

Fan Zhendong: Fan Culture "Bullying," Denied Practice Partners, Internal Exclusion — At the Moment He Won the Grand Slam at the Paris Olympics, He Was Already Thinking About Retirement. What Did "Xiao Pang" Go Through?

(Transcribed by TurboScribe)

In January 2013, the national team finalized the roster of athletes for the Paris World Table Tennis Championships through intense selection. Among them, Fan Zhendong's name appeared last on the men's singles list. That year, he was only 16 years old. In the third round, he was swept 4-0 by his senior teammate Zhang Jike, who was at the peak of his career, and was eliminated. However, 11 years later, he returned to Paris, having grown into a cornerstone of the national team. Under immense pressure, he won the Olympic men's singles gold medal, becoming the second "Super Grand Slam" champion after Ma Long. He is the youngest world champion in men's table tennis history, holds the Guinness World Record for 27 consecutive wins in the Super League, and is known as the "Heavenly Purple Star" of table tennis.

Yet, to everyone's surprise, during the Paris Olympics, he expressed thoughts of retiring more than once — even after winning the Grand Slam, his stance did not change. His fans published a long signed letter, detailing the mistreatment and injustices Fan Zhendong endured during the three years of preparation for the 2021–2024 Paris Olympics. They pointed fingers at factionalism within the national team, the exclusion of teammates, unequal distribution of training resources, and more — even drawing the attention of CCTV. Recently, Fan Zhendong participated in an exclusive interview. Does bullying within the team truly exist? What kind of suffering did he — widely regarded as Ma Long's successor — actually endure? Today, let's talk about the overlooked genius, Fan Zhendong.

Early Life

Fan Zhendong was born on January 22, 1997, in Guangzhou, Guangdong, with ancestral roots in Qidong, Hunan. Because he didn't have a Guangzhou household registration, schooling became a problem. After much inquiry, his parents learned that the First Primary School on Tongfu Road was a table tennis specialty school — children with table tennis talent could enroll without a local hukou and could even have part of their tuition waived. So, at age 5, Fan Zhendong began learning table tennis at the Zhuhai District Youth Palace in Guangzhou. In the talent class, the chubby little boy was called "Fat Kid" (Féi Zǎi). Later, this nickname followed him all the way to the national team, softened into the more affectionate "Xiao Pang" (Little Chubby).

At first, playing table tennis was just a stepping stone to getting into school — his parents never planned out a professional career for their son. But in the eyes of Youth Palace coaches Wen Haoguang and Yang Biyun, the child was exceptionally talented: superb touch, thoughtful play — a rare gem. In 2004, Fan Zhendong represented the Zhuhai District Youth Palace in the "New Seedlings Cup" youth table tennis tournament and won first place in the boys' division. Two years later, he was selected to the Guangzhou Sports Vocational and Technical College under Coach Zhang Min. Recognizing his extraordinary talent, Coach Zhang urged his parents to let him continue training, and they fully supported it.

In 2008, the 11-year-old Fan Zhendong represented Guangzhou in provincial competitions, winning first place in both team and doubles events. Coach Zhang admired his diligence and self-discipline: while other children might quit when tired, Fan Zhendong always completed his practice in full quantity and quality, always pushing himself harder. That same year, Fan Zhendong

was selected into the August 1st Table Tennis Team, which falls under military jurisdiction, under head coach Wu Jingping, becoming teammates with senior players like Wang Hao.

Rise to Prominence

In 2011, Fan Zhendong participated in the National Table Tennis Championships for the first time, losing to Lai Jiixin in the first round. Watching his seniors Wang Hao, Ma Lin, Wang Liqin, and others dominate the arena, he felt inspired for the first time. He worked even harder, determined to join the national team and become one of the greats.

The following February, just turned 15, he passed the training camp trials and earned first place to join the national second team under Coach Liu Heng. Shortly thereafter, in the men's singles of the National Table Tennis Championships, he stunned the world by defeating world champion Wang Liqin 4–3, earning promotion to the national first team.

