

Full-scale Mobilization: Transcending a Village-level Election in Rural China

Ouyang Dishun

[Abstract] China's official account on village-level elections in rural areas is that such is how China's peasants participate in the country's political life and wield their power as decision makers of local affairs. This recent fieldwork done in a Li ethnic prefecture in southern China may have added some findings to other dimensions of the above understanding. Two powerful clans have been in fierce conflict as their respective leaders are running for the President of the Villagers' Committee. Efforts during the campaign include uniting other families and promising financial returns for independent voters, among many other things. In the process, it seems that a set of rules which is obviously different from the official regulation has been established. Through constant manipulation and mitigation of these rules by the two parties, a new village head has finally come into power. This research tries to analyse how the two candidates gain their power as their clans' leaders, play with the rules, and relocate their resources to win over the rival. At the same time, there is also the complexity in the interaction among elements including kinship, subsistence, and informal power in the context of a modern state.

[Keyword] Rural China Grassroot Democracy Election

1. Introduction

China amended the Constitution in 1982, to terminate the organization of the People's Commune, and to set up Villagers' Committee in rural areas. Some detailed laws followed that up in 1987, regulating that such committee shall be elected. The nature of these organizations will be autonomous, in contrast to those wielding state power, for example the People's Congress.

It is usually the case that the President of the Villagers' Committee is the highest ranked figure to be determined by direct election in grassroot-level politics. Although the Villagers' Committee is actually not included in the pyramid of the governmental structure, the result of such an election has to be approved by the town-level government to be in effect. Theoretically, power that the Committee wields does not exceed helping the government collect taxes and organize agricultural production. In reality, since its role is not definite, and the regulation is vague in most sense, the Committee can have control over the villagers in many aspects of life.

When it comes to the election of the President of their Villagers' Committee, it is widely observed that peasants have such fervor that is seldom shown in other aspects of social life. Most political scientists view this as a sign of progress in grassroot democracy. When I talked to the Yingzhou town-level government officials, this was confirmed. Elections are held every three years, and have silently become one of the most important traditions. It is even more intriguing that, they said that of all the administrative villages, Gulou's election was hardly matched by any others, in terms of the level of villager involvement. They said it with a somewhat negative tone, and added that every time an election was to be held in Gulou, all the policemen in the

town and most of the town leaders would have to be there, because “it will otherwise be too chaotic”.

For me then, the field site had to be Gulou. The whole Gulou administrative village area consists of four natural villages, and the whole area lies along the coastal line. Traditionally, the village lives on planting and selling crops and fruit. Judging from the changes in recent years, the area developing into a tour site seems inevitable to the villagers. Apparently the town government has done its propaganda work, and the villagers acknowledged the inevitability. Some of them even looked forward to the change happening.

Since around year 2004, there had been a trend to promote tourism in Hainan Island. Economic value of land, especially land along the coast, had been rising significantly. In 2009, the central government of China decided that Hainan would develop in the direction of international tourism. By the time I entered the field site, in around July 2010, most of the coastal line of the town had been sold to various developers. Gulou was no exception.

The villagers would hold no grudge against the development plan at all, as long as they get their compensation “fairly”, which they thought they did not. Although Gulou is officially in the administration of Lingshui Li Ethnic Autonomous County, it is geographically much closer to the city of Sanya, the most famous tourism city on the island, to the west of the autonomous county. This proximity allowed the villagers in Gulou to easily gain information about how other villagers in Sanya were compensated for their land. Most villagers I talked to described a huge disparity

between the treatment they thought they were going to get and what they thought was happening in Sanya. They told me they were getting about one-fourth to one-fifth cash compensation of what villagers in Sanya had got, and even the Sanya amount would not be enough for their living, because they would have no land thereafter.

There were two versions of explanation for this disparity, according to the villagers. Some of the villagers attributed this to the President of the Villagers Committee. They said that the President had a role in the negotiations between the village and the government, and that he was corrupted, or at least incompetent and let the government people take advantage of the village. Others simply blamed the government, town and county level. For them, the importance lies in between the village and the government, and it seemed that they all acknowledged that the government already sold the land to the developers for good price.

