



This page, Above: On election day in Shanzhuang, Yang Yonghe kneels before villagers and local leaders to make an appeal for formal candidacy. Photo by Chai Jijun. Right: A villager asks an election official about the election process. Opposite page, Left: As one villager fills out his ballot others look on with curiosity. Right: A family lines up at the ballot box. Remaining photos by Maxvision

# Village Elections

The candidate recounts his campaign to reach out to the people

Story and interview by Zhang Lijia and Calum Macleod

**T**he Constitution proclaims that all power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people, who exercise that power through delegates to the national and local people's congresses. In 1983 the abolition of communes led to village committees, the lowest level of governmental organization in China. Initially village committees were appointed from above, but since 1988 direct elections for village committees began to meet the people's constitutional right to vote and stand for election. Peasants like Yang Yonghe have seized on the opportunity.

The fourth of six children, Yang was born in 1964 to an ordinary farming family in Anyang county, Henan province. He did well in school but his father's death forced him to take up carpentry to provide for the family. Every year, when not busy on the land or making furniture, he would leave his wife and son to work on construction sites in the provincial capital of Zhengzhou, or further afield. His exposure to the changes sweeping China encouraged him to contest the first free election in the village's history.

By February 1999, all of China's provinces, and over half of its 930,000 villages, had experimented with elections at the village committee level. These committees enjoy considerable autonomy over issues like irrigation and housing that matter more to villagers



than the macro-economy of distant Beijing. The government is relying on them to preserve social stability through economic growth. In campaign speeches, candidates offer villagers promises of higher incomes and reduced burdens. While irregularities are commonplace, if not inevitable, China has been happy to show off its achievements - President Clinton witnessed an election in 1998.

There is no official timetable for expanding elections to China's 45,000 townships. Made up of at least ten villages and 20,000 people, the township is the first formal rung of China's administrative ladder, and its leaders still must be appointed by county party officials. But encouraged by party and state leaders extolling the virtues of village democracy, some of China's townships have surprised authorities with direct elections.

Observers disagree over whether village elections are accelerating political reform in China, yet limited representation at the very bottom of society does comprise a step towards liberalisation. Only time will tell if China's "rice-roots" democracy fuels demands for accountability further up the power structure.

## **Village Elections: a farmer Yang Yonghe's struggle to get elected as the head of his village**

Yang was born in 1964, a year of dragon into an ordinary farming family in Shangzhuang village, Anyang county, in central China's Henan province. The fourth of the six children in the family, he was clever and determined and enjoyed a good academic record at school. At his final year at senior middle school, a high education level already by rural standard, he was forced to give up his dream of furthering education as his father passed away. He began an apprentice of carpenter and has worked as carpenter ever since. Every year, when is not busy with field work, he goes out to the big cities like provincial capital Zhengzhou or even Tianjin and Beijing to work as a migrant worker, which serves as eye-opening experience. He either hangs around in the street, waiting for carpentry work or makes wooden window panel or wooden model at construction sites. He lives with his wife and their 11 year-old son.

No one would link democracy with China's vast countryside or its mostly poorly educated farmers. By Feb. 1999, however, when south China's Guangdong province eventually introduced democratic election for village committee, farmers from all provinces in China had tasted democracy of some kind. Village committee is the lowest level of organization, Under constitution, it is not even considered the formal level of governmental administration, but a form of self-government. However, the head of the committee, has considerable power in managing local economy, levying tax, giving family planning quota or deciding other honey and butter matters that are important to the villagers.

In early 1980's, after Deng Xiaoping's rural reforms disbanded the collective communes that had managed the villages life for decades, village committees or assemblies were organized as a kind of self-governing body, though the chiefs were normally nominated by authority. In June 1988, pushed by the the Ministry of Civil affairs, the Communist Party decided to let people choose their own leaders at this lowest level of government through democratic elections. The trail Organic Law On Villagers Committee was introduced, which was endorsed by the National People's congress the year before. It allowed farmers to elect the committee chairman and its members for a term of three years. Though there was resistance, it won support from most of the top leaders. Some of the supporters were liberals who hoped that the grassroots democracy will gradually expand to township or even higher level of government. Some other supporters were surprising conservatives who saw the harmless democratic gesture no threat to the real authority, but a good way to ride off corrupting and ease dissatisfactions among farmers. The system was first implemented to villages in Fujian, Liaoning and Jilin and gradually spreaded out all over the country. In Nov, 1998, a revised Organic Law was passed with perfected regulations and precedures.

Now, most of the country's 930,000 villages have been following the democratic election, some are in their third or fourth terms. And more and more are adopting direct elections with secret ballots. At the beginning, there was little report in the press. The, the Communist Party bosses saw it as a good publicity to establish a more democratic image. Foreign journalists as well as statesmen are organized periodically to witness the village elections. Even the American President Clinton was arranged to see one, on top of his heavy schedule during his China visit in spring 1998. Overall, western observers feel there is a lot to be desired about the election. There are often very limited choice. Irregularities are found in all election precedures. Vote-buying and ballot-rigging are common places. And it is no small task to teach farmers, many of who are illiterate or illiterate to cast their ballots according to the rule, let alone the fact that people here are too used to the authoritarian tradition.