At the year-end World Youth Table Tennis Championships — his first world-class competition — he swept the men's team, men's singles, and mixed doubles titles, and took silver in men's doubles, making a stunning debut on the international table tennis stage.

One month later, during the national team's Paris World Championships selection trials, Fan Zhendong performed brilliantly in the first phase, surprisingly coming in second overall despite competing against many top players. He eventually defeated world champion Wang Hao to earn the final wildcard spot for the men's singles at the World Championships. Though he only reached the quarterfinals, his performance during the team trials made teammates and coaches realize: this boy with the youthful smile was not to be underestimated.

Indeed, in the next three months, he won two golds and a silver at the National Games, took the men's singles crown at the East Asian Games, and won back-to-back titles at the Polish Open and German Open. Along the way, freshly crowned World Champion Zhang Jike, German star Ovtcharov, and even the all-around warrior Ma Long nearly fell to his racket. At 16, Fan Zhendong became the youngest men's doubles champion in National Games history and was the focus of the global table tennis world in 2013. His explosive, energetic playing style paired with his slightly boyish face earned him the nickname from fans: "Violent Panda."

The Ma Long Era and Perpetual Runner-Up

Unfortunately, his rise coincided with Ma Long's era of total dominance. Starting from the 2014 Asian Cup, Fan Zhendong racked up runner-up finishes at major tournaments almost every time Ma Long was present: 3–4 at the 2014 Asian Cup, 1–4 at the 2015 Suzhou World Championships, 3–4 at the World Cup, 1–4 at the 2016 Qatar Open, and particularly at the 2017 Düsseldorf World Championships men's singles final, where he lost to Ma Long by just two points in the deciding game. That match became a classic in table tennis history. Fan Zhendong teared up in his post-match interview, saying he still had room to improve in seizing opportunities. Ma Long himself remarked that a match that exciting would probably never be seen again.

Some said Fan Zhendong seemed to have developed a phobia of Ma Long — but in truth, Ma Long also lost to him plenty of times. At the 2016 China Open, Fan Zhendong beat the newly crowned Grand Slam champion Ma Long 4–0. At the 2017 National Games, he defeated Ma Long 3–0 in the men's team first phase. In 2020, he defeated Ma Long consecutively at the National Championships and at the World Cup. Their rivalry embodied the gold medal relay between

generations — not a competition about who is better, but a spirit of mutual learning and collective progress.

At the time, Ma Long was the undisputed number one on the national team, and Fan Zhendong was unquestionably his heir apparent, dubbed by fans the "Celestial Purple Star." In the April 2018 international rankings, he topped the world rankings for the first time, boasting four World Cup singles titles, one Asian Games singles gold, two Asian Championships singles golds, a personal win rate of 100%, going 24–0 — breaking Ma Long's record of 23 consecutive wins.

Tokyo and Houston

At the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, Fan Zhendong — competing officially for the first time — won the men's singles silver medal and men's team gold. He again lost to his senior Ma Long in singles, but in the team event, after losing the first point, he rebounded with a dominant 3–0 sweep, laying the foundation for China's victory and displaying the composure of a seasoned warrior. In his post-match interview, he said: "Tokyo is a comma, not a period. I hope to keep working hard."

Later that year at the Houston World Championships, he defeated Swedish star Moregard 4–0 to claim his first World Championships title. Now, only an Olympic singles gold stood between him and the Grand Slam. Everyone anticipated he would complete it in Paris — but little did they know, the three years of preparation ahead would plunge him into the lowest point of his career, even the darkest moments of his life.

The Beginning of the Low Period

After winning his first World Championships singles title in November 2021, Fan Zhendong and his men's doubles partner Wang Chuqin dropped the ball in their doubles match. In an interview with Table Tennis World magazine, Wang Chuqin admitted that losing to Fan Zhendong in singles had affected his mental state, leading to an off performance in doubles. This was Fan Zhendong's first loss to a foreign opponent since he began competing in the three major tournaments in 2013.

