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Diving provides platform for the individual

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[Simon Barnes blogs from Beijing](#)

In any team, in any sporting organisation, in any society, the balance of individual and collective life is forever in a state of tension. That's as true in China as it is in Britain; save that right now, the tension is getting close to breaking point.

The ancient tradition of the collective is increasingly at odds with the emerging notion of the individual. We always assume that in Chinese sport, the state rules and that if you buck the system, you are out. That is no doubt the way the diehards would wish it to be, but it just isn't.

In a rapidly changing society, individuals are prepared to stand up to big organisations and sometimes they win. Diving seems sometimes to be the ultimate expression of the Chinese sporting machine, but look even slightly closer and you find a hotbed of individuality, a maelstrom of strong personalities unable to bear the idea of compromise.

Tian Liang was a national hero after he won gold medals in Athens and Sydney. Since then, he has cashed in. You can now in China.

He got rather too many endorsements for the taste of those who run the national team. You couldn't buy an electric bicycle or a seafood snack without Tian's recommendation, so they said he was a negative influence on preparation for the 2008 Games. And he wouldn't back down.

His old flame, Guo Jingjing, the diva diver, might have gone the same way, but she was prepared to make the public apology, with what degree of sincerity I couldn't say. She has won two golds here in the springboard. Asked who was her main rival, she said: "The fat Canadian." Now she says she will retire. Be a shame not to see her in London, but no doubt she, too, wishes to cash in.

So yesterday, in the ten-metre platform final, out stepped 16-year-old Wang Xin. She looked at first glance like the archetypal Chinese diver, a cowed but perfect product of the machine. But if you thought that, you were wrong. She walked out of her diving club because she felt that she was not getting enough recognition. Her coach, Yu Fen, then sued her for breaking a contract and lost.

Meanwhile, Yu, who was kicked off the national coaching staff because of her dangerous maverick tendencies and an explosive relationship with the head coach, Zhou Jihong, broke all protocol by claiming in her blog that she should be back to coach the China team. She had 6,000 supporters instantly.

Wang Xin used to be called Wang Ruoxue, before Yu made her change it, saying that her former name "sounded weak". Wang is anything but weak, at least in terms of will. She hasn't had dinner for 12 months. She knows that teenage girls who explode in weight can get kicked off the team.

In the final, though, she failed to give of her very best. Chen Ruolin, senior partner in the side, was consistently outdiving her - the pair won the synchronised platform gold together. But then a Canadian took the lead with a majestic fourth dive; not Guo's rival, but all the same, Emilie Heymans, though by no means overweight, doesn't look as if she goes without too many dinners.

The Chinese failed to win the women's ten metres at the past two Olympic Games and they looked as if they would miss out again when Heymans, consistently ahead of Wang, threw in a really solid dive to tell Chen that only something pretty close to perfection on the very last dive would be good enough.

Chen obliged. Oh, I love it when a medal is won not by the failure of one but by the success of another. The last dive was a corker. A back 2 somersault with 1 twists piked, since you ask. She hit that water, not with a splish or splash, but with that deep thrum that comes only with a perfectly vertical entry.

So it was a victory for the collective, or perhaps for the individual. It all depends on how you interpret these things. But despite the efforts of the old boys, the individual has a voice, in this sport and in this country, and it is increasingly loud.

How Bill Sweetenham found hidden depths in talent pool

"Who wants to be ordinary? You! Do you want to be ordinary?" This was a team-talk at British Swimming given by the Australian performance director, Bill Sweetenham. I had been invited along to see what he got up to. He got up to a lot. He challenged, shouted, bullied when he thought necessary. He spared no one. He is capable of being a deeply alarming man and has no qualms at all about doing so, when necessary.

But he raised the standards. He worked. He joined the Brits after the calamity of Sydney, where the Great Britain team failed to win a medal at the Olympic Games of 2000. He left last year, after his father had died and his mother was seriously ill. He was disliked by some; mainly by those who were inadequate at the highest level.

He played the bad cop with relish, constantly keeping swimmers and coaches on the hop, constantly insisting that if you want to win an Olympic medal, you have to be exceptional. And that involves doing exceptional things. All along, he said that Beijing would be the first measure of his achievement. Well, he is back in Australia watching on telly and texting his former team like mad.

And after yesterday's results in the open-water swim, in which David Davies won the silver medal, Britain finish third in the swimming medals table, tucked in behind the superpowers of the United States and Australia.

It really is as good as can be expected and the team are well aware of what they owe to Sweetenham. He changed their culture. He made British swimmers believe that they could be better than the rest, and after believing came the doing.

One person who did not get on with Sweetenham was Mark Foster, veteran of five Olympic Games. The only one he missed was when Sweetenham was in charge. He carried the flag for Britain at the opening ceremony, a classic plucky Brit. The best he has done is sixth; 23rd here. He is an emblem of former times, times when it was perfectly acceptable to be ordinary. The new reality is somewhat different.

Sweetenham had enemies, all right. He has been bitterly attacked, and in these pages. But the modern Olympic Games is a seriously uncompromising place to be. And you don't find people such as, say, Sir Alex Ferguson getting all their results by kindness.

Sweetenham was part of a sea-change in British attitudes to Olympic sport, directed solely at the idea of winning medals. This approach is unapologetically elitist. It has no time for those who are half-hearted. It rejects the ordinary at a very early stage. It is a change that has happened most notably in cycling and in sailing, where the bulk of Britain medals have come from at these amazing Games. The medals were not won by niceness. They have come from ruthlessness. They have come, above all, from contempt for the ordinary.

Some may find these methods unacceptable, and perhaps they are right. They are not suited to the ordinary. But those who find such methods acceptable and are prepared to submit to them are different. They have less ordinariness in them. And if sport is not about the search for the extraordinary, then I really don't know what it is for.

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