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Lei Feng: China's Evolving Cultural Icon, 1960s to the Present

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Lei Feng: China's Evolving Cultural Icon, 1960s to the Present

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

Clement A. Dugue' III

B.A., The University of New Orleans, 2007

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Abstract

In 1962, very few people within the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) had ever heard of Lei Feng, a young soldier who died in a tragic accident while driving a truck for the People's Liberation Army. The following year, his name was known throughout China as one of the finest young soldiers that the country had ever produced. In years to come, his diary was put in the hands of everyone from school children to soldiers to serve as a model for the ideal Chinese citizen. Furthermore, as Chinese culture evolved, so did the Lei Feng image, changing from citizen-soldier in 1963 to socialist entrepreneur after 1978. This study's focus is how Lei Feng has become not only a model Chinese citizen-soldier and entrepreneur, but a successful example to fellow nations of how they, too, could mold the ideals of their citizens for generations to come.

Keywords: Lei Feng, Cultural Revolution, Lin Biao, Chairman Mao, Chinese propaganda, Peoples Liberation Army of China

Introduction

In 1962, very few people within the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) had ever heard of Lei Feng, a young soldier who died in a tragic accident while driving a truck for the People's Liberation Army. The following year, his name was known throughout China as one of the finest young soldiers that the country had ever produced. In years to come, his diary was put in the hands of everyone from school children to soldiers with the purpose of serving as a model for the ideal Chinese citizen. As Chinese culture evolved, so did the persona of Lei Feng, from citizen-soldier-peasant of the 1960s and 1970s, to an icon for socialist entrepreneurship during the 1980s and 1990s. The twenty-first century has seen Lei Feng take on a life of his own, becoming a global ambassador professing the redeeming power of Maoist thought to all humanity.

Though Lei Feng was an actual person, the details of his life-including his famous diary-were largely manufactured by Lin Biao, a powerful leader and effective propagandist of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). But the question remains: why has the mythic figure of Lei Feng been so astoundingly successful from its creation in 1963 to the present day? To provide insights into the success and longevity of the Lei Feng story, this study consults a number of previous historical works on the subject.

Among the most important primary sources are Chinese governmental documents, particularly the writings of PLA leader Lin Biao and Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. Also very useful are contemporary newspaper and magazine articles, photographs, illustrations, interviews, and autobiographical accounts by Chinese citizens from that period. Secondary sources underpinning this study include general scholarly works on Chinese history by Jonathan Spence, Larry Wortzel and Robert B. Rigg, as well as works focusing particularly on Chinese

propaganda and the Lei Feng character by such authors as Chen Tung-lei, Julian Baum, and Ji-li Jiang.

Based on these various sources, the present study examines how and why the Lei Feng myth was deliberately and skillfully tied to historical events and cultural values in China in the mid-twentieth century. The analysis will include not only the government's propaganda efforts, but also the eager receptiveness of the Chinese people. In investigating these themes, this study argues that the remarkable tenacity of the Lei Feng story is due to its incorporation of both China's past and China's future into a single symbol, one that has outlived its creators and has even ascended to the level of a folkloric icon. This study's focus, as oppose to others is how Lei Feng has become not only a model Chinese citizen-soldier and entrepreneur, but a successful example to fellow nations of how they, too, could mold the ideals of their citizens for generations to come.

Lei Feng, A Symbol of China's Past



Figure 1. Photo of Lei Feng.

The childhood of Lei Feng is a typical tale of the daily oppression endured by peasants living in China before the Communist takeover of 1949. According to Chen Tung-lei's 1963 article, "Lei Feng: A Fine Example of Chinese Youth," the trials of Lei Feng's harsh childhood in old-society China instilled in him an obligation to confront the oppressors and exploiters of the proletariat.¹ By the time Lei Feng had become a teenager in the 1950s, the list of oppressors of the Chinese people had grown to include the United States. To the present day, the story of Lei Feng continues to promote the idea that total dedication to Maoist thought and the Party can lead to career advancement and personal fulfillment, as was the case for Lei. Observed by scholars including Jonathan Spence, were the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) struggle to recover from the disappointments of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961). As a result, Chairman Mao and party leadership sought a solution to their political woes, a means by which they could mold new generations of obedient and selfless soldiers and citizens.² The solution was carried out by the deputies of Chairman Mao, most importantly Lin Biao. It was Lin who established the ideological framework for the "Learn from Comrade Lei Feng" Campaign, in addition to playing a major role in the creation of the Mao personality cult and dogmas prevalent within Maoist

doctrine. According to Judith Farquar, the Cultural Revolution era was best remembered for Lei Feng's motto, "Serve the People" that appeared on "every public surface from latrine walls to the gateway of the central government compound in Beijing."³

