smoothly to complete the 1,500m ahead of Nuis, the event's defending champion from the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics.

Stolz raced in the final pair but could not improve on the time, clocking 1:42.75 in silver medal position, ahead of Nuis, who took bronze with a time of 1:42.82.

"Today he had a better race. It was super good," said Stolz, who already won the 500m and 1,000m earlier at the Games, on Ning's breakthrough performance.

"Ning is a cool guy. When I saw that he won, I was happy for him. I was a little emotional. I was thinking about how he must be feeling in that moment."

Ning's 1,500m victory was the Chinese delegation's first gold medal across all ice sports in Italy and the Chinese men's speed skating program's second Olympic title of all time, after Gao Tingyu won the 500m on home ice in 2022.

Celebrating wildly with Ning on the sideline was an equally emotional Dutchman in Team China uniform — renowned speed skating coach Johan de Wit — who welcomed Ning, along with Chinese women's skater Han Mei, into his own club Team Gold three years ago, when Ning did not win any medals during the Games in Beijing.

After training systematically with De Wit at the Japan-based camp, jointly set up by the Dutch expert and Miho Takagi, a two-time Olympic champion from Japan, Ning significantly improved his consistency and stability.

De Wit, citing Ning's work ethics and talent, said he'd witnessed Ning's potential and future success when all eyes were focused on Stolz.

"By watching him skate (in previous rounds), you can feel that good performances are coming," De Wit said after the final.

"We have this trust and love for everybody on our team. That's why they want to be with our team and that's why they pushed each other to improve."

After the two bronze medals he won earlier in 1,000m competitions, a dream gold has proved Ning's effort with Team Gold, making his yearlong absence from home worthwhile.

Adding to the country's gold haul, China's decorated freestyle skiing aerials team put up another stellar show when men's skier Wang Xindi won his first Olympic gold medal at Milano-Cortina 2026 on Friday to build on his wife and teammate Xu Mengtao's women's title two days ago.

Earlier, Ning's golden dash on Thursday capped off a frenzied two-day celebration for the Chinese delegation after snowboarding sensation Su Yiming delivered the country's first gold at the Games on Wednesday by winning the men's slopestyle final at the Livigno Snow Park in northern Italy.

Shortly after Su's victory, five-time Olympian Xu Mengtao delivered China's second gold by delivering a multi-flip stunt to defend her women's freestyle skiing aerials title, becoming the world's only aerials skier to retain an Olympic gold in the discipline.



Lively festivities

Visitors explore a themed block in Chengyang district, Qingdao, Shandong province on Thursday. The local government introduced public benefit initiatives, featuring vibrant intangible cultural heritage performances and other cultural tourism activities for visitors to experience the lively Spring Festival atmosphere.
ZHANG JIN'GANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Change: Culture, tech integration becoming tangible

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The Malanshan Audio and Video Laboratory has emerged as a core engine driving technological transformation.

Established as a high-level research platform, the lab focuses on core technologies across the entire audio-video chain, from production and editing to transmission and display. Its work spans AI-empowered content creation, home and in-car audio-video equipment, and professional audio-video testing systems.

In one demonstration area, a set-top box no larger than a USB drive delivers 4K ultra-high-definition images and immersive audio, transforming an ordinary living room into a cinema-like space. Nearby, an AI dual-lens live-streaming camera responds to hand gestures, simulates cinematic depth of field and automatically removes backgrounds, enabling a single creator to produce studio-quality broadcasts from almost anywhere.

"We aim to build a full technological ecosystem covering the entire audio-video pipeline, from capture and editing to transmission and display, while aligning with both international frontiers and domestic industrial needs," Tu said.

The research team has filed more than 200 patent applications and plans to develop the facility into a leading national center for audio-video technology within the next five years.

As AI tools continue to mature, Tu said the lab expects both accuracy and efficiency to improve further, providing Chinese cultural products a faster and more natural pathway to global audiences.

What is unfolding at Malanshan mirrors a broader national policy direction.

In 2024, the third plenary session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China called for exploring effective mechanisms to integrate culture with science and technology and for accelerating the development of new cultural business forms.

During a group study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee in October 2024, Xi stressed the need to explore effective mechanisms for integrating culture and technology, promote digital empowerment and information-based transformation in cultural development, and turn China's rich cultural resources into development advantages.

Xu Guobao, vice-president of the China Culture Administration Association, said deeper integration requires not only new technologies, but also effective institutional mechanisms.

He noted that reforms are needed to improve the allocation of innovation resources, allowing talent, capital, data and technology to flow more efficiently in cultural production. Such changes can stimulate creativity and accelerate the emergence of new cultural business models, he explained.

