

Steering China with a steady hand

PROFILE OF WEN JIABAO

PREMIER OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA



PREMIER WEN JIABAO confirmed as China's Premier in March 2003, now shoulders responsibility for steering a nation of 1.3 billion people through rapid economic and social change. He is a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPL Central Committee.

On the eve of Prime Minister Gordon Brown's visit to China, many observers in the West still find China's Premier Wen Jiabao something of an enigmatic figure. He does not seem to fit easily into the Communist Party's line of demonstrably forceful leaders – let alone trying to develop any kind of 'personality cult'. Indeed, until he was chosen to be Premier in 2003, Wen was usually described as being a "slight, bespectacled figure" or a "quiet-looking bureaucrat". Yet this same man now fills the key role in ensuring that China's economic miracle continues and that the accompanying social transitions go smoothly.

China's economic and social transformation will come into particular focus as the country prepares to host this year's Olympic Games. The Premier has stated categorically that "The Government will honour its commitment as host nation in the spirit of 'one world, one dream'", and has underlined that the freedom of foreign journalists in their news coverage will also be ensured.

Consensus-building is perhaps the most crucial of Wen's skills, but this belies other sides of his multi-faceted character. He is a voracious reader and, as with many erudite Chinese, often prefers to respond to a question by quoting from philosophy or one of the Chinese classics.

Amongst them are "Long did I hold back the tears; saddened as I am by the grief of my people" – lines written in the 3rd century BC by the poet and statesman Qu Yuan, who drowned himself after the emperor refused his advice. Or "You ask me why my eyes are always filled with tears. It is because I love my country dearly", by the pro-Communist poet Ai Qing who, significantly, was purged under Chairman Mao only to be rehabilitated after the Great Helmsman's death.

Another side of Wen Jiabao is that of 'man of the people' – a reputation that probably began back in 1998 when he was in charge of disaster relief after the terrible late summer floods of that year, but one which is maintained by his willingness to meet ordinary people and his habit of wearing an 11 year-old green coat in public.

So who is this enigmatic premier who, together with President Hu Jintao, faces the monumental task of steering China through the next phase of its modernisation?

Wen Jiabao was born in 1942, the son of private school teachers, in the coastal district of Tianjin – a

time and place which meant that his earliest memories are of the war against the Japanese aggression. During a visit to Harvard University in 2003, the Premier told his audience "I spent my childhood mostly in the smoke of fire and war... When Japanese aggressors drove all the people in my place into the Central Plaza, I had to huddle closely against my mother".

Some 35 million Chinese died or were wounded between 1937 and 1945, leaving a residual anti-Japanese sentiment (as expressed in the popular rioting of 2007). But personal experience may partly account for Wen Jiabao's stating in April 2005 that "only a country that respects history, that takes responsibility for history... can take greater responsibilities in the international community" – as part of China's opposition to Japan gaining a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

But the end of the Japanese war did not bring an end to his childhood sufferings. According to a Chinese-language biography by Dr Yang Zhongmei, during China's civil war the young Jiabao's family's village was razed by Nationalists to clear a line of fire against the advancing Communists. His family compound and school was burned down, and his beloved grandfather shot.

Wen soon proved himself an exceptional student and went to the prestigious Institute of Geology in Beijing, where he continued as a postgraduate specialising in geomechanics.

He became a Chinese Communist Party member in 1965, but that did not save him during the Cultural Revolution. Wen was sent off to Lanzhou in the impoverished western province of Gansu, where he worked in the Provincial Geology Bureau. During these years of 'exile' he gained first-hand knowledge of rural conditions and developed an expertise in agriculture and environmental issues – themes to which he would return to when he held far greater powers.

Wen became increasingly involved in party work and was picked out for rapid promotion during the early 1980s, becoming Vice-minister of Geology and Mineral Resources, member and deputy secretary of its Leading Party Member Group, and director of its Political Department. Between 1986 and 1993 he was head of the General Office of the Communist Party Central Committee, responsible for setting the agenda at party meetings and distributing internal documents.

Unusually, Wen served in this position under three successive Party Secretaries – Hu Yaobang, Zhao

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Ziyang and Jiang Zemin. Given that party heads normally wanted to install their own supporters at the top of the General Office, Wen Jiabao's long tenure there marked him out as being an indispensable and trusted lieutenant.

Wen's rise continued with his becoming alternate Politburo member in 1993 and then a full member in 1997, before being entrusted the following year with a broad range of responsibilities as vice premier. Zhu Rongji put him in charge of agricultural modernisation and reform of the financial system. When a Central Financial Working Commission was set up in June 1998 in the wake of the Asian Crisis, Wen was appointed as secretary. He was also put in charge of science and technology, disaster control and poverty relief. His handling of relief efforts after that year's disastrous floods brought him favourable publicity.

Wen is unusual for a member of the Politburo Standing Committee in that he has never been a provincial leader. Perhaps because he was therefore seen as having no local powerbase or core of supporters his steady rise seemed less threatening to potential rivals, and by the time that the 16th Party Congress was convened in 2002 he stood next to Hu Jintao, marking him out as premier-elect.

After the Congress ended Wen returned to the huge task of pushing through much-needed financial reforms. He dismantled the Central Financial Working Commission on which he had previously served, and set up a new body more focused on banking regulation – and specifically sorting out the problems of non-performing loans among State-owned banks – under his own leadership, the Central Finance Safety Leadership Small Group.

Confirmed as China's Premier in March 2003, he now shoulders responsibility for steering a nation of 1.3 billion people through rapid economic and social change. There has never been any doubt that Wen is an incredibly hard worker, attentive to detail, and a model of honesty in his personal life. A voracious reader with a philosophical bent – at Harvard he studied his discourse with quotations from Descartes, Goethe, Kant, Emerson and other Western philosophers – China's soft-spoken Premier has an unmatched track record as a consensus-builder.

But he is also a supporter of sometimes unpopular market-oriented reforms and has taken up the cause of reducing pollutant emissions and increasing the use of energy saving technologies. "We are left with no choice but to develop an economical clean and safe way" he said recently. Even more pressing, he is trying to ensure that China's investment-driven economy does not race out of control so that there is a 'soft landing' and, beyond that, a more sustainable growth path.

On social reforms, Premier Wen has pushed for

improved land tenure for rural peasants. But when it comes to political reform, Wen follows the party's gradualist approach. When asked during an interview with the Washington Post whether political reform should be accelerated to keep pace with rapid economic changes in China, Wen's response was that "in essence, political restructuring in China aims at integrating the leadership of the Communist Party, rule of law in the conduct of public affairs, and the people's role as masters of their own affairs".

The current approach to developing more democratic institutions is to work from the grassroots up. "Multi-candidacy elections are practised in China", he stated recently, "and the number of candidates standing will increase". Elections further up the chain will only be introduced when it is clear the system is working.

The emphasis is on ordered and structured change, and above all on maintaining social and political stability through this process of change. Meanwhile there is little tolerance of those deemed as 'subversive influences' who

want to rock the boat. Stability is paramount, both within the Party and the country as a whole. If politics in China continues to evolve along this institutionalised path, Wen Jiabao's low-key approach will be found all the more fitting.