August 15, 1962 marks the day when a previously unknown soldier of the PLA, Lei Feng, was crushed by a telephone pole in an unfortunate automotive accident. As the PRC reeled from the failures of the Great Leap Forward, its leaders scrambled to find a solution to these troubles. By March of 1963, the solution was officially announced to be Lei Feng, the martyred twenty-two year old. In Lei Feng the party leaders uncovered a perfect model to represent Mao's new socialist man. Lei was depicted as an iconic figure with a resolute faith in socialist ideals, self improvement, diligent study, and the value of matching words with deeds. He was the ideal candidate to revive the appeal of the PLA/CCP and serve as a shining light of Chairman Mao's revolutionary thought and its power to create a new, selfless Chinese citizen. The rather obscure automotive accident which took the life of Lei Feng provided the conduit for his eternal memorialization in Chinese propaganda and ideology.

While a tremendous number of common PLA troops were peasants, very few of their personal experiences or memoirs have been documented and brought to public light. The notable exception has been Lei Feng, whom Chairman Mao and the PLA/CCP leadership continued to promote as a "Fine Example of Chinese Youth." While discrepancies appear in the record of Lei Feng's birth, he was born in either 1939 or 1940 to a lowly peasant family in the Anching Township, Wangcheng County, of the Hunan province.⁴ During Lei Feng's infancy, his father was killed, either by Kuomintang bandit troops or invading Japanese Imperial forces, the latter perhaps having pressed him into service as a "coolie" for the Japanese invaders. His father's death left Lei Feng's mother alone to care for him and two fellow siblings.⁵

The family's hardships worsened. In an effort to compensate for his father's lost wages, Lei Feng's older brother found work as a child laborer at a local factory. However, as a result of overwork, Lei Feng's older brother died, "poor and helpless" while in his mother's arms.⁶ Soon after this tragedy, Lei Feng's younger brother succumbed to starvation and disease, thus leaving Lei and his mother to fend for themselves against what his biographers contend were unscrupulous and immoral men of power. While attempting to provide for her last remaining child, Lei Feng's mother began to work as a servant for a local warlord. At the hands of this unprincipled landlord, Lei Feng's mother endured humiliation and rape. After the rape, Lei Feng's mother succumbed to shame and hung herself, thus making Lei an orphan.

Life as an orphan proved quite difficult for Lei Feng, as he survived through the help and assistance of his fellow impoverished relatives. However, according to Chen Tung-lei's article, Lei Feng's misery came to an end during August of 1949, as his hometown was liberated by the Peoples Liberation Army. As stated in Chen Tung-lei's account, Lei Feng crossed the path of Peng Teh-mou, the chairman of the peasants' association, and later the head of the Township People's Government. Upon meeting young Lei, Peng stroked the boy's head and said, "We all owe our liberation to Chairman Mao, the Communist Party, and the People's Liberation Army."⁷ This chance meeting left young Lei with a feeling of eternal indebtedness and gratefulness to Chairman Mao for ending the misery that was his life. According to many accounts, Lei Feng devoted himself daily to repaying his debt through diligent adherence to the qualities, teachings, and morals promoted by Chairman Mao.

Through assistance from the peasants' association and people's government, Lei attended CCP-sponsored schools that embedded slogans such as "Long Live Chairman Mao" into their young pupils. While Lei was a student in CCP-sponsored schools, the party filled the void left by

the death of Lei's family and fed and nurtured him, thus showing him the love and attention that he had not intimately experienced since the death of his mother. These surrogate family actions on the part of the Chinese Communist Party appear to have endeared the party eternally to Lei Feng.

Lei Feng's first opportunity to confront the oppressors came at a mass rally intended to pass judgment on the local landlords and warlords who were known to have exploited the Chinese peasantry. This event, mingled with Lei's previous life experiences under the old Chinese system, served as an awakening for young Lei Feng. This confrontation with local landlords and warlords is documented as one the first times Lei Feng applied his recently acquired education on class struggle to improving the situation of his fellow Chinese. Lei soon found his place of belonging amongst the ranks of the common workers, PLA soldiers and CCP members. In addition to this, Lei was exposed to Mao Zedong's revolutionary thought, thus giving Lei Feng an ideological framework for his hatred for the oppressors and exploiters of the Chinese proletariat.

According to Lei Feng's biographers, he expressed the degree of his love and commitment for the Party in these words: "The party has rescued me from the depths of misery and enabled me to lead such a comfortable life," he often thought to himself. "How shall I repay its kindness?"⁸ The patriotic piety expressed in this quotation emphasizes the fact that Lei and many of his fellow soldiers were products of the old Chinese social strata that stressed loyalty to the crown and family. Qualities such as loyalty were further emphasized by Chinese religious practices of ancestor worship, in addition to Confucian beliefs that stressed total loyalty to family and higher authority. These qualities were combined by party propagandists such as Lin Biao to

create a Peoples Republic citizen who, in turn, was molded into a PLA soldier who maintained obedience in the face of death or unfavorable odds.⁹

Despite Lei Feng becoming the most well known of China's heroes, he was not the first. Instead, he came from a long line of lesser-known revolutionary heroes who at one time or another were presented to the populace and army as the party's vision for the Chinese soldier/citizen. Most often these lesser figures, who lacked the star-power of Lei Feng, were depicted as former peasants, farmers, bandits/warlords, and occasionally university and secondary school students. Those of the former bandit/warlord ranks who joined the PLA most often did so out of self-preservation, convenience, and sometimes belief in the Chinese Communist cause.



Figure 2. Photo of Dong Cunrui.

Another of the many lesser-known revolutionaries was Dong Cunrui. Born of humble origins in 1929, Dong Cunrui grew up in the Huailai County of the Hebei Province. After joining the Eighth Route Army of the PLA in July of 1945, Dong Cunrui found success early on and was named a squad leader. Soon thereafter, Dong embraced the beliefs of the CCP and became a Party member in 1947. According to the *PLA Daily*, "With mastery of military skills and intelligence and bravery in battlefield, he won three 'Bravery Medals' and one

‘Mao Zedong Medal.’”¹⁰ Dong’s unit even won the title of the “Dong Cunrui Training Model Squad.”

On May 25, 1948, the Peoples Liberation Army began the assault of Longhua City. While advancing, Dong Cunrui’s unit was halted as a result of a hidden pill-box bunker, constructed on a bridge. After successive attempts were made to blow up the fortification, according to the *PLA Daily*, “Dong came out boldly, carrying an explosive package and rushed towards the hidden bunker.”¹¹ Upon realizing that the bridge was taller than he, and also that there was nowhere to place the explosive charge, Dong Cunrui, without hesitation, emphatically shouted, "For a new China, forward!" and pressed the explosives against the bridge with his hand, destroying the pill-box.¹² Through sacrificing his 19-year-old life, Dong Cunrui furthered the advance of his comrades-in-arms.

Despite the lack of scholarly work on figures such as Dong Cunrui, Chairman Mao and party leadership recognized the propaganda value of his deeds. In acknowledging Dong Cunrui’s value to the PLA, Ding Hong’s 1954 biography memorializing his epic deeds was titled, *A True Warrior-The Story of Dong Cunrui*. In 1955 the deeds of this revolutionary martyr were celebrated in a war film by award-winning director, Guo Wei. Throughout the film, director Guo Wei depicts Dong Cunrui as a role model for his audience. In an effort to appeal to the youth of China, the director portrays Dong as a young army reservist who, like Lei Feng, is so enthralled with the PLA that he lies about his age to join the Eighth Route Army. The film also features the battle for Longhua City and Dong Cunrui’s role in destroying four blockhouses and five fortifications.

After 1957, the image of Dong Cunrui with uplifted arms, defying the enemies of Communist China, became commonplace in PLA/CCP propaganda posters. The first of these

appeared in 1961, in a PLA/CCP propaganda series titled “Young heroes’ scrolls.” As the first of many posters glorifying Dong Cunrui, the “Young heroes’ scrolls” cast the mold for the future depiction of PLA/CCP martyrs. The PLA/CCP’s use of Lei Feng in propaganda after 1963 marked the first time that one person or figure embodied all and more of the qualities and heroic nature of his revolutionary forefathers.



Figure 3. Posters entitled, “The Story of Dong Cunrui,” (1975) and “Young Heroes’ scrolls,” (1961).

Lei Feng during the Cultural Revolution

Although Lei Feng was an actual person, the details of his life, including those in his famous diary, seem to have been largely manufactured by Lin Biao. As Chairman Mao's top deputy, Lin was acutely aware of the government's need to redirect the public's attention after the demoralizing failure of the Great Leap Forward. As Mao, Lin, and others prepared their next plan to revolutionize Chinese culture, they needed a fresh young face whose words and deeds would help promote their new agenda. To fill the void, Lin Biao put forth the carefully crafted figure of Lei Feng, hero of the forthcoming Cultural Revolution.¹³

Mao Zedong began the Cultural Revolution with the intent of ridding China of its "liberal bourgeoisie" elements in addition to continuing revolutionary class struggle. The true motivation behind the Cultural Revolution was Mao and his supporters' desire to regain control of the party from rivals including Deng Xiaoping after the failures of the Great Leap Forward. As this internal power struggle continued, its effects resonated nationwide, causing social, political, and economic chaos throughout large sections of Chinese society and almost bringing the PRC to the brink of a second civil war.

