

The local Taiwanese politician: highlighting the urban/rural divide

There is a divide between northerners and southerners. Northerners are educated (*wenming* 文明), and southerners are uncultivated (*caogenxing* 草根性).¹

There coexist two largely distinct societies in Taiwan, one northern and urban and the other southern and rural, each with largely divergent ideas and practices regarding democracy and political life. This paper will attempt to highlight the urban/rural divide in political attitudes in Taiwan. For reasons of space and economy I shall devote only brief section in this paper to describing urban attitudes on the island, concentrating more heavily on the country. I argue that my urban informants' views on politics, democracy and leadership are an interesting fusion of contemporary ideas of transparency, good governance and accountability, but at the same informed by ancient Chinese concept inspired by Confucian thought. Urban voters tended to value and elect politicians with an appealing political philosophy, whereas rural voters care more about their politicians' effectiveness in delivering concrete benefits to the community.

Urban voters are disappointed about the democratic development in Taiwan. They complained about the low quality of voters and politicians that the country has. They also complained that the political system is defective, allowing certain 'crooked' politicians (*zhengke* 政客) to take advantage of the country's democratic reforms for their own benefit. Interestingly, the 'crooked' politician that urban voters referred to is, in the majority of cases, the very same democratically elected rural or local politician who enjoys huge support in the countryside.

Urban dwellers I spoke to have very clear notions of what a 'true' democracy needs to have and what kind of political class and citizens are necessary to make it happen. It is interesting that their views are an amalgam² of contemporary notions of politics and recognizably Chinese moral categories and concepts. I wish to argue that the following is a fairly accurate description

¹ Quote from an urban informant.

² The former include the impartiality of the civil service, elections as a 'rational' and 'civil' activity, elected officials acting as 'monitors' of the actions of government, etc. The latter refer to ideas such as *suyang* and *fengdu*, both essential virtues of the Confucian *junzi* or gentleman.

of the values of many residents of the capital, Taipei, and other provincial cities and larger towns, whose residents tend to be younger, and better educated than their rural counterparts. This description is especially true of the country's intellectuals. Below is a summary of their values:

- Politics and especially elections should be a civil and orderly contest of ideas and platforms between parties where personal animosity between politicians is absent. Once the election result is out everyone should respect the popular will and abide by the rule of law.
- Opposition politicians should graciously concede the result and work with the ruling party.
- They should offer constructive criticism to help the ruling party better govern the country.
- After the elections the whole country should put partisan interests behind them and unite and heal its divisions for the sake of the country.
- The role of the civil service and bureaucracy as impartial and objective arbiters of the law should not be questioned.
- Politicians should have demeanor (*fengdu* 風度), as well as self-discipline and literacy (*suyang* 素養).
- Elected officials should monitor the actions of the government, be the voters' eyes and ears.
- Voters should have *suyang*, meaning they must be rational, cool-headed and be aware of their rights and responsibilities, the most important of which is to choose politicians wisely and always hold politicians accountable.

Nevertheless, in the central and southern part of the island outside of the large cities, inhabitants, who are, by and large, older, more conservative and less educated than their northern counterparts, have distinct views to their urban counterparts. It is not easy to say how rural people talk about 'democracy' as abstract conversations about it rarely occurred during my fieldwork. Nevertheless, it would be safe to say that people are not preoccupied with it, at least in abstract terms. I am not saying that they do not hold any opinions, or care at all about politics. My experience is that rural voters care a lot about politics, not so much in the abstract, but in its concrete, daily manifestations, especially in areas of direct concern to their lives and welfare. Below is a summary of their political values:

- Elected local leaders need to have ample financial resources and influence in order to capture public office and 'govern'. 'Governing', in this sense means leveraging their power, influence and connections in 'getting things done' for the community. Thus, poverty is often seen as a negative attribute in an office-holder, whereas wealth, although by itself not a sufficient qualification for office, is critical to governing 'effectively'.
- People expect their elected leaders to serve as benevolent patrons and benefactors, and expect to have personalistic ties with them, helping them meet their basic needs, improve their lot, navigate the bureaucracy, etc. Consequently, a politician is judged in terms of his efficaciousness in office.
- People are deferential towards those with power and influence. The provenance of such power and influence is relatively unimportant. They are not overly concerned about their elected leaders' political views or philosophies and do not expect them to be saints or role models. They are quite tolerant and forgiving of past indiscretions and mistakes.

This paper is about rural expectations, particularly, what rural people want and expect from an elected politician. I have brought together a corpus of ethnographic data that I have collected. The data comprise, in parts, urban informants' views on their rural counterparts, rural people's own views on politicians, interviews with the local politician turned legislator Yen Ching-biao (顏清標) and his brother about rural Taiwan, and my own analysis and insights regarding the Taiwanese countryside. It is my belief that that by sampling widely, and from many sources, both from inside and outside the countryside, from talking to people from different backgrounds, I am able to provide a fuller and richer description of rural reality than if I had relied only my data from rural informants'.

'Southerners value personal relationships (*hen zhongshi renji guanxi* 很重視人際關係). Thus they won't care that their elected politicians are involved in illegal things. They are mistrustful of outsiders. What they do want is a fellow villager who will protect their interests. Candidates in the south make a promise to the electorate that they will promote their welfare by bringing construction projects, industry and jobs and local people will vote for candidates who keep their promise.'

Eric was an acquaintance of mine. He was a restaurant owner and urban informant from Taichung city. The above quote is his observation about country folk. Eric knew I had been spending a lot of time in Shalu, a small town with a rural feel to it, on the outskirts of Taichung city. Shalu is the stronghold of the famous and controversial local politician turned national legislator called Yen Ching-biao. I wanted to find out what is it that people in the constituency thought of him and why they re-elected him to the Legislative Yuan in December 2004. I had commented to Eric while on break from fieldwork in Shalu that I was experiencing difficulty eliciting comments from informants about their political philosophies. Specifically, I found it quite difficult to get my informants to say things that would enable me to infer or induce their views on why they vote for the people they do. Ideally, I was hoping for a 'the horse's mouth' comprehensive description both on an abstract and concrete level, of rural views on politics and politicians. I wanted people to tell me not only what they thought of their local politician and their reasons for supporting him, I also wanted them to tell me something about rural voters and politicians in general. In short, I was hoping to get them to articulate their *emic* theory of politics.

What I got was a lot of opinions about Legislator Yen, specifically his personal qualities, what he has done for the community, and how local people feel about him. I was also able to elicit people's concerns about daily life, stories and episodes that capture the essence of their daily lives, their hopes for the future and their anxieties. In this sense I felt very privileged to have been allowed to take a peek into the lives of people who lived in a different reality to that with which I was most familiar- the city. My interactions with them have afforded me an opportunity to appreciate some aspects of rural life that I had never been able to see in person. However, what I did not get was the *emic* theory of politics in their own voice that I really wanted to hear.

It would not be accurate say that my informants were not interested in politics, or that they did not have a political philosophy or theory of politics. On the contrary, I found them very interested in politics and political life. They all had opinions on the all the major politicians in the country, and talked about the

main political parties, and said what they liked or did not like about them. When they talked about local political life, however, I discovered that they cared mostly about practical issues that had a direct impact on their lives.

Thus they told me they voted for so and so because he would do this and that. And that so and so was voted for one term but did not get re-elected in the following election because he failed to do this and that. In the next section I intend to show that rural voters want and expect their leaders to be wealthy and influential. The local politician is expected to have ample financial resources at his disposal in order to occupy public office and 'govern', using his power, influence and connections to 'get things done' for the community. Thus, poverty is often seen as a negative attribute in an office-holder, whereas wealth, although by itself not a sufficient qualification for office, is critical to governing 'effectively'.

The local politician is a big man

What is it that people yearn to be or have above all? I posed this question to my Shalu informants to better understand what drives the rural psyche. My findings indicate that generally, most want to get rich (*caifu* 財富), have money (*jingqian* 金錢), material things (*wuzhi* 物質), a settled life (*shenghuo anding* 生活安定), and peace (*pingan* 平安). However, male informants I asked wanted all of the above, and more. Men I spoke to yearned for status (*diwei* 地位), power (*youquan* 有權), and influence (*youshi* 有勢). Men aspired to have leverage or influence over others (*you yinxiangli* 有影響力). They want to be respected, and don't want to be looked down on (*xiwang bei zunzhong* 希望被尊重, *bu xihuan bei ren kanbian* 不喜歡被人看扁). In other words, they wanted to be 'big men'.

Taiwanese history is replete with examples of influential leaders at the local and village level, who played very prominent roles in village life. An informant

describes it this way; ‘We have *jiaotou*³ (big man角頭) who is the head of the most basic unit, but larger in scope than the head of the household (*jiazhang* 家長) in each Taiwanese village, hamlet, district, etc. A *jiaotou* could be a rich businessman, or a guy with an extensive network of relationships whose resources he can mobilize. He could donate money for the construction or improvement of the local temple. He is also one who can persuade wealthy people to give donations or participate financially in community undertakings.

They were traditionally very important in village life, where they were called upon to handle or deal with all manner of things. Aspiring big men who wanted to gain social capital in the form of prestige needed one very important prerequisite, money and resources. All the above activities an ambitious man needed to undertake to raise his standing among his peers are predicated on one fact- that one already has money and resources in the first place. Thus the local political arena is an extension of village life. It is a locus of activity wherein aspiring big men are able to test their mettle and prove themselves worthy of the cachet ‘big man’.

“If you want to be a big man you need to spend a lot of money”
(*chuttau sunkak* 出頭損角)

New opportunities for enrichment in the countryside came with the central government’s decision to invest heavily in the nation’s infrastructure in the 1970s and 1980s. Vast amounts of money were earmarked for thousands of construction projects for roads, bridges, and buildings to be built in the countryside, and so locally influential businessmen, entrepreneurs, local politicians parlayed their connections at the local level, bribing officials, rigging public tenders, setting up construction companies, erecting structures with substandard materials, ensuring projects went to favoured friends and

³ In contemporary society the term has acquired negative connotations. *Jiaotou* is now seen as virtually identical in meaning as gangster (*heidao*).

business associates, all in order to profit from the massively lucrative construction projects (Chin 2003: 144).⁴

By the 1980s Taiwan's economic transformation was largely complete. It had a thriving economy and an ever-rising standard of living. A lot of capital was going idle, though, as the cost of labor was making low value-added industries uneconomic, but at the same time existing capital controls prevented entrepreneurs from setting up factories abroad.⁵ Ambitious individuals from the city and countryside realized there existed an opportunity to profit from a vast hitherto untapped market in leisure by catering to for consumers who were capital rich, and in the process creating the country's vast semi-legal leisure and entertainment industry- gambling joints, video arcades, karaoke bars, brothels, and even popular religion temples. Entrepreneurs ran underground lotteries and gambling places, operated illegal video arcades, managed karaoke bars and brothels, and even took over popular religion temples where resident mediums promised to divine the winning lottery number in exchange for a fee or donation.

The story of Yen Ching-biao

It is in this sociohistorical context, that local politicians like Legislator Yen Ching-biao, need to be understood. He has risen from obscurity and a criminal past to enjoy an unprecedented career in politics and is a media celebrity. Mr. Yen is rumored to have been a major gangster (*heidao* 黑道) figure in central Taiwan's coastal area, operating illegal gambling dens. He had a reputation as a highly influential *heidao* in central Taiwan in the early part of the 1980s. He was caught in Operation Cleansweep (*yiqingzhuanan* 一清專案) and subsequently spent three and a half years in Green Island's (*lüdao* 綠島) maximum-security prison in the wake of the then KMT martial law government's crackdown on organized crime in 1986. He was sent to prison at twenty-six.

⁴ Chin, Ko-lin. 2003. *Heijin: Organized Crime, Business, and Politics in Taiwan*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

⁵ The barriers to overseas investment were lifted in the 1990s.

