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‘Dread and terror’ or ‘happy, relaxed’? Body language experts break down Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam’s meeting with Xi Jinping

- One observer says chief executive was bundle of nerves at face-to-face meeting with Chinese president, but another finds her to be at ease
- Lam continues to keep political pundits guessing on her ambition for a second term, however, as body language experts come away with little on that front

Topic | Carrie Lam



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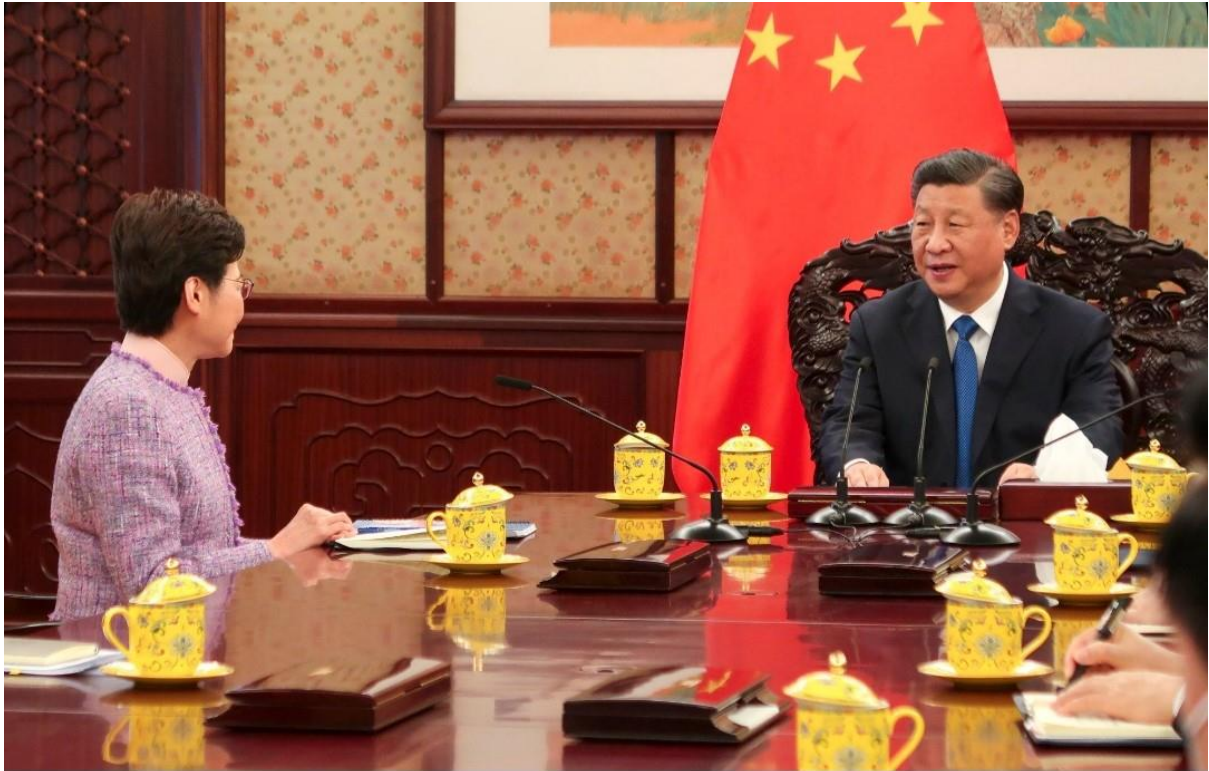
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Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor's duty visit to Beijing, which wrapped up on Thursday, was closely watched for any signs of the chief executive's chances or interest in seeking a second term.

It gained special significance also because the occasion marked Chinese President Xi Jinping's first public in-person meeting in nearly a year with a top official outside the mainland.

While Xi gave nothing away - and he was not expected to - two body language experts who analysed video footage showing the start of Xi and Lam's meeting held contrasting views on the vibes between both parties.

Dr Leow Chee-seng, a professor of non-verbal communication and human behaviour at the IIC University of Technology in Cambodia, said Lam appeared to be nervous and lacking in confidence when she walked into the room to greet Xi.



Chinese President Xi Jinping praises Carrie Lam for her work.
Photo: Pool

But Kiki Wong, a local body language expert, argued Lam was happy to be there and appeared relaxed.

Leow said: “Lam’s smile faded and was replaced by a mixture of dread and terror when she sat down with Xi. Her head was cocked downward, her lips closed, indicating a high level of stress.” He added that Lam was a bundle of nerves and had “no coherence between her mind and actions”.

Wong, however, pointed to changes in Lam’s expressions during a media photo session and when facing Xi, claiming she looked relaxed. “When she was speaking or when listening to Xi, she had a much bigger smile with her teeth showing. I believe that Lam was happy to be there with Xi,” she said.



Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam was happy to be at the meeting with Xi Jinping, according to one body language expert. Photo: Simon Song

Wong added: “Lam sat almost on the edge of her chair, so she could be closer to the people she was speaking to, which is a sign of respect ... She was very attentive when listening to Xi, constantly smiling and nodding her head, even towards the end.”

Wong compared how Lam spoke when facing the public in Hong Kong, and when addressing Xi, concluding she was relaxed in front of her boss.

“She knows what she wants to say, although it has been rehearsed,” Wong added, noting also that the chief executive spoke at an “appropriate volume”, indicating she was not merely putting on a show in front of the cameras.

Wong described Lam’s behaviour as “controlled”, saying Hong Kong’s leader showed respect and interest in the other party.

Leow, however, citing the chief executive's action of constantly clutching her hands on the table, said he found Lam to be on edge and anxious. He added that Xi showed restraint and reservation even when praising Lam for her security and pandemic work, while she appeared stressed, endorsing her superior's comments with "necessary nodding".

"Lam freezes her body and tightly crosses her fingers [as if] to avoid additional inquiries or concerns being voiced throughout the discussion," Leow said.

Wong said Xi was respectful to Lam throughout, smiling slightly as he gestured with an outstretched palm for her to stand next to him during a brief photo-taking session before the meeting.

“His baseline or usual mannerism seems to be ‘cold’ and not too emotional, to match the impression of a president in Chinese culture,” she said, adding that she could not discern any obvious sign of discomfort, frustration or impatience from Xi during the meeting.

Both observers agreed the parties at the talk divulged no sign through their words or body language that Lam was in the running or was interested in another term.

Briefing the press after talks with Xi and Premier Li Keqiang, Lam also brushed off questions on the matter, saying only that she would continue serving till the end of her current tenure.

“My term as chief executive will end in June. I will do everything needed in the capacity of a chief executive in this period of time,” Lam said.