In December 2021, Fan Zhendong won the Singapore WTT World Cup. He sat atop the 2021 world rankings. But a small incident occurred: during the World Cup men's singles third round against Fan Zhendong, Wang Chuqin suddenly switched rackets, claiming his teammate's racket was easier to use. Many fans felt this was a targeted move. The incident sowed seeds of animosity between the two players' fan bases.

In 2022, shortly after Fan Zhendong won the inaugural WTT Grand Smash, news emerged that his head coach Wang Hao would be leaving the national team. Wang Hao had recently stated publicly that he would accompany Fan Zhendong to the upcoming Budapest tournament. Then, without explanation, the national team released a statement saying Fan Zhendong would independently prepare for the team trials and voluntarily withdraw from two Budapest events. This cost him critical ranking points, and the international federation deducted 1,400 ranking points he had earned at the Tokyo Olympics. Fans didn't buy the official explanation, and confusion swirled around Wang Hao's departure. Eventually, the 1,400 points were restored — but by then, Fan Zhendong had been absent from competition for five months, and his ranking had dropped from 1st to 4th.

Resource Deprivation and Internal Exclusion

The national team had a longstanding rule: training resources such as technical coaching and sparring partners were allocated based on ranking. After his ranking dropped, Fan Zhendong gradually lost his status as a core player, becoming what fans called a "four-none" member: no technical coaching, no traveling sparring partner, no dedicated physical trainer, no basic medical support. By any measure of ability, he was China's No. 1 men's singles player with six world singles titles and the most appearances as the number one singles player in team events. The severe mismatch between his resources and his actual ability baffled fans.

What made them even more angry: in October 2022, Fan Zhendong — absent for seven months — appeared at the Chengdu World Team Championships covered in muscle tape. Fans wondered: if he had once been praised as the national team's most physically fit player, how had he gotten injured during a period with no competition? Commentator Liu Guozheng explained the tape was merely precautionary. Some media suspected that Fan Zhendong's move to Shanghai after the August 1st team was dissolved had angered certain individuals, leading to targeted suppression.

During the Chengdu Championships, Fan Zhendong performed well in the first round as the number one singles player, but Wang Chuqin lost 1–3 to Japan's Harimoto Tomokazu in the second round. Emboldened by that win, Harimoto came out firing in the fourth round and beat Fan Zhendong 3–2. While this did not affect the team's ultimate victory, many fans criticized Fan Zhendong for faltering at a critical moment.

A week later at the WTT Macao Champions, Fan Zhendong's injury worsened and he lost 3–4 to Wang Chuqin. The media piled on, reporting his consecutive losses to Harimoto and Wang Chuqin and claiming he had disappointed audiences.

The "No Explosion" Incident and Fan Wars

After the Macao tournament, teammate Lin Shidong posted a chat log with Wang Chuqin celebrating his title. But Wang Chuqin, just 20 minutes after the match ended, had posted an implied jab suggesting Fan Zhendong's strength was inferior to the young Lin Shidong — "didn't explode him." The phrase "didn't explode him" instantly went viral on Weibo, igniting a firestorm among Chinese table tennis fans. Netizens began hotly debating whether the national team was truly united. Under enormous public pressure, the post was quickly censored and many accounts that discussed it were silenced. Subsequently, the national team hung banners in training halls urging cohesion — but the situation only escalated.

In December 2023, fans of Wang Chuqin's official fan club printed "Didn't Explode Him" on banners, handheld signs, posters, phone cases, earrings, and other fan merchandise, proudly flaunting it online. On December 23, 2023, at the Super League, these fans — wearing masks and hats — walked into the arena waving those banners, publicly humiliating and provoking Fan Zhendong during his match, prompting security to intervene.