It is not to say that how these villagers held their different opinions was how they picked sides in the election, nor to say that the President made a fortune in the matter, but it certainly had implication at least in what the villagers thought to mean to be the President financially. Most villagers who were willing to talk on this topic told me that typically, a run for the presidency cost about six to seven hundred thousand RMB. However, they agreed that the President can “make a profit” and, if they had the money to spare, they would have run for it as well.

Six or seven hundred thousand for running for the President would be a large sum, even in Gulou. An average family in the village had a yearly income of about forty to two hundred thousand RMB, mostly from growing mango. While the Gulou villagers

were doing very well compared to most other peasants in China, it still seemed hard to accumulate the money necessary for the campaign. Some of the villagers asserted that there was a cycle, in which a President “made enough money” during one term, and became able to afford the next.

Such understandings blurred what is considered a sign of progress in China’s grassroots democracy. I later found, as will be shown in this article, the election had much more complication than the textbook “peasants exercising democracy”, including competition of power, economic consideration, and honoring a family name.

2. The Election

When I entered the field, an election had been scheduled to be held three weeks later. The current president, Dong YG, had just won another election a couple of days ago, in the village branch of the CCP, becoming Secretary. As to the Presidency, his only competition was Lin Y, who had been both President of the Villagers Committee and CCP branch Secretary for the last two terms. The next two terms were considered by the villagers to be crucial to Gulou and the people, since most of the land compensation procedures would be finished in the next three to five years. Additionally, it would be even more profitable for whoever elected President.

Before returning to Gulou for Presidency, Dong and Lin had similar experiences, in that they both ran a successful business in inland China and made money. Lin returned in 2001, and proceeded to be President of the Villagers’ Committee for two

terms, before being taken over by Dong. One of my informants Lei, 19, who shared the family name Dong with the current President, told me that this would be the third time these two matched up in an election.

Dong's camp was organized by their common family name. In fact, Lei's father was by that time one of the most important supporters of the President, in the form of a campaign executive in the upcoming election, also the Deputy Secretary of the CCP village branch. Lei's uncle was also an important figure in the Dong camp. I also met some other Dongs throughout the research, who regarded the election as the whole clan's endeavor.

The Dong clan was the core of the Dong camp. The Dong family name was very dominant in Gulou, no other clan could compete in terms of population. Common lineage contributed to their intimate bond, and ensured Dong YG would get the strongest support from the group. For Dong, his name was the most important resource he could relocate.

Obviously the Dong clan was very proud of their superiority in number. At some point before the voting day, I asked Lei given the situation, who was favored in his opinion, he responded, "It is hard to say. Lin has bribed a lot of people, he and his gang are richer, so maybe more people are going to vote for him. But we are united. There are more Dongs than any other family name. On that day, there is bound to be a fight. When it happens, Lin's gang would not fight for him, Lin would be on his own, while all Dongs fight for the family".

The superior size of the Dong family was further utilized through marriage to create an even larger Dong camp. Lei's mother's family name was Lin, as Lin Y. Lei told me that she and Lin Y were remotely related. When I asked her what her choice would be, she said with conviction, "I am a Dong now". And she admitted that sometimes it could get quite awkward, but the custom dictated that she should follow her husband.

On the other hand, the Lin camp was a combination of a few family names. I considered the pattern as trying to grab as many non-Dong as possible. However, this was still organized by family names. Once a family authority had allied with Lin, the whole family would vote for him. While Lin might not have the same amount of clan members as Dong, he managed to gather quite a camp through alliance strategy.

2.1 The Nomination

Although the villagers often referred to the election as "voting a President", there were actually four other seats in the Villagers Committee besides the President. A week before the main event, there was a preliminary election. It was more of a nomination, in which the voters would nominate five candidates to compete in the main event. The ballot paper was a form, on which were printed five slots, dedicated to one "President", one "Vice President", and three "Committee Members". The eight most nominated candidates would compete in the election.

