
3a. i. In Praise of Democracy, Still

---- Three Essays on the 2004 American Election, Part One

(Yang SU)

In 1994, at age of 73, José Simões-Ferreira cast the first vote of his life in Mozambique. He had lived there for five decades, when the country was a Portuguese colony, before he moved to the US with his wife in 1976. In the next two decades between 1975 and 1994, Mozambique was ruled by a one-party socialist regime, under which one million people, or more than 7% of the population, perished in political persecution and civil conflicts. He must have been waiting for that moment all his life. A conscientious medical doctor, he would bring his young daughter along on his calls into poor African families, just to let her to witness how those of lesser means lived.

When that moment, historical yet personal, was mentioned by his daughter Tereshiha (more commonly known as Teresa Heinz Kerry) in this year's American presidential campaign, it struck a strong cord in my heart. By the time I am 73, I asked myself, will I have the chance to cast my first vote in my home country? For a while when I watched all in display at the election campaign, the good and the bad, I felt very strong emotions that I could not quite articulate. Then the nature of those emotions began to crystallize when I heard the story about Dr. Simões-Ferreira's first vote. I tried to perceive what his emotions toward democracy may have been like, when he watched democracy up and close in a foreign land, yet knowing its very absence in his own country.

It must have been a combination of admiration and yearning. He may have admired what the Americans had and yearn for what his fellow citizens lack. Also, he must at times have been heartbroken when the machinery of democracy functions poorly. But on balance, he must have kept his faith unshaken until the very end—the only reasonable explanation of why he kept his Mozambican citizenship all his life, which let him go back to vote in 1994, 18 years after his emigration to the U.S..

Small wonder Dr. Simões-Ferreira's story resonated with someone like me, who lived through the Cultural Revolution as a child, and participated in the Tiananmen Square Movement as a college student. It was with the memories of political terror could one understand the intensity and nature of emotions stirred by a democratic election campaign. The 10 years of the Cultural Revolution witnessed many changes of political leaders, and they took place in the forms of persecution, imprisonment and death. Among those publicly beaten in that period was Peng Dehuai, the former defense minister and the general who had led the Chinese army to victory in the Korean War in the 1950s. And Liu Shaoqi, the president of communist China and one who had been groomed as Mao's heir for years, died during the Cultural Revolution alone in a prison cell under someone else's name. The Tiananmen Square Movement in 1989 was one of the most forceful bids by Chinese people to change the political system by a combination of peace and popular power. It was violently crushed. Thousands died.

During the American campaign this year, the emotions of admiration and yearning constantly accompanied me, although punctuated by disgust and disillusionment about dirty politics. But it is only on the election day of November 2, 2004 did these emotions surge to a level which greatly surprised myself. I am not eligible to vote in the U.S. But my life as an alien had been deeply politicized by the events in this country in the past few years. The prospect of a political change was eminently attractive.

In that election morning, my mood was almost poetic. Although not sure about the outcome of the election, it simply fascinated me that one may be able to change a regime by a peaceful means. Last time when *we* did not like a government, in Beijing, we were confronted by bullets, tanks and jail time. So in this November morning, I kept composing opening lines of a poem painting the political event with the

Californian sunshine. Indeed, outside my house, the Southern Californian sunshine was bright and golden; and people, as shown on TV, were filing long lines in polling stations across the country.

I put on a jacket and mounted on a bike. On the way to a neighborhood polling station, I kept fighting back my tears, the same tears I failed to hold back in the night of the Taiwanese election earlier in March. That night, with my family soundly asleep, I stayed up in the living room, watching the election returns on live TV. The outcome, a victory by the incumbent, was against my politics, but that did not curb my enthusiasm. I was moved by the scene of an election full of Chinese faces. In frame after frame of the TV coverage, I saw middle-aged Chinese women vocally counting votes, with many others watching. The orderly processing of the election, as shown on TV that night, should shut up all naysayers once and for all, those who say that Chinese culture is incompatible with democracy.