After his release he stopped leading a 'life of crime' and entered local politics, being a borough warden (*lizhang* 里長) and a member of the KMT's Black Faction (*heipai* 黑派) in Taichung soon after. Three years later he became a Taichung County councillor (*xianyiyuan* 縣議員) in the 1994 election. He was the candidate who garnered the most votes, and won all the elections he stood in and, by 35, was the youngest ever member of the Taiwan Provincial Assembly. In 1998 Yen was nominated county council speaker (*xianyizhang* 縣議長) after an easy reelection in that year's contest for the Taichung County Council. He became chairman (*dongshizhang* 董事長) of Jenlan Temple in Dajia, arguably Taiwan's most famous and prestigious popular religion temple, in 1999. The temple had a total savings of NT\$ 1.2 billion in 1999.

Yen Ching-biao went to prison in early 2001, convicted in a bribery and vote-buying case brought against him in 1994 for trying to win the Taichung County Council speakership. While under detention on the vote-buying case, Yen decided to enter the 2001 legislative election as an independent candidate in Taichung County. His wife and mistress actively campaigned for him and he mobilized the full resources of Jenlan Temple and won with 34,000 votes. He was released on a NT\$ 5 million bail on January 5, 2002, after a short stint inside. Yen, along with 10 other legislators, co-founded a new political party, the Non-Partisan Solidarity Union (NPSU) in June, 2004. He won his bid for a second term in the December 2004 Legislative Elections. Yen is still appealing his conviction for corruption and attempted murder and attempting to pervert the course of justice.

Thus, ambitious men from the countryside have had a long history of identifying and seizing opportunities to accumulate wealth and power, and raising their status in the community. Yen Ching-biao and many of his contemporaries saw their chance in the construction boom and burgeoning leisure industry in the 1980s, which at the time had an ambiguous legal status. They spotted an unmet need in the market, where consumers wanted places like gambling dens, brothels, karaoke bars, video arcades where they could spend their newly disposable income. These illegal, but highly lucrative

activities constituted the source of wealth of many newly rich individuals. The decision to participate in politics is a natural continuation in the trajectory of a man of means who wants to raise his profile in the community.

Now I will show that a rural politician is judged in terms of his efficaciousness in 'governing'. Specifically, people expect their elected leaders to help them meet their basic needs, improve their lot, navigate the bureaucracy, etc. They are not overly concerned about their elected leaders' political views or philosophies. In short, voters expect their politicians to act as benevolent patrons and benefactors, and have personalistic ties with them.

Legislator Yen's voters' surgery

Independent legislator Yen Ching-biao's voter's surgery (*fuwuchu* 服務處) is located in his hometown of Shalu. He rarely keeps office in Shalu, as he is often in Taipei serving in the Legislative Yuan. I have gotten to know his brothers quite well though, especially the second-youngest, Qing-shan 清山. 41 years old, married with an 8-year old daughter, Qing-shan was very approachable and talkative, and more importantly, he was available as he hung out at his brother's surgery all afternoon. I ask him what he does for a living and he says he 'serves people'. In course of my dealings with him I would frequently hear him utter the phrase 'constituency service' as if it were his eldest brother's, and by extension, also his, sole *raison d'être*.

'Oftentimes the gutter or sewer in the neighborhood is blocked, and the constituents call us for help in fixing it. We immediately get in touch with the relevant local government services and they come and deal with it. It's quicker that way. If we don't intercede it will be ages before the local government does anything about it. We are on very good terms with the Shalu town mayor and that facilitates things.' I have spent many afternoons in the surgery observing scores of local folk call in with the express purpose of requesting the honorable Mr. Yen's assistance in a variety of cases. My experiences as an observer in the surgery, have led me to my first point about rural attitudes to politics- rural folk want a benevolent patron, a benefactor who will assist them with many of their problems. In addition, they expect to have a strong

affective bond, a personalistic type of relationship with their local leader. Below are some illustrative examples.

