

SPORTS

WINTER SPORTS



Cidan Yuzhen first encountered ski mountaineering in 2020 and her exceptional fitness earned her a spot on the national team. At the Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics in February, she became the only female athlete from Asia to compete in the sport. XINHUA



From poverty to peak performance

At Milano-Cortina, Cidan Yuzhen took a huge step for her family and the nation

More than 70 years ago, Tashi Wangdrak was a young Tibetan serf, born into a world where freedom was unimaginable. He never thought he would live beyond middle age, and certainly never imagined that, one day, a descendant of his would compete at the Winter Olympics.

This February, his granddaughter Cidan Yuzhen raced on the snow of the Italian Alps at the Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics in ski mountaineering — a sport returning to the Olympic program after more than a century.

The 19-year-old's participation marked the pinnacle of a family journey that spans three generations, from the rigid confines of feudal serfdom to the global stage of competitive sport.

Bound by servitude

Tashi Wangdrak grew up in Chanang county. In old Xizang, nearly all Tibetans were serfs under a feudal system controlled by aristocrats, government officials and senior lamas. Serfs were considered property of manor owners rather than individuals, obliged to work long hours and pay burdensome taxes.

"I spent my childhood sewing clothes with my mother in a shed meant for livestock," Tashi Wangdrak recalled decades later.

"Even the food we ate had to be rationed

carefully. There was no freedom, no future we could plan for ourselves."

The obligations were crushing. Many serfs tried to escape, risking brutal punishment, or even death, if caught. Tashi Wangdrak and his mother decided to flee. They wandered through snow and hunger, finally reaching Rirong township in Luntse county, where they found temporary refuge.

There, he met Chodron, a young woman who had also escaped servitude.

They married and began to rebuild their lives, though poverty remained a constant companion.

Everything changed in March 1959, when the democratic reform swept Xizang, abolishing feudal serfdom and ushering in a new era of freedom.

These reforms allowed Tashi Wangdrak and his wife to raise children free from the bonds of servitude — the first generation of their family born with personal freedom.

"We were allocated land of our own," he said. "For the first time, I had a home of my own."

From plateau to city

Life in Rirong, perched over 4,000 meters above sea level, remained physically demanding and economically limited.

Tashi Wangdrak and his children depended largely on livestock herding, one of the few ways to survive on the harsh Tibetan Plateau.

“When we tested athletes on uphill climbs, boys and girls together, Cidan Yuzhen would finish first. But what impressed us most was her determination. She fell many times, yet she never gave up.”

Jin Yubo, coach of China's ski mountaineering team

Cidan Yuzhen was born in 2006. Unlike her grandparents, she had access to formal education, yet the rhythm of her family's life was still dictated by the mountains. She herded sheep and worked the fields, but her aspirations stretched far beyond the plateau.

"I wanted to be a physical education teacher," she recalled. "I wanted to see the world."

She was selected by a sports school from Shannan city and accepted the offer without hesitation, even before asking her parents for permission.

"I didn't know what it meant to leave,"

she said. "I just wanted to experience something new."

"I hoped she could fly out of the mountains and see the world," her mother said.

At just 10 years old, Cidan Yuzhen became the first member of her family to leave their rural village.

She traveled for hours along winding mountain roads to Shannan to embrace formal athletic training.

Dreams take flight

Cidan Yuzhen first encountered ski mountaineering in 2020, as winter sports gained momentum in China ahead of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics.

The sport combines uphill climbing and downhill skiing, demanding endurance, strength and precision, skills Cidan Yuzhen honed in the high-altitude environment of Xizang.

"She had never skied before," said Chinese national ski mountaineering team coach Jin Yubo. "At first, she fell almost every time she turned."

Cidan Yuzhen's exceptional fitness, though, earned her a spot on the national team in 2020.

"When we tested athletes on uphill climbs, boys and girls together, Cidan Yuzhen would finish first," Jin said.

"But what impressed us most was her determination. She fell many times, yet she never gave up."

In 2023, Cidan Yuzhen won two gold medals in the U18 individual and vertical races at the ski mountaineering World Championships.

At the Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics, she became the only female athlete from Asia to compete in the sport.

Thousands of kilometers away, her family watched from Xizang. In their village, neighbors now recognize them as the family of a world-class athlete.

But one key figure was absent: Tashi Wangdrak passed away two years before his granddaughter stepped onto the Olympic stage.

"Life has changed completely," Tashi Wangdrak told Xinhua in 2023.

"Thanks to the country's support, my granddaughter can be successful as she is. They'll never have to live the life as we did as children."

For Cidan Yuzhen, the Olympic journey is just the beginning. She said that representing China meant "showing the spirit of Chinese athletes to the world".

After the Olympics, Cidan Yuzhen returned home, greeted by family and the vast landscape that shaped her resilience.

"I just can't accept losing. I always want to be the first," she said.

"It's about challenging yourself and keeping on pushing your limits."

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