



## **When Wen Comes To Washington...** by Yu Bin

In the Chinese language, the character “wen” means moderation and modesty. This happens to capture the personality and policies of China’s new premier, Wen Jiabao. In his first trip to the United States as premier, Wen will try to present the image of a rising China that is liberalizing at home, is confident abroad, and willing and able to work with the world’s sole superpower. The U.S. side will also have a closeup look at the man who may well administer China for the next 10 years.

### **Mission in America: Two “Ts”**

Wen will take up at least two “Ts” with the U.S.: trade and taiwan.

Importance and imbalance are the catch phrases for bilateral trade relations. Although the unexpectedly strong U.S. economy is easing some of the contentious trade disputes between the two sides, the growing trade imbalance is always an easy target in an election year.

As Wen readies for the trip, Taiwan is emerging as the real challenge. Around the time Taiwan’s Parliament passed its “referendum law” Nov. 27, the issue of Taiwan’s independence has become a real danger with a potential to drag both China and the United States into a conflict that neither side wants.

Wen’s public warning to Taiwan on Nov. 23 came amidst a series of diplomatic, military, and political moves by the PRC, unprecedented since the Korean War. These include informing many governments that China would be forced to adopt stronger measures; urging Washington to restrain Taiwan; redeploying military including missile units to coastal areas; and preparing the domestic audience for the eventuality. Although the referendum law as passed excludes the most radical pro-independence measures, the legal procedure is in place and Chen has vowed to hold a referendum next March when Taiwan votes for its next president.

Despite the grave situation across the Taiwan Strait, Wen is likely to work with the Bush team for a soft-landing of the Taiwan issue. China may not want to appear to apply a “linkage” strategy between China’s cooperation with the U.S. on a whole range of issues and U.S. reciprocity over Taiwan. Wen, however, would reiterate China’s broad support for U.S. policies of antiterrorism, regional security and stability, and resolving the Korean crisis.

Meanwhile, Wen would like to probe for some more predictable and preventable “safeguards,” including more unambiguous and more consistent U.S. signals to Taiwan, for “crisis prevention,” in addition to cooperation in crisis management.

Progress on both “T’s” (trade and Taiwan) will serve a third “T”, that is, trans-Pacific relations and movement toward a broader, deeper, and possibly strategic, cooperation in the coming decades. The current relationship between Beijing and Washington, considered the “best ever,” ironically, remains fickle and fragile. Indeed, the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks barely deflected the crisis that followed the midair collision between a U.S. surveillance plane and a Chinese jet fighter. The ultimate goal of Wen’s visit is to convert the current “best” relationship from one based on “strategic surprise” into some form of “strategic sustainability.”

### **“Premier for Ordinary People”**

Wen will discuss a wide range of issues with various American political and social elites. Unlike President Bush’s quick pick of his Russian “soul-mate” (Putin), the U.S. side may not become intimate with Wen immediately. But beneath the surface of a rather ordinary Chinese bureaucratic functionary, U.S. officials will find a firm, versatile, and well informed negotiator whose grasp of major issues as well as attention to details may even surpass many of his predecessors and contemporaries in China.

Wen is low-profile, accessible, and effective. In contrast, his predecessor Zhu Rong-ji was known for his charisma, hot temper, uncompromising style, and determination to implement sweeping change. Although Wen emerged as a junior bureaucrat in China’s poorest province of Gansu, he has served three CCP General Secretaries (Hu Yao-bang, Zhao Ziyang, and Jiang Ze-min) as the chief of the Party Central Committee’s General Office (1986–93).

His trademark is keeping close contact with the less fortunate groups of Chinese society. Shortly after its debut, Wen’s fourth generation of leaders launched the so-called “New Three-People’s Doctrine” (“power from, care of, and interests for the people”) and “Three Closes” (“close to real life, to the masses, and to reality”). In actual policies, the Hu Jintao-Wen team has demonstrated considerable transparency and efficiency in dealing with domestic affairs ranging from controlling SARS epidemics, visiting AIDS patients, anti-corruption, managing unemployment, strengthening the social security system, liberalizing media, overhauling the criminal justice system, and promoting inner party “democracies” (meaning developing checks and balances within the CCP).

Wen’s embrace of the “common touch” has earned him the reputation of the “Premier for ordinary people” [*ping min zong li*] (The legendary Zhou Enlai was widely described as the “people’s premier,” however, only toward the end of his life). This policy outlook is perhaps imperative for a vast country ridden with acute socio-political problems. Decades of pro-market reforms have enriched many while leaving many more in precarious situations. China is now among the world’s most inegalitarian nations.

The Hu-Wen team is by no means embracing populism to address China's "equality deficit." Rather, it is seeking a proper balance between rich and poor, between efficiency and equality, and between speed and stability. If anything, the European social-democratic model seems to be China's long-term goal in its historical process of modernization.

Wen is not just popular at home. While antiterrorism cooperation remains the theme for U.S. global and regional policies in Asia, China's fourth generation of leaders offers opportunities (economics), cooperation (political and diplomatic) and confidence-building (military-military relations) throughout the Asia-Pacific. Problems and crises do occur. The consensus of Beijing's foreign policy community is that China should work with others, promote multilateralism, and respect differences in culture, religion, and political systems.

### **"Democracy in America 101"**

While pursuing a "big-and-nice" charm diplomacy abroad, Wen and others have no intention of challenging the U.S. in the region and around the world. To the contrary, Wen and his foreign policy advisors are convinced that China's historical rise would have to take place within the U.S.-led international system. A strong, stable, and prosperous America free from terrorist threat/attacks is not only in the interests of Americans but also of the Chinese.

For these reasons, among others, Wen will use his first official U.S. trip to directly observe the dynamics and diversity of American society and politics. For a country where a national best-selling book is about how to go to Harvard and where every Buick is sold several months before it even enters GM's assembly line in Shanghai, America remains a dream for many in China, ordinary or educated.

This was true even during the worst crisis of the Chinese embassy bombing in 1999. Wang Ji-si, a leading Americanist in China, found that the consensus of Chinese perception of the U.S. was of "beauty and the beast." Despite the perceived heavy-handedness of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, the U.S. domestic system of checks and balance remains attractive for many in China.

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