

The Making of a Hero:  
Lei Feng and Some Issues of Historiography

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Lei Feng 雷锋 (1940-1962), a People's Liberation Army soldier who was famous for his loyalty to the Party and Chairman Mao and for his selfless acts of helping others, became a cultural icon in the twentieth century in People's Republic of China. Nearly half a century after his death, books, essays and news articles about him are still being produced in print and Internet media; his name is ingrained in popular culture;<sup>1</sup> his story is being made into a new TV drama in 2009, starring Tian Liang, a hot young actor and a former diver who had garnered a number of Olympic gold and silver medals. At the same time, questions about the authenticity of Lei Feng's diary and indeed about the genuineness of Lei Feng's existence itself continue to trouble the public consciousness. This essay aims to examine the case of Lei Feng and, by doing so, raise two larger points: one is the continuity of premodern cultural tradition in modern China, embodied in the many deep cultural concerns coming to surface in the Lei Feng phenomenon; the other is the limitations of modes of historiography that seek to base truth-claims on "hard

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<sup>1</sup> A song composed by pop singer Xue Cun 雪村, "All Northerners Are Living Lei Fengs" 东北人都是活雷锋, was released in 1995 and acquired national fame, especially after it was combined with comical animation on the Internet six months later (and sparked nationwide enthusiasm for FLASH animation). A computer game named "Learn From Lei Feng Online" was designed in 2005.

evidence” but fail to take into consideration the complexities of forms of representation and self-representation.

*Beddings, Cabbage, and Moral Capital*

I shall begin with a quote.

Today is Sunday. I did not go out. I washed five sets of bedding for the comrades of my squad; I patched up one quilt for comrade-in-arms Gao Kuiyun; I helped the Cooking Division wash over six hundred catties of cabbage. I also cleaned indoors and outdoors, and did some other chores.... In a word, today I have fulfilled the duty of a *qinwuyuan*; although I am a bit tired, I feel very happy. My comrades were all wondering who laundered their beddings so clean. Comrade Gao Kuiyun said in amazement: “Who replaced my worn quilt?....” Ha, he actually has no idea that it was I who did it. I feel it is the greatest glory to be a nameless hero. From now on [I] should do more of those routine, petty and ordinary jobs, and say fewer pretty words.

This quote comes from the entry of October 15, 1961, from the diary of Lei Feng, the most famous PLA soldier of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not it was penned by a historical person named Lei Feng—and we will come back to this question—it always

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<sup>2</sup> *Lei Feng riji* 雷锋日记. Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyishe, 1964 reprint; p. 57.

strikes me as an extraordinary piece of writing. There are a number of things worth noticing. There is, first of all, a theatrical show of surprise on the part of Lei Feng's fellow soldiers, who, according to Lei Feng, co-operatively expressed due amazement at the anonymous launderer and mender of their beddings. It certainly should not have been hard to figure out that it might be the person who stayed behind and the person who had been famously doing "anonymous good deeds." But Lei Feng's good comrades-in-arms were all playing their parts faithfully: they probably knew very well that this was exactly what Lei Feng wanted in return for laundering their bed-sheets and sewing their quilt. It was not an unfair exchange. It does not matter whether or not they had really expressed surprise: what matters is that the narrative of doing good requires such an expression of surprise. It made the "anonymous hero" possible.

In this passage Lei Feng refers to himself as a *qinwuyuan* 勤务员, which I have left un-translated. It means an "odd-jobman," an "orderly" in the army context; but Lei Feng was no orderly at the time—in fact, he was the squad-leader, *banzhang* 班长.<sup>3</sup> The self-reference evokes Mao Zedong's famous remark, which was echoed by Chairman Hu Jintao in 2008 when he was visiting the earthquake victims in Sichuan:

All our cadres, no matter whether their offices are high or low, are all  
*qinwuyuan* of the people.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lei Feng recorded in his diary that he was promoted to be vice-squad-leader on May 14, 1961. *Lei Feng riji*, p. 42. He was promoted to be the squad leader in August of the same year. See Hua Qi 华琪, *Lei Feng de zhenshi rensheng* 雷锋的真实人生. Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 2003; p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> Mao Zedong, "1945 nian de renwu" 1945年的任务, first published in *Jiefang ribao* 解放日报, December 16, 1944. Cited by Hu Jintao, in *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, June 1, 2008.