I went to one of the two sites to observe the nomination. Both camps sent some of their "campaign managers" to the site, each carrying a written form. When the mass

came, those who promised to vote for Dong would recognize Dong's managers and approached to copy the paper. For those who could not read, the managers would fill out the form for them, or told them to "copy exactly bit by bit". So those who nominated Dong as President candidate would also nominate the exactly four other committee members prescribed by the Dong camp. Lin's supporters did the same. From what I got from the villagers, I inferred that few of them knew that this procedure was intended to make the nomination vary, instead of keeping it like this. They seemed to be under obligation to come and vote, without knowing what it meant.

There were also independent voters, but those were few. Most of these voters would come with a well written paper, drop it in the box and immediately went away, but some of them would come to the site and fill in the form there. I saw someone listed Dong as the President candidate, and Lin as the Vice President candidate. This was such an obvious way to tell that this had to be one of those independent voters.

There was still more to it when a voter nominated both Dong and Lin. For some, it was the representation of "my vote is for sale", for others, it could mean "I am neutral and whoever of you two win, please leave me and my family alone". They did not just flash their paper to the managers, some of them made sure that Dong and Lin's people saw it.

Result came in evening, Lin and his four would take up five slots in the main event, and Dong's party only got three. Some Dongs were clearly frustrated. But Lei said

that there was still chance, the Dongs could make some maneuver before the “real thing”.

2.2 The Heated Preparation

After the nomination, a lot of families already declared their position in the election. These big and entire families had taken up a large chunk of the voters, but there were still those independent voters to fight for. There was still a week’s time until the election. Dong YG’s place would constantly be occupied by numerous men in the evening. They would talk until midnight, setting up strategies. These were mostly Dongs, others were Dongs’ wives’ fathers and brothers.

They would talk about how to free those “hijacked” by Lin, and deal with Lin’s leverage against them, so that they could vote for Dong. Or more importantly, whose votes to buy. Lei told me that Lin bought many votes, and although the Dongs were reluctant to break the rules, it would be impossible to win if they do not start immediately to bid for some votes.

Since I was hosted by Lei’s family during the fieldwork, and I ate at Dong YG’s place a lot, if I directly approach Lin, it would be considered very rude by the Dongs, and I did not want to take the chance. However, I managed to approach one of the important figures in Lin’s camp, He. He responded to the bribe allegation that it was just financial compensation for those working elsewhere who came back just to vote. “Just a hundred RMB for everyone to express the gratitude”, he said.

Still, just each a hundred RMB for those who came back from work to vote could not explain the projected expense. Gulou was relatively rich, and unlike many other rural areas in mainland China, not many people go to the town for work. An explanation for the budget was the feasts. There were feasts going on everywhere in the last week. Dong and Lin were making sure that the committed voters would not change their minds in the future.

2.3 The Ballot Day

All the hard work before would be concluded today. As the “real thing” closing in, all the fierce, hidden competition surfaced. Everyone was mobilized today, all the dagger, calculation, and real forced would be applied now, or never, at least not in the next three years.

In the morning, men and women woke up unusually early in the morning. Dong’s son came back from Sanya, where he worked, on the night before. Lei’s older brother, who worked in the county, also came back. It was quite impressive as Lei tried and failed to reach him through his cell phone the previous night, yet he showed up at the house at 8AM. There were many like him, coming back for the most important thing every three years. Like Lei’s brother, most of them took no part in the campaign, but they autonomously subscribed to either group, just coming back was a statement. I walked to the school, where the vote would be conducted, with Lei and his brother. A man was carrying his mother, who looked very sick and weak and obviously should be resting in bed. Lei told me that it was not allowed to vote on behalf of anyone, so

in order to utilize his mother's vote, the lady had to be here. Lei said it in a tone that I felt that he wanted to make sure I understood that the man obviously took money.

I made myself clear that I was there to observe, and several people told me to expect something physical, as "every time there is a fight". The ballot box was placed on one end of the playground. There came most of the town leaders, and around twenty policemen, which I supposed was the most they could send. Another twenty young male villagers were especially paid to be there the whole day, just to "stop fights".

Dong YG's daughters and wife were there, as were Lei and his brother, their father and uncle. Some people came to fight, I or anyone could see it from the look of their eyes. Every little bit of confusion would instantly burst into fierce shouting. Dong's wife and Lin's daughters shouted at each other all the time, exchanging hostile gestures.