Physical Deterioration and Continued Injustice

Starting from the 2022 WTT Xinxiang World Cup, Fan Zhendong's injuries became increasingly severe. During warm-ups, he could hear his knee cracking and was in significant pain. After struggling through the match, he lost 2–3 to Ovtcharov, finishing in the top 8. Fans hoped Shanghai's team management would pull him from the arena immediately for treatment —

instead, the coaching staff kept him there until all events were over and a team photo was taken before letting him return to Shanghai for treatment.

While injured and unable to compete in the Asian Cup, teammates Wang Chuqin and Lin Gaoyuan both suffered defeats in his absence, marking China's worst-ever result in the 39-year history of participating in the Asian Cup men's singles.

After rehabilitation, Fan Zhendong saved the team's Grand Slam at the Globe Grand Prix and became the first man to win the singles title at the Grand Prix — yet the national team's coaching staff was reshuffled. His head coach was changed from Wang Hao to Liu Heng, and under mixed doubles coach Xiao Zhan's arrangement, he was pushed into mixed doubles competition — a category never his forte. Still not fully recovered, he fell outside the barriers trying to retrieve a ball during the mixed doubles, re-aggravating his injury.

In March 2023, at the WTT Singapore Grand Smash, Fan Zhendong won both men's doubles and men's singles. He even removed his back brace to go all out, but during the mixed doubles, his physical condition forced him to call a medical timeout, and he ultimately did not play the final.

The hardship wasn't over. The following month, an unknown woman illegally entered his hotel room. The frightening incident prompted Fan Zhendong to publicly call for a crackdown on extreme fan culture and announce he would cease all forms of fan interaction, urging that support for him remain limited to on-court appreciation only.

One month after the intrusion, he defeated Wang Chuqin at the Durban World Championships to claim his second world title. During the tournament, players from Korea and France raised complaints that Wang Chuqin was deliberately obscuring opponents' vision during his serve — even using the same obstructive serve against Fan Zhendong in the final. Though such serves typically only result in warnings, among players and fans alike, it's widely considered an unsportsmanlike way to win. Nevertheless, Wang Chuqin has continued using it, earning him the nickname "The Obstruction Net."

Final Descent and Paris

After the Durban World Championships, Fan Zhendong's condition deteriorated visibly. He caught COVID-19 on the eve of the Asian Games. During the Asian Games, he was clearly exhausted on court, called medical timeouts, and at times withdrew outright. Over a span of 329 days, he did not win a single title.

At the lowest point of his career, the Busan World Championships became his lifeline. In the men's team semifinals, with Wang Chuqin and Ma Long having each dropped a point, he defeated two opponents in a row to carry China into the final. His domination led Korean fans to call him "Superman" and say it was only because of Fan Zhendong that Korea lost. But it hadn't been easy. In the quarterfinal against Japan, the Japanese suddenly fielded 16-year-old newcomer Matsushima Teruku. With no pre-match technical scouting — a consequence of being a "four-none" member — Fan Zhendong had to study his opponent's old match videos while eating. His physical condition remained poor, and his only sustenance was a piece of bread and hot water in a plastic bag. After teammates dropped points and the coaching staff gathered around to support them, Fan Zhendong — the one who had carried the team — was left standing alone, ignored. In that moment, he felt deeply aggrieved.

He told Table Tennis World magazine: "It seemed like everyone assumed my point was already in the bag — but when I reached into that bag myself, there was nothing there." Under that weight,

he barely defeated his opponent — the French player who had previously beaten him — in the final, and China won the men's team gold. Fan Zhendong was named the tournament's best male player. Yet in the post-tournament media coverage, a photo was published that almost entirely obscured him, rendering the team's greatest contributor nearly invisible.

Around that time, he had just opened a Weibo account, hoping to share his life through social media — instead, it became a playground for internet trolls. Two days before the WTT Singapore-Malaysia Champions event, he and friend Lin Yun attended a Taylor Swift concert. A private video from that outing was posted publicly by someone claiming to be his friend's girlfriend. Since he went on to perform poorly in that tournament (losing in the round of 16), the concert video was wielded as "evidence" that he had let his performance slip for personal entertainment. He was forced to publicly respond: "My performance in Singapore was not ideal. I will continue to work hard in future competitions. On the court, serving the nation is my duty — something I have never neglected in over a decade. Off the court, in my limited private time, I am just an ordinary young person with normal hobbies and relationships."

