Flip Side to Fame in China

An Olympic diving star is a casualty in the Communist Party's bid to reassert old values.

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CHONGQING, China — Tian Liang, 25, is handsome, tall and was, until recently, the pride of China. When he returned from the 2004 Athens Olympics with a gold medal for synchronized diving, his star appeal skyrocketed and advertisers banged on his door. Tian decided to take a breather, grab some endorsements and enjoy the payoff after endless hours in the pool.

Not so fast, said the government-controlled athletic association, which kicked him off the national team in January, denouncing him for taking part in unauthorized business activities, turning up late for training and tarnishing the sport's image.

Advertisers wary of offending China's overarching Communist Party quickly dropped his television spots for health food and stopped hiring him for celebrity appearances. News stories detailing his past glory were expunged from websites.

"He has failed to reflect on his errant behavior and conduct a 'deep self-criticism,'" a swimming association official said.

Tian, a national symbol of tremendous propaganda value, is swimming against a new political tide as he is made an example of for a policy on full display at the National People's Congress, which ends today.

Under the slogan "A Harmonious Society," President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have laid out a two-part vision for their administration: to bring the ruling Communist Party back to its core values of discipline, virtue and collective effort; and to focus resources and political will on the have-nots, including the rural poor, migrants and urban laborers left behind by two decades of growth.

Tian was just one beneficiary of the economic changes that have created opportunities for millions of Chinese, and brought modern
architecture, Starbucks and wireless networks to China's big cities. In the face of such enormous change, however, the Communist Party remains vigilant, willing to sacrifice the individual for what leaders see as the collective good.

"The Chinese have a saying, 'Kill one to scare 100,' " said Zhao Jian, a 57-year-old businessman, waiting for his grandson in front of Tian's former primary school. "They're making an example of Tian, and I think it's a shame. They're being very hard on him."

Singling out a high-profile figure to make a point is "the old China peeking through," said Andrew Mertha of Washington University. But the mores set forth by Hu and Wen have several tangible goals: By championing the underclass and shunning immodest behavior, they are drawing sharp contrasts to the imperious style of former President Jiang Zemin, who focused on the urban elite, snazzy technology and splashy architecture.

More fundamentally, the leaders hope to defuse the growing instability and discontent fueled by China's yawning wealth gap, potentially a huge challenge to their rule. There were 58,000 protests and riots across the country in 2003, or 160 a day, many over perceived abuses by local authorities, according to government statistics, which could be underreporting the problem.

Hoping to reduce the pressure, China's leadership has eliminated taxes for farmers, increased subsidies and vowed to act against unjust land seizures.

The focus on social harmony and internal party discipline also dovetails with the personal style of Wen and Hu. Both men are seen as careful officials not known for bold moves or gestures of the sort that spurred Jiang to sing "Love Me Tender" on overseas trips. Both spent most of their careers in poor rural areas and understand grass-roots concerns.

"They bring that sensibility, what economic success looks like to those not enjoying the upside," said Kenneth G. Lieberthal, a China scholar at the University of Michigan.

Many analysts welcome their focus on alleviating poverty for such a large swath of China's, and the world's, population.

But Hu and Wen's emphasis on greater virtue, old-style Communist study sessions and renewed party discipline worries some. They see in this a willingness to keep the party above the law, able to act as it sees fit rather than establish modern institutions with checks and balances to curb malfeasance and inefficiency.

"They're calculating that if they pump more money into the countryside, they won't have to reform," said Richard Baum, director of the Center for Chinese Studies at UCLA. "They're de-emphasizing good institutions and stressing perfection of the individual."

Hu and Wen sit atop a party structure riddled by corruption and
struggling to modernize. In the process, they are shepherding one of history's great experiments: whether an authoritarian state can hold on to power over a society increasingly capitalist in all but name.

China's Communist Party maintains its monopoly on political power by delivering benefits to its 1.3 billion people, in line with governments worldwide. It also guards its turf jealously by ensuring that watchful party officials sit in every corner of society deemed a potential threat to that monopoly. This entails everything from "officially sanctioned" religious organizations and political parties to sports groups, chambers of commerce, university departments and farm collectives.

Groups viewed as a threat are quickly batted down, as seen with official crackdowns on Tibetan monks, Falun Gong practitioners, separatist Muslims in the country's west and Internet essayists. A recently published list of banned gatherings, which included an amateur singing club, a pigeon lovers group and a dozen people holding a ceremony to bless a new building, shows how jittery the party can be.