我们的一切工作干部，不论职位高低，都是人民的勤务员。

We should notice that here only cadres can be *qinwuyuan*; the “common folk” are not fit for this lowly position, because, paradoxically, their social status is not high enough. In other words, condescension marks and affirms power. We always say that with great power comes great responsibility, but the reverse is also true: when one takes on responsibility, one also takes on power. These two things are the two sides of the same coin. By serving his fellow soldiers, Lei Feng is asserting his social authority by establishing moral superiority. He is, in a word, accumulating *de* 德, both in the sense of “virtue and merit” and in the archaic sense of the word, which is power.

There is something intriguing about the nature of the work Lei Feng threw himself in as a *qinwuyuan*: washing, sewing, cooking, and cleaning. Yes, this is, traditionally, woman’s work. A man goes out and comes home and finds his house in order and a cooked meal readied for him on the stove—if this “plot” sounds familiar, then it is because it is one of the common motifs in Chinese folk tales in which a good-hearted young man, living alone, finds him rewarded by Heavenly God who sends a fairy to help him out with domestic chores while he is out working in the fields. The earliest of such tales appeared in early medieval times, but there are numerous later transformations.<sup>5</sup> The crucial element in such tales is the anonymity of the fairy—once her identity is discovered, she cannot remain in the mortal world any longer. There is also a distinct

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<sup>5</sup> The best-known example is the story about the “snail girl” in the collection *Soushen hou ji* 搜神后记 attributed to Tao Yuanming (365?-427). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981; p. 30-31. Translated in Karl S. Y. Kao, *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic: Selections from the Third to the Tenth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985; pp. 132-33.

hierarchy in such stories: the fairy represents a higher order of beings; more important, she is sent down by Heavenly God himself.

By delineating this familiar folk tale structure I am not suggesting that Lei Feng's diary entry is strewn with innuendos of some strange sexual dynamics amongst a group of young PLA soldiers; even though Lei Feng the historical person was very short—just about five feet tall, he was sometimes bullied by his taller fellow soldiers, had played the role of a girl raped by Japanese soldiers in a school play, and was once dressed up as a girl during a festival celebration.<sup>6</sup> I bring this common motif up to call attention to the immense cultural resonance of the Lei Feng figure. This shows that the popularity of Lei Feng is not simply a product of communist party propaganda; rather, the story of Lei Feng represents some deep concerns of the culture. The Party, after all, is not an abstract entity: it consists of people who have numerous connections with the Chinese cultural past, and the past persists in the present in permutations and transformations. This precisely demonstrates what Paul Cohen eloquently describes as “the tenacity of culture” in his paper included in this volume.

With this I come to the most striking element about the diary entry quoted above, and this is the numbers: 5 sets of bedding, 1 quilt, and 600 catties of cabbage. What do we make of this?

The answer lies, not in Communist ideology, but once again in the cultural past: the system of merit accumulation, slowly developed from early medieval period and

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<sup>6</sup> Sun Jianhe 孙建和 and Yin Yunling 殷云岭, *Lei Feng zhuan* 雷锋传. Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2003; pp. 150-52; 28-29; *Lei Feng de zhenshi rensheng*, p. 11. According to the latter source, Lei Feng had also played in a women's basketball team to “fill in the blank” as the team did not have enough women players. *Lei Feng de zhenshi rensheng*, p. 11.

reaching its apex of popularity in the late imperial times. This system found a particular form: the ledger of merit and demerit, a form of literature (literature in its broad sense) that has been so brilliantly explored by Cynthia Brokaw in her work.<sup>7</sup> Ledgers are morality “how-to” books that list a series of good deeds to pursue and bad deeds to avoid. The most important feature of such ledgers is the quantification of the good and bad deeds, so that each good and bad deed is assigned numerical merit or demerit points. The other important characteristic is that a ledger usually includes a calendar for the user to record his daily score; a carefully maintained balance book will, at the year’s end, give indication of his fortune in the year ahead, for the gods will mete out reward or punishment according to the merits and demerits a person has earned. Yet another noteworthy aspect of the system is the emphasis on doing good deeds in secret, *ji yinde* 积阴德.