In the polling station in my neighborhood, an election worker called Mary learned that I was not an American citizen and that I was from China. She instantly displayed an eagerness to show me around. Behind the back of those voters who were hovering over the electronic machines, Mary detailed to me how a voter would sign up to vote, what the ballot looked like, and how the votes would be tallied at the end of the day. To avoid disturbing the election for too long, I concluded my visit after about five minutes. But I was so grateful to Mary that I searched for some appropriate words beyond just a simple thank-you. I said: "Thank you, Mary. This experience means a lot to me. I was one of the many student participants in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement. I hope we can have an election like this in China some day."

If I had stayed longer, I would have told Mary more things I had experienced as a Chinese. For example, among the first Chinese characters I learned to read and write were three characters that make the name of *Liu Shaoqi*. Lesson 3 in my first grade textbook had one line: "Down with Liu Shaoqi." (Lesson 1 was "Long Live Chairman Mao!" and Lesson 2 was "Long Live the Chinese Communist Party!") Naturally as a six-year-old pupil I had no idea who Liu was, except that the school teacher had told us that he was a bad guy who wanted to "restore capitalism." Only many years later, I learned that Liu was once the president of China but was purged during the Cultural Revolution. He was labeled as a "traitor, spy and union-sellout" by a party committee and jailed to death without trial.

I could have also told Mary how sad and angry we were in the gloomy morning in Beijing on June 4, 1989. I could have even related my escape stories to her. In retrospect, my escape in the aftermath of the June 4th might have been totally unnecessary. But at the time, we had no idea who would be on the blacklist. Min and I passed the security checkpoints at the Beijing Train Station, and safely arrived at her hometown in rural Shandong. On the same day, a classmate of mine, SL, was caught climbing a fence at a suburban train station. He had gone to that suburban station, only to face the similar checkpoints he tried to avoid. He was then jailed for two years.

In a village in Shandong that summer, I developed paranoia towards police uniform, which would accompany me for many years to come. At times, I mistook a harmless situation as one in which my arrest was eminent. Once, we were toiling in a wheat field close to a car road, when suddenly about five police cars roared over and stopped not far away from us. Nervous and shaking, I began to say good bye to Min and her parents. It turned out the police were there for a gang fighting nearby.

At the end of my visit to the polling station in California, Mary the election worker, and I shook hands and she gave me a very thoughtful look. I felt the warm closeness between us: she seemed to have known everything I wanted to say. She was a middle-aged lady, nicely dressed. She was, I thought when I left, more likely a Bush supporter than a Kerry supporter, as a nicely dressed, middle aged woman in Orange County, California was likely to be. Our handshake hence may have crossed a deep political divide, for I

was staunchly against Bush's policies and hoped that the election would unseat him. For 5 minutes or so, her pride of, and my admiration for, American democracy brought us together as comrades-in-arms.

My festive mood, nursed by Mary's friendly reception, was further boosted by news reports during the day. Exit polls showed that the candidate I favored, Kerry, was winning. Additional positive signs included the high volume of voter turnout, reported everywhere, a sign that was considered to favor Democrats. All these, however, paved a dramatic turnaround in the late hours that night. George W. Bush won the election decisively. As I personally believed that the Bush administration had been doing enormous harm to America and to the world, the election result made a mockery of my admiration for American democracy.

On the election night, one half of America turned joyful, the other in anguish. Millions participated in an epic political struggle. No one was killed, jailed, or forced to escape. After a powerful attempt to overthrow the head of the country, the loser called the winner to congratulate him, and the other dissidents, all 50,000,000 of them, also resumed their normal lives the next day. True, it is reported that more Americans inquired about possible emigration than the day before; the number of hits on an official website of Canadian immigration tripled. True, three days later, a man from Georgia shot himself and died on the site of ground zero in New York, citing anguish at the election result. But overall, it was peace and nonviolence that ruled the day, as exemplified by the tranquility in voter lines across the nation. Anyone, who had experienced or read about political conflicts elsewhere, has to be marveled by what was absent in the process—violence and terror, I mean, as between political opponents, between warring mass factions, or as military repression.

Among the half of America who were saddened by the election outcome, I found myself, my friends and my colleagues—almost each and every one I met in the school of social sciences. We had started the evening with an election-result-watch party at a bar, organized by the Center for Studies of Democracy. But people disbanded early, as the TV sets in the bar sent wave after wave of bad signs. JL and I retreated to a friend's house, filled with both Chinese and American neighbors. People in the living room were in stone silence, gripped by the ever-worsening numbers reported on TV. A bottle of Champaign was sitting in the refrigerator, never to be touched.

As I elaborate in other essays, the Bush victory in this election represents one of the worst moments in American democracy. Among other things, it sanctions the unnecessary war in Iraq and will give green light to more reckless actions in Iraq and beyond. As I wrote elsewhere recently:

“A new government will be put in place by this half of American citizens: more than 70% of them continue to believe Saddam was behind the 9/11 plot and more than 75% of them continue to believe Iraq had WMD [Weapons of Mass Destruction] before the American invasion. ... No more will the killings and injuries in Iraq take place in a moral vacuum; they are now endorsed by the majority of the American voters. The election has certified the tragedies thus far--1,100 deaths and 8,000 wounded (many among them disabled) in the American military; and 14,000 Iraqi civilian deaths and many more wounded. Above all, the election officially put a righteous stamp on future killings to come, killings whose cause is as tragic as it is disgraceful.” (OYCF BBS, 11/3/04)

The night and the silence reminded me of another night some 15 years ago. It was in a graduate student dormitory room full of people in stone silence, listening. It was not TV sounds we were listening to that night, but radio. The content was not election results, but a government statement being repeated throughout the night. It declared that “a violent turmoil” had been waged against the military personnel on Beijing streets. We knew that was a pretext, false, to justify opening fire on protesters, and we knew what that meant to thousands who were still in the street. Many were being killed.

But there were also profound differences between the two nights. On this year's election night, no one was dying in America due to the political conflict unfolding to us through TV, while in 1989 we could occasionally hear gunshots from off campus. Also, this year, as upset as we were, we had no need to fear arrest or persecution; while in 1989 we feared a military occupation of the campus in which we would be rounded up. I knew I would have been very weak under torture and I would have confessed every bit of what I had done during the movement.

The losing presidential candidate, John Kerry, would go back to his job as a senator. As I watched him giving a very gracious concession speech, I could not help but think of Liu Shaoqi, the former Chinese president. I once saw a picture of his corpse, taken after his lonely dying process in a prison cell and published when his case was later reinstated with honor. Any student of politics would be haunted by the picture—a former president's body covered by a simple cloth—and the story behind it. It encapsulated the arbitrariness of the fate of human life in an authoritarian political regime—a fate as close to ordinary people as to political grandees. I also knew Liu had been an ardent supporter of Mao Zedong's struggle within the communist party. Not long before his own downfall in the Cultural Revolution, he had been designated as Mao's heir apparent, and had been zealously purging potential rivals. Among those he helped Mao bring down was Peng Dehuai, the former defense minister and an audacious critic of Mao's Great Leap Forward policies.

Life went on as usual after the American election. As Garrison Keillor put it: "After election I am fine /Although the sun refuses to shine." In the place where I live though, the sunshine under the Californian sky was as golden as ever before. The third morning I went to a friend's house, the same house where we had watched the election the other night. Upon receiving me at his door, the friend pointed to me a remarkable scene on the street: In front of many of the houses, sitting on the driveway were two, three, or more, packages of newspapers, blue plastic for New York Times, and white plastic for the Los Angeles Times. Apparently our neighbors were ignoring their newspapers to avoid revisiting the election.

It was not long after 1989 when I first touched down on this country. In my first letter home, I wrote: "Mom, I find myself surprisingly at home in this new place. I see people smiling at me, and doves, beautiful white doves, circling around my feet at the bus station. They are not afraid of humans at all, Mom. The language is very familiar to my ear. I have imitated it for years and now I finally get to hear its authentic accent. I am delighted by it as though I heard our home dialect." Years since, I have come to realize that the language I was referring to was not just English. I had other things in mind, say, democracy. Democracy in America, a familiar language we Chinese intellectuals strived hard to learn since early in 20th century, so far has not always produced results that delight us. But if at times we are disgusted by American democracy, we should work to improve it or try to create one that is better. I hope I can cast my first vote in China by age 73, like Dr. José Simões-Ferreira did in Mozambique, if not sooner.

November 11, 2004. Irvine, California.

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