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Chinese Democracy Ideal and Reality Revealed in *Please Vote for Me*

Please Vote for Me is a film produced in China, but provoking hot discussion all over the world. Because bare-knuckled threats, outright lies, well-placed bribes, and well-resourced lobbyists happen among eight-year-olds without a savvy politician's script. To any Chinese, this is the best material to review Chinese democracy. However, electoral politics is the system, but not the democracy itself. Similarly, the Chinese Electoral Law is the foundation of the Chinese political system, which does not mean democracy in reality. Therefore, it can be reviewed and adjusted to be more suitable for a better democracy.

Keywords

Democracy, election, electoral system, *Please Vote for Me*, documentary, democratic awareness, political reform

1 Introduction

According to the majority of westerns, most of the Chinese are still wondering whether democracy is a universal value that suits human nature or elections lead inevitably to manipulation. China has never had national elections. But democratic processes have been tried on the local level, mainly in the countryside.¹ Sometimes even pop idols are voted in this way.² Because the economic changes occurred first in the countryside, many speculate that this is the Chinese government's way of instating gradual political change. The purpose of the director Weijun Chen³ has conducted an experiment in election; attempting to find what democracy would be like if it came to China.

The film *Please Vote for Me* was produced in Wuhan, China, which is a big and modern city, just a little inferior to Shanghai in terms of economics. Third-graders at Evergreen Primary School first encounter democracy by electing a class monitor.⁴ Eight-year-olds compete against each other for

¹ Chinese Grassroots democracy is a tendency towards designing political processes where as much decision-making authority as practical is shifted to the organization's lowest geographic level of organization. See Grassroots Democracy Taking Roots in Rural China.

² For details see Super Voice Girls' challenges China's TV culture: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-08/12/content_468543.htm; Super Girl (contest): [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Girl_\(contest\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Girl_(contest))

³ Weijun Chen is a documentary director and producer living in Wuhan, China. After graduating from the journalism program at Sichuan University in 1992, he joined the documentary production department of the Wuhan regional TV station. His first film *My Life is My Philosophy* was nominated for the best documentary of the year by the Chinese National Association of Broadcasters. In 2003, he completed *To Live is Better Than to Die*, which was awarded a Peabody and Grierson award, as well as the Rudolf Vrba Award at the One World Festival. Major works: *Law of the Dragon* (2011), *The Biggest Chinese Restaurant in the World* (2008), *Please Vote for Me* (2007), *To Live is Better than to Die* (2003). For details see <http://pleasevoteforme.org/director.html>.

⁴ In Asian countries, every class has a class monitor, whose duties are to help keep fellow students in line during the school day, help teacher maintain a neat and organized classroom and assist the teacher with special projects, help create a class telephone and email list and may use an attendance list to take daily attendance. Most important of all, class monitor help the teacher to promote discipline and peace in the classroom, who may be given the power to send students to the principal, to detention or to another authority within

the coveted position, abetted and egged on by teachers and doting parents. It is supposed to mirror urban Chinese society in a school, its children and families. The film has been selected as a part of the “*Why Democracy?*”⁵ project which interprets democracy by 10 films from around the world and which broadcasted on 42 television networks to an audience of more than 300 million all over the world in 2007. The film also got the top prize on 2007 Silverdocs Documentary Film Festival. The festival's director, Patricia Finneran, said “the prize went to a nail-biting political drama...about 7-year-olds.” “It's a film about the idea of democracy, and a window into modern China, It's also about the shady politicking that goes on with third-graders”(Hesse 2007).

2 Content of the Film

The film's director Weijun Chen asks a wiggly eight-year-old: “What is democracy?”. No reply. “What is a vote?” – the next little girl squirms instead of answering. The film begins with these two questions and then the class teacher, Mrs. Zhang, writes the word “democracy” on the blackboard on the first day of the semester, and says: “Democracy. Isn't this new? You will choose your own class monitor.” Then she tells the class the three candidates who are selected by teachers' close-door discussion: a tough and skinny boy Luo Lei with a reputation as a classroom leader and bully; another boy – Cheng Cheng, who is somewhat pudgy and aggressively political in nature, seems to plan out every step he takes, and is constantly gauging his own support; the third candidate is a shy, well-behaved but ambitious little girl named Xia Fei whose single mother is a teacher at this school.

