

Xu Zhiyong

A Beautiful China

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Be True to the Law: Campaigning for a Seat as a People's Congress Delegate

Translated by Joshua Rosenzweig
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The Eternal Flame

In October 2003, Shu Kexin (舒可心), Qin Bing (秦兵), and Wang Hai (王海) issued an open letter announcing their candidacy in the election of delegates to the local People's Congress and that the three of them would set up a campaign office together. After many years of quiet, this "Three-Man Campaign Office" rekindled the spark of democracy.

On November 9, Duan Jun (殷俊), a master's student at Peking University's Center for Economic Research, announced his own candidacy in a post on the university BBS entitled "Our Shared Commitment: My Candidacy Declaration." At almost the same time, word spread that a Peking University Law School student named Chen Meng (陈猛) had issued a statement titled "The Road Stretches Out Before Us: Letter to Voters of the Law School" and that Chen Junhao (陈俊豪), a student at Tsinghua University Law School, had posted another announcement entitled "Your Trust, My Action."

History was repeating a scene first staged over twenty years earlier.

On November 7, 1980, a graduate student in the Philosophy Department at Peking University named Hu Ping (胡平) [announced his own candidacy](#) to become a people's congress delegate at the school, saying: "The voice of our generation has been ignored for too long!" After the calamity of the Cultural Revolution, there were a thousand things that needed to be done in China. That year there was a wave of "candidacy fever" in the universities, inspired by China's new election

law.

Under current law, only people's congress delegates at the township and county levels can be directly elected. This is practically the only chance Chinese citizens have to participate in democratic politics. Many people who came before us had worked hard for this. In 1987, Yao Lifa (姚立法) ran for a seat on the Qianjiang County People's Congress in Hubei Province. He was only elected on his fourth try in 1998. Yao took his position as a delegate seriously and began trying to supervise local government affairs. For this, he was attacked from all sides and lost his seat the next time around.

I had originally wanted to help with Yao Lifa's campaign. But Beijing offered a much better opportunity to make progress in 2003.

Shu Kexin and the others were already leading the way. My motivation for running for office was to use the campaign process to improve China's electoral system. I also wanted to work hard to get elected, and the thought of such a prospect boosted my confidence.

In my candidacy announcement, entitled "Why I'm Running for Election to the People's Congress," I wrote:

I love this country, and I believe that the modernization of a country means not only economic prosperity, but also social justice and individual freedom. I believe that in this great era, democracy, and the rule of law are not just empty phrases or beautiful lies. I long for genuine elections, and that's why I have started to campaign.

We worked hard on the campaign even though we knew the realities of what was possible. What kept us in the struggle for so many years was the chance to see a glimmer of light amid the darkness. What incurable optimists we were!

A Thousand Supporters

The first step in preparing to run for office was to establish my electoral district at the Beijing University of Posts & Telecommunications (BUPT). In principle, this could be either the location of one's work unit or of the residential neighborhood in the place of one's household registration. When one's permanent residence was not in the location of his or her household registration, one could stand for election in either place.

In Beijing, for example, there are 8 million permanent residents without a Beijing

household registration. Before any of them could stand for election in Beijing, they would have to meet two conditions. First, they would have to prove that they had been residents for more than six months (this residency period may have since changed). Second, they would need to obtain an official letter from the People's Congress standing committee in their place of household registration confirming that they were not participating in elections there.

The second step for me was to form a campaign team. Gu Xin (谷欣), then a second-year law student, reached out to several classmates and put together an effective campaign team. We probably spent less than 1,000 yuan on the campaign, mostly on printing posters and a few meals. Those meals served as our team meetings: for us, booking a private room in a restaurant was like renting a conference room. What inspired our political action was idealism, and we thought that spending a lot of money on a campaign would degrade democracy.

The third step was to collect the names of more than 10 people willing to nominate me. This would allow me to become an initial, first-round candidate. Experience told us that the more names we collected, the better.

I was fortunate to have someone with more experience advise me on the importance of getting many people to nominate me. The law required first-round candidates to be nominated by 10 people, but that didn't mean that 10 people would be enough. You had to consider the possibility that a person who nominated you might withdraw their support under pressure, thereby derailing your chances.

In practice, some of the more serious election committees decided the first round of candidates based on how many people had nominated them. That's how they did it in the Peking University constituency in 2003. That meant that if you collected more nomination signatures, you were more likely to become an official candidate.

This was therefore a very important step. Some independent candidates didn't pay enough attention to this part of the process and were thus forced to drop out early. Of course, there's no point in being so careful if the dictatorship is going to ignore the law completely. But you want to do your best to prevent these types of legal shenanigans so that the other side's lack of scruples is exposed all the more clearly. At least we would have the moral high ground.

Collecting nomination signatures is itself a process of social mobilization. From the beginning, we tried to mobilize broadly and enable voters to see the candidate firsthand. Showing a candidate as an enthusiastic, humble, idealistic neighbor is a great way to mobilize enthusiasm for political participation. In elections in every

country, candidates for office spend much of their time meeting with voters.

