

Liu Yong¹ – Municipal Bureaucrat, Petitioners' Office, China

“We must help other people, make a difference”

“Even when I was a student, I wanted to be a civil servant.” Yong speaks haltingly, at once proud and a little bashful about his interest in the civil service and all that it entails. He bounces between furrowed brows of concern and bouts of laughter as he recounts the ups and downs of his journey. Yong is speaking as an “insider” and an “outsider”; as a former civil servant, but also of someone who has studied public administration.

Born in a small village in South China, Yong’s hopes for becoming a public official began early. As a child, people thought he resembled Chairman Mao. He was often told, “you are looking like Chairman Mao, you must be a big figure in the future!” He was keenly aware of the prestige that his family, and wider society, placed on being an official within the Chinese Government. Yong recalls his parents encouraging him to “just join the government so you can glorify your sisters, glorify your family.”

Yong grew to dream big about the potential influence he could have in government. His own adherence to Confucian values would determine how he’d eventually wield that power. He believed that on the “inside, we are noblemen, according to Confucian values, who must help other people, make a difference, or just help society, change society.” Yong believed he could make this change through the government.

After studying political science, Yong joined the municipal government of a large city in a role receiving petitions from citizens. He knew he was starting at a low level of the hierarchy, but “wanted to see how the government worked, how the bureaucracy functioned,” and also believed that if he stayed long enough to “become a senior level official, [he could] make a difference.”

On the surface, Yong’s job seems frustrating. Every day, petitioners would “come to the government with different problems.” Because his role was more of a coordinator rather than a problem-solver, in many cases Yong “felt powerless.” He recalls thinking often, “okay, you [the petitioner] are right, you are right, and your problems are just really serious and the government should be responsible for that, but we have no real power to do [anything].”

Still, Yong’s faith in his potential to make a difference never wavered. He found himself surrounded by peers who were similarly driven by the promise of what the government could do for those in need. Of his colleagues in this role, Yong says, most “are self driven—they are Mission Driven Bureaucrats.”

“One of my classmates,” he recalls with a smile, “he was a genius. He’s really smart. Then after graduation, he got an offer from a financial group where his pay would be really high. But he refused that offer and he chose to join the government for much less pay, I mean *ten times less*.” Ultimately, this classmate, and many of Yong’s peers, eventually hoped to find “powerful positions where they could improve things for many people.”

¹Pseudonym used at the request of the interviewee.

The motivation Yong felt himself and observed within his peers may have partially been driven by their own career ambitions, but he and his fellow bureaucrats were also driven by the satisfaction of being able to offer help to fellow citizens. “Most of us were really nice to petitioners because we had sympathy for them... We deemed that these guys are helpless, these guys are innocent.” Yong recalls one case from several years ago in particular. “I remember one grandma came to the municipal government more than one hundred times because her husband was overcharged by the hospital many years ago and she insisted on seeking justice.” Yong “coordinated different departments” that needed to work together and was finally able to address the mistake.

“After my effort,” Yong goes on, “the case was resolved. And this grandma sent me a flag – a red flag, just a compliment [to say] you are a good guy and got my problem solved!” These small accomplishments, the times that Yong was able to apply his own effort and ingenuity to solve a problem for a citizen, shine brightly in his memory. “Even though I was nobody, I was not a senior one, I was a junior guy in the government, I got this thing done. I was proud of it.”

Yong would come to find that many aspects of this job brought him pride, but the real work of this office was not exactly what he expected. He found himself with three broad options for each petitioner he came across, and he chose different responses depending on the nature of each issue. “Some problems were identified as contradictions among the people, so it’s not a contradiction between government and enemy ...we can resolve it with [money].” On the other hand, some problems, like the grandma’s, required lots of internal coordination. Yong would listen and report their issues, following up with relevant departments to urge them “to deal with it as soon as possible.”