The election process involves song-and-dance talent show, class planning and a healthy dose of tear-shedding. There are lies, betrayal, and bribery, parents even arrange field trips for the class in order to win votes. Support is bought and sold. Assistants change sides. The candidates criticize one another for eating too slowly, being picky, and not paying sufficient attention in class. Most striking are those dialogues between the candidates and their parents which lead up to the election. They speak truths about the nature of freedom and liberty. They grasp the idea of liberty as something inborn. One of the candidates Cheng Cheng gets home and asks his father: “What kind of thing is democracy?” His father's response is concise, but powerful: “Democracy is when people are their own masters.” The second candidate, Luo Lei, is shown describing the election process to his parents, who are both police officers, and surprisingly, they attempt to brainstorm for ways to coerce the other classmates into voting for him. The father says:

school when students misbehave.

In Chinese primary schools, power is wielded by the class monitor, whose authority over his peers is almost absolute. Usually the one with good academic performances and capable student can be appointed by teachers as class monitor. Sometimes class monitors may volunteer for the position or may be elected. The term *class monitor* is used primarily in Asia and in a number of European countries. Schools in the United States prefer the term *hall monitor* which is primarily used to ensure that students arrive safely at their class.

⁵ *Why Democracy?* is a documentary project using film to start a global conversation about democracy. In October 2007, ten one-hour films focused on contemporary democracy were broadcast in the world's largest ever factual media event. More than 48 broadcasters on all continents participated, airing the films in over 180 countries. That is not all. 17 thought-provoking short films deal with personal, political and legal issues around the theme “What does democracy mean to me?”. Their ambitions have extended well beyond the broadcast media. In a groundbreaking collaboration *Why Democracy?* has teamed up with Metro Newspapers worldwide to ask everyone – from political leaders to athletes, celebrities to religious figures – 10 questions about democracy. The answers appear online, in the press and in a collection of short films. For details see <http://www.whydemocracy.net/>

“You must have a trick. Luo is adamant in rejecting such help. His father says: “You need some tricks to let you win.” Luo responds with: “No! I don't want to control others. I think they should think for themselves.” In the course of the election campaign Luo even want to give up because the campaign is not like what he thought before, of course the other candidates spread the news in great pleasure. At last Lou had to listen to his parents who arrange field trip for the class and give a powerful speech at the final secession. The film ends with class's cheer about Luo's winning and the other two candidates weeping.

3 Typical Comments All Over the World

The film has been on show all over the world, and also got rewarded various times. Why does this film attract so many people's attention all over the world? Actually, it is hard to find the reason in academic research, but it is easy to find it in the audiences' blogs. So, I have searched in “The Internet Movie Database” (IMDb) comments from the audiences' blogs all over the world, from democracy point of view, to help you to understand this film and learn something about Chinese democratic ideal and reality.

- “They may require the candidate to make commitment to ask teachers to reduce the homework load, call for the improvement of school meals, etc, if the students know their votes actually have so much power, by which they can participate in the improvement and management of classes, the democratic power of democracy have been explored and everyone will seriously consider which one to choose. However, why children do not realize these rights? Because no one knows the magic of democracy so much, the shadow of a dictator has been around, that person is the teacher. Teachers directly selected three candidates, then let you play with democracy, when the election is over, the teacher also regain the power...” (Web nickname: Lost in the Summer Wild, 2008, China).

- “Drawbacks of democracy can be improved in many ways, such as raising citizens' knowledge standard, which can be achieved from the universal of education. Technology also can be applied to increase transparency, reduce the spreading rumors. Monitoring mechanism can be set up, so improper means cannot succeed. We may disappoint at democracy, but we must not give up” (Weiwen Li, Taiwan, 2010, China).

