

# Chinese Life

# Bitter-Sweet Portraits

2009



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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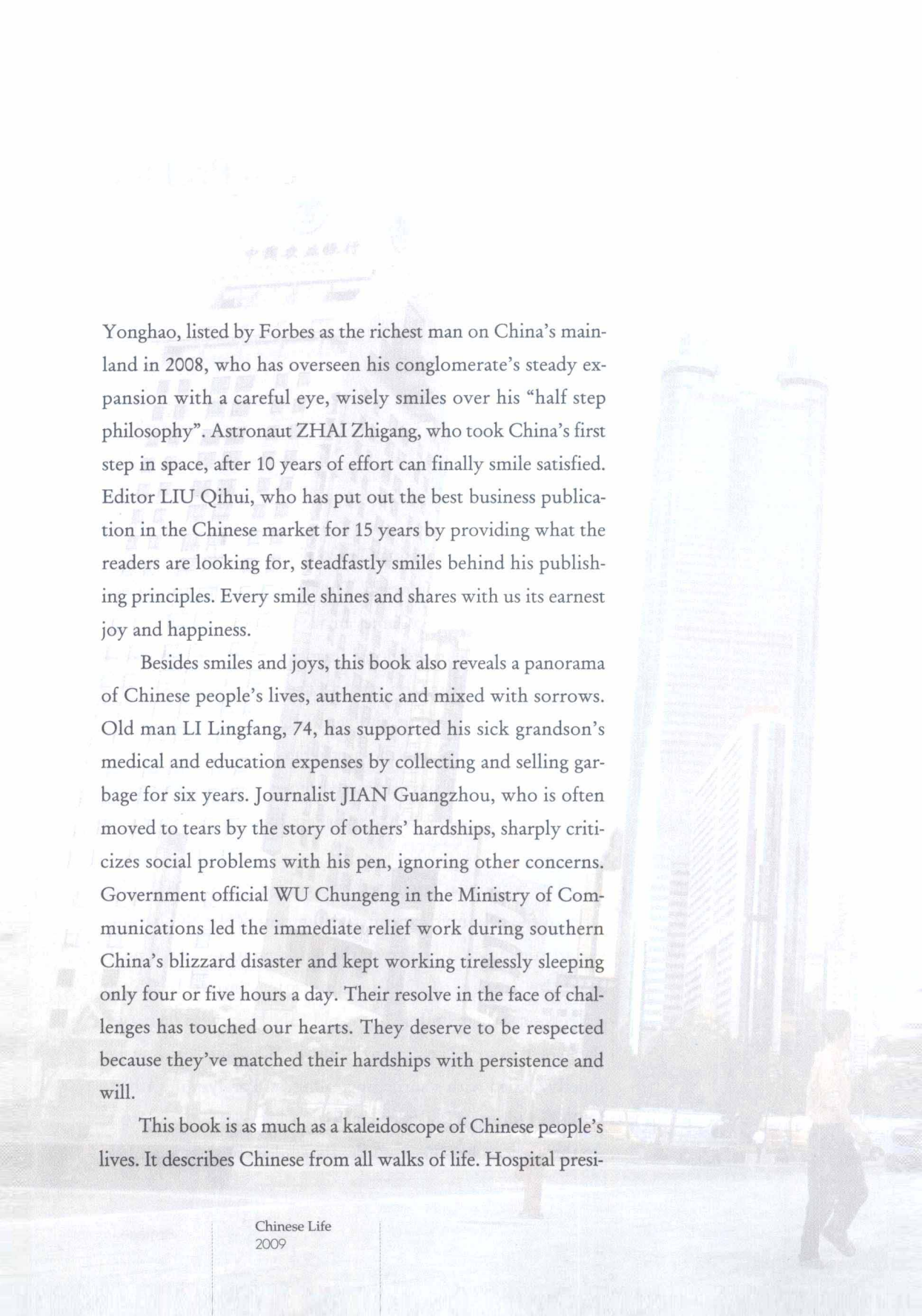
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# Preface

The world is witnessing China. The devastating Wenchuan earthquake stunned the world. The fireworks over Bird's Nest during Beijing Olympic Games amazed the world. China's first space walk, its role in the global financial crisis, the breaking of Huji(residence registration system), the reform of medical and health care...throughout an eventful 2008 and a promising 2009—China has been in the spotlight on the world stage and the Chinese people have attracted more attention. What are Chinese people like? What are their lives like? The world wonders.

