

From the quiet stalls of Nanxiang wet market to a judo champion

Li Qian and Xi Lingyan

In the predawn quiet of Jiading's Nanxiang Wet Market, the pickled-vegetable stall run by Xie Changsong is always among the first to light up at 5am. From this small booth — fragrant with brine and lined with jars — his son, Xie Yadong, began a path that led to the podium of China's 15th National Games, where the 26-year-old won silver in the men's 90-kilogram judo final.

On the morning of the championship bout, the father arrived at his usual hour and propped his phone against a row of pickle jars. "The vendors from a few stalls down all came to watch," he said. "Everyone was cheering for Yadong." Even as he spoke, his eyes stayed on the screen.

His routine of working the stall from 9am to 1pm while watching the match was familiar. He only saw his son compete in Tianjin eight years ago. "It's even more nerve-racking in the arena," he said. "Judo ends in minutes, and the kids who don't place are often in tears."

He paused.

"It hurts to watch. He loves it. As parents, we can't put our worries on him."

After every tournament, he saves the match videos on his phone and replays them. "At these Games, he did pretty well," he said. "I just worry he won't think so."

After the Games, Xie Yadong will finally have a brief rest, something his

father has been waiting for. "When he's home, he strolls around the stall, chats with his mother, then helps me move the pickle barrels," the father says. "I hope he stays a few more days."

Born in 1998, Xie Yadong was selected for judo training by Jiading's youth amateur program at the age of 12. In 2011, he officially joined Shanghai's judo team, marking the start of his professional career.

"Training is exhausting, and injuries are constant," his father said. "But he never complains."

His record reflects the same perseverance: back-to-back youth titles in 2012 and 2013, his first adult gold

in 2021, and silver at that year's National Games.

"I didn't fully execute my techniques," Xie Yadong said of the latest final. But compared with four years ago, he felt "calmer, more composed" and focused more on the process than the result. That shift, he added, comes from years of competition and

an intense season. "This year was basically training through competing. I fought more than 10 tournaments."

There is still a hint of disappointment, but his next goal is already set. He and his fiancée, also a judo athlete, have agreed to push for another cycle. "After two Games, I've improved physically and mentally," he said. "Now I want to enjoy training and competing. Hopefully next time, I'll do better."

From a pickled-vegetable stall to the mats of the National Games, Xie Yadong has spent 16 years carving a path defined by quiet determination. True to the spirit of judo — respect — the next chapter of his journey is one to watch.

Xie Yadong (top) during practice



▲ Xie Yadong (third from left) poses for a group photo with fellow judo medalists after the 2023 National Judo Championships.

◀ At his Jiading pickled vegetable stand, Xie Changsong sneaks in between customers to watch his son's competitions. — Photos by Xi Lingyan