Since Li Na won the 2011 French Open, China's tennis market has soared to an estimated $4 billion.

FOR SELF OR FOR COUNTRY

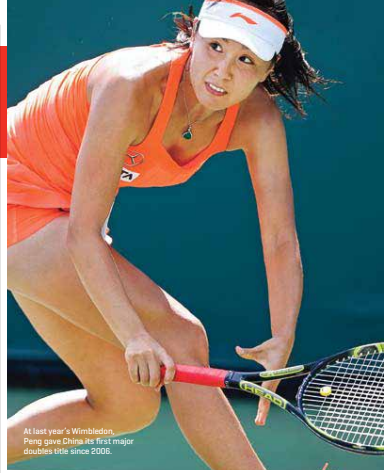
LI NA AND PENG SHUAI HAVE LAUNCHED A TENNIS CRAZE IN CHINA. BUT BY CHALLENGING THE COMMUNIST SPORTS MACHINE, THEY'VE ALSO FORCED THE NEXT GENERATION TO CHOOSE SIDES. BY SHAUN ASSAEL

photographs by JOHN LOOMIS

THE $3,982,178 $1,159,186

BANNER YEARS

In 2013, Li Na and Peng Shuai both had career-best finishes on the WTA money list. Li's $3.98 million ranked third and made her the highest-earning female athlete in China (see page 82), while Peng's $1.16 million ranked 19th. Through April 7, Li was No. 1 on the 2014 money list ($3.1M) thanks to her Australian Open win.



At last year's Wimbledon, Peng gave China its first major doubles title since 2006.

flowers, Carlos Rodriguez will tell you, explain everything.

In January, the veteran tennis coach was in China to watch Li Na—the woman he's helped turn into the second-best player in the world—win her second consecutive Shenzhen Open. Just three years ago, Li was a relative unknown outside her country, having yet to claim the 2011 French Open title that would start her meteoric rise as the first Asian to win a grand slam. Just three years ago, a Shenzhen Open didn't even exist.

With a population of more than 10 million, Shenzhen is one of the many cities fueling China's tennis boom and sending sponsors flocking to Li, now a $40 million global brand. But the final of the 2014 Shenzhen Open was symbolic for reasons far greater than Li's repeat. On the other side of the net was her Chinese rival Peng Shuai.

After taking the first set 6-4, Li lost four straight games in the second set, then rallied to win the match. As the women shook hands, a message crackled over the public-address system. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is very important and memorable," an announcer told 4,000 fans packed into the Longgang Sports Center, their flashes popping. "Let's use our video cameras to capture this moment."

It was only the second time in WTA history that two Chinese players met in the final of a sanctioned event, the first on Chinese soil. Still, Li's No. 2 ranking (through April 13) and Peng's emergence as the tour's No. 1 doubles player don't fully explain why the WTA will hold nine more events on the mainland in 2014, up from two in 2011. Or why China's cities are dueling each other to build ever more lavish stadiums. To truly comprehend the country's tennis craze, you had to be with Rodriguez as he walked from the stadium to the car that was waiting to whisk him to the Shenzhen airport.

The driver was holding a bouquet of flowers, tears in his eyes. "He said he wanted me to have them because I made him so proud of his country," says Rodriguez, who used to coach former No. 1 Justine Henin. Then he shakes his head: "I won seven grand slams with Justine, and no one ever offered me anything like that."

TO UNDERSTAND WHAT brought that driver to tears, you need to know how much Li and Peng mean to the People's Republic of China, as well as how long and arduous the journey has been for both women.

The Chinese Communist Party runs tennis, like all sports, by overseeing teams aligned with each of the country's 23 provinces. They act as feeders for the party's Olympic machine and make up the backbone of the Chinese Tennis Association (CTA), which controls nearly every aspect of athletes' training, from choosing their coaches to setting their schedules to dictating their style of play. In exchange for funding their careers, the party pockets 65% of their winnings and nearly all of their sponsorship dollars. But the primary goal for CTA players isn't money—it's serving one's province and country.

Li entered the system at age 5, when her father, a former badminton player, enrolled her in a feeder school near their home in Wuhan, a city of 10 million in central China. Soon, a coach recognized that Li's size and skill set were well-suited for tennis. But as Li quickly learned, her instructors taught tennis the way earlier generations of party coaches taught gymnastics or ballet—through mind-numbing repetition and negative reinforcement.

"From the age of 11, I'd be hearing a coach behind me yelling, 'Stupid,' or 'Are you a pig?'" Li writes in her memoir, *Playing Myself*. She became so miserable that at night she would "huddle alone under the blanket and cry quietly," refusing to let her coaches see her suffer.

That headstrong attitude is also what set Li apart on the court. Rather than mindlessly hitting the flat, one-dimensional volleys that her coaches drilled, Li liked to take chances, either serving and volleying or testing the range of her topspin. By age 14, she was tapped to represent her province, Hubei, in the biggest annual tennis event on the Chinese sports calendar, the National Open. By 15, she was named to the exclusive national team and competed in the larger, more glamorous National Games, which are held every four years as a prelude to the Olympics. There she was targeted as an Olympic prospect, and in 1997, as part of the CTA's sponsorship deal with Nike, Li was sent to study at the prestigious John Newcombe Tennis Ranch in Texas.

Two years later, wanting to measure her potential against international competition, the CTA pushed Li to go pro—meaning she would play on the ITF women's circuit, the WTA's developmental tour, and also continue to represent her province and country at CTA events. But the move backfired. The more Li was exposed to less regimented styles and the more matches she won, the more she became frustrated with forking over her earnings and being followed on tour by a party official. Burned out after four years of shuttling between her pro career and the national team, Li quit. She left tennis and went to college, with no intention of returning.

Meanwhile, Peng, who is four years younger than Li, was able to avoid the rigidness of the Chinese feeder schools—at least until age 12. Growing up in the northeastern city of Tianjin (population 14 million), Peng studied the game with the help of her uncle, who was a well-respected coach. But as soon as she was recruited to play for her Tianjin team, she came under the watchful

eye of the CTA. It was also at that time, in 2002, that she drew the attention of then-IMG agent John Cappo, who was trying to recruit a star who would help IMG break into the Chinese market.

"It was winter, and I remember sitting in a little room, shivering, watching everyone around me chain-smoking," says Cappo, who is now the president of AEG China, the country's leading sports and entertainment marketing firm. "Nobody had any background in tennis, but they all thought they knew what was best for Peng."

What was best, they believed, had to do with the Chinese philosophy *juguo tizhi*, which translates to "whole country support for the elite sport." While Cappo wanted Peng to experience the WTA Tour and adapt to different styles, the bureaucrats balked, insisting that Peng's obligation was to her province—even if it meant skipping Wimbledon. Cappo was aware of the subtle yet significant split in the way the party ran its tennis program. On one side were the provincial leaders who didn't look much beyond their next tournament, hoping success would earn them points with the party. On the other side were the government officials who took a broader view because they were intent on improving China's image abroad. "The key was balancing the aspirations of the Chinese leadership while incentivizing Peng to perform," Cappo says.

He eventually negotiated a deal with the CTA that allowed Peng to turn pro and train at the IMG Academy in Florida, so long as she also stayed on her Tianjin team. Like Li, the 16-year-old Peng quickly blossomed outside the rigors of the Chinese system, going from 359th in the WTA rankings in 2002 to 37th in 2005. But also like Li, Peng grew restless under the party's thumb. She began to speak out against the limits of the CTA and was soon joined by Li—who had returned to tennis in 2004 after two years away only to find the same frustrations. Both players came under criticism in the official state media; Peng was branded unpatriotic, and Li was warned that she might be yanked from the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

But those Olympics actually turned out to be a defining moment both for Li and Chinese women's tennis. When Li swept past Venus Williams in the quarterfinals, only to lose to Russia's Dinara Safina in the semis, it proved that she had the talent to hold her own on the world stage. It also proved that to excel, Li needed more than her country could offer.

What emerged from Li and Peng's battle with the party was an official policy called *danfei*, which translates to "fly solo." Under danfei, Peng and Li (and two other veteran players) were given special status, allowing them to keep roughly 90% of their income, set their own schedules and choose their coaches. In return, they would be responsible for funding their own training and travel. The CTA's lone request: Bring greater glory to China.

> "YES, WE HAD A FIGHT, BUT IT'S NO DIFFERENT THAN FIGHTING WITH YOUR PARENTS."
>
> PENG SHUAI, OF HER RUN-INS WITH THE PARTY

IN THE SIX years since flying solo, the stunning success of Li and Peng has stoked not only national pride but a massive influx of tennis investment in China's most populous cities, creating a market estimated at $4 billion.

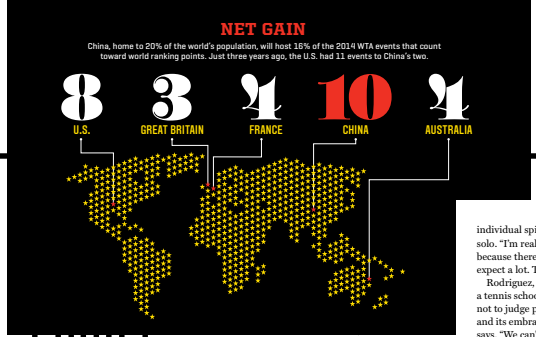
First came the Shenzhen Open in 2013, then the Wuhan Open, which will debut Sept. 21 in Li's hometown. Tokyo had owned the WTA event for 30 years, but its facilities required major repairs after the 2011 earthquake. Not only did Wuhan beat out Tokyo for the rights (event executives declined to give specific numbers), but it promised to construct a stunning 15,000-seat tennis center with a retractable roof that is scheduled to open in 2015. Wuhan will lead directly into what was once the Beijing Open but has been rebranded as the China Open, one of the four mandatory events that combine the men's and women's tours, with a purse of $6.6 million. (The others are Indian Wells, Miami and Madrid.)