Local election committee offices might try to control access to nomination forms as a way to suppress independent candidates. When my campaign team went to the election office to seek nomination forms, they made lots of photocopies. Some places refuse to accept photocopied nomination forms, even though it is illegal for them to do so. Our strategy was to get as many of the people we mobilized to nominate us to go in person to the election office to ask for their own nomination form. If they refused to accept photocopied nomination forms, we would file a complaint with the election committee or petition to have the forms declared valid.

Gu Xin led the highly effective work of the campaign team. They collected more than 600 names in a single day. With solid support from the teachers and students at the School of Humanities, we would probably have enough support to make it into the first round of candidates.

On November 18, there were 285 initial candidates who had received at least 10 nominations in the first round. I had the second highest number of nominations, with 1,071. With so many people nominating me, I would have a strong basis for appeal if I didn't go on to become an official candidate.

A Sincere Idealist

I announced my candidacy on November 12. I wanted to sincerely express my goals both to voters and to the public at large, hoping that they would all take the election seriously. Sincerity is precious because it is so rare, especially in Chinese politics.

What would really help me get elected was low-key and meticulous work in the BUPT election precinct. But social progress requires the efforts of many people, so I spent much of my time promoting a primary election process and encouraging everyone to vote.

On the afternoon of November 18, I spent the time between classes talking to students about my campaign devoted entirely to achieving social progress in China. I told them about how I had participated in [the activism surrounding the Sun Zhigang \(孙志刚\) incident](#) and represented [Sun Dawu \(孙大午\)](#), all to promote democracy and the rule of law in the country. Now, I was running for office with the same goal of creating a better China.

I, myself, was quite moved during these conversations. I was explaining my electoral positions, as well as my orientation toward life in general.

Voters seek two kinds of benefits when they cast their ballots: material and non-material. Voters in the Heilongguan residential area voted for Nie Hailiang (聂海亮) mainly because he had already done a lot to protect the rights of homeowners there. So, voters either believed that Nie had brought them real material benefits or hoped he could do so in the future. There were non-material factors as well. There is a kind of proud sense of happiness that comes when people like Nie Hailiang win credit and honor by working on behalf of homeowners.

I didn't really understand the material needs of the voters at BUPT, and fighting for material interests was not my strength. I therefore positioned myself as a person working for justice and the law and as someone whose lifelong goal was to defend freedom and justice — a sincere idealist.

Everyone has dreams. People don't just care about having enough food to eat — we also care about the fate of society, the nation, humanity, and even the universe. In an era of change, as long as one is sincere, sometimes showing concern for things that seem distant will get you more support than being concerned about the daily necessities of life. Our goal was to gather strength in this way.

Candidates in different constituencies need to position themselves differently. In a university constituency mainly composed of students and intellectuals, it is more possible to motivate people with idealism. In other areas, residents are more concerned about concrete and specific issues, such as the protection of their rights or availability of social services.

I had never run for office in a residential area before, but I did much of the legwork to do so in 2006. At that time, there had been a number of conflicts between residents and the property management company in my neighborhood, leading to calls for the formation of a homeowners' association. Along with other residents who were passionate about the idea, I spent several months' worth of effort setting up the association and was elected president.

After the homeowners' association was formed, the property management company changed its tune. As a subsidiary of a large property developer, the company had considered itself to be in charge from the beginning. Now, we had decided to fire them. However, there were differences between residents' economic situations and some were mostly concerned about keeping costs low. Since we couldn't actually find a less expensive property management company, we re-negotiated a contract with the existing company, adding a series of new restrictions that we had proposed.

Being elected president of the homeowners' association was a sign of the confidence others had in me. I had met with many residents while forming the association and discovered some who also believed in democracy. Of course, it would have taken a lot more concrete work to run for people's congress delegate in that precinct. I would have to help a lot of people and become a figure known for serving the community. In the end, being a good citizen means having the willingness and talent to help others, being firmly rooted in one's community, and being a servant of society.

The details of voting are also important. Grand theorizing is unnecessary; just emphasize the need for true elections. Refuse to vote for candidates you do not know well. Instead, write in the name of a candidate of your choice in the space marked "Other candidate." Spreading awareness about the details of write-in voting is very important.

Moderate Opposition

There's another way to position yourself toward an election: Are you more concerned with the outcome or the process? Are you trying to get elected or just a gesture of opposition?

The first two times I ran, my goal was to get elected. So, I took a low-key, cautious approach.

Whenever I was interviewed by the media, I did my best to criticize less and encourage more. Positive and hardworking, I faced the realities of China with a spirit of tolerance. I wanted to tell the world that China was making progress.

The people at the election office kindly suggested that I not make myself too conspicuous. I told them not to worry, that I would heed their advice. I postponed my original plan to put up campaign posters. But I also asked them to understand that I still needed to do some publicity, since I had only been in Beijing for a little over a year and many teachers and students didn't know who I was.

The easiest part of the process to manipulate was the "incubation" of official candidates. The Party often used the consultation process during this time to get rid of candidates they didn't like. We convened seminars, called for primary elections, made our voices heard in the media, and generally tried to increase the pressure of public opinion.

Perhaps it was because of the widespread scrutiny, but the election at BUPT was conducted by the book, relatively speaking. The election office printed a booklet

with all 285 first-round candidates and sent it to voters. Each voter could choose no more than three, and then six official candidates would be determined by the total number of votes. This list of six candidates would then be sent to each voter group for a round of discussion. After that, the list would be further narrowed down to four official candidates, essentially based on the number of votes they received in the first round.