Police, cybercops and vaguely worded national security laws are among the bluntest weapons in the party's arsenal. At least as effective are the demotions and other subtle threats that engender self-censorship.

Communist leaders have read their history and are well aware that at least as many Chinese dynasties have fallen to internal rot, complacency and corruption as to barbarian threats beyond the Great Wall.

That's where the Hu and Wen campaign for enhanced discipline comes in. With 68 million members, or an all-time high of 5.2% of China's population, the Communist Party is bloated and increasingly unfocused.

At the upper reaches, the party has promoted smart, well-educated leaders with overseas experience, many with degrees from Harvard and Oxford. Further down the pyramid, things become more wobbly.

A growing stream of scandals involving corrupt mid-level cadres feeding at the public trough has fueled resentment and mistrust among average Chinese. And at the bottom levels, membership is dominated by uneducated peasants and laborers, a far cry from the well-educated elite the party envisions as rulers of the country.

As the party tries to upgrade its membership, it's trying to recruit more well-educated professionals like Zhu Li. The daughter of party officials and granddaughter of a revolutionary who accompanied Mao Tse-tung on the Long March, she grew up seeing the party as "a glorious thing with shining circles." She gained membership while still in high school, a relative rarity, excelled at national exams and went on to Beijing
University, China's equivalent of Harvard.

Now in her mid-20s and working in public relations, some of her idealism has been tempered and she doesn't go to many study sessions these days, but she's still willing to give the party the benefit of the doubt. "Many friends think it's like joining a corrupt group," she said. "I still think some party members are good, but I wouldn't say most."

As part of its modernization drive, the Communist Party is also reaching out to entrepreneurs, a strategy Jiang launched years ago. "Given how fast the economy is moving, if the party didn't recognize them, it would eventually be sidelined," said Yang Zhaohui, a Communist Party historian.

Although some new members may be attracted by communist ideals, many more see it as a vast networking opportunity given the party's control over land allocation, jobs and other earmarks of patronage. "The party is now a party of development," said Victor Yuan, chairman of Horizon, a market research firm that contracts with the party and private companies. "Most people who want to be members are there for the benefits."

But the party is quick to point out it is embracing the entrepreneurs on its own terms. "It's given the signal to chief executives that they're welcome to join," said Dong Guanpeng, assistant dean of the journalism school at Qinghua University in Beijing. "At the same time, they must join to support the party."

That principle applies to all members, including sports stars.

Tian Liang, China's "diver prince," got his start at Xin Hua Primary School in Chongqing, his hometown.

Tian could not be reached for comment, but former classmate Xiao Jing, 33, whose daughter attends the same school, recalls him as a shy boy who didn't seem destined for greatness.

"He was very small and rather pale," she said. "I wouldn't call him naughty, but he caused trouble sometimes. He wasn't that outstanding. I don't know how they picked him out."

Math teacher Huo Bin, who tutored Tian to ensure he didn't fall behind, said the boy showed at least one remarkable characteristic in the pool. "While he wasn't one of the quickest," Huo says, "he was the one who would practice constantly until he got it."

At age 7, Tian was identified as a promising swimmer under China's rigorous sports system, and began a punishing regimen that lasted more than a decade. He was never at the head of the pack, but at 14 he joined the national team. A year later, he won his first national title, which led to his first world championship in 1995.

His big break came in the 2000 Sydney Olympics, when he beat Russian favorite Dmitry Sautin to clinch the gold in the 10-meter
platform event, setting an Olympic record. He followed this up with a gold and a bronze in Athens four years later.

In what has become known as the "Tian Liang affair," the diver fell afoul of authorities after he "engaged in 30 business endeavors," explored acting and singing, and hired an agent, something that is forbidden under China's athletic rules.

Sports officials defended their hard line, saying that the nation paid for his years of training, giving them the right to call the shots.

"Part of Tian Liang's value is as an Olympic champion, which was given to him by the country," Yang Yue, a fellow at China's Sports Research Institute, told the Beijing Review magazine. "Naturally [decisions on how athletes may profit] should belong to the country."

At his former schools in Chongqing, Tian remains a source of inspiration for young students, and many in his hometown hope he will show the contrition, modesty and team spirit needed to regain his spot on the national team in time for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

"We certainly want him to rise again and bring brightness to Chongqing and all of China," said Ding Xiangpei, principal and head of party activities at Xin Hua Primary School.

Bu Yang in The Times' Beijing Bureau contributed to this report.