

Chinese Heroism Effort Is Met With Cynicism

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FUSHUN, China — Some national heroes are born in the crucible of war. Others have far less dramatic origins.

So it was in the summer of 1962, when a soldier at this army base in northeast China reversed his truck into a telephone pole, sending it crashing onto the head of a 22-year-old comrade. The young man died, but his short life provided Communist Party propagandists with a perfect icon: Lei Feng, industrious, generous and irresistibly impish, China's most endearing soldier, the sort of fellow who would darn his comrades' socks and skip a meal so others might eat.

In urging people to "Learn from Lei Feng" a year after his death, Mao Zedong sought to imbue China's youth with a passion for self-sacrifice and patriotism — and perhaps distract them from the hunger pangs of famine that followed his disastrous effort to rapidly industrialize in the Great Leap Forward.

But the party's efforts to resuscitate the spirit of Lei Feng on the 50th anniversary of his death have exposed the limits of old school propaganda in the age of the Internet. The campaign, which culminated Monday with the annual "Learn From Lei Feng Day," has provoked a fresh round of public cynicism about a ruling party that is struggling to cultivate a sense of legitimacy.

The familiar lessons about Lei Feng's feats and thoughtfulness that have inundated newspapers and television have been met by snickers, expressed through essays, cartoons and blog postings that highlight the government's failure to practice the idealized morality it seeks to propagate.

One posting on Sina Weibo, the country's popular microblog service, seemed to sum up the sentiment that it is party officials, not ordinary citizens, who should be studying Lei Feng's selflessness. "Your children have migrated overseas but you ask me to learn from Lei Feng in China," said the posting by the sharp-tongued blogger who goes by the name Notebook and has two million followers. "I have cancer because of the poisonous milk I drank but you ask me to learn from Lei Feng." The post was deleted by censors on Friday.

Even Ren Zhiqiang, one of China's wealthiest property developers, could not help himself. Apparently invoking a line from Lei Feng's official diary that schoolchildren once memorized, "My only ambition is to be a rustless screw for the great cause of revolution," Mr. Ren called the legend a naked propaganda tool "for turning all citizens into screws that can be willfully placed anywhere."

"That way, there is no need for democracy, human rights or freedom," he wrote.

Dai Qing, a muckraking journalist and lapsed Communist Party member, said that many Chinese were offended by the patronizing message of moral righteousness. "Would I help a senior citizen or a child in need?" she said in an interview. "Of course I would, but not because I was told to do so by a government movement. Empathy is a minimal requirement of human decency, not one that should be directed by a political party."

The propaganda blitzkrieg, which also includes the breathless promotion of modern-day heroes and model citizens, seeks to counteract a growing sense that China, preoccupied by seemingly ceaseless economic growth, is ethically unmoored.

Tales of official malfeasance abound, the rich drive Lamborghinis without license plates and good Samaritans appear to be in short supply. Lei Feng's good deeds sound especially hollow to Chinese still shocked by the inaction of the two dozen people who last year walked past a mortally injured 2-year-old as she lay in the street after being run over by two vehicles.

Li Chengpeng, a sports writer and novelist who commands a huge Weibo following, said that government-sponsored role models strained credulity. Previous party icons include Iron Man Wang, who dog-paddled in a vat of cement when there was no machine to mix it; Shi Chuanxiang, a happy-go-lucky "night soil" collector; and Wang Yiqing, an electronics worker who assembled five million radio parts without a single mistake.

"China has had hundreds of these somewhat fake role models," Mr. Li said in a phone interview. "They don't work because they don't represent the right values. Lei Feng is a good guy but he doesn't have critical thinking skills, doesn't reflect on things and only follows marching orders."

Western scholars have long questioned the Lei Feng biography, and now the Internet has given rise to deniers who have been merrily poking holes in his story. They have questioned how a poor orphan living on a tiny army stipend could donate so much money to the needy, and how he collected more than 300 pounds of cow dung on a single day during Chinese New Year.

Others have questioned the flawless script in his official diary and wondered how there came to be hundreds of photographs recording his every good deed. [Liu Yi](#), a designer in Shanghai, pointed out the absurdity of one famous image showing Lei Feng in bed reading Mao's collected works by flashlight — except that the flashlight is off and the room is fully illuminated. “And there just happened to be a photojournalist passing by to capture the moment,” he wrote.

If the maelstrom of ridicule seems particularly intense this year, it might be because Weibo users — whose numbers recently surpassed 300 million — realize the days of unfettered, anonymous criticism may be drawing to a close. Beginning on March 16, new government regulations will require real-name registration. Another rule will require Sina Weibo to review the posts of those who have more than 100,000 followers. Those “harmful” to national interests, according to the rules, must be summarily deleted within five minutes.

Here in Fushun, where Mao's favorite soldier is buried beneath a hulking granite plinth, those who have devoted their lives to preserving Lei Feng's legacy seem unconcerned. “Call it propaganda but in these days of waning morality, everyone should be studying Lei Feng all year round, not just on March 5,” said Chen Zhao, the director of the [Lei Feng Memorial](#), a propagandistic tour de force packed with the minutiae — real or otherwise — of its subject's abbreviated life.

Highlights include a console that plays his tinny, animated voice and the rope his mother — hounded by a greedy landlord — purportedly used to hang herself. Then there are the excerpts from the 330 diary entries, 12 articles, 18 speeches, 30 poems, 3 novels and 9 works of prose attributed to him, all dating to his two-plus years in the army.

After a quick spin through the relics, Zhang Dongping, 65, a retired chemical engineer, emerged with a facsimile of Lei Feng's diary and a set of classic post card images that show the model youth polishing military vehicles with delight. As Mr. Zhang posed for a picture beside Lei Feng's tomb, he was asked whether he had been inspired to practice noble deeds as a teenager.

Mr. Zhang paused and shook his head. "To be honest," he said, "back then I was too busy trying to find enough food to eat."

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