- “Promoting democratic politics is the task that Chinese government and people have been doing currently. But everything must have a process, which can't be achieved overnight. To achieve the ideal democratic society, generations or even dozens of generations' effort should be taken. But I think that the most fundamental is to train democratic awareness and cultivate spirit of democracy of our next generation constantly. But things do not turn out the way you want; sometimes it's off the trail of democracy. The film is one of the examples, which should provoke our whole society to think

deeply” (Web nickname: sea fish 110, 2011, China).⁶

- “The campaigning spirit of the students is often negative, in fact, and they are continuously trying to generate a mob atmosphere that will ride their opponent out of town on a rail, so to speak. In fact, you have to wonder if Chinese censors might not approve of Please Vote for Me – the director, Weijun Chen, seems to have found his financing in South Africa – since it could be construed as casting the democratic process in a negative light. Turning people against each other and letting them tear each other apart for raw personal gain is corrupting to the spirit and to the community, you can imagine them saying, and after watching this film, you might agree with them” (Ryan Stewart, 2007, America).

- “After finishing watching this just now, my first thought was "who produced this?" was it the Chinese government tries to show democracy as a bad/flawed idea, or pro-westerners trying to say "yeah man, you DO need democracy now!"... It is a surprisingly honest and intimate documentary; quite cleanly played out (not editorialized). Just like in most elections, the good guy you hope and would really love to see win; gets done over by the political machinations of the more cut-throat dodgier candidate as is sadly too often the case in real world politics” (Billy Corgan, 2007, Australia).

- “The document was filmed in my hometown... Chinese people never enjoyed the true democracy since 1949, and the school system we are having just reflects the real society. This class monitor thing is just another part in the dictatorship hierarchy, teachers picked the kids they like to monitor other classmates, and cool kids like me never really care who will be the guy to monitor us because we will fight the stupid system anyway. Why bother to introduce a democratic system to elect a little dictator anyway. Kids are so keen to get the job because the power it represents. Parents are so keen to help their kids to win because they know it will give them bonus at the time they graduate. For teachers, I have no idea, might be just extra fun at work... so anyway. China is never short of voting system, the problem is the government never wants people to understand the true democracy. I have the feeling that the director probably shares a similar feeling to me, which is sort of disappointment about these younger generation, which made me sad. By the way, I was elected as class monitor once in a quite similar way, but teacher refused to accept the result simply because he didn't like me and chose another kid. He said to us about his decision, "I trust you guys and give you the democratic rights, but look at the guy you chose, you are abusing your rights..." (Anonymous, 2008, Australian-Chinese).

- “This is the most fascinating documentary I've seen in a long time. The

⁶ <http://www.asianreporter.com/film/2007/42-07pleasevote.htm>

subject matter may sound stale, but the action, drama and raw emotions are fresh and real. It's less a story of the baser elements of democracy and/or the human spirit, as some reviewers superficially assert, as it is about how parents affect their children. For all the benefits of parental involvement in their children's academic and emotion success, this film make you stop and question yourself as a parent" (Barry, 2008, Thailand).

- "While *Please Vote for Me* has an interesting subject and an interesting way to look at it, being a part of the "Why Democracy?" series, it fails to make a point about democracy, while only seeming to" (Yimzyidz, 2009, Turkey).

- "But I was greatly encouraged by this film. It seems like we see our rights threatened every day. All that 'shall not be infringed' is infringed upon constantly. Our government takes what it wants, and speech is increasingly less free. As government continues to seize civil liberties, we witness the death throes of the republic. America would do well to remember the two truths found in this film:

Democracy is when people rule themselves. Not "the people," but individuals.

Being an elected official does not grant the right to control others; we all retain the right to manage our own affairs" (Stefano R. Mugnaini, 2011, America).

4 Election Reality Reflected in the Film

In 1953, just few years after the foundation of Peoples Republic for China, Electoral Law was issued and put into practice. It was revised frequently later in 1979, 1982, 1985 and 2004. In 2009, the draft amendment to the Electoral Law⁷ was set and has been used until today. Although this is a film arranged by the director, it reveals the election reality in some kind. Let's explain step by step according to the provision of the Electoral Law.