Few believe that China is marching towards a democratic modern society. But over all, people from both in and outside China are impressed and pleased about the touch of democracy, believing China does need a solid ground when the real democracy finally comes. After all, it is a big step forward, as giving county folks choices is unprecedented in China. And once people taste democracy, they'd want make good use of it, like carpenter Yang Yonghe.

Interesting, it is the city intellectuals, even democracy activists who are not skeptical and unexcited about the rural democracy. They think the village committee chief has less power than the Party Secretary who is usually not democratically elected. Secondly, village election, taking place in the very bottom of the society in the countryside, does not make a difference to the whole picture.

Top leaders like Jiang Zemin has been talking about expanding democracy at the grassroots. High level officers from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the department that oversees the rural election, said after direct election at village level is standardized, it could be introduced at the township level. Indeed, one unauthorized direct election for township chief took place in December 1998 in Buyun, a remote corner in Sichuan province. There is probably a long way to go before such election can be authorized in China.

### **In his own words:**

If you trace back eight generations of my ancestors, you won't find any in a position of authority. But so what?! As a carpenter, a 'commoner', I too now have the right to be elected as a village leader. The idea to contest for the leadership got into my head in spring 1998, watching a TV programme about farmers in the northwest fiercely competing for the village committee through democratic elections. It was on the popular programme 'In focus', shown nightly after the national news. I always watch both, for I like to know what is going on. I thought to myself, Premier Zhu Rongji is launching a campaign to fight corruption, yet our own village leaders are so corrupt. Why don't I give it a good shot when I have the opportunity? I'm fairly educated and not stupid.

I didn't have to wait long. In early October, we were told there would be an election for the new village committee chairman and two committee members on the 28th. For the first time, it would be a direct election by secret ballot, open to all voters. It meant a more democratic election and more chance for a commoner like me. I was very excited. I must admit I had never served as a cadre in the village before. There were supposedly two elections before. But I only remember one that took place 6 or 7 years ago. I had nothing to do with it, though I was over 18 then. Only a few representatives cast votes. To be honest, most people didn't even care at that time as they thought 'the candidates were nominated by the authorities, so that was it!' Some hold such views even today.

Up to 90% of villagers share the family name Yang and many of us are related. One day, a relative who was the head of our group showed me a piece of paper with three names on it. "Do you agree that these three will be our representatives?" I asked what for and he couldn't even give me a clear answer. Most people just agreed without knowing what for. I then found out these representatives were the important people who would decide the candidates for the election. Let me explain. All villagers in Shangzhuang were divided into 12 groups. The old village committee nominated three representatives from each group, supposedly with the consent of villagers.

I immediately threw myself into the election campaign. I told my fellow villagers, the representative in particular, that I wished to run for village committee chairman. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the day before voting for the preliminary candidates, I put up three big character posters in the village, in which I declared my administrative programmes if I was elected. I concentrated on three issues. Firstly, I want to solve the old problem of village chiefs spending public funds on lavish banquets; secondly, I want to deal with the distribution of land for housing in a just and fair way; and, finally, I plan to set up a service company to engage in various business. My poster roused a big stir. Such behaviour was unheard of! For a while, everyone was talking about it. Some appreciated my efforts, some said I just wanted to satisfy my thirst for power, and others thought I was crazy. Anyway, probably with the help of my posters, I got myself elected as one of 6 preliminary candidates. I was the odd one out: the other five candidates all had positions in the production team before, and all are Party members.

On October 25, three days before the real election, the names for the final candidates were decided according to election procedure. As expected, I failed. Yang Yanqing, the old village committee chairman, and Yang Shukuan, the cadre in charge of family planning, would compete for the chairman's position as they achieved the highest votes. The other three were candidates for two committee members seats. Disappointed, I did not want to give up yet. The day before polling, I put up another poster, in which I urged people to cherish their sacred ballots and elect someone they really trust. I also got 5 well-respected old Party members to sign it. This caused more gossip. Some criticized my 'Cultural Revolution style'. But I argued that I didn't ask people to vote for me. What's wrong to ask people to vote carefully?

On the same night, our Party Secretary called for me. By the way, the Party Secretary is appointed, not democratically elected, yet he is just as powerful as the village committee chairman, if not more so. He asked me what all the fuss was

about. I explained I did not mean to make a fuss, but to take part in the election sincerely. I asked if he could have a word with the election work team to let me give a speech, even a very short one. I knew candidates may give a campaign speech if they wish. He refused at first, but I begged him, and he eventually agreed to speak to them, but no promises.

On October 28, election day, I got up early, anxious and excited. That morning, my younger brother, the village electrician, set up a loudspeaker at the primary school where polling would take place. How I wished I could use that loudspeaker! When he returned, he brought back a message, saying the election work team wanted to see me. I found the team in a classroom. Made up of rank-and-file villagers, they were very polite, but soon came to the point: did I have any intention of making a speech. I replied 'yes'. They first praised my enthusiasm, but suggested I forget the idea. They said they were under pressure to make sure the election was carried out smoothly. "You have no chance anyway," they pointed out, "why make things difficult for everyone?" That was my weak point: I knew I had little chance, and after hesitation, I agreed.