A fight finally broke out when a campaign manager of Dong's accused Lin of stealing ballot paper from an old lady. Lin's men were obviously outmatched, but the policemen interfered very quickly to ensure no one got hurt. When time was finally due, with both sides watching intently, one of the town government officials sealed the box and left the school. Dong never showed up.

They counted the votes in the Villagers' Committee Office. Thirty or so men watched anxiously. As they were counting, I went to Dong's place to check him. He was staring at the TV but obviously not watching anything. I then went back to the office, and found out Dong had lost. The Dongs looked somehow relieved, and Lin's

supporters were not exceptionally happy. I had dinner at Dong's house that night, nobody talked much and it was very awkward.

3. Behind the Scene

Depending on what democracy means, there can be different interpretations regarding their fervor. Although some political scientists would cheer for such enthusiasm and consider it a leap for China's grassroots democracy, there is plenty of evidence suggesting it is not purely democracy in the making.

According to the villagers, electing a more potent leader to serve the village was neither Dong's nor Lin's primary concern. Even their respective supporters knew that they both calculate the election by financial measures. Concordantly, there would be no guarantee that either one would act in the best interest of the village in their office term.

Villagers also took their chance to maximize their economic gain, whether by directly accepting bribe or promising to vote for a camp in exchange for future gains. When the election was coming, electing a better leader was also not their primary concern.

A case can still be made though, for the democracy part, that some villagers actually took the opportunity to exercise their power as a factor in a voting system.

Members in the Dong camp thought that in Lin's service, the village management performed very poorly, and that Dong YG just took some initiatives in his term and

changed things in a favorable way. A Dong told me that when Lin was the President, he tended to not serve the villagers well, for example “someone got very sick, and he just watched”. According to this Dong, Lin would also purposefully create difficulties for the Dongs and the people voted against him, and if some Dongs would need his help to deal with the government, he would ask for money. It was thus reasonable for the Dong’s to be interested in getting rid of Lin. Democracy replaces bad rulers with good ones.

One of Lin’s allies had another version. This man had a mango plantation near the constructing super highway, and he was forced to sell it to the government soon. He insisted that it was Dong’s inability to fight in the villagers’ best interest that led to his disadvantageous place, in which he could only get one twentieth the compensation by Sanya’s standard.

Also noticeable is how lineage institution plays a role in the matter. Although the Dong’s did not make it explicitly clear that they were fighting for the honor of their family name, they would always consider their family’s great success if Dong YG ever made it to President. During the campaign, the way they referred to the confrontation was mostly “we Dong” versus “Lin and his gang”.

Lei thought of Lin’s run for the Presidency as mostly to make money. This was echoed later by multiple staff members in the Dong camp. However, Lei did not think money was the major incentive for the Dong camp. “Lin and his people will celebrate in a way insulting to us if he wins,” Lei said, “Fireworks and feast. Last time he was elected, they celebrated the whole week just to make us feel bad.” Lei also brought

about an example to showcase how evil the Lin camp was. In Lin's last office, he and his people used fireworks to celebrate after someone in the Dong camp had a car accident and was badly injured. So the Dong camp must fight in the election, according to Lei, just so that they would not have to put up with Lin and his people any more.

4. Conclusion

Political anthropology can never see election merely in election's perspective, thus distinguishing it from political science. In order to understand one vote, anthropology will try to look at all the social network and all kinds of consideration behind the voter. While democracy and civil rights are of course one way to look at it, economic concerns are always a powerful enough distraction.

In the recent years, the view that China's grassroots democracy is fast developing, because of the awakening of reason and the promotion of democratic knowledge, is really catching many eyes. But if Gulou's case can be generalized in any way, this view has a lot of questions to answer. Of course there is an institution to ensure that elections will go on, there will be no promise that they are running in the intended form, and for the intended effect.

Another point to note would be that lineage power in rural areas has always been reserved as its own territory, rejecting the insertion of state power. In Gulou's case, the state is nowhere near penetrating lineage power, let alone controlling it. Additionally, lineage has been used as a means in the process of individuals

confronting each others to grab certain state power. Economic incentive has to be brought up again, because the ultimate goal for wielding power, be it lineage or state, is to maximize economic value.