

WEN Jiabao

Wēn Jiābǎo 温家宝

b. 1942 Premier of China 2003–present

Wen Jiabao, who began his second five-year term as premier in 2008, is a respected leader because of his managerial abilities and a popular figure because of his common-man approach to political and social issues. Following the deadly Sichuan earthquake of 2008, he emerged as the compassionate face of the Chinese government.

Wen Jiabao was born of Han parentage on 15 September 1942 in Beichen, Tianjin Municipality, in northeast China. The people of Tianjin are said to be eloquent, humorous, and open, which in many ways fits Wen. He is known as the people's premier and has a common touch that has earned him the nickname "Grandpa Wen."

Wen attended Nankai High School, the same school from which Zhou Enlai (China's first premier) graduated. From 1960 to 1968, Wen studied at the Beijing Institute of Geology, where he earned a baccalaureate degree in geological surveying and a postgraduate degree in geological structure. He joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1965.

His training and political enthusiasm helped him secure government posts. Between 1968 and 1985 he held such positions as technician and political instructor of the geomechanics team of the Gansu Provincial Geological Bureau; deputy director general of Gansu Provincial Geological Bureau; and vice minister of the Policy and Law Research Office of the Ministry of Geology and Mineral

Resources. During this time Wen built his powerbase and gained standing as a strong administrator and dedicated technocrat.

In 1985 Wen was named deputy director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee. In 1986 he was elevated to director, an office he held until 1992. During this time he held a number of other party positions, including chief of staff to general secretaries of the CCP Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Jiang Zemin.

Wen's career nearly ended in disgrace in 1989. A photograph of him alongside the then general secretary Zhao Ziyang visiting student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square on 19 May 1989 appeared on the front page of the *People's Daily*. To many party leaders, the photo signified their support of the students. Zhao was purged for his actions, but Wen somehow managed to escape persecution and continued to rise in power.

In 1993 Wen became a full member of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee. In 1997 he became a member of the Politburo. In 1998 he was appointed one of China's four vice premiers. The pinnacle of his career, to this point, came on 16 March 2003 when he was appointed to his first term as premier of the People's Republic of China. His second five-year term began on 16 March 2008.

Wen is a popular and, by most accounts, effective leader. His premiership is marked by his "people-first" policy. He has launched programs aimed at revitalizing the rural economy, restructuring the banking system, and reforming state-owned enterprises. He has held impromptu news conferences (an unheard of practice in a country with a state-controlled press), championed the

2008 Beijing Olympics, and shed tears in public, especially following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.

The quake, which struck on 12 May 2008, was one of the deadliest disasters in China's history. More than 69,000 people were killed, and more than 5 million were left homeless. Along with other structures, thousands of schools were destroyed. The total economic loss is estimated to be more than \$75 billion.

A few hours after the quake hit, Wen headed for the quake zone to take charge of rescue operations. As a trained geologist, he understood the magnitude of the disaster. He was immediately named the executive director of the Earthquake Relief Efforts Committee. Media and amateur videos showed him directing rescue crews and comforting victims. In one instance, at the site of a collapsed elementary school, he introduced himself as Grandpa Wen (unwittingly earning himself a nickname) to a child pinned under debris and said, "Hang on child. We'll rescue you." His unusually sympathetic face of the Chinese government solidified his popularity and respect.

Wen's reputation and his face are now well known to the world. He appears often, in action, on Chinese television. He is seen as a man for his times. He has a profile on Facebook, the Internet social-networking site. The author of the page is unknown, but Wen and the Chinese press have welcomed the exposure. During Wen's trip to Europe in early 2009, when the world was focused on global economic woes, the prime minister garnered some attention for mentioning that he carried in his suitcase a copy of Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Wen explained his view of the book's

message, telling reporters that it is morally unsound—and a threat to stable society—if the fruits of economic development are not shared by all. The view is bound to resonate among those in China who suffer from the uneven distribution of wealth resulting from the country's own rapid growth. By emphasizing this aspect of Smith's philosophy, the *Economist* reported in March 2009, "Wen is trying to show he cares."

Wendell ANDERSON

Further Reading

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