4.1 Problems in Selecting, Deciding and Introducing the Candidates

Selecting, deciding and introducing of the candidates are one of the most important procedures in election. Moreover, it is the foundation of fair election. Although Chinese Electoral Law has some procedure about this, the articles are not so clear and sufficient. Thus, in some election, when selecting, deciding and introducing the candidates, disorder situation appeared with regard to the following aspects:

- first, with regard to internal decision, some candidates are not selected

7 The Chinese Electoral Law was first enacted in 1953, revised in 1979, and it has been amended four times since then. But people still think the improvements are too slowly. For example, the electing deputies to people's congresses are still based on different population ratio in urban and rural areas. Until the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2007, which was proposed to firmly develop socialist democratic politics, expand the people's democracy, and ensure the people are the masters of the country. It was suggested that the goal should be gradually achieved that electing deputies to people's congresses be based on the same population ratio in urban and rural areas. For details see "Explanation on draft amendment to electoral law" (http://www.china.org.cn/china/NPC_CPPCC_2010/2010-03/08/content_19554098.htm).

according to the procedure of the Electoral Law but are appointed by the superiors. According to the film, three candidates are selected by the teachers' secret consultations. The fact that Luo Lei is the former class monitor and Xu Xiaofei's mother is a teacher play maybe a decisive role in the teacher's consultation;

- second, with regard to the qualifications of the candidate, in the Chinese Electoral Law there are no strict restrictions for candidates, especially in terms of their profession. Thus, in reality, there are a lot of government officials who have influence and power to get into the deputy to the National People's Congress, the ratio is as high as 70% (张若渔, Ruoyu 2007, 32), as it is also reflected in the film. Apparently, the former class monitor is selected as a candidate;

- last but not least, with regard to the introduction of the candidates, the Chinese Electoral Law has only few words about the introduction of the candidates, hence, in a real election, most of the introductions only confine to curriculum vitae, even in some electoral district, the procedure of introduction is missing, similarly as in the film. People know seldom about the candidate, as a result, secret ballot and political indifferences can be observed.

4.2 Voters' Blindness and Ignorance

Voters are the subject of the election who will have an important direct impact on the election. After more than 30 years of opening-up, Chinese citizens' sense of democracy and participation has improved a lot. However, there are little improvements in certain areas and cities. In rural areas, voters' blindness and ignorance are still prevailing. This is shown when the director asks students in the canteen: "Who do you want to vote?" Some of the students answer: "Nobody;" others say: "I don't know." According to a survey in Zhejiang Province China in 2010, 37.12% voters know nothing about candidates and only 36.4% people in Zhejiang province have experiences of voting (林龙, Lin Long, 2010). In my opinion, voters' blindness and ignorance in politics can be explained by two factors:

- first, political reforms develop slowly. This has a direct impact on most Chinese citizens because they only know the meaning and effect of elections superficially;

- second, the election working group does not introduce the candidate. Therefore, voters know little about a particular candidate and his aims, attitudes, and opinion (周宁宁, Ningning 2007, 22).

4.3 Power Intervention

There are power interventions in Chinese grassroots election. As soon as the elected are voted, power can get involved into the whole procedure of electing, hoping to affect voters and let the expected candidate win. In the film, those parents who intervene in the elections, who teach the students to

be scheming, to defame others, or to bribe. The point is that parents' wisdom helps the candidate to win. With the perfection of Chinese electing system, power intervention phenomenon has been transformed, which becomes indirect and obscure.

4.3 Bribery

Another drawback in Chinese elections is bribery. Bribery and democratic politics goes hand in hand, which is a by-product of democratic politics: where there is election there is bribery. A bribery scandal prevails all over the world today. China's amended electoral law defines bribery as follows: "with money or materials to buy the election staff or voters to get votes or to change the election results" (郑明怀, Minghuai Zheng 2009, 33). Bribery also happens in the film and plays a decisive role in the election. Bribery politics happens in China frequently which results from:

- first, from the perspective of bribers, marketing economy – somebody maximizes benefits unscrupulously and distorts their sense of political participation. Bribery is only one of the forms;
- second, from the perspective of bribee, they are usually satisfied with little interests just because of the inferior sense of democracy, sheer ignorance of the importance of the ballot, huge income gap between themselves and others;
- finally, with regard to the election environment, China has an imperfect law system with a lack of supervision and provides only weak punishment for bribery (陶相根、潘福宽, Xianggen, Fukuan 2010, 27-28).