The wrath of Chairman Mao was felt through the actions of his minister of defense and successor during the Cultural Revolution, Lin Biao. As a veteran general of the PLA, a major contributor in the creation of "Peoples War" doctrine, and Chairman Mao's "best pupil," Lin immersed himself in efforts to eradicate the foes of Mao. Early in the history of the PLA/CCP, Chairman Mao displayed utmost confidence in Lin Biao, naming him to head the institution that trained all Chinese Communist military leaders. Soon thereafter, Mao appointed Lin to head the reorganized party school and made him the Peoples Republic's lead negotiator for the Chungking peace talks with the remnant of Nationalist forces.¹⁴

For over twenty-five years, Lin Biao championed Mao's thought and displayed wholehearted faith in Mao's agenda. According to a 1970 CIA intelligence report, *Lin Piao and the Great Helmsman*, Lin was a character who has "abjured anybody of thought of his own, or even any identity of his own, apart from that of Mao. He has presented himself as entirely Mao's instrument, the perfect servant, recognizing the distance between the law-giver and himself, doing his best to understand and carrying out with all his might what he could understand."¹⁵ The personal attributes of Lin Biao, as noted by such Western sources, were exactly those qualities he employed in creating the many facets of Lei Feng. One additional quality included Lin Biao's devotion to the authority of Chairman Mao, and his total commitment to the revolution.¹⁶



Figure 4. Poster entitled "Study from Comrade Lei Feng, foster a Communist moral character," (1983).

In the persona of Lei Feng, Lin Biao saw potential for creating the perfect iconography for Mao's new socialist man. In many respects, Lei Feng was an improved version of Lin Biao himself: A good-looking man (a trait Lin reportedly lacked) who was a studious and diligent student of Maoist thought (just as Lin had proven to be). Lin's next task would be to use his skill

as a promoter of political doctrine to convince both citizens and soldiers to support Mao's vision of the Cultural Revolution, with Lei Feng as the ideal example.

During the Cultural Revolution, official reports about the Spartan-like qualities of Lei Feng were disseminated throughout the education system. According to these reports, Lei's highly promoted willingness to do without and his personal desire to help his nation and fellow countrymen had first become evident in 1956, when Lei happily left school to join a cooperative farm in the Chinese countryside. After a stint at the cooperative, Lei Feng began working in the Wangcheng County Committee of the Communist Party. While there, Lei Feng became captivated by the stories of revolutionary martyrs like Dong Curui, told to him by the Party secretary.¹⁷

Thereafter, having found a place in which he belonged, Lei Feng dedicated himself to the teachings of the CCP and the PLA and began to offer his own thoughts on patriotic service. For example, one of Lei Feng's best known writings referred to the importance of a single screw to a machine, an analogy for the importance of every Chinese citizen being diligent in his appointed role in the revolution. According to Lei, "It is only by the many, many interconnected and fixed screws that the machine can move freely, increasing its enormous work power. Though a screw is small, its use is beyond estimation."¹⁸



Figure 5. Poster of “Lei Feng in truck.”

His selfless deeds were commemorated in a propaganda poster series titled “Great Communist Warrior-Lei Feng,” that depicted Lei as the completely devoted CCP soldier. One such poster illustrated his willingness to serve as a much-needed tractor driver on a recently established communal farm at Tuanshanhu. While in the cab of his truck, Lei devoted every spare moment to immersing himself in the teachings of Chairman Mao. Another poster displayed his joyful military enlistment upon hearing reports of conscription. In these ways, Lei conformed completely to Chairman Mao’s vision of the fully indoctrinated Chinese soldier who, in turn, was to serve as the conduit for the indoctrination of Chinese workers and peasants.¹⁹

From 1963 onward, Lin Biao was determined to mold the psyche of an entire generation of Chinese children, teenagers, and young adults with Lei Feng as their “Superman.”²⁰ By bombarding China’s youth with images of Lei Feng as the iconic savior, Lin Biao encouraged hordes of young boys and girls who, in dedication to Chairman Mao, would take it upon

themselves to emulate the deeds of Lei Feng. Lin Biao hoped that many of these boys and girls would go on to fill the ranks of the PLA and toil in obscurity in party-owned factories, or work for years on communal farms in distant counties or provinces.



Figure 6. Poster entitled “Uncle Lei Feng tells revolutionary stories,” (1965).

To reinforce Lei Feng’s image as a mentor to children, Lin Biao used propaganda posters to drive the message home. For example, one 1965 poster, “Uncle Lei Feng tells revolutionary stories,” depicted the young hero reading to a group of children. To Western eyes, the scene might seem reminiscent of a kindly uncle entertaining youngsters with “Mother Goose” tales. In this case, however, the “uncle” wore a military uniform, the surrounding group was comprised of Young Pioneers with their signature red scarves, and the tales involved the intellectual and moral principles of Chairman Mao and the PLA. With such images, “Uncle Lei” was forever etched in the minds of generations of Communist youth as a surrogate family member who could always take time out from the revolution to provide others with insight on Chairman Mao’s thought.²¹

In addition, Lin Biao presented excerpts from Lei Feng’s diary (now widely acknowledged as Lin’s own fabrication) to inspire Chinese youth. Taken from Lei Feng’s diary were slogans imploring young people to “willingly submit to the Great Leader,” Chairman Mao.

In another, Lei asserted that “I must learn to be a good soldier of Mao Tse-Tung and devote all the golden time of my youth to the most splendid cause of the motherland.”²² Over the course of the Cultural Revolution, party leaders continually promoted the figure of Lei Feng as one who embodied morality, integrity, and selflessness, in addition to complete dedication to party and nation.

The impact of Lei Feng’s image on children, teenagers, and young adults was made clearly visible in the novel, *Red Scarf Girl*, by Jiang, Ji-li. In her work, Jiang provided a vivid depiction of the role of propaganda and ideology in Communist China, both before and during the Cultural Revolution.²³ Jiang relayed how Lei Feng “study groups” emphasizing his good deeds were imposed on her, her fellow students, and civilians in general, during school hours and even private times at home. Jiang Ji-li’s work validated the effectiveness of the “Learn from Comrade Lei Feng” campaign which, according to a 1970 CIA report, was creating a “new completely political, hyper-motivated, selfless party worker who will direct imperfect men in the building of a new Chinese society.”²⁴

In 1964, the foundations of a Lei Feng personality cult, approved by Chairman Mao, were firmly established with the opening of a museum dedicated to the spirit of Lei Feng. While benefitting from the “James Dean” factor (dying young and tragically), Lei Feng’s new life as an icon of mythological proportions began during the Cultural Revolution. From 1966-1969, the PLA carried out the orders of Lin Biao and created ad hoc groups,²⁵ similar to the “study groups” mentioned in Jiang, Ji-li’s novel, *Red Scarf Girl*, that encouraged citizens to actively follow the example of Lei Feng. In addition to this, the Lei Feng “study groups” mentioned in *Red Scarf Girl* were also used to indoctrinate and oversee workers, students, and even fellow soldiers.



145 A group of "Little Red Guards" admire the new four-volume edition of *The Selected Works of Mao Zedong* and the reprinted *Quotations from Mao Zedong*. The boys had walked from Baoqing county, over 400 kilometers away, and waited overnight to buy the new editions, Harbin, February 1967.

Figure 7. Photo of Little Red Guards admiring *The Selected Works of Mao Zedong*

This indoctrination of all elements of Chinese society is vividly apparent in a picture from 1967, which depicts a group of enthusiastic "Little Red Guards" who, in following the example of Lei Feng's "screw spirit," are diligently immersing themselves in the newly released four-volume edition of *The Selected Works of Mao Zedong* and the *Quotations from Mao Zedong*. As the 1970s began, the imagery of Lei Feng retained its continuity as China's most recognizable symbol of "whole-hearted service to the people." During this time the example of Lei Feng was quickly becoming firmly entrenched in a generation of children, whose adolescence and teenage years spanned the course of the Cultural Revolution (1966-69).²⁶ It was this generation who set it as their goal to forever rid their nation of the corrupting forces of old China. An excellent example of this determination is found in a conversation Jiang, Ji-li had with her grandmother during these tumultuous times, in which she rebukes her grandmother, stating:

“But Grandma, we have to get rid of those old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. Chairman Mao said they’re holding us back....”²⁷ The authoritative voice of the youthful Jiang to her grandmother displays the influence of both Chairman Mao’s thought and his “golden boy,” Lei Feng.

After 1970, Chairman Mao and his top deputy, Lin Biao, turned to Chinese peasants to shore up their faltering regime. As their emphasis shifted, so did that of the Lei Feng propaganda. This subtle, yet very important shift culminated in imagery depicting Lei Feng as a compassionate soldier/citizen who had the highest regard for the peasantry, the PRC’s backbone. For example, in a 1973 poster titled, “Our army is for the people, the people warmly love our army,” Lei Feng is shown smiling joyfully at the sight of friendship and unity between himself as a young soldier and a rugged peasant.



Figure 8. Posters entitled, “Our army is for the people, the people warmly love our army,” (1973).
“Have a deep love for Mao Thought just like comrade Lei Feng,” (1977)

The new, peasant-loving image of Lei Feng managed to survive even the deaths of Lin Biao in 1971 and Chairman Mao in 1976. Evidence of this is displayed in a poster titled, “Have a deep love for Mao Thought just like comrade Lei Feng” (1977). In this poster, the image of Lei remained the face of Chairman Mao’s new socialist man, despite the political upheavals following the death of Mao in 1976. Clearly visible are attitudes of the Party leadership’s continuing vision for the peasantry, displayed in the image of a hard-working and hard-studying female, who always has her Maoist teachings on hand. Ever a symbol of continuity and solidarity, Lei Feng’s image helped to quell potential citizen dissenters during the transfer of power from Mao to Hua Guofeng, and eventually to Deng Xiaoping, who seized power in 1978.

Lei Feng as a symbol of China's Future

Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, a new phase of Lei Feng's popular imagery began. The Deng philosophy asserted that "party policies were based on reality, not dogma. And most importantly, it was wrong to follow every word of Mao to the letter."²⁸ Just as Lei Feng had been recreated over the years, so he would be again from the late 1970s to the 1990s. Under Deng's "socialist market economy," Lei Feng now became the face of entrepreneurship, consumerism, and prosperity.

Lei Feng's role in promoting this new emphasis on prosperity is clearly evident in propaganda posters such as "Mama tells me to study Lei Feng" (1982). In this depiction of the Chinese family, they live in a new house, both taking in the beauty of nature and enjoying modern comforts, including a television. The economic standing of this mother, under the "socialist market economy," has improved to the point that she is depicted in fashionable women's clothing. Further, she is wearing a wristwatch, an item disparaged for many years as a capitalist luxury within the Peoples Republic China.

The mother is herself very likely a child of the Cultural Revolution who had experienced the pleasures and pains of those years. Now she is teaching her own child the rich history of Lei Feng. Interestingly enough, the picture of Lei on the little boy's storybook was the party-approved image of militaristic Chinese masculinity that had long been propagated to young boys. This model continued to be widely promoted, despite the new career options available to both boys and girls in Deng's "socialist market economy."



Figure 9. Posters entitled, “Mama tells me to study Lei Feng,” (1982). “We will learn from Lei Feng and become new people” (1982).

These new-found economic opportunities of the 1980s were made visible and accessible to a new generation of the PRC’s youth, once more through the model of Lei Feng. In another poster titled, “We will learn from Lei Feng and become new people,” there is a fusion of tradition with modernity that revolves around comrade Lei Feng, the party-appointed torch bearer. The recurring image of “Young Pioneers” saluting comrade Lei Feng serves as the glue, binding the noble revolutionary past to the symbols of skyscrapers and modernity looming in the horizon behind the little girl and boy, representing their future in the PRC. As the party-approved face of Chinese values, Lei Feng’s image would later oppose the efforts of millions of little girls and boys, who became disgruntled teenagers and young adults during the tumultuous Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

The fusion of revolutionary ideals and twentieth-century modernity made great strides during the 1980s and 1990s within the PRC. As American boys were watching patriotic G.I. Joe

cartoons and playing with “action heroes” based on their favorite characters, their Chinese counterparts amused themselves with similar militaristic action figures depicting Lei Feng, Mao’s “socialist man,” fully equipped in all the battle armaments needed to defeat American Imperialism and all remaining enemies of the Peoples Republic.



Figure 10. Photo “PLA Transportation Soldier Lei Feng.”

Lei Feng became the paramount iconic figure of the Peoples Republic of China during these prosperous times within the market economy, surpassing his creators, and arguably Chairman Mao himself.

Through Deng’s careful manipulation of Lei Feng’s many personas, his face and name became a stamp of approval for citizens to engage in ventures previously thought of as un-socialist, including private ownership and entrepreneurship. As the representations of Lei Feng during the 1990s became modern and progressive, his “can do” attitude intermingled with capitalistic practices. Lei’s entrepreneurial spirit was made evident, for example, in an article

praising “a laid-off worker who had opened a shop of his own.” The official *China Daily* said he possessed Lei's “lofty spirit.”²⁹



Figure 11. Poster by Yang Liqun, “Study Lei Feng, serve the people wholeheartedly.” Studying Lei Feng leads to technological progress,” (1995).

While Deng Xiaoping avoided propagation of his own image during his premiership, his administration oversaw the enrichment of “the Lei Feng Spirit” with capitalistic attributes and ambitions. This trend inspired by the market economy became evident in a poster titled, “Study Lei Feng, serve the people wholeheartedly. Studying Lei Feng leads to technological progress.” Here, Lei is cast as a celestial figure leading young and old, peasant and worker to the fruits of modernity, depicted as skyscrapers, monorails, roads, and space exploration. In the top left hand corner of this poster, military security and dominance in the form of satellites and rockets radiate from the reassuring and uniquely Chinese image of Lei Feng.

Always benefitting society through his every action, the image and influence of Lei Feng crushed the opposition’s preconceptions of capitalism and instead became the party-approved

image of a Chinese socialist in the market economy. Within the domain of the market economy, Lei would not only perform acts of generosity, but he would open businesses and create jobs for his fellow countrymen. This concept of performing acts that simultaneously benefitted society and self was articulated in an interview with Lan Hai, a computer engineer, and the son of a retired officer in the People's Liberation Army. "We don't think being a capitalist is bad. A capitalist is a manager," said Lan Hai. "Managing a company benefits society. If we don't have capitalists, I don't think society will work well. Everyone should be a capitalist, I think."³⁰



Figure 12. Photo of Lei Feng condom packaging.

