

Propaganda determined by a historical background

[Countries](#), [China](#)



I. Introduction

“ Learn from Lei Feng” campaign was a nationwide campaign begun in the 1960s in China. The aim of the campaign is to call on people to learn from Lei Feng. Although more than 50 years has passed, recently, a discussion about the authenticity of Lei Feng on Zhihu makes him the focus of people again.

Actually, the controversy over Lei Feng has existed for a long time. Chinese government considers Lei Feng a good model for people to learn from and scholars in China mainly focus on the spirit of Lei Feng rather than its authenticity. However, many scholars abroad suspect the authenticity of Lei Feng and consider him as a tool of propaganda. John Anderson Fraser, a Canadian academic, quotes, “ Lei Feng is an invention of the propaganda department.”

However, whether Lei Feng was an invention of the government or not, it can't change the influence of the campaign in the past 50 years. This article will mainly discuss the campaign in the early 1960s from the aspect of propaganda and reveal the association between propaganda and the historical background.

II. “ Learn from Lei Feng” Campaign

According to Lei Feng Wang (雷锋网), a website hosted by the Publicity Department of the Party, Lei Feng, who was born in 18 December 1940, lost all of his family before the age of 7. He began his work in 1956 and joined

the army in 1960. He died in 1962 at the age of 22, when he was hit by a telegraph pole struck by an army truck.

Early in 1961, Lei Feng was praised by Lin Biao, the vice chairman of the Party then in the campaign of reading the works of Mao Zedong. However, Lei Feng wasn't widely known until after his death when Lei Feng's Diary was found. The diary was full of his desire for serving the people as well as his admiration for Mao Zedong.

In 1963, Mao Zedong wrote the famous inscription: " Follow the examples of Comrade Lei Feng" (向雷锋同志学习), after that, a nationwide propaganda campaign began. 5 March every year has become the official " Learn from Lei Feng Day" (学雷锋) since then. In the campaign, Lei Feng was portrayed as a model citizen and people all over the country were encouraged to learn his selflessness, modesty, and devotion to Mao. Lots of groups were set up to learn Lei Feng.

Between 19 March, 1963 to 27 March, 1963, an exhibition of Lei Feng attracted more than 600000 visitors. The authority said that Lei Feng was an inevitable product of the socialism and the Maoism. People were informed that they could make progress as long as they read the works of Mao Zedong and do things under the direction of Mao Zedong. Several songs were written, some of which became so famous that even today, almost every Chinese know them. Take Follow the Good Example Such as Lei Feng (学雷锋) for example:

学雷锋

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In this song, people are asked to endorse the Party and Mao Zedong. It can be viewed as an epitome of the campaign then. After 1966 , the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was launched, and the “ Learn From Lei Feng” campaign reached its second climax. The campaign shifted gradually to a cult of Mao Zedong in the same period.

III. China in the Early 1960s

In order to analyze the “ Learn From Lei Feng” campaign, it’s necessary to look back to the China in the early 1960s.

·Politics

Since 1960, the relation between China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had been deteriorating for the divergence derived from their national interests, the conflicts of ideology and many other complex reasons. This made China isolated in the socialist countries then. The Sino-Indian War of 1962 made the relation between China and India reach a new low. India was rebuilding its army with the help of Russia, Britain and the

USA then. And with the significant assistance of the USA, Taiwan had a harvest in economy in contrast to mainland China, it had also boasted a battle-ready army of 400000 men. So at that time, China was put in simultaneous feuds with the USSR, the USA and India, the three most populous nations in the world after his own.

Situation inside the country was also worrying. In contrast to the passion and determination people had in the first five-year plan, the Great Leap Forward and the Great Chinese Famine made people feel uncertain of the future. Mao Zedong also pointed out that most cadres didn't understand what is socialism, let alone ordinary people.

·Economy

The Great Leap Forward was launched in 1958 in order to rapidly transform China from an agrarian economical society into a socialist society through rapid industrialization and collectivization. However, it was actually a disaster for China then. In order to produce steel, lots of farmers left their farms behind, which partly led to the dramatical decrease of the output of crop in 1960 compared to that in 1957 (Table 1).

In 1959, the Great Chinese Famine began, according to government statistics, there were 15 million excess deaths in this period. The government had to buy wheat from abroad at a cost of \$782 million. The Great Leap Forward boost the heavy industry to some extent, however, the investment in the light industry was only 11% of that in the heavy industry. This imbalance made the light industry declined a lot during 3 years. To

make things worse, in 1960, the USSR withdrew more than 10000 engineers and technicians, which had a great impact on China then. Lots of factories were in chaos because those specialists took their blueprints with them.

Although in 1960, the Great Leap Forward was stopped gradually, there wasn't obvious improvement in economy. The economy then was a borderline economy, any improvement is immediately felt, and so is every decline.

China in the early 1960s, with those serious problems on various aspects, the government had to do something to deal with these problems, or rather, it had to conduct propaganda.

IV. Propaganda and Influence

According to Oxford Dictionaries, propaganda is "information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view". The history of propaganda can date back to 515 BC, however, it wasn't until 19th century that governments realized the importance for swaying public opinion in favor of its policies. During two world wars, governments conducted large-scale and well-organized propaganda. There are lots of propaganda techniques including news reports, government reports, radio, movies and posters.

Propaganda is always not impartial because it presents facts selectively and sometimes even tells a lie, and it also uses loaded messages to produce an emotional rather than a rational response to the information presented. In

order to reach its political purposes, propaganda is often seditious, which makes it easy to influence people's thoughts. Communist Vietnamese politician Mai Chi Tho, commenting on the use of propaganda in the Vietnam war, stated:

" Ho Chi Minh may have been an evil man; Nixon may have been a great man. The Americans may have had the just cause; we may not have had the just cause. But we won and the Americans were defeated because we convinced the people that Ho Chi Minh is the great man, that Nixon is a murderer and the Americans are the invaders... The key factor is how to control people and their opinions. Only Marxism-Leninism can do that."

It shows that sometimes, propaganda can play an important role in big issues.

So why did the government launch a nationwide campaign to call on people to learn from Lei Feng? As the media reported, Lei Feng was always eager to serve for people, and he sought the spiritual wealth instead of the physical abundance. He was willing to endure hardship as long as it can benefit others and it was called " Screw Spirit" (螺丝精神) later. So the subtext of the propaganda was that although the life was poor, you can bear it as long as you are rich in spirit. In order to be rich in spirit, you should be willing to be an ordinary person, doing tiring and boring work just like a screw.

If you successfully integrate yourself into the community, then the collective interest will be more important than your self-interest, and because you devote yourself to the community, your life is meaningful and everyone will

be proud of you. In the early 1960s when people sometimes even couldn't feed themselves, the spirit of Lei Feng was undoubtedly inspiring. The government wanted to make people be passionate again so that the economy could gradually recover the recession and by learning Lei Feng, people could forget their hunger and poverty for a time.

Because Lei Feng was such an ideal person according to the media reports, it was natural for people to think that what Lei Feng did was always right. Luckily, Lei Feng's Diary was found. Although scholars holds different views about its authenticity today, at that time, almost everyone believed that it was true. Lei Feng was eager to learn Mao Zedong's works and he had great devotion to the party, the socialism and Mao Zedong. So the government wanted to call on people to learn Lei Feng, learn his devotion.

The government thought it was a good opportunity to let people learn Maoism and endorse the Party. The propaganda made people believe that because Lei Feng, the model of people endorsed Mao Zedong and the Party, you should also endorse them. It also implied that although people suffered a lot in the early 1960s, the quality of life would improve at last as long as everyone learn Mao Zedong's works, do things under the direction of the Party.

So for the propagandists, Lei Feng was a perfect model for people to learn from. They hoped people would be willing to endure hardship and be confident of the future, the Party and Mao Zedong. The government wanted to stabilize the society, economy and the politics.

Actually, shortly after the “ Learn From Lei Feng” campaign began, it became popular all over the country. An official document in 27 March, 1963 said that people especially young people gained power from Lei Feng. Many people realized their mistakes, felt shamed of themselves and were determined to be a “ new man” after learning Lei Feng. People were moved by Lei Feng’s selflessness and they felt proud of being a small screw of the country. The campaign united people to some extent and successfully arouse people’s passion to build their country. The campaign also improved Mao Zedong’s image and made people be confident of the Party. Propaganda successfully showed its power.

V. Not an Single Case

Propaganda like the “ Learn From Lei Feng” campaign wasn’t an isolated case. In the same period, “ Good 8th Company on Nanking Road” (南京路八号好八连) was also learned and praised by people all over the country for their responsibility and eagerness to serve people. The target of it was almost the same with learning Lei Feng.

However, because certain propaganda serves for certain targets, it has to be associated closely with certain politics, certain economy and certain culture, as a result of which, it can’t be once and for all, nor could Lei Feng. In a survey conducted on 2008, more than 90% students didn’t know much about Lei Feng and less than 30% students had read Lei Feng’s Diary. Most students didn’t learn Lei Feng except in “ Learn from Lei Feng Day”. In 2010, Guo Mingyi, a worker in Liaoning, was thought to be a new model of the spirit

of Lei Feng. Although seems similar with Lei Feng, propaganda of Guo Mingyi concentrates more on his contribution to the society rather than his worship of a certain person like Mao Zedong, which is more consistent with people's understanding today.

VI. Conclusion

How should we think about the “ Learn from Lei Feng” campaign?

Chinese historical background in the early 1960s made it a must for the government to “ find” an ideal man like Lei Feng to unite people. Although the authenticity of Lei Feng is heavily disputed by scholars, Lei Feng, as a tool of propaganda, accomplished his mission to lead the fashion of society. It might be ridiculous in some people's eyes, but it was a successful propaganda at that time because the government obeyed the rule that certain propaganda should be closely associated with a certain historical background. This rule applies to all countries in all periods.