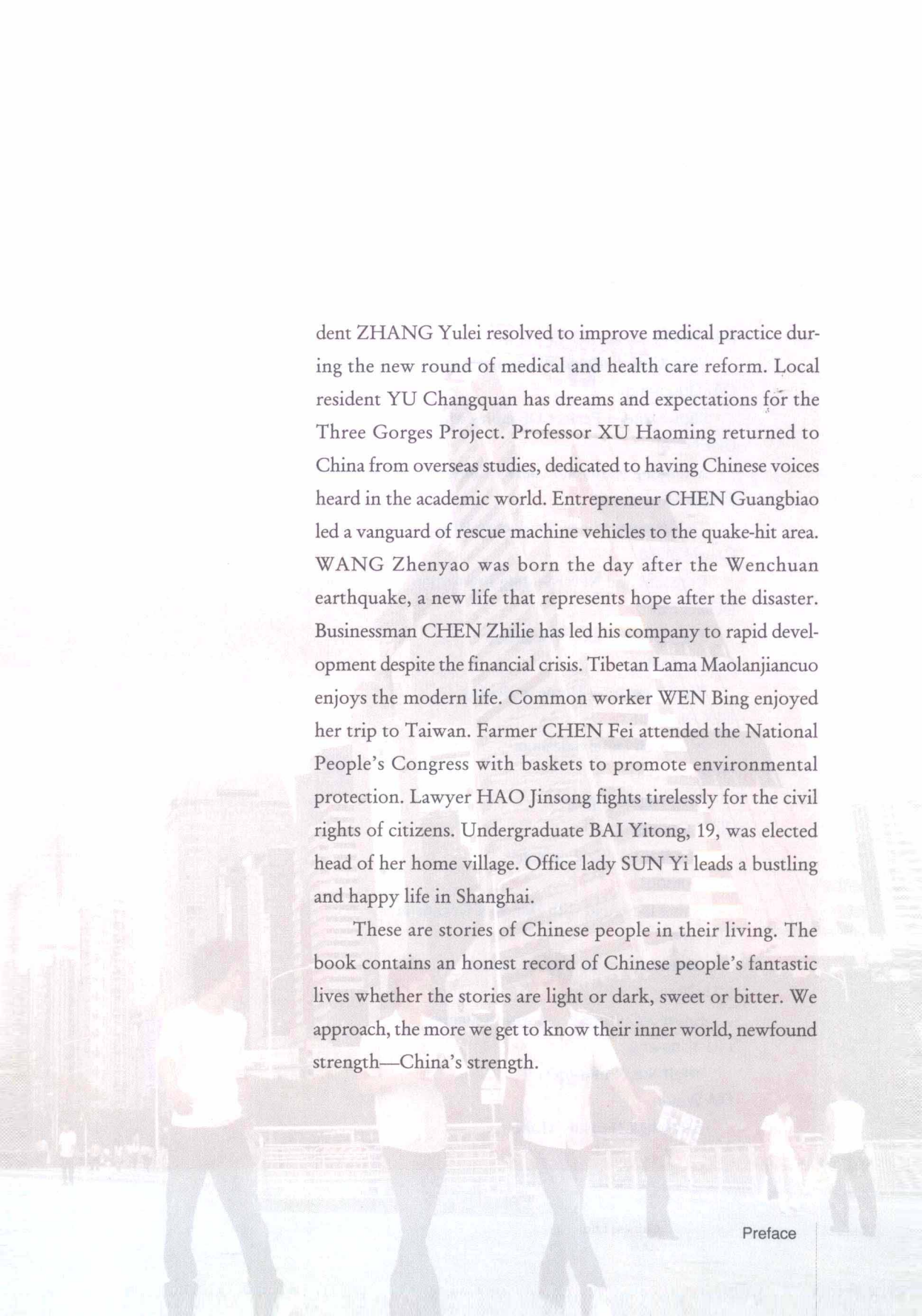
The world was fascinated by a collection of 2008 smiling faces in the Olympic Opening Ceremony. ZHANG Yimou, the artistic director, had given the world an image of China. It was the image of Chinese people's most brilliant expression—their smiles. 9-year-old LIN Hao, who had saved the lives of two other children during the Wenchuan earthquake, quietly smiled with a surprising calmness. Paralympics athlete DONG Fuli, who lost her right leg but has courageously stood up throughout her life, confidently smiled. Businessman LIU



Yonghao, listed by Forbes as the richest man on China's mainland in 2008, who has overseen his conglomerate's steady expansion with a careful eye, wisely smiles over his "half step philosophy". Astronaut ZHAI Zhigang, who took China's first step in space, after 10 years of effort can finally smile satisfied. Editor LIU Qihui, who has put out the best business publication in the Chinese market for 15 years by providing what the readers are looking for, steadfastly smiles behind his publishing principles. Every smile shines and shares with us its earnest joy and happiness.

Besides smiles and joys, this book also reveals a panorama of Chinese people's lives, authentic and mixed with sorrows. Old man LI Lingfang, 74, has supported his sick grandson's medical and education expenses by collecting and selling garbage for six years. Journalist JIAN Guangzhou, who is often moved to tears by the story of others' hardships, sharply criticizes social problems with his pen, ignoring other concerns. Government official WU Chungeng in the Ministry of Communications led the immediate relief work during southern China's blizzard disaster and kept working tirelessly sleeping only four or five hours a day. Their resolve in the face of challenges has touched our hearts. They deserve to be respected because they've matched their hardships with persistence and will.

This book is as much as a kaleidoscope of Chinese people's lives. It describes Chinese from all walks of life. Hospital presi-



dent ZHANG Yulei resolved to improve medical practice during the new round of medical and health care reform. Local resident YU Changquan has dreams and expectations for the Three Gorges Project. Professor XU Haoming returned to China from overseas studies, dedicated to having Chinese voices heard in the academic world. Entrepreneur CHEN Guangbiao led a vanguard of rescue machine vehicles to the quake-hit area. WANG Zhenyao was born the day after the Wenchuan earthquake, a new life that represents hope after the disaster. Businessman CHEN Zhilie has led his company to rapid development despite the financial crisis. Tibetan Lama Maolanjiancuo enjoys the modern life. Common worker WEN Bing enjoyed her trip to Taiwan. Farmer CHEN Fei attended the National People's Congress with baskets to promote environmental protection. Lawyer HAO Jinsong fights tirelessly for the civil rights of citizens. Undergraduate BAI Yitong, 19, was elected head of her home village. Office lady SUN Yi leads a bustling and happy life in Shanghai.

These are stories of Chinese people in their living. The book contains an honest record of Chinese people's fantastic lives whether the stories are light or dark, sweet or bitter. We approach, the more we get to know their inner world, newfound strength—China's strength.



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## Introduction

Several months ago, she was still a plainly dressed college student, taking photos with her classmates and having fun drinking and dancing. Every day, she promised to lose weight to herself. Nowadays, she sits in a cave dwelling with peeling walls and rallies the villagers of Gaojie, Qingjian County, Shaanxi Province for meetings. She is just a 19-year-old girl—BAI Yitong. She is a sophomore majoring in Chinese at Ankang College of Shaanxi Province. On 14th January 2009 in the election of Gaojie villagers' committee, 450 villagers out of a total of 461 voted for her. She was easily elected as the chairperson of the villagers committee by a landslide. Recalling her election, BAI Yitong can't hold back her excitement.

## BAI Yitong Part-time College Student, Part-time Village Official

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*"I hope villagers would foot the Yangge dance (a popular folk dance in north China) to welcome me here as well as see me off."*



## To Build the Foremost Village in the Yellow River Valley

The 7th election of Gaojie villagers committee in 2008 was in a dilemma—no candidate was qualified to be the head of the village because none had obtained more than half of all the votes. The villagers were helpless until a sophomore majoring in Chinese in Shaanxi Ankang College expressed her willingness to return to the village and run for the election.

BAI Yitong had been away from the village since she was 5 months old. She admitted that she knew little about the people's lives in Gaojie Village and surrounding rural areas, but the initial motion that she should come back and run for the village head was put forward by her father. One day in November, 2008, her father told her over the phone that no candidate had succeeded in the village election again, and suggested she should come back and run for the election. Although she knew nothing about what a villagers committee chairperson should do, she understood her father's expectations when recollecting her father's and grandfather's desire to boost their village's economy. In October 2007 when her family returned to the village for the funeral of her deceased grandmother, they received kind-hearted help from villagers and experienced firsthand the villager's honesty and simplicity. Therefore, she made up her mind to return to the village and run for the election.

Her father took her back to the village. Then she began to find out the facts about their village, and her credentials as a candidate were examined and approved by the village election committee. On 1st December 2008, she handed out a color-printed leaflet handbook for the election to villagers, titled "Build the Foremost Village in the Yellow River Valley".

A 19-year-old school girl running for village head aroused a heated debate. In December, the Party members and villagers meetings were held successively to discuss whether she should be nominated to be a candidate. But finally, the election committee decided that whether or not she should be a candidate should be determined by the villager's signatures collected under the supervision of the county government officials.





Villagers dance Yangge dance in appreciation of Bai Yitong running for village head.

At last, she was confirmed as a candidate by 329 votes.

On 14th January 2009, the election in the village looked more like a grand festival. In the early morning, a 60-strong Yangge team began to sing and dance joyously at the entrance to the village: An elderly man, brandishing a colorful umbrella, sang a northern Shaanxi folk song and led the way, followed by a team of villagers dressed in red or green. They were marching to the drum beats towards the entrance of the village. When she entered into the election hall, BAI Yitong was greeted by villagers dancing Yangge dance as a token of their trust in her.

After all the candidates had made their campaign speeches, villagers began to fill in the ballots and cast them. Four hours later, the election result was announced: "The villagers committee chairperson is BAI Yitong."

## How Could She Be Elected?

The election in Gaojie Village hadn't been plain sailing since 2003. In that year, the election procedures were improved and the candidates could be elected freely while the mobile ballot boxes were cancelled; as a result, the election could be regarded as a democratic one.

"The first time I got less than half the total votes, but I was elected the second time," BAI Genshen, the chairperson elected in that year, said.

The population was 1,227 in Gaojie, where villagers lived on growing dates or migrant working. Taking advantage of the reform and opening-up since 1985, some villagers began



to grow their own dates and they got rich first. BAI Fuzhou was among them. He began to plant date trees in 1985. Two years later, he switched to working in a date processing factory in town, where he mastered the baking technique. After that he went back to his home village and set up a date-processing workshop. While villagers were growing dates on a large scale, he began to process and sell the dates bought from them. When asked why he didn't run for the village chairperson, BAI Fuzhou shook his head and said: "According to the county rules, a village head or a Party secretary of a big village like ours with the population of more than 1,200 can only get 1,600 yuan subsidy a year. Furthermore, a village head has a lot of things to deal with, I'm afraid I can't afford to run for the position."

The requirements villagers hold for a village head can be summarized as follows: First, he or she shouldn't just get paid and idle away his or her days; second, he or she should be young, competent and open-minded, one who is able to help attract investment for the village. "BAI Yitong is exactly the kind of person our village needs," villagers said. Moreover in her campaign, she indicated that she would keep the public informed of the financial affairs of the village every month. "The financial affairs should be transparent for ever", she declared, to the acclaim of the villagers.