It is easy to see how Lei Feng fits in all these traditional categories of the merit accumulation system. His diary should more accurately be called a ledger, in which he records his daily tally: giving one catty of apples to the patients in a hospital on February 16, 1961; giving 10 *yuan* and buying one catty of biscuits to a comrade in need on December 30, 1961; spending 1 hour 40 minutes to walk a mother of two home in the pouring rain on May 2, 1962; spending the entire morning of a Sunday to fill up the potholes of a street, one hour maintaining the army truck, and two hours helping a local peasant plow his field on May 6, 1962.<sup>8</sup> There are numerous similar instances. It is

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<sup>7</sup> See Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> *Lei Feng riji*, pp. 27, 60, 79-80.

interesting how Lei Feng always carefully records the exact amount of money or time he spends on others: this is Lei Feng's moral capital.

The merit accumulation system was directly translated from the flourishing commercial culture of late imperial China; and one of the new phenomena in the old structure of *bao* 报, retribution, in connection with the developing money economy, was capital. The essential thing about capital is its invisibility: you cannot always tell from the surface what a person has; and a person who has capital awaits the moment to invest it in a secure venture in hopes of getting returns. Contrary to what many people once believed—that Lei Feng was an “ordinary soldier” whose accidental death and the subsequent discovery of whose diary made his fame—Lei Feng had already been a well-known media figure while he was alive. He won honors as a “Frugality Model” (*jiyue biaobing* 节约标兵); he was also constantly invited to give speeches about his “miserable childhood in the old society” because he was an effective, infectious speaker.<sup>9</sup> The first media exposure he received happened in November 1961, shortly after he became a member of the Communist Party (considered highly unusual for a relatively new soldier like Lei Feng, who had joined the army only ten months ago). A news report about Lei Feng was given the title, “Chairman Mao's Good Soldier,” was published on November 26, 1961 in *Qianjin bao* 前进报 No. 1309, Shenyang Military Region's newspaper, with a photo of Lei Feng reading Chairman Mao's work. The same report was sent to Xinhua News Agency, Liberation Army Newspaper (*Jiefangjun bao* 解放军报), and other

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<sup>9</sup> *Lei Feng zhuan*, pp. 160-61, 191; Shi Yonggang 师永刚 and Lei Qiongxiang 雷琼雄, *Lei Feng: 1940-1962*. Beijing: Sanlian, 2006; p. 120.

newspapers.<sup>10</sup> Lei Feng rapidly acquired social and political prestige in his brief life of twenty-two years, and his moral capital continued to earn him returns even after his death.

Just as the ledger system was originally associated principally with Buddhism and Daoism, there is also an unmistakably religious aspect to the Lei Feng figure. For him, the ultimate reward would be to see Chairman Mao face to face one day, and the diary entries record a number of dreams in which he fulfilled that wish.<sup>11</sup> This is, in fact, one of the classic modes of Buddhist meditative visualization: to see the Buddha with the mind's eye or in one's dream is considered an important means of obtaining ultimate enlightenment. While the political vocabulary in Lei Feng's diary is contemporary and completely in line with the 1950s and 1960s socialist ideology, the cultural vocabulary of his diary is age-old and fully inscribed within the Chinese tradition. Lei Feng did get what he wanted: his physical demise—a martyrdom, regardless of the mundane reason of his death—made his name known to Chairman Mao, the god who conferred socialist sainthood on Lei Feng by writing the famous inscription, “Learn from Comrade Lei Feng.”

*Snapshots, Posing, and Taking Pictures to Fill in Blanks* 抓拍、摆拍与补拍

The question is: Did Lei Feng really die? The answer to this question depends, of course, on whether you believe Lei Feng had ever been alive. Indeed, two questions have constantly come up regarding Lei Feng: one question is, Was Lei Feng for real? The other question is, Was Lei Feng real? Both are deceptively simple questions that must

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<sup>10</sup> *Lei Feng*, p. 121.

<sup>11</sup> See *Lei Feng riji* (1964 rpt), October 1959, p. 5; February 22, 1961, p. 29; July 1, 1961, p. 47.



elicit complex answers; the second question in particular touches on some of the essential issues of historiography.

One major approach to historiography is to gather evidence and make referential statements in the form of truth claims based on that evidence. Dominick LaCapra terms this approach “a documentary or self-sufficient research model” which gives priority to research based on primary documents that enable one to derive authenticated facts about the past.<sup>12</sup> This research model is, however, necessarily complicated by the nature of the documents used as evidence. It is one thing to have a set of numbers and statistics in front of you as the object of observation, although even statistics are subject to human manipulation and interpretation; nevertheless, it is an entirely different matter to face such primary documents as diaries and photographs, both being complicated and problematic forms of self-representation.

Lei Feng left behind nine books of diary and reading notes as well as more than three hundred photographs.<sup>13</sup> How could an “ordinary” PLA soldier like Lei Feng possibly have had so many pictures of himself, both black-and-white and colored, in an

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<sup>12</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001; p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> For the number of Lei Feng’s notebooks, see the colophon to *Lei Feng riji*, p. 90; *Lei Feng de zhenshi rensheng*, p. 206. Two army photographers, Zhang Jun 张峻 and Ji Zeng 季增, took the most number of photographs of Lei Feng. Zhang Jun claimed to have taken 223 photographs of Lei Feng (many of which were taken on the same occasions). Ironically, in 2004, Zhang Jun and Ji Zeng were involved in a publicized dispute over the copyright of Lei Feng’s photographs and had a fall-out that was not very much in the “Lei Feng spirit.” Yang Shiyang 杨时昀, “Bei ‘Xiugai’ de Lei Feng” 被 ‘修改’ 的雷锋 in *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan* 中国新闻周刊, No. 14 (2009): 78. Ironically, in 2004, Zhang Jun and Ji Zeng were involved in a publicized dispute over the copyright of Lei Feng’s photographs. Zhang Wan 张婉, “Tudi ‘paohong’ qinqun, shifu nutao Lei Feng zhaopian ‘shuming quan’” 徒弟炮轰侵权，师父怒讨雷锋照片署名权, *Dongbei xinwen wang* 东北新闻网, <http://liaoning.nen.com.cn/77972966595362816/20040302/1350447.shtml>.

age when taking pictures was still considered a luxury? More important, how could there be so many pictures of Lei Feng doing his “anonymous good deeds”? When the latter question was posed by reporters from the Associated Press, it seems to have become particularly stinging, as it came from “the outside.” As a result, several books about Lei Feng published in recent years take pains to account for the odd phenomenon, and when they do, they unanimously cite the question of the Associated Press reporters.<sup>14</sup>

According to the explanations offered by these books, a professional army photographer had reportedly followed Lei Feng around as much as he could, so as to catch Lei Feng in the very act of doing a good deed and snap a picture of it, *zhuapai* 抓拍, whenever possible. Sometimes, we are told, the photographer even relied on “informants” to achieve his purpose.<sup>15</sup> This information, if true, gives us a new perspective on Lei Feng: we might even say that it was the first socialist “reality-show” in photographic stills. In a reality show people are recorded as “being themselves” but at the same time they are intensely aware that they are “being themselves.” Does this make whatever they do real, or unreal, or hyper-real? Or should we redefine the real and unreal?

A much more convincing, though no less troubling, explanation, given in the more recent publication *Lei Feng*, states that many of the “classic” pictures of Lei Feng doing good deeds or performing various tasks were designed and taken by professional army photographers as part of preparation for a traveling exhibit of Lei Feng’s

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, *Lei Feng de zhenshi rensheng*, p. 148; *Lei Feng zhuan*, p. 267. Interestingly, while the former book places the Associated Press reporters’ trip to the Lei Feng Museum in Fushun, Liaoning in “the spring of 1990,” the latter pinpoints the event as happening in August, 1989, which, of course, is a politically sensitive timing because of the students’ movement and the Tian’anmen Square tragedy in the summer of 1989. Also see *Lei Feng*, p. 133.

<sup>15</sup> *Lei Feng de zhenshi rensheng*, pp. 143-46; *Lei Feng zhuan*, pp. 225-32.

accomplishments within the People's Liberation Army.<sup>16</sup> Some of the occasions represented in these pictures are in fact exactly what the other books insist were spontaneously photographed “on spot.” Before we decry the fakeness of such an arrangement, however, we must consider a directive issued by the “leaders” of Shenyang Military Region: “The photographs [taken of Lei Feng] must be real, and they must represent the good deeds that Lei Feng has actually done.”<sup>17</sup> The photographer Zhang Jun thereupon drafted a “plan” based on Lei Feng's speeches, oral accounts as well as his diary entries, and Ji Zeng, the junior photographer, carried it out. After citing Zhang Jun's plan, the authors of *Lei Feng* made a fascinating observation:

From this plan we may see the effect produced by Lei Feng's own writings on taking “documentary photos” of Lei Feng....To take pictures of Lei Feng is but a technical link in the whole propaganda project. The materials written by Lei Feng unintentionally became a “script” for the picture-taking.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, what the photographers did was to “take pictures to fill in blanks” *bupai* 补拍, so that each worthy action of Lei Feng has a visual image to accompany it, to illustrate and document it, to show—and herein lies the irony of the situation—that it has really happened. The pictures are based on “reality,” and so cannot possibly be “fake.”

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<sup>16</sup> *Lei Feng*, p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

As the author of *Lei Feng's True Life* stresses defensively:

Although there is a “time difference” for some of Lei Feng’s “pictures taken on spot,” this is no stain on a white jade and this is certainly not staged by a director. Lei Feng was real and the events were real, therefore the pictures cannot but be real.<sup>19</sup>

Many of Lei Feng’s photos were, however, nothing but carefully staged, so much so that the authors of *Lei Feng* refer to him as “one of the people made to pose for pictures most often in Chinese history” 有史以来中国被摆拍最多的人物之一。<sup>20</sup> The famous image of Lei Feng lovingly, smilingly, polishing the army truck is just such a staged photo (Illus. 1). Normally Lei Feng drove a Russian GAZ truck; but the photographer switched it with a Jiefang (“Liberation”) truck made in China, and adjusted the angle and lighting in such a way that the words, *jiefang*, occupies a prominent position in the picture frame.<sup>21</sup> The allegorical meaning is obvious. Nevertheless, if we

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<sup>19</sup> *Lei Feng de zhenshi rensheng*, p. 149.

<sup>20</sup> *Lei Feng*, p. 129.

<sup>21</sup> Much mystery shrouds this photo, which is apparently only one of the many photos taken on the same occasion or occasions. It is unclear which photographer, Zhang Jun or Ji Zeng, was the author of the photo or the very first person who came up with the idea of photographing Lei Feng polishing the Jiefang truck, as each seems to claim the credit for oneself. One thing was clear in the various, mutually conflicting accounts: the idea was so attractive that it was used twice, once in the winter of 1960 and once in the summer of 1961. The initial photo was entitled “Once a Suffering Child, Now a Good Soldier” (“Ku haizi, hao zhanshi” 苦孩子, 好战士) and was printed in *Jiefangjun huabao* 解放军画报, No. 3 (1961). For different accounts of how the photo was taken, see “Lei Feng zhaopian beihou de gushi” 雷锋照片背后的故事, <http://www.southcn.com/news/community/dqsj/200203061288.htm>; “Lei Feng zhaopian beihou de

believe the account given by the photographer Zhang Jun, the photo was initially inspired by a poem entitled “When Putting on the Army Uniform” (“Chuanshang junzhuang de shihou” 穿上军装的时候) written by Lei Feng in January, 1960. In the poem, Lei Feng mentions polishing his truck so that it will be “as bright as a shining mirror.”<sup>22</sup> The true “director” of Lei Feng’s staged photos was none other than Lei Feng himself, who remained the central figure in the production of his images in many ways.