Developing such models is strategically important, he said, for building a strong cultural sector, as it can promote high-quality economic growth, meet the demand for immersive cultural experiences, strengthen the preservation of traditional culture through digital tools, and enhance China's cultural soft power globally.

Meanwhile, across the country, the integration of culture and technology is becoming tangible, particularly in major cultural institutions.

At the Palace Museum in Beijing, digital transformation has become central to public engagement. Since the launch of the digital Palace Museum mini-program in 2020, millions of users have explored the former Chinese imperial palace through panoramic tours, livestreamed seasonal scenes and interactive exhibitions. Online ticketing, smart navigation, visitor comfort indices, as well as accessibility features for elderly and visually impaired users have further enhanced the experience.

In October, the Palace Museum further expanded its digital collections, bringing the number of high-definition digitized artifacts to more than 150,000, according to the museum authorities.

At the Mogao Caves in Gansu province, advanced scanning and rendering technologies recreated the famed Library Cave in digital form in 2023. Once housing tens of thousands of Silk Road manuscripts, the chamber can now be explored virtually.

The project was a joint effort between the Dunhuang Academy and Tencent, carried out under the guidance of the National Cultural Heritage Administration. It enables visitors to explore a virtual reconstruction of the historic chamber and its manuscript treasures.

The Digital Library Cave project received the Star of Outstanding Award from UNESCO's Global Awards for World Heritage Education Innovative Cases for 2023, and an international version was launched in Europe in 2024, offering English and French interfaces to overseas users.

In northern Shanxi province, the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda — the world's tallest surviving all-wooden structure — has gained a digital "avatar" in recent years through the collaboration between Lenovo and Tsinghua University's School of Architecture.

Using spatial computing and AI-generated content, researchers reconstructed the pagoda's structure and historical evolution, enabling long-term monitoring and immersive public experiences without physical intervention.

These projects demonstrate how digital technology is extending the life of cultural heritage while broadening its audience, experts said.

Digital cultural resources are increasingly being transformed into consumer products, rather than remaining traditional souvenirs. Cultural symbols drawn from classical paintings or historical motifs now appear on food packaging, clothing, watches and household goods.

According to market consultancy iiMedia Research, China's *guochao*, or China-chic, economy surpassed 2.2 trillion yuan in 2024. Cultural elements are becoming part of daily consumption on the strength of technology rather than confined to niche or ceremonial contexts.

Zhou Dan, a senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Philosophy, said the integration of culture and technology is central to building a strong socialist culture in the new era.

Quoting President Xi, he noted that the quality of cultural development should not be measured solely by economic returns, but by whether it provides cultural products that both meet people's needs and strengthen their spirit.

As new technologies such as generative AI emerge, development and security must be balanced. Digital tools are expanding creative space and enriching cultural experiences, but they also bring risks that require improved governance, ethical oversight and content regulation, Zhou emphasized.

He added that digital innovation should offer new means of expression for history and tradition, not rewrite or distort them.

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Guide: Many prefer giving cash over digital transfers

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In Cantonese, the term *laisee* carries auspicious homophones meaning "good fortune" and "smooth affairs". The red paper conveys joy and prosperity, while the money inside represents luck shared between generations.

While digital transfers have become commonplace in recent years, many still prefer the tactile ritual of preparing crisp new banknotes and stuffing them into red envelopes. Wang Xiuying, a 66-year-old retiree in Guangzhou, is a typical example. She recently exchanged 2,000 yuan in fresh bills at a local bank.

"Giving *hongbao* to children is a must and a perfect gift for Spring Festival," she said. "New banknotes feel more festive."

Her grandchildren returned home for the reunion dinner on Chinese New Year's Eve. For Wang, the envelopes are less about the amount and more about welcoming her family with blessings.

Across China, the amount of money in a *hongbao* can vary widely. In some regions the sums have risen in recent years, putting silent but very real financial pressure on many. It is precisely this pressure that the Guangdong chart appears to erase.

Cheng Qiongfang, an office worker in Guangzhou, said she distributed red envelopes with 10 or 20 yuan in each just like she has in past years.

"If *hongbao* becomes just a way to compete with others, it loses its original meaning," she said. "It should be a token of good luck."

Observers note that the popularity of the chart reflects more than regional custom. It speaks to a broader desire for a lighter, less burdensome holiday — one centered on warmth rather than wealth.