On November 30, the results of the first round of incubation discussions were released. Of the six candidates put forward, I was ranked third in terms of votes.

I prepared to organize a lecture entitled “2003 – An Era of Rule of Law Progress: Looking Back at SARS, Sun Zhigang, and Sun Dawu.” I wasn’t allowed to make campaign speeches, so this was meant as a substitute.

On December 2, we put up posters for the lecture. Soon afterward, we were forced to cancel the event. The campaign team was sternly criticized by the school’s youth league committee, one of the bodies used by the Party to control students. We gave in, and I told the volunteers to stop the publicity.

At 6 p.m. on December 5, I went to the classroom where the lecture was originally scheduled to take place. I apologized and told everyone that the event had been canceled. At 6:30, I apologized again to another group of late-arriving students.

Another lecture by Professor Wu Qing (吴青) scheduled for the same evening was also canceled. The BUPT Humanities Forum, organized by Mou Huansen (牟焕森), Wang Zengmin (王增民), and several other young lecturers, had invited Professor Wu to speak about her experience as a people’s congress delegate.

I reminded myself that I was living in China and should not hold grudges. Change scares people, and new things had to happen gradually so that everyone could accept them. Political behavior has to be appropriate, so I did my best to remain low-key on campus and not make anyone feel uncomfortable.

I told myself to love every single person. Every person has a conscience. I had many silent supporters, even within the system. In a post-totalitarian society, this is the space in which we can operate.

There was also good news. On December 4, China Central TV broadcast an award ceremony and named Yu Jiang, Teng Biao, and myself as recipients of one of that year’s “Rule of Law Personality” awards.

When the ceremony was being taped a few days before the broadcast, the master of ceremonies, San Beining (撒贝宁), asked Teng Biao who he would most like to present the award. Teng Biao said he hoped that a completely unknown, ordinary farmer would present his award. When San asked the presenter to come on stage, Teng Biao's jaw dropped in shock. It was his own father who had come to present the award!

That day, class leader Pan Xinyi (潘欣怡) printed more than 200 leaflets informing everyone that a teacher at BUPT would be named that year's "Rule of Law Personality" on television that evening. Teachers Chen and Jiao also posted the news about my award on the BUPT home page.

On December 5, the BUPT election office announced the list of four official candidates. In addition to me, there were the deans of the Schools of Computer Science, Telecommunications, and Information Engineering – all renowned professors.

One of the candidates, Professor Guo Jun (郭军), told graduate students during one of his classes: "Don't vote for me. Vote for Xu Zhiyong, because he can do more to promote social justice than I can." I heard about this only much later.

After so many years, that kind of confidence and expectation still motivates me.

Election Day

December 10 was the day of the election. First thing in the morning, a loudspeaker at Zhongguancun played "Jingle Bells", then a voice called on everyone to go cast their ballots. The atmosphere in 2003 was truly something different!

Dreams of democracy and freedom are hidden away in the hearts of every Chinese person, dreams that have been suppressed for too long. The indifference people feel toward politics under authoritarian rule stems from their sense of hopelessness.

As I lay there, quietly looking up at the ceiling, I felt a faint sadness. This was an important day – important both as the culmination of the events of 2003 and as the beginning of what was to come. Such is a life spent traveling on the long and winding road toward democracy and freedom.

I paged through my journal from high school and found this entry from the summer of 1988, an account of the first time I had observed a grassroots village

election:

People crowded into a crude and simple building, each holding a piece of paper, their voter registration certificate. Spirited discussions were underway as people talked about the latest village news or their domestic affairs.

“Everyone, please quiet down!” the village party branch secretary said. “Hurry up and vote! Fill in your ballots and bring them up here!”

The discussion paused. Some were pondering over whom to vote for. Then, one of the talkative old aunties spoke up: “How about I choose someone for everyone?” Before anyone could respond, she continued: “How about we vote for our party branch secretary? Everyone agreed?”

“Agreed!” chimed in a few women.

“What are we even voting for? Just let our party branch secretary do it,” added a few more.

“Okay, so it’s settled.” The whole thing took about a minute.

People began to walk out, tearing up their unmarked ballots and tossing the pieces into the air like confetti. Some of the younger people were outraged: “What’s the point of these ballots? Why are we going through this fake exercise?”

One middle-school graduate understood the situation well: “I guess we’re not doing this democratically!”

Many years had passed since then. China continually dithers on the threshold of modern political culture. Each generation of people with high ideals steps forward to replace the last. We are the newly arrived, and we must take responsibility for this country.

We are committed to the struggle, but “committed” doesn’t mean radical. We are revolutionaries through and through, but “revolution” doesn’t mean violent chaos. We are armed with new ideas that will lead China to say goodbye to autocratic government and autocratic culture and allow the nation to be reborn.

In the afternoon, I picked up my voter registration certificate from the university office. At 2 p.m., I went to the polling station and solemnly cast my ballot.

I learned the election results on December 11. Of 12,609 valid ballots cast, I had

received 10,106 votes — more than any other candidate.

Thanks to the People at BUPT

I never promised to do anything for BUPT.