The most famous image of Lei Feng shows him wearing a fur-lined army hat with ear flaps, holding an automatic rifle, standing tall and gazing into distance (Illus. 2). We learn that his hat did not belong to Lei Feng himself but was borrowed, so that he would look better; the photographer chose his perspective carefully so that Lei Feng, who was rather short, might look tall and majestic.<sup>23</sup> The most interesting revision happened posthumously. In 1977, when the Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Press was publishing a Lei Feng Album, they added a pine tree to the background to symbolize the tough revolutionary spirit of the PLA soldier (Illus. 3). This tree, however, was identified by the villagers of Tieling 铁岭 at Liaoning, where Lei Feng’s regiment was stationed in 1962, as one of the local pine trees. They even named it the “Lei Feng tree.” It has subsequently become a pilgrimage site and brought much fame as well as economic benefits (including ¥60,000 donation from the People’s Liberation army to build a “Lei Feng Tree of Hope Elementary School”) to the otherwise obscure little village. According to a newspaper

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gushi,” *Zhongguo dang’an bao* 中国档案报, August 31, 2007; “Lei Feng zhaopian beihou de gushi,” *Lei Feng de zhenshi rensheng*, p. 146; and *Lei Feng zhuan*, p. 228.

<sup>22</sup> *Lei Feng*, p. 140. For the poem, see *Lei Feng riji shiwen xuan* 雷锋日记诗文选, Beijing: Zhanshi chubanshe, 1982; p. 129.

<sup>23</sup> See *Lei Feng zhuan*, p. 233. The photo was taken by Zhou Jun 周军.

article published in *Liao Shen Evening News* (*Liao Shen wanbao* 辽沈晚报), after it becomes known that the photo was altered and the pine tree in the photo was added, many upset villagers still adamantly maintain that *their* pine is the “real” one, although the villager in charge of the “Lei Feng Exhibition Room” at the local elementary school wisely said, “What we admire is the ‘Lei Feng spirit’; we do not dispute the origin of the tree in the photo....”<sup>24</sup>

### *The Making of a Hero*

Much more so than photography, diary is an intricate form of self-representation, as it negotiates the private and public, memory and objectivity, real happening and reconstructed experience. One of the recent biographies of Lei Feng, published in 2003, relates an interesting anecdote: the 16-year-old Lei Feng asked the editor of a Hu’nan county newspaper how to keep a diary and how to “write it well.”<sup>25</sup> This anecdote seems to suggest that Lei Feng himself was quite aware of the artifice of the genre of diary.

As said before, Lei Feng successfully turned his diary into a ledger to record his good deeds in quantifiable terms, and he either actively showed his diary to others or left the diary in the open for it to be read by anyone who cared to.<sup>26</sup> Excerpts of Lei Feng’s diary were first published in *Qianjin bao*, December 1, 1960. For Lei Feng, diary was definitely not a private form, and indeed “privacy” must have been an alien concept to a

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<sup>24</sup> “‘Leifeng shu’ chengwei hongyang Lei Feng jingshen de yizuo fengbei” “雷锋树”成为弘扬雷锋精神一座丰碑, *Liao Shen wanbao*, March 5, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> *Lei Feng zhuan*, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> *Lei Feng*, pp. 143, 154; *Lei Feng de zhenshi rensheng*, pp. 202-203.

Communist soldier for whom the “public,” *gong* 公, was the only valid category. Once again, Lei Feng’s use of diary bears an amazing resemblance to the use of blog today: both ostensibly claim to be the record of one’s personal sentiments and opinions that is carried out in the most public venue imaginable. The value of a publicized diary does not lie in the privacy of the form but in the form’s *claim* of privacy.

Sometimes one cannot help wondering if Lei Feng, a young man with great political instincts, consciously or unconsciously used his diary to get what he wanted. In the diary entry of April 24, 1961, for instance, he recorded how some people thought he was already a corporal (*xiashi* 下士) instead of merely a “first-class private” (*shangdeng bing* 上等兵), and emphasized, perhaps a little too eagerly, how he was too busy devoting himself to the Party’s great enterprise to care about such things as promotion and ranks.<sup>27</sup> Shortly after this, however, he was promoted to be vice-squad-leader, whose military rank was normally the equivalent of corporal.