Since the onset of the twenty-first century, imagery of Lei Feng has inspired millions to pursue private ownership and entrepreneurship that profit society and self. This form of profit-making had been appalling to Chairman Mao and hard-line CCP members in their efforts to control society and prevent PRC citizens from participating in all forms of vice, even those that made money. Even in recent times, though, the government has drawn the line on some of the more extreme uses of Lei Feng to promote profit. For example, one go-getting Chinese entrepreneur was ordered by authorities to stop selling condoms with the image of Lei Feng on the packaging, as shown in the picture above. While this was an admittedly outrageous act of commercialism, the argument could be made that this Latex condom distributor's morally

questionable product does serve society in the state's campaign for population control and the prevention of STDs and AIDS.³¹

Now as the “promotional face” of a wide array of industries, Lei Feng's ideal of “service before self” took on new meaning in the 21st century. Lei's image came to represent a reassuring icon of the party's noble past that was increasingly tinged with Western behaviors of modernity, as a result of capitalism. The image of Lei was now one of a learned socialist man of the world, and a consumer, a fact that may have enhanced his appeal to the Western world. This loosening up of Lei Feng's image propelled him into the role of a global icon for industriousness and dedication to state.

After years of proven ideological success in China, the strength of Lei's "lofty spirit" achieved yet another victory for Chairman Mao's “socialist man” when he came to the attention of Western nations and institutions. According to a *Peoples Daily* article, “the American people founded the Association of Learning from Lei Feng, and sent delegates to China as pilgrims.” As a result of their actions, reportedly “the portrait of Lei Feng hangs high in a hall at West Point.”³² Furthermore, among the “five great heroes” admired by West Pointers, “Lei Feng's name is at the top.” His personal mantra, “A person's life is limited. Serving the people is unlimited,” is reported to have been printed in the West Point student handbook.”³³ This reported American acceptance of Lei Feng's "lofty spirit" blossomed into a UNESCO proposal for the internationally acclaimed "Lei Feng Spirit." In an effort “to make sure that Lei Feng stays alive in the hearts of the Chinese people,” CPPCC member Liu Jianglong has submitted a proposal suggesting that the government apply for UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status for the "Lei Feng Spirit.”³⁴

In death, Lei Feng and the flexibility of his propaganda imagery surpassed that of rival Western icons. Michael Jordan can serve as the post-1984 face of international basketball, while selling Haynes t-shirts or underwear. Michael Jackson as the “King of Pop” transcended musical and generational gaps while being so recognizable that his likeness was used to sell Honda scooters and Pepsi Cola in the 1980s. However, for one reason or another, their images and others like them were generally confined to certain themes. This was not, and certainly is not the case with Lei. Lei Feng has become not only a model Chinese citizen and soldier, but a successful example to fellow nations of how they, too, could create a timeless, global image of the ideal man.³⁵

Conclusion

Despite Lei Feng's death nearly fifty years ago, his symbol has continued to evolve with the times, illustrating the CCP/PLA's changing concept of the omni-competent soldier and citizen. This phenomenon is firmly rooted in the fact that Lei Feng embodies many qualities that Chinese citizens have continued to value and appreciate. His personal philosophy, still esteemed by many Chinese, both young and old, was summed up in his own words: "I believe we should live so that others may have a better life.... I will gladly put up with a few hardships myself if I can thereby help others and do some good deeds."³⁶

Since the publication of Lei Feng's diary, this eternally young martyr, through his complete devotion to Chairman Mao and the CCP, has become a national and worldwide symbol of selflessness and sacrifice. Additionally, the qualities of Lei Feng have ingrained themselves into Chinese culture and language. For example, various publications describe the actions of individuals as "He/ She is learning from Lei Feng," and "He/She is a Lei Feng." Over the course of more than forty years, the deeds of Lei Feng have inspired generations of Chinese to emulate his actions in one form or another, through the party's use of pictures, posters, movies, and even comic strips.

In spite of the influx of Western culture and economic standards, these beliefs approved by the CCP have managed to be integrated into Chinese society even as both the general culture and the symbol of Lei Feng have changed through the decades. To this day, the party promotes lei Feng as a timeless icon who simultaneously represents China's past, present, and future. "As times change, the interpretation of the Lei Feng Spirit has also been continually enriched and has now far exceeded the narrow scope of altruism," as the official *China Daily* has asserted. "It can always have new definitions suited to the demands of the times."³⁷

