

When words matter: Reviewing the Wong-Wang meeting

by **Jocelyn Chey**

John Menadue's Public Policy Journal Pearls and Irritations, Jul 13, 2022

Link: <https://johnmenadue.com/when-words-matter-reviewing-the-wong-wang-meeting/>

Failure to recognise linguistic nuances partly explains the misinterpretation of the meeting by Birtles and other journalists.

Hasty comments in the press about last week's meeting between Penny Wong and Wang Yi reveal more about commentators' biased line on China than about the substance of the meeting. Careful reading of official reports of the meeting is essential to understand how relations between Australia and China might be taken forward.

When a long-awaited meeting between the Australian and Chinese Foreign Ministers finally took place on Friday 8 July, it signified the beginning of the end of the deep freeze on diplomatic relations. The public waited with some excitement to learn details of the hour-long meeting and any indication of the atmosphere or hints about possible next steps.

Penny Wong issued a brief statement the same evening. She said that the talks had covered regional issues as well as bilateral relations and that both ministers "spoke frankly and listened carefully". "We have our differences, but it is in both our countries' interests for the relationship to be stabilised", she said. Significantly, she added that Australia would seek to resolve issues under the terms of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

This arrangement was established by the Abbott government in 2014 and has been cited by leaders on both sides many times since. It indicates a level of mutual trust and a commitment to high-level regular dialogue. Having fallen out of use in recent years, the resurrection of the term now indicates that there is an expectation of further rounds of dialogue. This will be essential for a healthy relationship.

Penny Wong's report on the meeting was brief and conveyed little other information. In terms of reports of diplomatic meetings, it ranked above "a frank exchange of views" but avoided any suggestion of warmth or friendship.

The next day the Chinese Embassy in Canberra [issued their own report](#) on the meeting that conveyed more substance. This was the basis of various press articles and comments on the meeting.

Bill Birtles of [the ABC said that](#) Wang Yi had blamed the previous Morrison government for the decline in relations and had told Wong to “treat China as a partner not a threat”. Will Glasgow of *The Australian* said that Wang had laid down four “requirements” for Australia to improve the relationship. Eryk Bagshaw [of the Sydney Morning Herald described](#) these four as “proposals”.

When we look at the wording of the Embassy’s text in Chinese, we see that it was exactly considered and carefully worked over. Unfortunately, the [English translation](#), which appeared on Sunday, was less than perfect. For instance, anyone with more than a cursory level of ability in the Chinese language could tell you that one major difference between Chinese and English is the framing of requests and instructions. Let me give some comments by way of explanation.

English language speakers tend to soften requests, using “Could you please...” or “It might be better if you...” and similar circumlocutions. Chinese language is very lacking in these constructions and speakers tend to use simple verbs such as “Come”, “Sit” etc, whether they are speaking in Chinese or English. Those who have lived and worked in China soon learn to ignore this brusque language, realising that it is not impoliteness.

Another feature of Chinese language is its frequent use of phrases drawn from classical literature. These aphorisms are also often moralistic, referencing the widespread influence of Confucian culture. Their use can make life difficult for a foreign learner who has not studied classical Chinese.

The Chinese Embassy English language report on the meeting between Penny Wong and Wang Yi reveals the importance of these linguistic nuances. Failure to recognise them partly explains the misinterpretation of the meeting by Birtles and other journalists. Having read the report in both languages, let me highlight some critical passages.

According to the report (my translation), “Wang Yi said that at this point of time, when the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Australia was drawing close, and in the spirit of mutual respect, China was willing to take the pulse, to recalibrate, and to set sail once more, striving to put bilateral relations back on track.” The colourful language no doubt reflects the actual phrases used by the Minister.

The point that emerges and has been overlooked in press reports is that the onus is not simply placed on Australia. The Chinese side has also committed to a thorough review of its Australia policy.

Again, according to the report, Wang Yi said (again, my translation), "It was hoped that Australia would catch the current opportunity, take concrete actions, reconstruct a correct perception of China, and reduce negative equity and accumulate positive energy in order to improve China-Australia relations." At this point, the sentence in Chinese lacks a subject, which is not unusual, so I have used the passive in English, making it is obvious to the reader that this is not an instruction but a moralistic statement.

This also applies to the following sentence that has been taken by journalists as "requirements" or "proposals". I suggest they are better rendered as follows:

"First, China should continue to be regarded as a partner not a rival. Second, the way of 'seeking common ground while reserving differences' should be maintained. Third, (the practice of) not aiming at others or being controlled by others should be maintained. Fourth, the building of a foundation of positive practical community support should be maintained."

It should be particularly observed that apart from the first point, the other three points are not exclusively aimed at Australia. They reflect some basic principles of Chinese foreign policy that Wang Yi has quoted before in other meetings, such as his March meeting [with the European Union](#).

When read with better appreciation of the subtlety of language, one sees readily that the official report of this historic meeting is positive. We should take encouragement from it for the future development of relations.

Jocelyn Chey is Visiting Professor at the University of Sydney and Adjunct Professor at Western Sydney University and UTS. She formerly held diplomatic posts in China and Hong Kong. She is a member of the Order of Australia (AM) and a Fellow of the Australian Institute of International Affairs. She is also an Associate of China Matters.