The third category of problems were politically charged, religious or just “unresolvable.” For these problems, Yong’s job was to make sure the petitioner didn’t take their concerns to protest in Beijing. “The office leaders faced a lot of pressure from the higher-level departments...we could not let those petitioners go to Beijing.” Wincing slightly at the memory, Yong recalls how he was instructed not just to resolve the petitioners’ concerns so that they wouldn’t attempt to head to the capital, but also when necessary, to *physically* stop them from going to Beijing “at a railway station, bus stop, and at the airport—they were recognized by our officials and taken back to their home.”

Another part of Yong’s role may be familiar to all bureaucrats, or even all workers – reporting metrics to superiors. Despite his team’s “efforts to stop them,” discontented citizens would still, sometimes, leave town. He notes, “one [part] of my work was to calculate how many people today escaped our control... How many successfully broke our defenses.” He punctuates his story with bouts of nervous laughter. “So, every day, I had to calculate and report the number of how many people [were] missing...and how many people are in Beijing already? You know, just showing up in Tiananmen Square?”

He recalls one specific dilemma he faced in reporting this number. “One day, there were suddenly a lot of people missing and a lot of people showing up in Beijing Tiananmen Square. Our leaders were very nervous.” They told Yong, “you know, this is not good. This number is not good. I don’t like this number.” Upon reporting the unexpected indicator that his office had

not restrained enough discontented citizens, Yong was shocked to hear his superior's response. "My leader was very angry and they just urged me to...think twice. You know, think about it again." He was asked, "Did you calculate wrongly? Did you get the right number?" Yong's confusion would resonate with anyone in a position like this, unsure of what he should do – "Just to under-report it? Give the real number, or the one [his leaders] wanted to hear?"

Yong, and many of his peers, were left feeling like "just a small part of the whole machine," unable to serve the mission that had led them to public service in the first place. Unable to take ownership of their mission and forced to deliver on questionable instructions and metrics, Yong and some of his peers lost motivation. Ultimately, despite his passion to help the petitioners who came to him, Yong left his role to instead pursue a career elsewhere.

While Yong is no longer employed in the Chinese bureaucracy, he continues to observe it closely with some concern. "Nowadays, these guys, they shirk away from responsibility or they choose to do nothing, to avoid making a mistake." This doesn't change Yong's view of the public servants themselves and their internal motivation. "I think actually, that most bureaucrats still want to do something good, according to their values, but they are fearing just making a mistake... They don't want to make a mistake or get imprisoned, or get fired by the top level of organization or department."

He worries particularly about "bottom level bureaucrats" who have "few opportunities to get promoted, to make money, to get good pay." Combined with the decline in autonomy, culture, and initiative brought on by the anti-corruption campaign, he believes that "as soon as they have a good opportunity, many will quit" the bureaucracy, leaving the government worse off.

What could be done to reverse this trend? "Just as former generation of Chinese leaders" did, Yong instead wishes for "the Chinese government [to] give them more autonomy" and find a way to rely more on trust. He proposes, "let's assume the bureaucrats are mission driven. I think...trust is very important. We trust them, we do not just treat them as thieves, [or] treat them as the corrupt officials."

The impact of a Mission Driven Bureaucrat like Yong can be long felt. Years after he left his role at the municipal government, Yong returned to the city in which he had served. Recalling his visit, his grin returns in full force. "Many petitioners still remembered me!" he says. "They came over [to say excitedly], '*Oh mister you are back! Where have you been?*'" They had missed the familiar face of a bureaucrat ready to listen to them and do what he can to address their concerns.

While Yong's tenure as a municipal bureaucrat has ended, his commitment to public service has not – he talks about doing "something big" in his future. Yong next hopes "to be a Deputy Governor in an underdeveloped county in mid-west China... to be in charge of the poverty alleviation and rural education." He dreams about taking advantage of a more senior role to overcome the constraints he faced in his first that prevented him from fulfilling his mission. When he does, he might bring with him more knowledge and experience; his steadfast commitment to serve the Chinese people will remain unchanged.