Publicized diary also affords Lei Feng a place to explain and defend himself. In the entry for September 10, 1961, he recorded a conversation he had with his superior, who informed Lei Feng that his comrades had complained about his authoritarian management style. While Lei Feng profusely praised his superior for his excellent advice and swore he would improve in his future work, he nevertheless gave a full account, in his own words, of the incident that had led to such criticism and by doing so implicitly justified his own behavior. He also said: “Even if some complaints are not entirely accurate, I still welcome them.”<sup>28</sup> In the entry for July 29, 1962, he recorded another

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<sup>27</sup> *Lei Feng riji*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>28</sup> *Lei Feng riji*, pp. 49-50.

instance of “complaint” made by a certain comrade that he was carrying on some romantic affair with a “female comrade.”<sup>29</sup> In this case there is nothing but vehement denial of the accusation, although Lei Feng also adds an interesting comment, “I have also thought to myself: I grew up from the nurturing of the Party, and there is no need for me to worry about the issue of my marriage myself....” If the “Party” were to read his diary and pick up the hint, it certainly would not work to the disadvantage of Lei Feng.

The artifice of Lei Feng’s diary is also reflected in the fact that Lei Feng’s diary has been much edited for publication. The public is never allowed to see the diaries in their entirety, only in excerpts; within individual diary entries, there are often ellipses that indicate deletions, and these ellipses appear in the very first printing of *Lei Feng riji* in 1963. Subsequent reprints sometimes supply the deleted parts and sometimes drop other parts. Incidentally, indicating omissions by ellipses is evidence that Lei Feng’s diary, while having certainly undergone a make-over, was not entirely fabricated; otherwise we would have to imagine that the initial fabricators of the diaries were deliberately leaving blanks for the later editors to fill in.

Comparing the variants as well as the exclusions and inclusions in the different editions of Lei Feng’s diary proves fascinating. The changes, affected to either refine Lei Feng’s writing or to suit current circumstances of the day, reflect shifting ideological trends in different eras. In the preface to the edition published in November 1968, a time that marked the height of the Cultural Revolution, the editors stress that the earliest 1963 edition was a “distorted” version of Lei Feng’s diary, with many entries either deleted or pruned, and that this serves to show the evil intention of a “small group of Capitalist

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<sup>29</sup> *Lei Feng riji shiwen xuan*, pp. 87-88. *Lei Feng riji xuan* 雷锋日记选. Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 1989; pp. 62-63.



Roaders” led by Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 (1898-1969), who had just been deprived of his title of Chairman of the People’s Republic of China in October, 1968. The edition published in November 1969 claims to have restored the original look of Lei Feng’s diary, with previously deleted entry or passages supplied and marked either with asterisk or in a different font. Two things stand out: this edition contains more entries heartily praising the greatness of Mao Zedong and extolling the importance of Mao’s works to Lei Feng’s daily life; it also portrays Lei Feng not just as a good-hearted server of the people but also as a fierce fighter against “class enemies.” For example, an added diary entry of February 15, 1960 records how several comrades made sarcastic comments on Lei Feng’s petite size and how Lei Feng overcame his self-doubt by studying Chairman Mao’s essay, “In Memory of Norman Bethune.”<sup>30</sup> Another added entry for June 29, 1962 gave a detailed account of an incident in which Lei Feng noticed a “suspicious person” at his military base and reported him to the local police station, and that the person turned out to be a “counter-revolutionary.”<sup>31</sup> The entry includes an uncharacteristic reconstruction of the dialogue between Lei Feng and the said person like in a stage play, and is in fact the most “suspicious” of all entries from Lei Feng’s diary in terms of authenticity.

The entry for April 29, 1961 contains an outline of a report Lei Feng was to give about his study of Chairman Mao’s works. In the outline, Lei Feng listed a number of Chairman Mao’s essays and how each essay helped him achieve some worthy deed. In the 1963 edition, Mao’s essay entitled “An Analysis of China’s Various Social Classes”

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<sup>30</sup> *Lei Feng riji* (1968), pp. 18-19. A comparison of this entry with the version of the same entry in the 1982 edition of *Lei Feng riji shiwen xuan* shows that the earlier version is more drawn-out and written in a more colloquial, cruder language. *Lei Feng riji shiwen xuan*, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> *Lei Feng riji* (1968), pp. 100-102.

did not seem to motivate Lei Feng in any particular situation except for having “elevated [his] thought.”<sup>32</sup> In the 1968 edition, however, the study of the above-mentioned essay inspired Lei Feng to “struggle against Chairman Zhu of the Workers’ Union, who came from a ‘rich peasant’ family background.” An editor’s note indicates that Chairman Zhu was a bad guy who “slipped into the Party” but was exposed by Lei Feng, and that Lei Feng “utterly defeated” Chairman Zhu at a public meeting.<sup>33</sup> The image of Lei Feng as a vigilant soldier battling “bad elements” of the society was very much in line with the Cultural Revolution atmosphere, but the same diary entry in the 1982 edition of Lei Feng’s diary reverses back to the original edition, calling into question the authenticity of both of the earlier editions.