I felt so depressed at that moment, but I remained civil. I heard in other villages, when people were not happy with elections for some reason, they burnt the ballot boxes and boycotted elections. When I walked out of the room, I met some of my mates. I confessed that I had agreed not to speak. "Silly man! Why not try? You have lots of good ideas." I began to regret I had given up so readily.

At 10am, the election began, accompanied by the national anthem. The chairperson announced the election procedure and relevant rules. Just as people were about to cast their ballots, on impulse of action, I threw myself to the ground. Kneeling in front of the podium, I pleaded "Please give me a chance! I want to say a few words." Kneeling down is a traditional way to beg from the authorities. The people who sat high on the podium jumped up straightaway. Meanwhile, I was encircled by curious and excited crowds. "What's up?" they wondered. I did cause a big scene. I was taken away by an election team member to a quiet classroom.

The officer from Anyang's Civil Affairs Bureau who came to supervise the election explained patiently that only formal candidates have the right to deliver campaign speeches, according to the Organic Law of the Villager's Committee. Others added that if everyone wanted to give a speech, there would be chaos. It was indeed getting chaotic. More and more people came to the room to have a look. Some shouted "Give him a chance to speak." I was too excited for words. Hot tears rolled down my face. "A real man does not shed tears easily." I didn't know why I cried. As the situation was getting out of control, the officer discussed with the election team and decided to let me speak. Otherwise, there was no way for the election to continue.

Overjoyed, I went up to the podium and made a passionate speech, the only one of my life, in front of my fellow villagers. I basically summarized my administrative programme. My speech lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. When I finished, I was greeted with loud applause. I thought people would like my points. We farmers all hate to see the village leaders entertain their bosses from the township or higher authority with expensive banquets, or to find all kinds of excuses to treat themselves. True, this is a very common problem in China's countryside, but our place is poor: our average annual income was 1,600 yuan in 1998. Another big complaint was the land usage rule for housing in the village. In recent years, the government tightened the control of non-farming land usage, in order to protect the shrinking arable land. When people needed to build new houses, it was getting more and more difficult to win permission. To take advantage, the village committee decided to let people bid for plots of land. As a result, the price soared. The highest bid to date is 36,500 yuan! (permission to build a new house used to be only RMB2,000). The price does not include the actual cost of constructing a house. I believe such practice is illegal. Finally, I do not think the village committee tried hard at all in leading us villagers to get rich. I frequently go out to work as a migrant and I see changes happening everywhere. How about us? There are a couple of iron mines which got going back in Chairman Mao's time. Some money from mining, plus the profit from house bidding, and limited income from agriculture. That's all we have. There is no rural enterprise or any other kind of business. The idea of my service company is to provide farmers with more business opportunities, such as raising animals, or some kind of processing industry, to help people get rich.

Back to the election. The results came out in the afternoon. The two official candidates Yang Yanqing and Yang Shukuan got 337 and 150 respectively and I myself 197. 1,230 villagers were qualified to vote, but I am not sure how many votes were valid. I do believe I might get 100 more votes if it had been explained properly to people how to vote



for people who are not formal candidates. They needed to cross out the listed candidates and then add my name. Many did not cross them out, and others circled them *and* added my name. Since none of us received more than half of all votes, the election was declared a failure. There would have to be another election.

My life was changed completely since the election. I was shunned by village leaders as well as their families. On the other hand, I also won sympathy from those who appreciated that I said what they wanted to say. People kept asking me “Why did you do that?” I always answered “It is not important that I get elected or not. I just hope that the democratic elected leader will feel the pressure and responsibility, and therefore do his best to serve the village during his three year term.” That’s the whole point about this wonderful system. I am sure it will push forward not only democracy, but also the development of rural China. There are many, many problems now. Some are still not interested and some don’t even know how to vote. But once they see they can make a difference, they will vote carefully. Some may try get elected through bribery, but once people see he does not want to serve them, they will not give him a second term.

I don’t know when the re-election will be. Of course, I will contest it again. But I am not going to wasting my time waiting. I just invested in a new type of sweet potato which is believed to have higher yields and stronger ability to resist insects. If I am successful, I want to introduce that to my fellow villagers. I hope I have more to offer to them when I am a village leader. I don’t mean to promise miracles. I am no miracle worker with ‘three heads and six arms’. What I *can* promise is a clean chief who is keen to work for their interests.

I am confident about China’s democracy. I don’t know much about western democracy. I heard about American President Clinton’s sex scandal from TV. At least in their system, there are incredible things like putting the president on trial. I am not sure we want that kind of democracy. But as China develops, we may one day have a democratically elected president too.

### **Grass-root Democracy**

**Yang Yonghe, a carpenter from Shangzhuang village in central China’s Henan province, speaks to Lijia MacLeod about village committee election**

#### **Start**

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