Within the vast tapestry of Chinese New Year rituals — from couplets on doorways to family banquets — the red envelope remains one of the most intimate and enduring gestures. A thin fold of paper carrying a modest sum embodies centuries of cultural memory for those sensitive enough to appreciate it.

In Guangdong's understated *laisee* guide, many have found not only a reference chart, but a reminder that the true value of a red envelope lies not in its denomination, but in the goodwill it conveys.

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Researchers conclude Antarctic sea survey

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The Chinese polar research icebreaker *Xuelong* completed all scheduled oceanographic survey operations in the Amundsen Sea and Ross Sea on Thursday having deployed new technologies and domestically produced equipment. The operations are a part of China's 42nd Antarctic expedition.

The team aboard *Xuelong*, also known as the Snow Dragon, carried out a series of scientific surveys in the waters of Antarctica including the hydrological environment, marine biology, marine chemistry, atmospheric environment and penguin habitats from Jan 2, said team leader Zhang Haifeng in an interview with Xinhua News Agency.

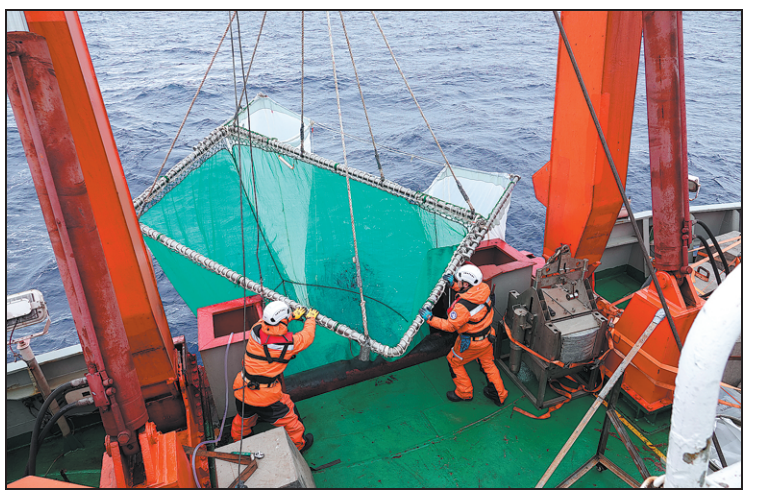
The western parts of the Antarctic region, where the surveyed waters are located, are among the areas most significantly affected by global climate change. The ice sheets and ice shelves south of the Amundsen Sea are rapidly melting, making this area a hot spot for Antarctic scientific research on climate change, according to Xinhua.

The team overcame adverse weather conditions such as wind and snow, fog, waves and severe ice conditions to conduct ocean surveys in the target sea areas, Zhang said. "We focused on investigating key elements of the marine ecosystem and carried out operations such as the deployment and recovery of moored buoys, the use of new krill trawls and observations with expendable conductivity and temperature."

Chinese researchers collected a batch of high-value specimen such as Antarctic krill, midwater fish and deep-sea benthic organisms, which provide a scientific reference for clarifying the trophic structure of key species in the upper and middle layers of the ocean in the relevant sea areas and for tracking and understanding the trends in key population changes.

During the operations, a batch of new technologies and equipment was put to use, said team member Li Shuai. "The deployed polar ecological mooring system, equipped with domestically produced acoustic and optical detection modules, enables long-term continuous observation of the ocean beneath the ice."

Additionally, a newly improved krill trawl with a multilayered design was put to use. It has effectively increased the catch and helped the team understand the distribution of krill across different water layers, Li added.



Members of the *Xuelong* oceanographic team conduct the first krill trawl operation of the voyage on the vessel's aft deck on Jan 24. GU TIANCHENG / XINHUA

The *Xuelong* ocean team comprises 31 members from 12 domestic research institutes and universities. Next, the team members will take the icebreaker to Hobart Port in Australia, before flying back to China. The *Xuelong* will then proceed to China's Zhongshan Station in Antarctica to carry out other tasks.

China's 42nd Antarctic expedition, organized by the Ministry of Natural Resources, relies on the *Xuelong*, *Xuelong* 2 icebreakers and various research stations to conduct a series of ocean surveys. It's an important part of China's long-term monitoring and scientific research in Antarctica, providing crucial support for studies on Antarctic climate change and the ecological environment.

Wei Fuhai, leader and chief scientist of the 42nd Antarctic expedition, said previously that China has conducted multidisciplinary surveys in the Amundsen Sea for eight consecutive years since 2018. Such long-term continuous observations are crucial for capturing the complex and rapid marine change processes in this region. The survey results will provide valuable data for assessing the impact of global climate change on marine ecosystems.