I had phoned the School of Humanities at BUPT back in March 2002. After a few words of introduction, Jiao Aiping (焦爱萍) told me to come by for a chat. A few days later, I gave a job talk, and then I signed a contract about a week later.

Eleven years later, on July 16, 2013, the police searched my office at BUPT. That was the last time I saw the campus that had become so familiar to me.

BUPT is primarily an engineering and science university. The law program was established much later within the School of Humanities and Economics. I taught constitutional law and legal theory and occasionally taught a course called “Fundamentals of Law” to undergraduates from other departments.

I am not a good teacher, and I don’t have any academic achievements to speak of. When I think about it now, I wasn’t very professional in the classroom. I was always negotiating with the school to reduce my hours, often teaching only one afternoon a week so that I could have more time for my social justice work.

I remember one time when I was in charge of the final exam in constitutional law for the students who entered in 2004 and thus had the test papers with me. The night before the exam, I went out drinking with an old friend I hadn’t seen for years. When I woke up the next day, I was two hours late for the exam. I grabbed a taxi and rushed to the Changping campus. I apologized to the students and said that I had overslept. Technically, this was a serious incident for a teacher, but neither the students nor the other teachers ever reproached me.

I never shied away from sensitive areas when I taught constitutional law. I was simply honest with everyone about how things were supposed to be in theory and how they were in practice. I was grateful to the students who rated my course on constitutional law the best in the major. Friends asked me whether any students had ever reported me for having reactionary ideas. I said no, never – at least I never heard of it. In my mind, they were like my little comrades-in-arms. Perhaps it was because of my influence that more than a third of the students in the class did some kind of volunteer work. When the constitutional law course was over, we gathered on the Hongfu Campus lawn for a group photo.

There are too many people to thank. There’s Professor Guo Jun, who told students

“Vote for Xu Zhiyong” during the 2003 election. There’s Zhang Shulin (张树林), the party secretary of the School of Humanities, who publicly expressed support for me at a school meeting in 2006, saying, “Isn’t democracy in Taiwan great?”

There are so many other teachers and students who ran around helping me during my campaign or spoke out in support of me during my imprisonment. Lou Yaoxiong (娄耀雄), one of my Ph.D. students, was as gentlemanly as they come. Su Hua (粟花), a beautiful, slender cornflower, was the English teacher who loved music. Mou Huansen, with a common ideal of freedom, ran a forum and organized lectures. Teachers from the School of Humanities like Yang Ganlin (杨甘霖), many of whom taught classes on Marxism-Leninism, supported my campaign nonetheless.

I recently re-read the note of thanks I wrote after I was elected and see all those familiar names:

Thanks to the faculty and students at the School of Humanities and Economics! . . . Thanks to Gu Xin, from the second-year law school class. Thanks also to second-year students Pan Xinyi, Tongtong, Feng Tianchi, Shao Guangming, Zhu Wendan . . . and all the other students. Thanks also to Wang Xin, Mou Huansen, Jiao Aiping, Yang Ganlin, Xu Yeping, Chen Wei, Professor Cui, Professor Shi, Professor Du, Professor Zhang, Professor Xiao, Professor An . . . and all the other faculty from the School of Humanities and Economics. You gave me such powerful backing each step of the way. Thanks also to the members of the first-year law school class – you are all simply wonderful!

Thanks also to all the faculty and students at BUPT! Thanks to Wang Zengmin, Su Hua, Dai Xianmei, Ai Wenbao, Li He, Li Yajie and other faculty too numerous to mention. So many members of the faculty I’d never met before worked tirelessly on my behalf! Thanks to students Xue Haiqiang, who I’d never met before, and Wu Zhen! Thanks to Pan Na, Wang Yilong, Zhang Jingwen

Thank you! I will not let you down!

It’s September 2014, and I’m in the reception room of Liulin Prison. The party secretary at the School of Humanities and someone from the personnel office at BUPT are delivering a letter announcing my dismissal.

We sit face to face in silence for a long time. It’s awkward, but I feel much more sadness. The young party secretary had often been forced by pressure from above to have a word with me, but we respected each other. They are participants in the

banality of evil, but I can feel the kindness in them and that is enough.

I can denounce the banality of evil, but I don't consider any specific individual to be my enemy. I respect and love every single person.

I often feel very lucky. People have helped me everywhere I've been. My 11 years at BUPT gave me a guaranteed livelihood, many friends, and happy times.

People care about justice and are willing to devote themselves to the cause. It's just that autocracy has stifled the good in people for far too long. I am a person who works on behalf of justice and law, a sincere idealist. Thank you, people of BUPT, for supporting me, for helping me, for joining the struggle!

I will never blame the people or complain about the silent majority, because we have done far too little. Besides, the time for that has not yet come.

A Delegate from Haidian

What can a people's congress delegate do after being elected?

Many friends feel pessimistic and hopeless when they see civil rights activists being suppressed for campaigning for election. In fact, there are many more who campaign but whom you never hear about. They are rooted in their communities and engaged in service to society.

There were 420 delegates to the new 2003 session of the Haidian District People's Congress. About a dozen or so were elected, more than I expected. Among them were lawyers, engineers, retired professors, retired officials, and retired workers. They served their communities, were nominated by voters, and were elected without any fanfare.

