

Beijing's new moral model: from peasant soldier to middle class consumer

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For generations of Chinese, Mao Zedong's slogan of "learn from Comrade Lei Feng"—a peasant soldier who symbolised Maoist "morality"—has been an ever-present component of their education and lives. This year, Beijing is suddenly updating Lei's image transforming him into a new moral model more conducive with "market reform" and its ideological needs to appeal to the rising middle class.

Mao elevated Lei, previously an unknown peasant soldier in the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA), as the ideal for Chinese youth after he was killed in a traffic accident in 1962. In the aftermath of the economic disasters of the "Great Leap Forward," Lei was hailed as "the revolutionary screw that never rusts", whose loyalty to the PLA, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Mao Zedong remained rock solid.

Lei supposedly left behind a diary, probably faked. According to the official account, his childhood was a tragic example of the plight of the labouring masses of "old China". His father was killed by Japanese invaders and his mother committed suicide after landlord demanded payments she could not afford. As a rural orphan, Lei symbolised the changing fate of the Chinese peasants as the new CCP regime provided him with education and a decent job after the 1949 revolution. In his diary, he declared that he wanted to be "a good soldier of Mao Zedong" and "a model member" of the CCP.

For decades, Lei served Beijing's propaganda as the archetypical plain, hard-working, unquestioning peasant who formed the foundation of the regime. Images of Lei was widely propagated in his army uniform, doing "good deeds" as well as expressing his loyalty to Beijing and his personal appreciation for the Chinese Revolution. Lei became a legendary figure about whom stories and songs were written to glorify him, especially among school kids. Even after Mao's image had long disappeared from most public places, Lei still frequently appeared on public bill boards and in the media as an idealised expression of "socialist" morality.

Now Lei is undergoing a radical remake. New research in a book entitled "Lei Feng: 1940-1962" was released on

March 5—the official "Learn from Lei Feng Day"—which "discovered" a new Lei who was more "trendy" than previously thought.

The book discloses that Lei was not always dressed in his army uniform but owned sweaters, a leather jacket and an elegant watch—all luxury items in 1950s and 60s. It also appears that he had a girl friend. Lei's interest in driving a truck is compared to "driving a BMW car" today. One of the newly published photos shows him riding a motorcycle in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. A slightly "rebellious" edge is given to him with the claim that he hid a more fashionable hair-style that was banned at the time in the army.

Shi Yonggang, the book's editor, said the publication was aimed at contemporary Chinese youth who no longer have much regard for Lei. "It's a pity that the image of Lei Feng depicted in those books [previous publications] is hard for people, especially young people, to understand and accept nowadays... Lei Feng did almost all the fashionable things of his days," Shi told the official Xinhua news agency.

The new facts about Lei and the hundreds of supporting pictures reveal that he was an ordinary young worker, who came from the countryside. He briefly worked in a factory before joining the army and becoming a driver in a logistic unit.

Beijing's efforts to refashion Lei's image is a clear pitch to newly affluent layers who have benefitted from two decades of "market reform". By substituting one fabricated picture of Lei for another, without any explanation, the regime is hoping to create a new social base of support, even as its previous one among the peasantry is breaking down amid rising levels of poverty and social inequality.

These crude propaganda efforts have been accompanied by a new online computer game entitled "Learn from Lei Feng," released earlier this month. Developed by a NASDAQ-listed Chinese software company, Shanda Interactive Entertainment, the game promotes Chinese patriotism and obedience to authority among the country's online gaming community of 14.3 million, mostly young, players.

Although the official justification is to divert young people from Internet pornography and violence, the game is hardly enlightening, politically or culturally. The game requires players to do “good deeds” by helping each other to gain strength and combat “evil forces” such as secret agents attacking the Motherland—all in collaboration with Communist Party secretaries. One of the game’s rewards is a copy of Mao’s collected works and the ultimate goal is a meeting with the Chairman himself.

While the game is probably not going to be a winner among young Internet fans, there is no doubt that Beijing’s relentless appeals to reactionary Chinese nationalism have had an impact. Last year’s eruption of anti-Japanese protests and vicious racist attacks on Japanese citizens in China by layers of mainly middle-class youth was one result. The Fengqing or “angry youth” of China are a product of a climate of intellectual ignorance and backwardness. They view their future as bound up with the rise of Chinese capitalism against its rivals.

The refashioning of “Learn from Lei Feng” is part of a broader propaganda campaign. As the social gulf between rich and poor widens, Beijing can no longer rely on its false claims to be “socialist”. The general social breakdown is expressed in the widespread poverty and endemic official corruption, as well as prostitution, drug addiction and rising levels of anti-social violence.

The social basis for the Maoist morality—unquestioning loyalty in return for limited social guarantees of a job, housing, health care, education and a pension—has been destroyed. In order to provide a new “morality” to regulate a deeply divided society, the Chinese leadership is increasingly turning to conservative traditional ideologies, particularly the “Confucian values” of the old imperial system.

On March 4, President Hu Jintao issued a new official moral code, which was particularly aimed at young people. He listed “eight honours and eight disgraces,” stating that people should: “Love, do not harm the motherland”, “Uphold science; don’t be ignorant and unenlightened” and “Work hard; don’t be lazy and hate work”... and “Be disciplined and law-abiding instead of chaotic and lawless”.

Hu declared at a National Peoples Congress seminar that the code would provide a new guideline. “We must not allow the boundaries to be blurred when it comes to right and wrong, evil and kindness, beauty and ugliness,” he insisted. How was “right and wrong” or “evil and kindness” to be determined? Hu explained that the primary criterion had to be: anyone who “endangered” the motherland was “disgraceful” and thus immoral.

Of course, Hu’s list of “eight honours and eight disgraces” was not meant to apply to his audience of senior bureaucrats.

The children of the Chinese leaders have amassed enormous personal wealth through the plundering of state enterprises. Provincial and local party bosses often keep concubines and use their positions for commercial gain. Some “communist cadres” join with the emerging mafia in organised crime, while others are welcome guests at international casinos where they play with stolen public funds.

Mao’s moral code never had anything to do with socialism. Rather it reflected the necessities of a guerrilla army and the outlook of the peasants who enlisted in it—austere self-sacrifice, collective effort and unquestioning loyalty. Its suspicion and hostility to urban life, education and culture came to the fore during the so-called Cultural Revolution in the 1960s when all of the above were denounced as “bourgeois”—no doubt the reason that Comrade Lei Feng’s leather jacket and watch were omitted from earlier official accounts.

While Hu’s new code attempts to hark back to Mao, the new emphasis is on the individual, rather than collective or cooperative effort. Previous references to “socialism” have been largely expunged. The amassing of obscene wealth at the expense of others has long ago been declared by the Chinese leadership to be an honour rather than disgrace. What remains is the supreme virtue of unquestioning loyalty to the motherland—that is to the present police state regime.

None of this has any meaning for the millions of workers laid off from state enterprises or the massive pool of rural poor desperately seeking a job in cities. While the new Lei Feng may have some appeal to the affluent middle-class elite, the vast majority of young people in China still regard an expensive watch as a luxury and a BMW as an impossible dream.



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