## A Village Chairwoman

On 15th January 2009, BAI Yitong began to perform her duties as the village head. She called upon the representatives of the last villagers council to have a meeting.

"We need you to become experienced because you are still not old," BAI Yitong said to a middle-aged man in a loud voice.



Bai Yitong helps an elderly villager to button up.

## Links

### Student Village Head

In 2008, the Central Organization Department formulated a plan including 100 thousand college students to serve as village officials to be a vital new force in developing the countryside. When the national focus was shifted towards the "three rurals" issue (rural economy, rural areas and rural residents), the central government advanced a series of policies on college students employment based on rural areas demand, such as improvement of government work at the grass root level, technological progress for agriculture and cultural development. These policies include implementing the "three supports and one assist" program (college students who work at the grass root level in rural areas support agriculture, education and medical care and assist in poverty alleviation ), selecting college students to work in local governments at town and village levels, and appointing college graduates as village officials. These young student village officials will live up to the expectations of the public in building a new socialist countryside.

Seven or eight seniors sat around huddled in a cave dwelling, watching BAI Yitong speak severely to the middle-aged man while she sat in the middle of the room with her legs crossed. The middle-aged man was reluctant to act as a family planning director. “Will you appoint a new director instead of me?” he asked. Eventually, another man was recommended as the family planning director by several seniors, and the middle-aged man as his deputy. Although the final decision was made, BAI Yitong still said to him: “Learn from others very well so that you will accumulate some experience.” Then, every one was relieved. The appointment took effect as the representatives signed the resolutions by signatures or finger prints (of the illiterate representatives).

Finally, based on the proposal from BAI Yitong, tellers and accountants were chosen by the villagers committee through discussion, while a money management team composed of 8 members was established, and the vacant positions such as Youth League branch secretary and director of the village women’s federation were filled for the first time in 10 years.

In order to rectify the villagers’ coming late to meetings and the non-productivity of the meetings, she divided villagers into groups along military lines, in consideration



Bai Yitong reading the design drawings of the village theater.



of their living in scattered places. She asked them to govern themselves at every level so as to cultivate their capacity for self-governance.

In a couple of days, BAI Yitong succeeded in switching her role from a college student to a village head. Every day in the early morning after she got up, she began to clean her cave dwelling. After putting the village documents and the work records into her satchel, she headed for the villagers committee office for a meeting. But as soon as she stepped out of the gate of the office, the serious expression on her face was instantly gone. She showed her gentle and affable character when she warmly greeted the elderly people basking in the sun. One month previously she was entirely unfamiliar with everything here, but now she patted middle-aged men on their shoulders or plucked at the tufts of white beards of the seniors. Despite having lived in the city for a long time,



Bai Yitong visits with Bai Shangcai, an 83-year-old lonely widow.

she hadn't forgotten that status in the countryside is based on seniority. When villagers call her by her pet name "Lele", she would call them grandpa, uncle or brother.

During her term of office, BAI Yitong held the first large-scale activity—a village sports meet, which fully demonstrated to villagers her organizing ability. "Villagers used to play mahjong in their cave dwellings during the lunar New Year, but on this

year's New Year holidays I want to hold a sports meet so that we will have a good time outside." It took only 11 days to plan and carry out the sports meet, and 11 events were included. She invited an advertisement company to design and make a logo as well as the staff's name tags. Winners of the events would be honored with awards. Thousands of people participated, including villagers from the nearby county town.