Wu Guanle (吴观乐) had served as director of the Patent Department of the State Bureau of Intellectual Property and was an authority in his field. He had never abandoned his democratic dreams. In retirement, he took pleasure in helping others and won the support of the voters who elected him. He convened the 18 delegates dedicated to social justice as a caucus group. We continued the "Haidian phenomenon" by attending standing committee meetings, overseeing budgets, and taking an interest in major issues,

Some joked that we formed a "third party" in the legislature. Everyone knows who the "first party" is. They made up more than 70% of the delegates and met as a group before each official session of the people's congress to ensure adherence to

party discipline.

The “second party” was the military caucus. Each delegation had two military officers of the rank of major or major general. They soon found each other and formed a small group, even eating together. They were more of a grouping based on personal relationships. Occasionally, they would come together to propose resolutions on issues concerning relations between the local government and the military.

We were the democratic faction inside the assembly. We carried on the flame of democracy in Haidian that was lit in 1980.

This flame had never been extinguished. It shone most brightly during the previous session, when Haidian delegates met to elect delegates to the Beijing Municipality People’s Congress. They used their power as a bloc to reject 15 of the 100 candidates put forward by the Party and to elect 15 of their own nominees.

As a consequence, the higher-ups replaced the head of the Haidian District Party Committee’s Organization Department and were determined to smother these democratic shoots. By the time of the 2007 elections for the municipality people’s congress, the democratic forces were routed to an unprecedented degree.

According to Chinese law, people’s congresses have a great deal of power. They elect the district chief and deputy district chief, the chair and deputy chair of the people’s congress standing committee, and the president of the district court and chief procurator of the district procuratorate. They also approve the budget and decide on matters of major importance. We took these powers seriously and worked hard in this narrow space inside the system, raising questions about the budget and casting our votes carefully by refusing to play by the hidden rules during voting.

Unfortunately, there are too few delegates like us.

Three memories stand out most for me from my time as a delegate.

In July 2006, Haidian announced that it was shutting down more than 30 private schools that had been set up to serve the children of urban migrant laborers. With the closure of these “illegal schools,” only about half of the more than 15,000 children affected would be eligible to attend public schools. In order to attend school, most would be forced to return to their hometowns and become “left-behind children.”

Together with fellow delegates Wu Guanle and Wei Aimin (卫爱民), I went to inspect these schools for the children of urban migrant laborers. More than 10 delegates signed our official petition to the district education committee, recommending that it do its utmost to increase the places available to students in local public schools. We also urged them to reconsider the decision to shut down the schools. With the help of the media and other sectors of the community, the decision to close the schools was suspended.

The Cuihu Wetlands project, which involved excavating more than 100 hectares of dry wheat fields in order to plant lotus flowers and provide a habitat for birds, unexpectedly became a top “national urban wetlands project” approved by the Ministry of Construction in 2005. In 2007, the Haidian District government allocated 2 billion yuan to “renovate” this land into a huge wetland park.

I happened to be passing through the town of Shangzhuang, and it brought to mind this huge project accounting for one-fifth of the district budget. I asked local residents how to get to the Cuihu Wetlands. The residents were scornful: “What wetlands? Drylands would be more like it!”

They pointed out each plot of land and told me when the excavations took place. They showed me photographs of the wheat fields that had been destroyed by bulldozers. Later, I went to inspect the wetlands in my capacity as a delegate. Looking closely, I saw a red-crowned crane with its wings clipped and rare birds tethered with transparent threads.

I made a CD-ROM of the videos I’d taken during my investigation and sent copies to the more than 400 people’s congress delegates in Haidian District. A group of delegates introduced a resolution calling for a halt to the project pending a process to determine fair compensation for the lands requisitioned. The goal was to use this as an opportunity to regularize the power that the law had given the people’s congresses to decide on important matters.

The second phase of the wetlands project was basically brought to a halt. As for the power of people’s congresses to decide important matters, though, there’s little hope for this under the current system.

Originally, a people’s congress delegate served a five-year term. But because of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, delegates to the 2003 session suddenly had their terms shortened to three years. We collected the signatures of 123 delegates from Haidian to oppose this, saying: “This is, in fact, a premature dissolution of the legislature and government. The National People’s Congress Standing Committee has no authority to make this decision.” We proposed that the National People’s

Congress meet in plenary session to debate and decide on the matter.

The resolution went nowhere. But the united resistance of more than 100 delegates counts as an act of courage under the current system.

How a Rubber Stamp is Molded

Party pronouncements on “advanced democracy” and “core values” can be seen on propaganda banners hung in every corner of the country. But none of it can be taken seriously. This is a clever form of manipulation.

First, the key is manipulating competition.

Candidates inspire voter enthusiasm. There are differences here. There are outstanding politicians who manage to maintain their ideals even in extremely hostile environments. There are politicians with a passion for public service who actively participate in elections. But the vast majority of ordinary people don't pay much attention to politics. Candidates come in all shapes and sizes. They have their own stories, ideals, and even dirty secrets. The media questions them repeatedly. They try to build momentum and excite people's enthusiasm through speeches in front of boisterous crowds, with campaign banners waving colorfully in the air. This is what democratic politics looks like!

