

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Monday, January 28, 2019.

[South China Morning Post](#)

EDITION: INTERNATIONAL

MON JAN 28, 2019 **HONG KONG**



Wang Qishan could be the new face of Chinese pragmatism after Zhu Rongji – and a voice of reassurance for the West

- Tom Plate says China's vice-president made it a point in his Davos speech to stress Beijing's commitment to taking a pragmatic approach in problem-solving – welcome words that should help ease tense US-China relations

PUBLISHED : Tuesday, 29 January, 2019, 1:03am



Vice-President Wang Qishan in Davos. China's right-hand man to President Xi Jinping seems cut from the same pragmatic cloth as Zhu Rongji. Photo: EPA-EFE



[Tom Plate](#)

During his run as premier under president Jiang Zemin, [Zhu Rongji](#) – a former Shanghai mayor – was the object of respect from Western leaders and one reason they regarded China's rise as a sustainable economic and geopolitical force with which they would have to work, like it or not. He had force of

intellect, semi-ready pragmatism, and a command over the relevant mainland bureaucracies that were relied on to deliver on understandings with Washington.

Since he stepped down 16 years ago, a missing element of sorts at the highest level of Chinese leadership seems to have surfaced. It is an unrealised factor in the [recent downturn](#) in the China-US relationship.

Western observers, myself included, perhaps focus too intensely on aspects of leadership personality in analysing a nation's international relations. Singapore's late, great [Lee Kuan Yew](#) once took me to (mild) task for "the Western journalist's exaggeration of eccentricity" in my writings about him. Fair enough. Yet Lee's gargantuan political personality in Lilliputian Singapore served to elevate his country to a sort of Sweden-Plus.

What's more, and for good reason, leaders themselves will always seek to take the measure of their counterparts before an important meeting or summit, going through page after page of their intelligence services' psychological reports. No, sorry – political personality counts, and it can count for a great deal.



Then Chinese premier Zhu Rongji meets US Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky in Beijing in 1999. Photo: AFP / Xinhua

And so it may be that the perceived political-personality vacuum at China's top is now being filled by another former Chinese mayor – this one from Beijing,

rather than Shanghai. Perhaps [Wang Qishan](#) will never become a well-known figure in America, or if he ever is, his identity will be framed as little more than a dreaded top Communist Party official, and that will be that. But China's current vice-president and right-hand man to President Xi Jinping seems cut from the same pragmatic cloth as Zhu.

If America – in this or the next presidential administration – cannot deal maturely with the Wangs and Zhus of China, then it is going to have serious problems adjusting to the 21st century and finding a more fitting place to settle.

Wang made his first notable American stage appearance in 2005, in Los Angeles, before a civic group. His message was international and seemed as far removed from primaevial Red Guard ideology as almost any communist could be. The audience of American businessmen and academics was immensely reassured. That approach was also evident last week in Davos, where Wang was the headliner dispatched from Beijing to [put the best possible face on Xi's China](#).

Now, we acknowledge that Davos [isn't what it used to be](#); few things are. Fifteen to 20 years ago, the World Economic Forum was to the notion of globalisation what an advertising agency is to the big client: a big glossy front. When Bill Clinton in January 2000 politely raised the Davos-party-deflating demurer that globalisation also had the power to create dark dimensions as well as new profits, in the first speech at the World Economic Forum ever by a sitting US president, I can still recall sharkskin-suited American and European CEOs muttering: "What does he want us to do about it? Our job is to make money. We're not socialists."

Wang's Davos address was almost neo-capitalistic, especially for a committed career communist, and it made considerable sense. Move forward but understand the need to bring as many people along with you as possible; even China (it seemed he was saying) has domestic political winds in constant swirl: "By striving to meet people's aspiration for a better life, we can surely win their support."

Dogmatism won't do the trick: "We have moved away from revolution to reform, from a planned economy to a market economy ... We have broken free from the fetters of dogma and Utopian thinking, freed our minds and taken a realistic and pragmatic approach, and applied Marxism's basic tenets in the context of China's realities." That sounds like the old Zhu to me – as well as Wang in 2005 through to the present.

It's true that Wang, who at 70 is well [past the official "mandatory" retirement age](#), won't be forever seated next to Xi, now 65 (and with length of incumbency unlimited by the constitution). The America-impressing Zhu, now in retirement at 91, held the job until he was 75, which seems achievable for Wang, should he continue to desire to remain so high up on a perch in plain sight of so many in China who are bitter – the wails coming from the relatives of Chinese prisoners nailed by Wang's anti-corruption sweeps.

It would be much easier for me, an American, to feel righteous about criticising China's repressive style if for our own part we had not locked up in our prisons so many black Americans or – so recently – brutally [separated children from parents](#) caught illegally on American soil to store in dreary camps. You can look down at others from your high horse, but it is harder to see yourself clearly with a downward focus.

And so, in the wild of the animal world, we learn that male lemurs (otherwise rather cute) engage in a form of combat that the wonderful English author and scholar Katherine Rundell described in a London book review as "stink fighting" (I will spare you the details), adding, "all the while maintaining an aggressive stare until one or the other animal retreats".

Surely Beijing and Washington can rise above the lemur level, right? Yet Rundell did add of the lemur male behaviour: "It feels no madder than current forms of diplomacy."

Columnist Tom Plate, the author of Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew, is the distinguished scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles