

Please Vote For Me

A FILM BY WEIJUN CHEN



In an elementary school in the city of Wuhan in central China, three eight-year-old students campaign for the coveted position of class monitor. This is the first election for a class leader to be held in China. The three candidates hold debates, campaign tirelessly and show their intellectual and artistic skills, until one is voted the winner.

FROM THE FILMMAKER

As a Chinese citizen, democracy remains a deep and heartfelt longing. Living in a Chinese society, there is not much opportunity to practice democracy. That is why the starting point of all my reflections have merely been what I believe in my heart to be fairness and justice. Simply put, democracy should not only be a political or a legal system and should not merely be about making a choice and casting one's vote. The object of democracy must include two parts, one is rules and regulations which are related to democratic law; the other is the participation of a country's citizens in the practice of democracy. Hence, we need to ponder upon the questions: What is democracy? Why democracy? Not only must attention be paid to the legal rationality of democratic rules, careful examination must also be given to the potential conflict and confusion that a population's cultural traits and the spirit of democracy may create.

A consummate democratic system does not necessarily create a perfect democratic society. Why? This is where the "human factor" plays a big role. Ultimately, a democratic system must depend on the people within the system for implementation and compliance. If the people are not equipped with the necessary democratic culture or if there is a conflict with their inherent cultural beliefs, then the democratic system will only be reduced to a stiff and rigid legal provision. It would then be difficult to create a true democratic society.

When I was pondering on the question of democracy in adult society, the image of an eight-year-old boy already aspiring to become the highest official of the Communist Party caught my attention. I rested my sight on that child.

The children are our successors and the future of our countries. However, our societies and our educational systems have complicated the growing up process of children by compromising their simplicity and making their child-like innocence conform to worldly standards. While the universal qualities of good and bad can be found in children, they have also retained the candour and purity that is already missing in adults. It is because their instinctive reaction to foreign objects is much closer to the dictates of the human nature. If we place the democratic rules found in an adult world among these eight to nine-year-old children, make an experiment, and ask audiences to make their own observations, this process would surely initiate more questions and more reflections. This would especially be useful for viewers who are hardly interested in democratic politics. And they comprise the majority of the audience. The purpose of creating television programs is not merely to make a film and store it in the filing cabinet but to encourage more people to watch and to reflect.

Because of China's family-planning policy, a couple can only have one child. The growing up years of these children is usually spent with six adults - their parents and two sets of grandparents. The company of the adults and the lack of opportunities to play with children of their own age have resulted in these children's early maturity, especially in their thinking and language abilities. While Western children are still immersed in fairy tale stories, Chinese children are already aware that these fairy tales are a sham. Early on, the bad things found in society have already affected them. In addition, the patriarchal system found in Eastern cultures has already become deeply embedded in their psyche. What then would be their reactions when they find a clash between the patriarchal system that they have been accustomed to and its extreme opposite, the democratic elections?

A story about children can always invite the attention and resonance of the majority. How will they react when the rules and regulations found in an adult society are placed among these eight to nine-year-old children? Fascinated by the misplaced story, it will be easy for the mature audience to see the link between the democratic games played by the children and the democratic system found in today's realistic society. From the innocence of the children, it will be effortless for the audience to discover the relationship between democracy and human nature. Because we have travelled from our own childhood into a society of adults, the children are our successors and the future of this society.

The children are our future; will it also be the same for democracy?

Weijun Chen



THE FILM

For the first time ever, the students in grade three at Evergreen Primary School in Wuhan, China have been asked to elect a class monitor. Traditionally appointed by the teacher, the class monitor holds a powerful position, helping to control the students, keeping them on task and meting out punishment to those who disobey. The teacher has chosen three candidates: Luo Lei (a boy), the current class monitor; Cheng Cheng (a boy); and Xu Xiaofei (a girl). Each candidate is asked to choose two assistants to help with his or her campaign.

To prove their worthiness, the candidates must perform in three events. First is a talent show, where each candidate plays an instrument or sings a song. Second is a debate, in which the candidates bring up the shortcomings of their opponents as well as their own personal qualifications. And finally, each candidate must deliver a speech, an opportunity to appeal directly to classmates and ask for their votes.

Selected People Who Appear in PLEASE VOTE FOR ME

Ms. Zhang – *Class 1, Grade 3 Teacher*

Luo Lei – *Boy*

Cheng Cheng – *Boy*

Xu Xiaofei – *Girl*

Luo Lei's parents:

Luo Mingjiang – *Father, police officer*

Lei Zizhu – *Mother, police officer*

Cheng Cheng's parents:

Mr. Gao – *Father, engineer at China Mobile*

Cheng Rui – *Mother, Director at Wuhan TV station*

Xu Xiaofei's mother:

Huang Junhong – *Mother, Director at Evergreen Primary School*

Luo Lei's assistants:

Tu Yubin – *Girl*

Wang Shuyi – *Boy*

Cheng Cheng's assistants:

Zhang Yifei – *Boy*

Guo Zichuan – *Boy*

Xu Xiaofei's assistants:

Tang Yun – *Girl*

Mo Rujiao – *Girl*

At home, each of the children is coached by his or her parents and pushed to practice and memorize for each stage of the campaign. Although their parents are supportive, the candidates feel the pressure. Tears and the occasional angry outburst reveal the emotional impact. At school, the candidates talk to classmates one-on-one, making promises, planning tactics (including negative ones) and at times expressing doubts about their own candidacies.

For all three children, the campaign takes its toll, especially for the losing candidates and their assistants. Viewers are left to decide if the experiment in democracy has been “successful” and what it might mean for democracy education in China. The film challenges those committed to China’s democratization to consider the feasibility of, and processes involved in, its implementation.



Pronunciation Guide

Cheng Cheng – *zheng zheng*

Luo Lei – *loo lay*

Xu Xiaofei – *shoo shaow-fay*

Deng Xiaoping – *dung shaow-ping*

Liang Qichao – *lyan chee-zhaow*

Mao Zedong – *mou dzu-dong*



Definitions of terms used in the film

Communism - a theory and system of social and political organization based on common ownership of property. In theory, communism would create a classless society of abundance and freedom, in which all people enjoy equal social and economic status. In practice, communist regimes have taken the form of coercive, authoritarian governments that cared little for the plight of the working class and sought above all else to preserve their own hold on power.

Democracy – government in which the supreme power is retained by the people and exercised either directly or through a system of representation.

Ideographs – pictorial symbols used as a form of writing in Asian countries; a single ideograph may represent an idea rather than a single word.

Karma - usually believed to be a sum of all that an individual has done, is currently doing and will do. The results or "fruits" of actions are called karma-phala. The effects of all deeds actively create past, present and future experiences; loosely, it can also mean fate or destiny.

Pinyin – method of Romanizing the Chinese language, which provides spellings for the sounds of Chinese.

Chi (or Qi) - a kind of circulating life force or energy believed to be part of all matter; frequently translated as "energy flow," or literally as "air" or "breath." Chi is a fundamental concept of traditional Chinese culture.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A very brief history of China

For most of its 5,000-year history, China was ruled by a succession of dynasties, in a repeating cycle of cultural, economic and political growth followed by corruption, rebellion and the establishment of a new dynasty. A series of rebellions brought down the Qing dynasty—China's last—in 1911, and the Chinese Republic was established under the leadership of Sun Yatsen and the Chinese Nationalist Party. The Communist Party of China was founded eight years later, and for several decades the two parties struggled for dominance. The Communists were ultimately victorious and on October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong announced the formation of the People's Republic of China, setting up the Communist government that still rules China today.

Outbreaks of democracy

Democracy first appeared in China in the late 19th century. Liang Qichao, a writer steeped in the works of Western political philosophers, wrote a series of essays in which he interpreted Western democracy through the lens of his own Confucian beliefs. Liang felt that individual interests and public interests were essentially the same. Individual rights existed in order to strengthen the state. The Chinese communists and their leader Mao Zedong embraced the concept of the unity of state and individual interests and worked toward establishing this type of democracy.

Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, believed that Chinese feudal culture was a major impediment to democracy and that the culture should be changed through a gradual process of education guided by a strong central authority. Deng's actions led to a pro-democracy movement in the late 1970s, when Chinese citizens hung posters on a "democracy wall" near Tiananmen Square in Beijing, advocating political and social change. The calls for democracy led to a government crackdown and the arrest and imprisonment of leaders of the Democracy Wall Movement. By the late 1980s, however, democratic stirrings were again in evidence as student protesters held demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, calling for freedom of expression and other reforms. In June 1989, the government used military force to end the protests, sending students to "re-education" centers and imposing mandatory military service.

China today blends its Communist political system and state-run economy with limited private property rights and carefully delineated avenues of democratic expression. The current Chinese constitution, adopted in 1982, contains a long list of rights and duties of citizens, tying them to the interests of the state. The emphasis is on maintaining stability while promoting the expansion of the economy. The constitution recognizes that all citizens are equal, but control of the electoral process remains in the hands of the Communist Party.

Chinese education system

Under China's education law, children must attend primary school for six years, starting at age six. The school week is five days long, and the 9-1/2 month year is divided into two semesters, beginning September 1 and March 1, with a summer vacation in July and August and a winter break in January and February.

The primary-school curriculum consists of Chinese (Mandarin—the common spoken language), mathematics, physical education, music, art, science and one foreign language, usually Japanese or English. Students are also expected to perform practical work around the school building and grounds. Chinese education stresses moral training, which includes patriotism, loyalty to the Communist party and values such as teamwork, respect and selflessness; these are integrated throughout the curriculum.

Most schools hold after-school activities that involve students in recreation and community service. The activities are often organized by the Young Pioneers, a government-sponsored organization for young people, who wear a red scarf as a form of identification. Students attend regular Monday assemblies that include a flag-raising ceremony, and most schools require morning exercises where all students assemble in the school field and perform a series of stretches and movements.

Compulsory education beyond the primary grades includes three years of secondary school. Secondary schools are called middle schools and are divided into junior and senior levels. Junior, or lower, middle schools offer a three-year course of study, which students begin at 12 years of age. Senior, or upper, middle schools offer a two or three-year course, which students begin at age 15. Attendance at this level is optional.

Chinese culture and society

In many ways the organizing principles of Western and Chinese culture are polar opposites. Where Western philosophy emphasizes individualism and competition, Chinese philosophy focuses on cooperation and harmony. In Chinese society, the interests of the state and the individual are seen as one; individual rights are granted in order to strengthen the state. The democratic struggle for individual rights is often a messy and chaotic business, a difficult notion to accept in a society where one of the highest ideals is achieving harmony by putting the needs and interests of the group ahead of those of the individual.

The current one child policy—a measure enacted by the government to contain population growth—has profound implications for Chinese society. As succeeding generations of only-children have children, there will be fewer and fewer aunts, uncles or cousins, while the one child in each family becomes the focus of parental energies and ambitions. Some Chinese citizens already feel that the one child policy has led to many "little emperors" or "little suns." How a nation of only-children will play out the ideals of harmony and cooperation remains to be seen.



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

- The children at the beginning of the film were unable to define democracy. Do you think American children would have trouble coming up with a definition? What is your definition of democracy?
- Do you think the way the election was structured was fair? Why or why not?
- Why were other children in the class crying when Xu Xiaofei (the girl candidate) became upset? Would an incident like this have happened with students in the U.S. or other countries—that is, children jeering a candidate for a class office?
- Were you surprised by any of the *behavior* on the part of the children? Please explain.
- Were you surprised by anything the children said or by the way they *expressed themselves*? Explain.
- What commonalities do you see between the children in the film and children in the U.S. and other countries? What differences do you notice? Did you study different forms of government or hold class elections when you were in third grade?
- How do you feel about the parents in the film and the ways they helped their children campaign? Would American parents help their children in the same way? What might they do differently?
- Are you satisfied with the outcome of the class monitor election? Why or why not?
- In your opinion, did the election for class monitor work as an exercise in democracy? What do you think the children learned from this experience? What did you learn from this experiment?
- What is the most important message or idea that you take away from this film?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Learn more about different forms of government and organize a discussion group to explore their relevance and relationship to modern societies. A starting resource is:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_forms_of_government
- Register to vote! Go to <http://www.vote411.org/> for information on where to register in your community.
- Research opportunities for how you can impact local policies and development in your community. A list of national civic engagement organizations can be found at:
<http://www.acui.org>

- Find out if there are organizations in your community, such as colleges, churches or business groups that sponsor cultural exchanges or international visits by students or others. If Chinese visitors are expected, offer to help house them, or learn about other ways you can participate.
- Increase your understanding of Chinese culture. Research credible online sources and visit your local library. (Please see Resources)
- Engage your children and/or students in discussions about democracy. Information on teaching democracy can be found at these sites:

The National Center for the Preservation of Democracy:
<http://www.ncdemocracy.org>

Lesson plans from the National Conference of State Legislatures:
<http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/democracylesson/contents.htm>

Curricula and activities around Voting and Democracy:
<http://www.kidsvotingusa.org/>

- Did you know that anyone seeking a teaching credential or completing the U.S. naturalization process must take a test about the U.S. Constitution? Find out about the test here:
http://www.usimmigrationsupport.org/citizenship_test.html

Test your knowledge! Take a practice U.S. Constitution Test:
<http://www.dailyrepublican.com/constitution-test.html>

Find out about the U.S. Constitution:
<http://www.constitutioncenter.org/education/>

- Organize an issues forum to discuss contemporary social issues or policies with others in your community. Learn more about how to organize a forum here:
<http://www.nifi.org/>

For additional outreach ideas, visit <http://www.itvs.org/outreach>, the website of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.



RESOURCES

Information about China

<http://www.state.gov> – Find China listed in the “Countries” section, which provides a history and profile of the country. The site also contains information on Youth Exchange and International Visitor programs.

<http://www.cia.gov> – The World Fact Book contains a wide range of factual information on Chinese government, economy, industry and population.

<http://www.bjzc.org/en> – The online English-language version of the monthly magazine Beijing Spring is dedicated to the promotion of human rights, democracy and social justice in China.

<http://www.china.org.ch> – China Internet Information Center, a newspaper-style, government-authorized site contains comprehensive, up-to-date information on China.

<http://www.tsquare.tv/themes/essay.html> – “Chinese Democracy,” a good summary essay on the history and interpretation of democracy in China.

Democracy/Civic Engagement

List of Different Forms of Government -

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_forms_of_government

List of Civic Engagement Organizations -

http://www.acui.org/content.aspx?menu_id=20&id=506

Curricula and activities around Voting and Democracy -

<http://www.kidsvotingusa.org/>

http://www.usimmigrationsupport.org/citizenship_test.html

The National Center for the Preservation of Democracy -

<http://www.ncdemocracy.org/node/1089>

Lesson plans from the National Conference of State Legislatures -

<http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/democracylesson/contents.htm>

Take a practice U.S. Constitution Test -

<http://www.dailyrepublican.com/constitution-test.html>

National Constitution Center -

<http://www.constitutioncenter.org/education/>

National Issues Forum -

<http://www.nifi.org/>

Other / General

<http://www.nctasia.org> – The National Consortium for Teaching about Asia encourages and facilitates teaching and learning about Asia in world history, geography, social studies and literature courses. Seminars for teachers are available in 46 states across the U.S.

<http://www.ncss.org> – The National Council for the Social Studies sponsors several teacher travel programs, including the China Teacher Leadership Study Tour, for educators who take a leadership role within their schools or organizations to teach about China.

PLEASE VOTE FOR ME WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON October 23, 2007 at 10 PM. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS. PLEASE VOTE FOR ME is a film by Weijun Chen. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.itvs.org/outreach.