Endnotes

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- ² Jonathan Spence, Pei-kai Cheng, and Michael Lestz, *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary History* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 417.
- ³ Judith Farquhar, *Appetites: food and sex in postsocialist China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 37.
- ⁴ Tung-lei Chen, "Lei Feng," 450.
- ⁵ "Lei Feng, Chairman Mao's Good Fighter," in *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, edited by Patricia Ebrey (New York: The Free Press, 1981), 442.
- ⁶ Tung-lei Chen, "Lei Feng," 450.
- ⁷ Ibid., 451.
- ⁸ "Lei Feng, Chairman Mao's Good Fighter," 443.
- ⁹ Robert B. Rigg, *Red China's Fighting Hordes* (Pennsylvania: The Telegraph Press, 1951), 2.
- ¹⁰ "Dong Cunrui," *PLA Daily*, July 7, 2007, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/site2/special-reports/2007-07/12/content_875676.htm.
- ¹¹ "Dong Cunrui," *PLA Daily*, July 7, 2007, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/site2/special-reports/2007-07/12/content_875676.htm.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Jiaqi Yan And Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 182.
- ¹⁴ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Lin Piao and The Great Helmsman*, CIA Released Document 1/21/1970, 4, http://www.foia.cia.gov/browse_docs.asp?doc_no=0000283487
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 3.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 3.
- ¹⁷ Tung-lei Chen, "Lei Feng," 451.
- ¹⁸ Julian Baum, "New-Old Role Model, Peking propagandist bring back their '60s hero: Lei Feng," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 6, 1987, <http://www.morningsun.org/living/heroes/ChristianScienceMonitor.html>

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- ¹⁹ Ibid.. 11.
- ²⁰ “Lei Feng,” 442.
- ²¹ Stefan Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages*, <http://www.iisg.nl/landsberger/lf.html>.
- ²² Tung-lei Chen, “Lei Feng,” 453.
- ²³ Ji-li Jiang, *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 154.
- ²⁴ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Lin Piao and The Great Helmsman*.
- ²⁵ Larry Wortzel, “The General Political Department and the Evolution of the Political Commissar System,” in *The People’s Liberation Army as Organization*, edited by James C. Mulvenon and Andrew N.D. Yang, 226.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ji-li Jiang, *Red Scarf Girl*, 25.
- ²⁸ Chang Jung, *Wild Swans Three Daughters of China* (New York: Flamingo, 1993), 386, [http://www.scribd.com/doc/7167916/Chang-Jung-Wild-Swans-Three Daughters-of-China](http://www.scribd.com/doc/7167916/Chang-Jung-Wild-Swans-Three-Daughters-of-China)
- ²⁹ Steven Mufson, “China Beefs-Up Its Private Sector,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, April 12, 1998, A18, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/china/stories/private041298.htm>
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Japundit, “Learn from Lei Feng,” November 14, 2006, <http://blog.japundit.com/archives/2006/11/14/4149/>
- ³² Des Forges, Roger V, Ning Luo, Yen-bo Wu, *Chinese democracy and the crisis of 1989: Chinese and American Reflections* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 325.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Joel Martinsen, “Lei Feng heritage for the whole world,” *Chongqing Morning Post*, March 5, 2009, http://www.danwei.org/people/lei_feng_2009.php
- ³⁵ As a result, the exportation of revolution by the People’s Republic of China the effectiveness of the Lei Feng propaganda became clearly visible through insurrections in Cambodia, Vietnam, Angola, and several other nations.

³⁶ Jonathan Spence, Pei-kai Cheng, and Michael Lestz, *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary History* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 420.

³⁷ China Daily, cited in Stefan Landsberger, *Paint it Red. Fifty years of Chinese Propaganda Posters* (Groningen: Intermed Publishers, 1998), 23, <http://chinese posters.net/resources/landsberger-paint-it-red.php>

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Vita

Clement A. Dugue' III was born in New Orleans, Louisiana and earned his B.A from The University of New Orleans in 2007. While blossoming late scholastically, Clement A. Dugue' III has made great strides in academia since completing military service by maintaining a cumulative 3.61 grade point average. Clement A. Dugue' III's high standard of collegiate academic achievement was first recognized in the fall of 2005, when he became a recipient of the highly competitive, Nicholls State University, Louisiana State Government Internship, in addition to making the Nicholls State University Dean's List for the fall of 2005. After completing his undergraduate degree in May of 2007, Clement A. Dugue' III's dedicated efforts were rewarded with a graduate school scholarship by the University of New Orleans History department. In return, Clement rewarded the faith and wise judgment of the University of New Orleans History department with an appointment to the Deans List during the fall semester of 2008 and an excellent showing as the Closing key-note speaker at the University of New Orleans, Graduate Student Colloquium, 2008.

Despite working full-time throughout college and graduate school, Clement A. Dugue' III continues to stay abreast of current trends within the field of historiography and remain active within both the academic community and overall society of New Orleans. Since 2007, Clement A. Dugue' III has served as a Board Member for the New Orleans African American Museum, Exhibit Planning Committee. Additionally, Clement has served as a contributing artist with Young Audiences, a private organization dedicated to preserving the artistic and scholastic attributes of New Orleans.