

China celebrates its first Fields Medal recipients, while another Chinese-speaking laureate draws attention

The Innovation Editorial Team *

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China's mathematics community erupted in celebration after Chinese mathematicians Deng Yu and Wang Hong became the first Chinese nationals to win the Fields Medal, the world's highest honor in mathematics, at the opening ceremony of the 2026 International Congress of Mathematicians on July 23.

Deng Yu, a professor at the University of Chicago, was recognized for groundbreaking contributions to partial differential equations, particularly the rigorous derivation of fundamental equations in statistical physics. Wang Hong, a professor at New York University and a permanent professor at France's Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques (IHÉS), was honored for major advances in harmonic analysis, including her work on the long-standing Kakeya conjecture. She also became only the third woman in history to receive the award, often described as the "Nobel Prize of Mathematics".

Accepting the honor, Deng Yu said it was "a great honor to have my name listed after all those great mathematicians I've always admired". Wang Hong said the recognition meant "a lot" to both her and her collaborators, adding that she had been inspired by Terence Tao's Fields Medal win when she was still in high school.

The historic achievement quickly became one of the most widely

discussed science stories in China.

Peking University, where both mathematicians began their undergraduate studies in 2007, published a special feature tracing their academic journeys. Although Deng Yu and Wang Hong eventually pursued different research directions and built careers overseas, the university noted that "their journeys began in the same PKU cohort", describing their success as evidence of the growing international influence of the university's mathematics program.

Leading mathematicians also hailed the awards as a milestone for Chinese mathematics.

Shing-Tung Yau, the first ethnic Chinese mathematician to receive a Fields Medal in 1982, said Chinese mathematics has advanced steadily since the country's reform and opening-up.

"We were once far, far behind the world's leading mathematical powers", Yau said. "Today, thanks to the efforts of several generations, we have come close in many respects".

Efim Zelmanov, the 1994 Fields Medal laureate and a foreign member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, emphasized that both winners received the core of their mathematical education in China.