5 Suggestions for Improving Contemporary Election

5.1 Standardize Candidates' Nomination, Determination and Introduction

I think the improvement can be carried out from the following aspects:

- first of all, it is necessary to select candidates according to the existing electoral law and intensify supervision of the procedure to ensure a fair and open nomination of candidates;
- second, a pre-elect mechanism should be introduced gradually to replace selectively the way of pre-negotiated candidates;
- third, the principle of non-compatible profession qualification⁸ should be introduced into Chinese election. According to the film, they can establish the class rules, former class monitor have no right to participate again;
- finally, it is important to pay special attention to the introduction of the candidates, because this is the unique opportunity for candidates to

⁸ In some Chinese government offices, if you're an office leader, you can't work as the next candidate at the same time. We called it the principle of non-compatible profession qualification.

promote their ideas and show their ability. For voters it is also an important way to learn and distinguish candidates. Apparently, a Curriculum vitae is not the only way for the improvement; moreover press, network, new media, even a face-to-face communication are excellent ways to get to know candidates.

5.2 Improve Voters' Democratic Awareness by Education

In the film, students do not know what the ballot means to them; in fact, they do not know which class monitor means what to them, so they can be easily manipulated by the political tactics which are mainly planned by the candidates' parents. As a result, education should be responsible for improving the citizens' democratic awareness. Western successful political and citizenship education experiences are worth studying by contemporary school teachers (陈慰, Wei 2009, 75-76). Another reason for the weakness of citizens' democratic awareness might be the low standard of Chinese economic development. In some rural areas, farmers tend to be attracted by small favors, and lose their standpoint in a critical moment. Therefore, only by economic development and incomes improvement, the effective operation of the election can be ensured.

5.3 Competitive Mechanism Should Be Obligatory

Competitive elections are helpful to make the electoral process fair and transparent. The debate between the candidates can be the climax of the entire election campaign in the film, which exposes all aspects of the candidates to the voters. In fact, candidates seldom get in touch with voters; most of the election is blind election (蒋明华, Minghua 2005, 77). The enthusiastic participation of the voters in elections has decreased. At the beginning of the competition during election candidates are forced to maximize their advantages. This is done by attacking each other and exposing shortcomings. Afterwards, the public gains a more comprehensive understanding of the candidate. The intensity of the campaign determines the brightness of the eyes of voters because the more intense the competition is the more the voters will know who to select.

In addition, the campaign gives the election a sense of entertainment to some extent, which will no doubt attract the attention of the public, and will raise a public awareness of participation. The broader the social base is the easier the realization of democracy.

5.4 Intensify Supervision

There is no supervision in the film. Parents teach little students tricks regardless of the camera is filming or not. Even one of the candidates instructs the director to go back and privately query that student again to see if she was only expressing support because she was intimidated by his

presence. If only some teachers or students representatives from another class follow the election campaign, who have the veto power or admonition rights, things will be on the right track. Therefore, if an electoral process without supervision, the election should be an imperfect one. The outcome of the election must go astray.

5.4 Strictly Enforce the Illegal Sanctions

At the end of the film, students cheer to the victory of Lou lei with Luo's gifts still on the desk. The whole procedure of voting takes place without supervision by professional citizenship teachers, e.g and even worse, nobody realize it. In current Chinese Electoral Law, only three articles sanction false elections. This generally lacks procedural requirements, this is not enough elaborated and also it is not easy to install supervision in election (陶相根、潘福宽, Xianggen, Fukuan 2010, 28-29).

6 Conclusion

As a matter of fact, it is difficult to find what is meant by democracy in *Please Vote for Me*. However, we should not take it so serious and draw too ambitious conclusions about Chinese democracy, because the democratic experiment showed in the film does not mirror true elements of current political life. The Chinese have been debating so much about democracy, and in too many cases, we are not entirely clear what we are talking about. Because Chinese have never experienced real democracy in public life after the foundation of new China, they lack of comprehensive knowledge and understanding of foreign democratic theory and practice. However, because the Chinese have had a discourse on that, the exotic democracy's richness has been deconstructed or deviated. In fact, most of us do not know what democracy is, what functions and objectives democracy has, and what the external conditions to run a democratic system are. I do not know how these parents gain the democratic state so quickly. Although we have all only a basic knowledge about real democracy, we cannot blame them for picking up Western democratic shortcomings easily; perhaps they hear too much western so-called hypocrisy of democracy.⁹ When taking up democratic weapons, they still don't know how to fire, take the false democracy as real one.

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⁹ For details see Keane "Hypocrisy and Democracy"
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