In elections under authoritarian rule, urban enforcement officers tear down candidates' posters and banners. The police disperse rallies and detain candidates. Party slogans are the driest of phrases. The media report only on the leader's meetings and instructions, while candidates are hidden from view. They skillfully create an atmosphere in which elections are a government-run exercise and individuals must obey, not make decisions for themselves. There is no competition, no passion. Most voters are unenthusiastic because voting is no longer a right but, rather, a necessary part of obeying the leadership of the Party. They are organized to vote. If you don't know anything about a candidate, just circle a name and the job is done.

In fact, if you have enough people who are willing to engage in actual competition, the hidden rules of control begin to weaken. If several hundred people in a city openly compete for elections in a peaceful, rational way, they will win the support of the people and the departments in charge of “maintaining stability” won't be able to control them all. *They* will be the ones who are isolated, not us.

The second kind of manipulation is turning delegates into “masses.”

After delegates are “elected”, they are divided into groups, or “clusters,” by the township or urban sub-district. Before the formal session of the people’s congress, each cluster holds a preparatory meeting. The sub-district chief or party secretary introduces himself or herself to the elected delegates as their boss and, taking advantage of people’s lack of familiarity with each other, begins to circulate lists of candidates for “chief of delegation” and “deputy chief of delegation” to be proposed for adoption by acclamation. Arrangements have been made beforehand for a few people to take the lead in applauding the lists, and the rest are too embarrassed not to join in.

And suddenly, people’s congress delegates have been transformed into “masses” under Party leadership. Important matters are decided on by the delegation heads who serve as members of the presidium and ordinary delegates have no say.

This hidden rule of political manipulation is just like a thin sheet of paper covering a window: just touching it will pierce it. When the majority expresses disagreement, these hidden rules lose their power. Unfortunately, control over the first stage of direct elections means that authentic delegates are really too few in number, and everyone just follows the hidden rules.

The third form of manipulation is China’s bizarre indirect elections.

Elections for a new session of the Beijing Municipality People’s Congress were held in 2007. According to the law, delegates to provincial and municipality people’s congresses are chosen by delegates from the urban district and rural county levels. Then, the provincial and municipality delegates choose delegates to the National People’s Congress. The Party nominates its candidates, and 10 or more delegates may also nominate candidates.

I was among those nominated by 10 or more to be a candidate. That was the only time I campaigned for a seat in the Beijing People’s Congress.

By law, there is a 48-hour “incubation period” during which candidates have an opportunity to introduce themselves. The head of our delegation, a subdistrict director, suddenly sent word that we were going to go out and have a good dinner that night. All the delegates were staying at the conference hotel in the suburbs, but now I had to go into the city to eat. The Party’s organization units had arranged for all the people’s congress delegations to go out to eat and have a good time, leaving the hotel empty that night.

When it came time to vote, the Party-nominated candidates and the candidates

nominated by 10 or more people were put on a single list arranged in alphabetical order. The head of the delegation said, “Does everyone know how to vote?” Half-joking, he pointed to a man sitting in a corner at the back of the room and said, “Look, the KGB is behind you, watching!”

The man had been sent there by the Party’s organization unit. Every delegation had one. The entire people’s congress was manipulated behind the scenes by the Haidian District Party Committee Organization Department. It’s the same at every level of the people’s congresses. On the surface, they are supposed to appear democratic, but underneath they are controlled by party cadres. Everybody knows the truth. Everybody knows it’s a sham. It’s like the story of the emperor’s new clothes — everyone is just pretending that nothing is wrong!

A post-totalitarian regime ceases to function when enough people refuse to play by the hidden rules. If only a few refuse to play by these rules, they can be made to pay a price. Once, I was part of a group that nominated a candidate for deputy district chief. That evening, the person we nominated received a visit from the authorities. The very next day, he issued an announcement turning down our nomination for “health reasons”.

The vast majority of delegates follow the hidden rules. They pick up their pens and diligently circle the Party-nominated names on the list. For them, being a delegate is seen as an honor or favor. After all, they, themselves, have been chosen by the Party.

In that year’s election, we suffered defeat on a scale not seen for many years. I received 98 votes from the 420 delegates of the Haidian people’s congress. Wu Qing, who had served multiple terms as a delegate to the municipality people’s congress, received about 100 votes and was not elected. The independent candidate with the most votes received only 170. No one was elected. Perhaps nationally this would be considered a “not bad” result.

They make it look real. In every bizarre way, the Party demonstrates its “organizational plan” by manipulating the system at every level so that the National People’s Congress delegates become a total rubber stamp that will pass any law with a high number of votes.

Calling the National People’s Congress the supreme organ of state power is the most absurd joke of this post-totalitarian system. That’s why the period of the annual “Two Sessions” is so extremely sensitive in Beijing.

Cherish Your Ballots!

In 2006, I ran for a second term. I wanted to prove to everyone that my election the first time around was no fluke and that an incumbent delegate could be re-elected to another term. The election process was no longer transparent. This time, the final vote totals were never made public.

I was first arrested in 2009. From then on, I was deprived of the opportunity to teach. When it came time for the election in 2011, I thought that being elected twice was enough. But the forces of autocracy were simply cracking down too hard on elections. Wei Huanhuan's (魏欢欢) investigative report "Democracy under Party Leadership" listed a number of problems:

It is difficult to obtain a voter registration certificate in one's place of household registration, which means that very few residents living outside their place of household registration register to vote. Some places refuse to accept candidates nominated jointly by more than 10 people. In some cases, the voting to determine the list of official candidates is completely skipped. The ability of independent candidates to promote themselves is restricted or suppressed, including through unlawful restrictions on personal liberty. Independent candidates are the victims of disinformation or character assassination. Independent candidates' blogs and social media accounts are blocked. Secret ballot boxes serve as mere props, as the Party supervises the voting process. Election results are not announced in a timely manner. And the list goes on.

I was not running for election again to achieve results. It was only to express my opposition.

Lawyer Ding Jiayi came to campus to help me campaign. He gave speeches in his capacity as a lawyer, telling students that running for office was necessary and legal, and receiving enthusiastic applause and cheers from the students.

I wrote an open letter:

Cherish your ballots – A Letter to BUPT Students (2011)

On November 8, 2011, you will receive a ballot listing the names of four candidates. After each candidate's name, you have the right to express support, abstention, or opposition.

You may also write in the name of another candidate in place of any name that you reject.

Perhaps you've never cared much about voting. Maybe you think it doesn't make a difference and so you've felt disappointed or indifferent for too long. But in 2003 and 2006, the students who preceded you at this school cherished their ballots. On those two occasions, BUPT took pride in conducting lawful and fair elections.

As their chosen delegate to the Haidian District People's Congress and as a former lecturer in constitutional law, I urge you to cherish your ballots, too, and treasure this opportunity that comes once every five years to take responsibility for your country and society.

According to the constitution, the most important duties of people's congress delegates are the essential work of election; the supervision of government, procuratorate, and court officials; and the setting of budgets. During my eight years as a people's congress delegate in Haidian District, I deeply felt that the reason this organ of state power had become a "rubber stamp" was that very few delegates actually carried out the duties assigned to them by law. If the "fundamental political institutions" of the state are such a sham, how can we build a credible society?

And the reason that there are so few delegates who perform their duties in accordance with the law is because there's no competition and because voters don't vote according to their conscience.

I can understand your indifference, because you've never seen "your" candidate — a living, breathing, human being — and have only been able to see his (or her) slogans. You don't know what he (or she) plans to do or is capable of doing, and you don't even know who he (or she) really is.

Therefore, like any other candidate, I have a responsibility to use posters, text messages, speeches, and all other forms of expression allowed to citizens by the constitution to tell you who I am and what I intend to do. Then, each voter will make his or her "choice". This is not the kind of "vote buying" that is a special feature of China's corrupt officialdom. This is a true candidate "introduction" necessary for true elections.

Your responsibility is to cherish your ballots.

Don't think that voting doesn't matter. The injustice in our society is linked to everyone's indifference.

If all state organs — whether the people's congresses or judicial bodies — were

able to perform their duties in accordance with the law and be accountable to the people, China would not be as corrupt and unjust as it is today. You may think you're far removed from the person who sets herself on fire over a forced housing demolition, the petitioner locked up in a "black jail," or the desperate prisoner sentenced to death despite continuing to proclaim his innocence. But Haidian is not far from such things at all.

Are you really willing to continue to watch Haidian delegates overwhelmingly elect a district head who, just one year later, receives a suspended death sentence for corruption? Are you willing to watch them spend 2 billion yuan to turn wheat fields into a "national wetland park"? Are you willing to see schools for the children of urban migrant laborers demolished on a whim? What about an "organ of state power" that does nothing while privilege and corruption run rampant without a shred of justice?

If you say that the last four years have had nothing to do with you, it's time for you to cast your very own sacred ballot.

Please cherish your ballots! You only get one chance every five years. It doesn't matter who you vote for; what matters is that it's your choice.

On November 8, the law doesn't require you to circle a few names passively or at random. It requires you to elect responsible members of the legislature on behalf of the people of Haidian District. (By virtue of their statutory duties, people's congress delegates are essentially members of a legislative body.)

Don't pay any attention to who made the nominations, whether the candidate has served as a delegate before, or whether he or she is an official. You should make your own judgment as to whether the candidate is willing to show concern for public affairs and perform his or her duties in accordance with the law.

Then, make a circle next to the names of the candidates you support, abstain from voting for candidates you don't know well, and put an "X" next to the names of candidates you oppose and write in the name of any citizen you'd like to see as a delegate in the space marked "Other candidate."

Like you, I have also considered not voting in the past. I hesitated for a long time about running a third time, asking myself over and over again if I really cared about this position.

The first time I ran for election in 2003, I urged everyone to take their right to vote seriously. When I ran again in 2006, I wanted to prove to everyone that an

independent candidate without official backing could be re-elected. I insisted on telling people that there is hope for our society.

I didn't originally intend to run for a third term, but in the eight years as a delegate I have seen no progress in our political system. On the contrary, I've seen the continued suppression of independent citizen candidates and the continued silence of voters manipulated into participating in this hypocritical charade.