All this investment coincides with an emerging urban middle class, which has disposable income to spend on tennis, and the policies that China's energetic new president, Xi Jinping, has put in place to encourage economic competition and lure foreign investment. He has also vowed to make Beijing an international sports capital. Case in point: After Li won the Australian Open in January, Nike plastered her face across China with an inspirational message that echoed the new zeitgeist: Dare to Aim Higher Than the Sky.

Peter Johnston, managing director of the WTA's Asia-Pacific operations, has to pinch himself when he thinks about the potential. "The stars have aligned for us to a great degree," he says.

BUT WHAT HAPPENS when Li, 32, and Peng, 28, retire? Can China's talent supply keep up with its tennis demand?

That question is at the heart of a paradox between the country's new-style capitalism and its old-style communism: While cities like Wuhan and Shenzhen are paying for new tennis stadiums and inviting the world to see them, the party's coaches aren't producing enough quality players to put in them.



The only other Chinese player in the WTA's top 50 (through April 13) is 25-year-old Zhang Shuai, at 46th. After 59th-ranked veteran Zheng Jie, who is 30, you have to go to 140th before finding another player from China.

The WTA is responding like any American company faced with a manpower issue: It's trying to help newcomers gain on-the-job training by starting a minor league series. Of the six WTA 125K Series events that are being launched this year to help amateurs earn ranking points, four are in China (NanChang, Suzhou, Ningbo and Chinese Taipei). But the tour still has to overcome the entrenched interests of party coaches. A provincial coach who steadily wins at the National Open can receive more funding for his team, a loyalty bonus and even a promotion. That's a powerful incentive for the coaches to discourage top players from fulfilling pro aspirations abroad.

Even more challenging are the numbers the WTA and the men's ATP World Tour are up against. Li and Peng were able to cut financial ties to the party because they were good enough to win, and win big. But consider the top Chinese player on the men's ATP tour, Wu Di, who is ranked 197th. He's won $33,810 in prize money this year, but because 65% of his earnings go back to China, he can't yet afford to fly solo and cover his own training and travel. Instead, he continues to balance ATP events with his Shanghai provincial team in order to cash the party checks: A top CTA player can bank $60,000 for wearing a provincial team sponsorship patch or receive a six-figure bonus for medaling in the National Games.

Those perks are enough to make some players think twice about chasing what are seen as meaningless world ranking points. According to Peng's longtime adviser, Alan Ma, many young Chinese players have grown comfortable in the CTA system and don't possess the individual spirit that gave Li and Peng the desire to fly solo. "I'm really stressed about Chinese players today because there's no motivation to fight," he says. "They expect a lot. Too much."

Rodriguez, Li's coach, moved to Beijing in 2010 to open a tennis school for 400 full-time students, but he's careful not to judge players or coaches who are wary of danfei and its embrace of the West. "It's a personal thing," he says. "We can't tell them they are wrong. As long as they have what they want, I can't criticize that."

IT'S STILL HARD to fully appreciate how much all of this rests on the shoulders of Li Na. The new stadiums. The fact that China is suddenly a $4 billion tennis hotbed.

But even with all this pressure—with 22.5 million social network followers and China's leaders dissecting her every move—Li remains at the top of the women's game. In January, when she won the Australian Open, the country's leading micro-blog lit up with more than 370,000 posts, many applauding her for not mentioning China in her victory speech. "Li Na didn't stick with clichés like thanking the motherland or the party," one post said. "Support Li Na."

When she returned home to Wuhan, however, she was reminded that she still has critics. Locals pounced on Hubei's governor for giving Li a $132,000 reward check for the Aussie win, asking why taxpayer money should go to support a player who chose to fly solo. The third-most-read paper in the country, the *China Youth Daily*, even attacked Li for not smiling enough during the ceremony.

For Peng, things are less controversial at home. She long ago softened her antiparty rhetoric, and unlike Li, she still plays for the national team once a year. In March, during a stopover for Miami's Sony Open, Peng downplayed her past run-ins with the party, eager not to dwell on the past. "Yes, we had a fight," she says. "But it's no different than fighting with your parents or your best friend. I am still appreciative."

Of her decision to fly solo, Peng says: "It was one moment back when times were tough. Now [officials] realize tennis is not about *the way*. It is about many ways."

But even as her country uses tennis to show the world how far it has come as a modern economic power, it finds itself grappling with an old-fashioned principle.

In Communist China, turning pro is a foreign concept.