

CFI COMMENT — ZHANG YUANFENG

Guangdong U17 vs Wellington Phoenix U17 | August 2026

Zhang Yuanfeng (张元锋), Defensive Midfielder, 17/01/2010 (16), China. 187 cm.
Guangdong U17. Captain, No. 6.

Defensive midfielder with a mixed profile, playing in front of the centre-backs and involved in Guangdong's build-up. **Right-footed, but he uses his left when needed, mainly for simple actions and to keep the ball moving.** He offers himself to receive from deep and showed scanning before receiving, looking to recognise pressure and identify his next passing option. With time and no immediate pressure, his short passing was good, keeping his game simple and maintaining circulation. When pressure arrived, he was less clean, particularly with his body shape and first touch. Some heavy touches took the ball into contested areas. On a few occasions he recovered by engaging and winning the following duel, but the initial touch was still poor. He needs to improve his receiving shape and first contact when an opponent is close.

He can play forward and does not limit himself to safe passes. His best action on the ball was a long pass in behind the last line that resulted in a goal, with a good read of the run and good execution. He showed he has that pass in his game, although I need to see it more often before considering it an established strength. He also showed initiative to move forward when space opened up. He was not always fixed as a No. 6: on several occasions he supported the attack, gained ground and arrived around the box. This is a positive part of his mixed profile when he chooses the right moment to leave his position without affecting the team's balance.

Out of possession, he had some good covering actions and adjusted into spaces left by teammates. He has a good stride to get into defensive actions, competes well in duels and looks to defend on the front foot. The main area to improve is his **positioning and decision of when to step out and when to hold.** On some occasions he engaged the ball carrier well; on others he stepped out too early or left space behind him. His defensive aggression can be useful when he reads the situation correctly, but he still needs to improve his timing and become more consistent as the player protecting the space in front of the centre-backs.

Physically, he has good tools for the age group. At 187 cm, he has a good frame, good stride and competes well in contact. His stride also allows him to support attacks and arrive from deeper positions. On set pieces he was involved in both boxes and competed adequately in the aerial duels observed, although his positioning before attacking the ball can improve. His physical qualities help him correct some situations: he can recover ground after being caught out of position and can win a duel after a poor first touch. **Winning the second action does not erase the mistake in the first.** This is something to monitor against quicker and stronger opponents, where he will have less margin to recover in this way.

As captain, he remained involved throughout the match, asked for the ball and responded well after mistakes. He mixed good reads, particularly in some covering situations and moments when he recognised space to move forward, with positional and execution errors. He has tools to play as a defensive midfielder who can also step forward and arrive higher up the pitch, but he needs more consistency in his decisions. Based on this match alone, I would not consider his tactical game consolidated yet.

Good game. Player to keep monitoring. I liked his involvement in the game, his ability to keep the ball moving with short passes when given time, some of his covering actions and his intention to play forward. The long pass for the goal was his highest-level action, and he also showed the ability to leave his position and arrive from deep when space opened up. He adds good physical tools, stride and ability to compete in duels. In the next matches, I want to look more closely at his **body shape, first touch and response when receiving under pressure**, as well as his **defensive positioning and decision of when to step out or hold**. I particularly want to see him against a team that presses high and takes away his time on the ball. After one match, there are still important points to confirm.