Before the Spring Festival(lunar New Year)was over, BAI Yitong began to organize the building of roads around the mountains. Date groves were scattered around the mountains, where paths were created by harvesters constant treading. When harvest time arrived, dates were picked by hand. Villagers put the dates in baskets and then carried them down the mountain, but often dates were damaged or spoiled during transportation. BAI Yitong not only donated her own private savings, but also mobilized her friends and relatives to contribute money and materials to the building of a 38-kilometer-long road around the mountain. Led by BAI Yitong, more than 800 villagers joined in the road

building project. She was the first one to put on cloth shoes and climb up the mountains, her enthusiasm deeply moved the villagers. During the project, all the participating villagers worked hard for no pay. Even though some of their date trees needed to be cut down, they didn't ask for compensation. They said: "Everything will go very well only if the leaders put their heart into their work." On the mountainside, BAI Yitong drew a beautiful blueprint for the village: "We would attract investment to transform our cave dwellings nearby into hotels if we develop the tourism potential of our village. The derelict primary school will be altered into an old age home. We have attracted more than one million yuan investment, and now we are waiting for the county education bureau's approval for revamping the teaching building."



BAI Yitong took villagers to repair the roads.

## Dialogue

Journalist: You must be a person of great individuality.

BAI Yitong: Yes. In a study report meeting in college, 4 representatives spoke up. But the first 3 representatives' speeches made me nod off, so when it was my turn, I mounted the platform and said: "The first three students have expressed my opinions exactly, so there's no need for me to speak. Thank you!"

Journalist: More than a month has passed since you took office, haven't the villagers committee members been confirmed?

BAI Yitong: No, I have no right to appoint villagers committee members, who can only be chosen by local residents. As they now have no intention to choose any, I will not force them to.

Journalist: Since you have been a village head for a month, do you think that you have built up prestige among the villagers?

BAI Yitong: I don't know whether I have built up my prestige, but I do know they support me. Definitely there're some people who are opposed to me, but those are only a tiny few. Nothing will go as smoothly as one expects.

Journalist: How much do you earn per month as a village head here?

BAI Yitong: It's said to be 1,600 yuan a year, a little more than 100 yuan per month (laughing). Not much money to earn.

Journalist: Are you willing to be a village head if the villagers should re-elect you 3 years later?

BAI Yitong: Of course, I would continue my job even if they elect me 6 years later.



## School: Independent Study

As a student at school, BAI Yitong was caught in a dilemma between “working as a village official” and “going to school”. Her school, Ankang College, supported her choice of serving the people in rural areas. Therefore her school gave her a “green light”, and formulated an “independent study scheme” for her.

Currently to some extent, there inevitably exist contradictions between employment and study for college students. But our nation hasn’t had any definite policies or regulations so far to guide them to strike a balance between these two aspects. On 17th January 2009, Ankang College got down to formulating an “independent study schedule” for BAI Yitong to be in place from February 2009 to July 2010. Flexible teaching methods have been specially designed for her. Apart from major courses she has to learn, some other courses related to countryside management have also been designed for her, such as “An Introduction to Management”, “Countryside Sociology”, “Planning and Management of Villages and Small Towns”. Teachers will give her instructions and correct her homework by e-mails, instant messaging tools, and audio and video materials. But according to the school’s regulations, BAI Yitong should attend no less than 40 class sessions each term. She can return to school for class, but if necessary, classes can be held in Gaojie Village. In addition to that, BAI Yitong has written a report on rural issues — “A Case Study of Gaojie Village”.

For her future goals, BAI Yitong wants to continue studying till she obtains doctor’s degree, and then she will want to become a writer or set up a garment factory on her own account. As to her official career, she said: “It’s too early to talk about that!”

### BAI Yitong, Moving Forward

The villagers committee election in Gaojie Village failed four times. It was somewhat inevitable in the democratic development at the grass root level and it was also a result of the economic restructuring in rural areas since late 1970s and early 1980s. Currently, in order to address the “three rurals” issue, the central government has rolled out a slew of preferential policies such as land transfer, selling home appliances and agricultural machinery to rural residents at discount rates, the increase of the purchasing price of foodgrains, etc. Therefore, hundreds of thousands of responsible, dynamic and well-trained village officials are required to carry out the preferential policies. College students are a new source of village officials. When BAI Yitong had taken office for just five days, the villagers already felt BAI Yitong’s passion for her work. A review of the impact created by them brings home to the villagers the prospect that the new-generation village leaders will make China’s villages “larger and stronger”.