I don't care about the status that comes with this position. I've been deeply frustrated for the past eight years, but I care about the countless men and women who have fought continuously for more than a century for the sacred rights and principles that have been written into our constitution today. I care about the freedom and dignity of each and every Chinese person and about the real suffering caused by social injustice. I care about achieving the dream of a simple, honest, and just society. I am compelled to care about these things.

I also care about whether the university campus where I've lived for nine years will be destroyed by the falsehood, evil, and ugliness in our society. I want life on campus to be an honest, free, and happy time without the hypocrisy, selfishness, or corruption of bureaucrats or quasi-bureaucrats. Students should not have to undergo spiritual castration for the sake of a so-called future.

I hope this election will be honest, free, and happy, without fear of receiving warnings or threats from above, without forums being shut down, and without fear and indifference.

I know that some teachers and students have already been brought in for "chats" and warned against supporting me. I apologize for becoming too "sensitive."

My innate sense of mission has led me to follow this path of seeking freedom and justice. I've sought compensation for the babies poisoned by melamine-tainted milk powder, represented Chen Guangcheng, investigated black jails, and brought warm clothes to the poor petitioners huddled together in underground passageways to escape winter's chill. I've opposed the demolition of schools attended by the children of urban migrant laborers and advocated for a society of democracy, rule of law, equality, and justice. As I've progressed further along this path of conscience and justice, I've become more and more "sensitive."

I don't know how to turn a blind eye to the suffering and anxiety in this country. There's always a voice telling me that this society can be made better. I've lived for this dream for so many years, a dream that impels me forward while bearing

witness to so much suffering.

The pursuit of this dream of a free China has led me further and further away from BUPT.

For nine years, this school has provided me with a secure livelihood. But the school came under pressure after I was elected as a people's congress delegate. Many teachers and students deserve my eternal gratitude!

I once believed that I could find a balance between this political system and my conscience and that I could be a competent teacher of legal theory and constitutional law while simultaneously serving the cause of justice. I wanted to explain to these beloved students what the law is, how to embody the law, and the meaning of free expression. At the end of each semester, students would bring their cameras and preserve a smiling, happy memory out on the lawns of the Hongfu Campus. I loved those days!

But I haven't been allowed to teach since the summer of 2009. I haven't adjusted well to being relegated to the laboratory or library. Though I've done my best to lend a hand whenever teachers or students seek my assistance, my ability to help has been limited by my choice to live as a modern citizen and reject all "connections" and compromises.

I'm afraid that the only thing I can promise you is the same thing I promised back in 2003: I will focus on social justice and promote democracy, rule of law, freedom, and happiness in this country. Please don't ask me what I can do for BUPT; instead, ask me what we can do for China together.

Yes, we all have a responsibility to consider what we can do for our country. Perhaps you've never noticed the inordinate greed of those with wealth and power, the widening gap between rich and poor, or the growing anger over housing costs, educational inequality, state monopolies, and judicial corruption. Perhaps these problems fill you with feelings of resentment. Or perhaps you've learned to turn a blind eye to them. But you actually have a deep connection to those who suffer in despair because of social injustice.

One's sense of well-being is relative. All our feelings of success and failure, happiness and misfortune, or poverty and wealth depend on those around us. When you, as members of an elite social class, enjoy the happiness associated with wealth and success, do not forget your fellow Chinese who are poor and disadvantaged.

Your happiness is closely linked to the price they are forced to pay. As human beings, our interdependence requires us to love one another.

Please cherish your ballots! Don't say they're useless, and never give up hope or slacken your efforts one bit.

No matter how many times I've experienced frustration, I've never wavered in my determination to turn this "rubber stamp" into a true "organ of state power." I've never given up my dream of a just, free, and prosperous China. Realizing this dream will require the concerted efforts of many, many people. Please help me awaken the apathetic and indifferent! Take your own rights and the future of this country seriously!

That yearning for justice and beautiful, radiant love exists deep within each of our hearts, but we must awaken it in others through our own actions. No matter how much pressure I face, I shall remain steadfast. I shall light the faint and flickering candle of truth and love in this collapsing society.

I sincerely hope that the teachers and students of BUPT, along with millions of other citizens, will join me in lighting the flame with which we may illuminate the path of our nation's future. Thank you!

— Xu Zhiyong, October 18, 2011

November 8, 2011. There had been censored social media posts, threats, and disinformation. Classroom advisors watched closely over the voting. Despite this atmosphere of near terror, more than 3,500 students and teachers crossed out the name of the official candidate and wrote in the name "Xu Zhiyong." Thank you!

In 2017, I met Wu Guanle again. He said the curtain had already fallen on the "Haidian People's Congress phenomenon." The 40-year dream of reform was over. Under a totalitarian regime, such local breakthroughs are not allowed.

But we still take our rights seriously. As long as there is an opportunity, we shall do everything we can. There is no point in waiting. We can't imagine that elections alone will change the system, but elections are important in themselves. They are a mobilization of society, an exercise in democracy. Even more important is the process of preparing for an election, of being deeply rooted in the community, and of serving society and building up strength.

Independent candidates have stood up from time to time in the past. But too few openly campaigned, so they had little impact and lacked electoral support. If, one

day — say, in the autumn of 2021 — millions of citizens decide to stand up, the impact would be huge, and they would receive strong support in their districts. They could get 3,000 votes as write-in candidates. Citizen power makes a big difference!