Helping the car accident victim

One afternoon at Legislator Yen's surgery, a man walks in and talks to Ching-shan. The two men have a lengthy conversation in Taiwanese, and through Ching-shan, who intermittently translated for me, I learned that the man's son had an accident while riding a scooter. Apparently, he was on a busy motorway when a fire truck in front suddenly braked. The son was not at a safe distance behind fire truck, so when he also braked to avoid hitting it he was struck from behind by a third car. He went underneath the car and sustained serious injuries to his cheekbones. The driver did not make an effort to tend to the boy. He did not call for an ambulance, instead he waited for the police so that he could make a statement. Although the son's health insurance will cover most of the bills, the father is angry over what he perceives is an injustice.

'Thank god the boy was insured', Ching-shan relates to me in Mandarin Chinese. 'Without any insurance the total hospital bill would have been over NT\$ 300,000. Luckily, the family only have to pay out NT\$ 10,000. This boy's father is angry because the driver of the car that ran his boy over refuses to pay anything. He is angry that he didn't lift a finger to help the boy. He says he just stood there waiting for the police. His excuse was that the son's injuries were not life-threatening (*buzhiming de* 不致命的). He says it's the boy's fault as he didn't keep a safe distance behind the truck (*mei baochi juli* 沒保持距離). Anyway, the driver says the health insurance should take care of everything. However, the health insurance will only cover most of the hospital bills, while the scooter's insurance will only cover the actual damages incurred to it (*qiche sunshi* 氣車損失).'

'At present the driver is unwilling to pay any compensation. So I advised the father to go and sue him', Ching-shan continues. 'When the driver sees the court summons and the civil charge he'll be intimidated and then might be amenable to settle out of court. He'll make the first move and contact the

father and offer a settlement and when that happens I'll be there to mediate and make sure the family gets a fair deal. In the past, when you're involved in a car accident, or when a driver knocks you down or runs you over he would quickly apologize and offer money as compensation, as well as the hospital bill, and damages to your car or scooter. The police are useless, and the courts are slow and ineffective, so most cases are settled amicably between the two parties with the aggrieved receiving some compensation. Nowadays they won't want to pay you anything. Our job is to help our constituents who are car accident victims to get a fair compensation'.

Mediating neighbors and spousal disputes

Yen Ching-shan also describes how he mediated (*woxuan* 斡旋) between neighbours' disputes. 'Once there was a local resident who built a wall from his house, which cut off his neighbours' access to the passageway. The neighbours complained to us and asked us to persuade him to tear it down. How do you deal with that kind of problem? The man insisted he had sole access to the passageway and prohibited anyone else from using it.' I volunteered that they could seek redress with the police or through lawyers. However, Qing-shan dismissed the notion that formal institutions were of any use in resolving these kinds of issues. 'Judges and the police would not have a clue! They won't be of any help.' Qing-shan went on to say that he used his influence to persuade the man that he either tear down the wall, or allowed others right of access to it, or he would have to financially compensate his neighbours for the inconvenience he has caused.

There is one kind of dispute wherein he says he or his brothers are very reluctant to get involved in, that is husband and wife quarrels. 'Getting involved in these issues is like a gamble and we'll end up getting in trouble (*hui daomei* 會倒霉). Once one guy was unfaithful and became involved with another man's wife, and her husband eventually found out. That is a very common occurrence in Taiwan. The husband threatened to accuse the adulterer of rape. The guilty party denied committing rape, but agreed to pay the husband some compensation instead. The adulterer offered NT\$ 160,000, but the husband wanted NT\$ 200,000. I advised him to pay NT\$ 100,000 up

front and NT\$ 50,000 later on as a bargaining tactic. The husband rang our surgery and claimed that he knew a Taichung County counsellor (*taichung xianyiyuan* 台中縣議員) who was a good friend of my eldest brother and he had taken an interest in the case. He said we had to give the counsellor “face” (*mianzi* 面子) by increasing the offer by NT\$ 100,000, making it NT\$ 1,600,000 all in all.’

Dealing with the bureaucracy and other formal institutions

One afternoon in the surgery, a voter came in requesting help. He was fortunate that day, because Legislator Yen was there in person. This was one of the rare occasions when the Legislature was not in session and the honourable Mr. Yen was able to attend to his constituents in person. He had had a medical problem and had been to hospital for treatment. Like most salaried workers, he had national medical insurance that normally covers a large part of the medical bills one would normally incur if one were ill. He had had his illness seen to at hospital, but was now informed that he had to settle a substantial bill. The balance was about NT\$ 50,000, or about two months of an average worker’s salary. He disagreed with the amount as he thought it was excessive, so he had tried to speak to the relevant hospital staff, trying to get them to reduce, if not eliminate the bill altogether.

Apparently, the hospital staff detailed to him all the medical interventions that had been performed as well as all medicines that he had been prescribed. The employee then informed him of the item for item cost of each medical procedure done on him, and all the medicines he had been prescribed and consumed, hence the total bill. As the man was describing all this to Mr. Yen in Taiwanese, I have a hazy understanding of the exact reasons why the man thought the bill was unfair. He obviously thought he was right and tried his best to explain side to the hospital staff. He was unsuccessful and it seemed to me he was frustrated as he did not fully understand the hospital employees’ logic and reasoning, and he looked to his representative, Legislator. Yen, as his last resort.

Legislator Yen had one of his secretaries phone the relevant department at the hospital and got in touch with that same employee the man had spoken to. Mr. Yen identified himself, and said he was phoning on behalf of the man in the surgery. Mr. Yen explained that he thought the amount was unfair and he expected the hospital to substantially reduce it. Initially Mr. Yen was patient and polite with the employee, but as the conversation went on, he progressively got angrier and angrier, and he ended up shouting obscenities into the phone. Finally slamming the phone down on the receiver. As I was only hearing one side of the telephone conversation, I don't know what the other party had said.

All I know was that Mr. Yen was visibly angry and he tried to use his stature as a legislator, and his well-known reputation as a former 'gangster' and a man capable of acts of violence to achieve his ends, to intimidate the poor employee into giving in. I didn't know it at the time, but he was issuing threats to the employee, he said would use his influence to cut funding from the hospital if he did not get his way. The matter was still unsolved and the man eventually left the surgery. He decided that he was to go back to hospital and try to negotiate with them one more time. But the fact that his elected representative did try hard to help him with his case seemed to have left a favourable impression on him.

Legislator Yen is very modest about the amount of power and influence he wields. Although he doesn't deny the fact that he is an influential person, he insists that whatever influence he has within his community is the result of his good deeds, and of his constituency service (*xuanmin fuwu* 選民服務). However he tries to play down and misrepresent the source and provenance of his power, it is obvious that he was not chosen by the electorate just because he had made a vow of service to them, or because he was considered particularly honest, or virtuous. In the words of one informant 'What good is an honest, decent man who is a nobody?'

The Shalu electorate voted for him because they wanted someone who was 'effective', meaning someone with sufficient wealth, resources, and influence

in order to 'get things done', mediate disputes, intercede on their behalf with the bureaucracy, etc. The people wanted someone with enough clout and influence to effectively deal with outsiders and to represent their interests in the outside world, especially in the corridors of power in Taipei. I will now show that people are quite tolerant and forgiving of their leaders' past indiscretions and mistakes. They are not overly concerned about the origin of their leaders' power and influence. It is relatively unimportant.

Rural people are quite forgiving and tolerant of past mistakes

The gap in perceptions between town and country regarding rural politicians in Taiwan is huge. Urban informants are scathing about the type of politician who gets elected in the countryside. They cannot comprehend how is it that people with comparatively low educational levels and with prior criminal convictions can serve public office. Perceptions in the countryside are markedly different. Few country folk refer to their local elected representatives as gangsters (*heidao*). The few exceptions when this term is evoked involves people who saw themselves as rural community leaders, by virtue of education, moral stature, etc, yet who do not have the necessary money and access to resources that a successful career in local public office requires. They are resentful that they have little real power and are resentful of local politicians.

The comments of two informants, both rural elementary school teachers, are illustrative. 'Yen Ching-biao is a legal criminal (*hefa de liumang* 合法的流氓) with a dark, powerful influence (*eshili* 惡勢力). You won't need his help if you are law-abiding and upright. It's only when you do illegal things that you'll need him. He uses his power and influence to favour his friends (*buyuzhiping* 不予置評). The police are afraid of him, so if you have problems with the law you can turn to him for help. With him at your side the police will "obey" (*qufu* 屈服) you. He managed to get out and stay out of jail because of his behind the scenes (*beihou* 背後) and under the table connections (*goujie shangceng* 勾結上層) with some government officials.'

Rural informants, on the contrary, are much less likely to see politicians like Mr. Yen as a cancer in the body politic. Moreover, they do not judge him harshly and are ready to overlook his turbulent past. Several informants do acknowledge he had made mistakes, but are quite forgiving. Many reply ‘yes he was a gangster (*heidao*), but that was in the past. Life is a process of growth and learning. He went to jail as other people wanted to bring him down. Many people do bad things when they’re young, it’s because they’re ignorant, but may gain wisdom when they are older’. What they do stress repeatedly are his virtues, such as his filial piety, amiability, and record of service to the community and loyalty to voters. Below is a quote from an informant:

“Before his mother died, he would visit his mother every day and talk to her everyday. He is very good with people. He is very personable. Of course if he hasn’t met you he won’t talk to you, but if he knows you, he’ll greet you whenever you bump into him and ask about your family. He calls everyone ‘uncle’, or ‘aunt’ (a-pe 伯伯, a-ma, 奶奶, a-chim 嬤嬤) like you were family. When Taiwan was suffering from a wave of typhoons this summer and many villages high up in the mountains suffered from landslides, Mr. Yen hired a helicopter to bring food and necessities to those isolated towns in the mountains far from Shalu. A lot of the people who live in the mountains are poor aboriginals. You must have seen it reported in the news.”

As the above quote indicates, many rural politicians express their relationship with their constituents using idioms of family and kinsfolk. People I spoke to in Shalu regard him with affection and gratitude, noting his humility and shyness, a rare feature in someone as powerful as he. Indeed, Mr. Yen’s often repeated campaign slogans for the 2004 legislative election sum up his grassroots appeal, ‘If you give me ten dollars, I’ll return you 100’ (*chialang jikau, huanlang chitdau* 吃人一口, 還人一斗), and ‘When people do you a favour, its like a debt that you need to repay, when you make a promise you need to fulfil it, whatever it takes’ (*langjing dua naze, welang kachamsi* 人情大那債, 允人卡慘死).

As an outsider, I find his transformation from ‘villain’ (at least according to official views) to ‘saint’ quite stunning. I am not used to seeing previously vilified people undergo such a complete rehabilitation in such short a time. People, however, do not see the contradiction between his violent criminal past and his present role as benefactor and champion of the community. When I press them about this seeming discrepancy between past and present, people often sigh and say:

“Once a killer puts down his knife he becomes a Buddha”

(*fangxia tudao, lidi chengfo* 放下屠刀,立地成佛)

Conclusion

Urban-based politicians appeal to their highly educated urban constituents’ own political philosophies and ideologies. Often these can be about highly abstract themes like ‘restoring morality to politics’, or things which, although they may be desirable in themselves, have no practical impact on peoples’ lives like ‘changing the country’s name and asserting independence’, or ‘amending the constitution’. These politicians run on an ideological platform as well as one that advocates efficient and effective government. Urban voters vote for the candidate who most closely resembles their own philosophies and pet peeves. The local politician, on the other hand, has an ideology and political philosophy of cultivating strong and close interpersonal and affective links with those whose individuals whose votes he seeks. He prides himself in his ability to use his personal charisma, local influence, and the clout that his office confers in order to right past injustices and grievances that his voters are suffering. He uses the power of office to fight to have national resources in the annual budget diverted to his hometown to build and construct roads, schools, intercity highways, hospitals, etc.