Wang Chuqin's more extreme fans then stepped in to pour fuel on the fire, maliciously leaking Fan Zhendong's national ID number and phone number, spreading them online, and even digging out his family members' contact information to harass and abuse them. Fan Zhendong was forced once again to publicly call for reason: "I urge certain people to come back to their senses. Do not cross legal boundaries. There are no protective umbrellas in fan culture."

After securing his Paris Olympic berth, Fan Zhendong gathered with friends to celebrate, recording a video toasting his upcoming title win. After a friend posted it online, "black fans" attacked him for "popping champagne before winning," sending the phrase trending on Weibo. Some went so far as to tear and even burn photos of him holding his gold medal.

On June 3, 2024, Fan Zhendong won the WTT Chongqing Champions men's singles 4–3 over Wang Chuqin. During his victory speech, the venue was flooded with Wang Chuqin fans chanting and drowning him out. Sponsor Yili's congratulatory Weibo post was eventually deleted under intense protests from Wang Chuqin's fanbase.

In July, as athletes moved into the Paris Olympic Village, Fan Zhendong's sparring partner Zhao Zihao was unable to accompany him to train because the national team had provided no identification credentials. It was only after Shanghai team leadership arrived in Paris that a pass was finally issued for Zhao Zihao.

By then, Wang Chuqin had been shockingly eliminated in the round of 32, leaving Fan Zhendong as China's sole remaining hope for the men's singles gold. Yet Wang Chuqin's fans launched large-scale online curses directed at Fan Zhendong. In the quarterfinals, Fan Zhendong started 0–2 down against Harimoto Tomokazu. In the stands, team captain Ma Long and other national team members watched anxiously. Meanwhile, Wang Chuqin's sparring partner Liu Dingshuo was caught on camera smiling and whispering to Wang Chuqin. In the deciding game, Fan Zhendong clawed back and won. Wang Chuqin's fans posted: "So disappointed in Harimoto for you."

On August 4, Fan Zhendong lived up to national expectations, defeating his opponent 4–1 to claim the men's singles gold at the Paris Olympics, becoming the second male table tennis player after Ma Long to achieve the Super Grand Slam. It was unquestionably the most glorious moment of his career — yet he didn't look particularly happy.

After the team's subsequent victory, Fan Zhendong was again omitted from an official congratulatory telegraph issued by the Beijing municipal government. The day after it was published, his fans seized the moment to release a long signed letter on Weibo, publicly detailing

all the injustices and mistreatment Fan Zhendong had suffered throughout the three-year Paris Olympic cycle, shaking the Chinese sports world.

Fan Zhendong himself revealed his thoughts of retirement, and CCTV quickly arranged an exclusive interview. On camera, his face still carried a deep weariness. He spoke of the pressures he had faced and the impact of the fan wars: "Whether it's for me, or for the team, or for everyone's sense of unity — I think it does absolutely nothing but harm."

From the 16-year-old genius who burst onto the scene, to the 27-year-old steadfast pillar who responded to grievances with grace; from his first trip to Paris, to his return — 2,862 days had passed. Fan Zhendong's Grand Slam is perhaps the longest in history. As one fan wrote: "I see no favoritism toward him whatsoever. And in certain younger teammates on the national team, I see not even the basic courtesy toward Fan Zhendong. Regardless of what happens in Paris, what I want most is for him to be happy and free."

Once, he was a spirited, nationally celebrated teenage prodigy who believed that until the halftime whistle blows, nothing is impossible. But after breaking so many impossibilities, he found himself more and more desperate to escape.

At the end of the CCTV interview, the reporter asked whether he truly intended to retire. He said he hadn't thought about the next Olympics. "As for the future — I'll leave it to time."

Transcribed by TurboScribe