There are other editorial modifications that reveal the ups and downs in the Chinese political arena, such as the appearance and disappearance of the name of Lin Biao 林彪 (1907-1971), Mao’s appointed successor who staged a failed coup and died in a plane crash in 1971.<sup>34</sup> Apart from alterations motivated by contemporary political needs, the various editions of Lei Feng’s diary also show an interesting trajectory of how Lei Feng was first stripped of his human attributes and how he has been restored to humanity in recent years. Both maneuvers of Lei Feng’s image, however, serve to keep the legend of Lei Feng alive for social and political purposes. Not surprisingly, the de-emphasis and emphasis on Lei Feng’s humanity always fall into the sphere of food and sex, what had

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<sup>32</sup> *Lei Feng riji*, p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> *Lei Feng riji* (1968), p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> Lin Biao’s name appears in *Lei Feng riji* (1968), p. 49.

been called “where the greatest human desires lie” by Confucius.<sup>35</sup> For instance, an innocent remark about Chairman Mao “dining with me and giving me many delicious dishes to eat” in the entry for February 22, 1961 in the original edition is deleted in the 1968 edition.<sup>36</sup> Written during a period of famine and economic depression by a 21-year-old soldier who must be constantly hungry, the remark reveals a human Lei Feng who transformed his fantasy about Chairman Mao’s fatherly and nurturing nature into a literal image of granting food and allaying hunger. In recent years much has been made of Lei Feng’s several purported “girlfriends,” but the most telling sign of the trend of “humanizing Lei Feng” since the 1980s is the inclusion in his diary of the hitherto excluded entry, cited earlier, on his denial of any romantic liaison with a certain “female comrade.” Although it might appear counter-intuitive that the denial of romance indicates an attempt to humanize Lei Feng, it should be pointed out that any mention of romance, even in the form of negation, was considered a moral stain in a Communist hero in the earlier era.

To draw a conclusion from the above discussions about Lei Feng’s diary: saying a diary is not fabricated is not tantamount to saying that it is not an artifact. While the speculation about the authenticity of Lei Feng’s diary is not likely to ever get resolved, it also seems to have missed the point: the point is that not only Lei Feng’s diary was a highly self-conscious production, but Lei Feng himself was a made hero. He was made by the state, the army, the press; but more important, he was self-made in every sense of

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<sup>35</sup> *Liji zhushu* 礼记注疏, in Ruan Yuan 阮元, comp. *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏, Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1955; 22.431.

<sup>36</sup> *Lei Feng riji*, p. 29. *Lei Feng riji* (1968), p. 47. The part about Chairman Mao feeding Lei Feng with “delicious dishes” is replaced by ellipsis.

the word, as he rose from an orphaned peasant boy to a national hero and finally to a cultural icon largely by the intensity of his will power and by his active engagement in the verbal and visual production of his own image. Since Lei Feng was never “real,” he could not have been “unreal.” In such a context, when we confront the diary much mediated by both writer and editor as well as the doctored photographs of an apparently highly self-conscious subject, the question to put forward should not be, “Are they real?” but should instead be, “what does ‘real’ mean?”

Ultimately, we may want to use Lei Feng as an occasion to reflect on historiography: apart from figures, numbers, and statistics, we must also confront the complex human truths in the writing of history. If in the writing of history we stop at asking the question, “Was Lei Feng a real person, or was he the Party’s fabrication?” then we are not looking at a large part of the picture, that is, the structure of the Lei Feng narrative and the very real cultural, social, political and ideological factors that constitute the structure. If we do not understand Lei Feng, but regard him as either a hypocritical careerist or a brain-washed fool, then we do not understand the age that made him.