"The essential part of both laureates' education was completed in China",

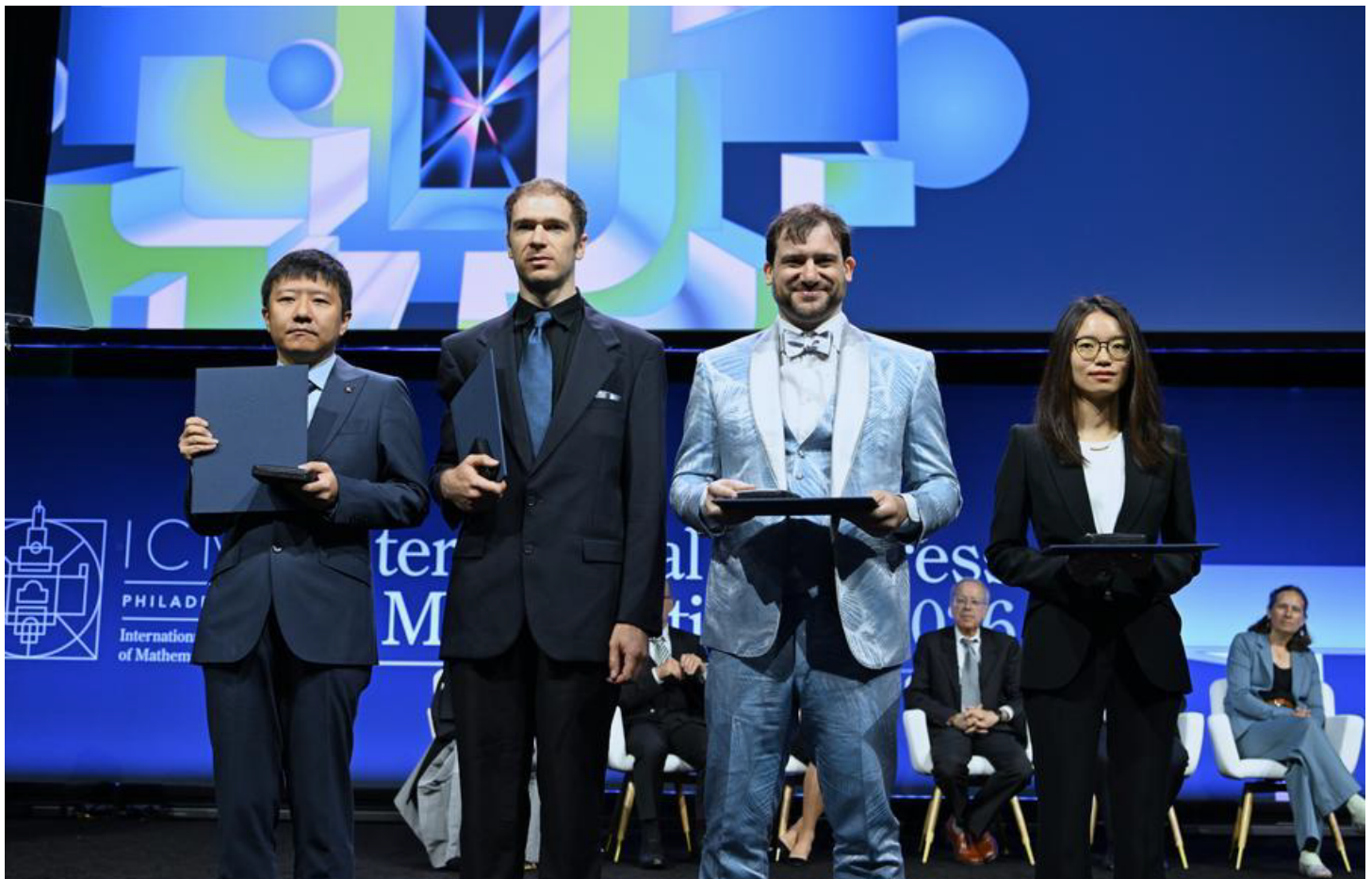


Figure 1. Fields Medalists at the 2026 International Congress of Mathematicians in Philadelphia, from left: Chinese mathematician Deng Yu, American mathematician John Pardon, Canadian mathematician Jacob Zimmerman, and Chinese mathematician Wang Hong Image source: Xinhua News Agency

he said, calling their success a recognition of China's increasingly important role in the global mathematical community.

Chinese state media likewise portrayed the achievement as a historic breakthrough.

In a commentary published after the awards ceremony (Figure 1), Xinhua News Agency wrote that "after a long wait, the dream has finally blossomed", adding that the news from Philadelphia had "thrilled countless Chinese people". The report described the awards as a watershed moment for Chinese mathematics and examined the decades of investment in mathematics education and basic research that had helped make the breakthrough possible.

Xinhua also highlighted that although both laureates now work at leading institutions overseas, they received their foundational mathematical training in China, describing their success as evidence of the country's growing strength in cultivating world-class mathematical talent.

Zhang Jiping, an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and professor at Peking University's School of Mathematical Sciences, called the awards "a historic breakthrough and a milestone" for Chinese mathematics.

"For decades, mathematicians of Chinese origin have been an important force in the international mathematical community", Zhang said. "This is the first time Chinese nationals have received the Fields Medal".

He added that the achievement would significantly strengthen confidence among young Chinese researchers by demonstrating that China is capable of producing mathematicians at the very highest level.

Another Chinese Academy of Sciences academician, Tian Gang, director of the Beijing International Center for Mathematical Research, said the awards

showed that Chinese mathematics had gained new international standing.

"Years ago, the Fields Medal seemed far beyond the reach of Chinese mathematicians", Tian said. "Now we know that, through hard work, it is entirely achievable. This will inspire young students to pursue bigger scientific questions with greater confidence".

While Deng Yu and Wang Hong dominated headlines, another Fields Medal winner also attracted widespread attention in China.

American mathematician John Pardon, a professor at Stony Brook University, received the award for pioneering work in symplectic geometry. But among many Chinese internet users, he was equally well known for another reason: his fluent Mandarin.

Pardon studied Chinese while at Princeton University, won the US championship in the Chinese Bridge competition, and represented Princeton in international Chinese-language debating contests. Videos of him delivering speeches and debating in Mandarin resurfaced across Chinese social media following the announcement, with many viewers amused by his use of erhua—the distinctive rhotic accent associated with northern Chinese speech.

His linguistic talent soon became a source of online humor.

"Seventy-five percent of this year's Fields Medal winners speak Chinese. I told you learning Chinese improves your math scores..." wrote Joey Zhang, a well-known humor blogger on X, in a tongue-in-cheek post that drew hundreds of likes and playful comments.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests.