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Liberation Army Soldiers

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Yesterday's Lei Feng and Today's Young People's Liberation Army Soldiers

Che-po Chan

Abstract

Lei Feng has been propagandized as a model of emulation for the People's Liberation Army soldiers since the 1960s. This paper uses Lei Feng as a yardstick to measure contemporary young soldiers' general behaviors and orientations. We are interested to find out to what extent contemporary young soldiers have accepted the Chinese Communist Party's political education and have followed the norm set by the Party. It is found that the widely publicized Chinese role model has exerted little influence on contemporary young soldiers. Young soldiers today are utilitarian and materialistic, sharing the same youth culture with most Chinese youths of other social sectors.

Introduction

Lei Feng (LF) was a People's Liberation Army (PLA) squad officer in China. He died in a car accident at the age of twenty-two in 1962. It was found from his diary that he was extremely loyal to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), believed deeply in Communism, endured hardship, was willing to show self-sacrifice and was totally altruistic. Since Mao Zedong called upon the nation to "learn from Comrade Lei Feng" in 1963, the CCP has set up this short-lived soldier as a model of emulation for PLA soldiers and

Chinese youths of all other sectors. Campaigns have been held to help the younger generation overcoming selfishness, greed and other unhealthy practices. They were also aimed at raising youths', particularly PLA soldiers', political loyalty and ideological commitment. LF has exerted great influence on the Army and society's mental outlook and has been worshipped since by generations of Chinese youths. Among the various CCP established role models, LF has been the most glorified and best-known among Chinese youths and PLA soldiers.¹

Soldiers are recruited through a mixed system of conscription and enlistment in China.² Rank-and-file soldiers are mainly recruited through conscription. After serving the conscripted years, one could change to be an enlisted soldier or junior officer. The focus of this research is to investigate to what extent contemporary PLA soldiers have accepted the Party's political education and have followed the norm set by the Party. We would examine contemporary young soldiers' attitudes towards LF and whether this PLA role model guides their behaviors and orientations in the army.

¹ Refer to Jiang Wandu, "From Lei Feng to Xu Honggang", Beijing Review, 25 April 1994, vol. 37, issue 17, p. 4; Xi Mi, "Who is Lei Feng?" China Today, July 1993, vol. 42, issue 7, p. 63; Yang Chunya, "'Lei Feng Spirit' still relevant", China Today, June 1998, vol. 47, issue 6, p. 63.

² Under the conscription system, every male citizen is obliged to serve in the army and during the comparatively short service, one only receives a nominal salary. Under the enlistment system, one joins the army voluntarily and receives regular salary for a longer service. One usually treats the army service as part of a long-term career development under the enlistment system. Before 1955, China practiced an enlistment system. After 1955, the recruitment system changed to the conscription one. From 1978 onwards, it has changed to a mixed system. Refer to Xiang Ronggao, Shixing xin bingyi zhi yu zhaojiu gao suzhi qingnian shiguan duiwu de xin sikao (The practice of the new military recruitment system and the new thinking of training a team of high quality young officers), Qingnian yanjiu (Youth studies), no. 4, 2000, pp. 1-3.

This is an indirect measurement of soldiers' reaction to political education and their acceptance of the official political norm.

Learning from Lei Feng in the PLA in the Era of Reform

Lei Feng has been portrayed as a role model of PLA soldier. We are interested in his popularity among contemporary young soldiers. In an open-ended questionnaire survey with 675 soldiers, when they were asked, “who do you worship most in your life,” only 8% mentioned LF and the other 92% worshipped a variety of famous people including scientists, reformers, writers, singers, movie stars, sport stars, etc.³ Young soldiers favored famous achievers who were known, if they were Chinese citizens, as a result of their being beneficiaries of the economic reform and open door policy rather than rank-and-file followers who were known because of their obedience to the authoritarian rule. The survey reflected the tendency that young soldiers selected their models of learning not as dictated by official standards but according to their own values. In the era of reform and opening to the outside world, youths' values come from multiple sources. They ignore the system of socialist values represented by LF.

Since LF's death, his affiliated regiment in Shenyang has become a "window of the LF spirit". An investigation of the changes in this regiment in the reform and openness period would provide us with insights for our understanding of the change of the

³ Wang Guisheng, Guanyu lei feng de dianxing xiaoying ruohua wenti de sikao (To ponder on the decreasing effect of Lei Feng as a classical model), Qingnian yanjiu (Youth studies), no. 3, 1990, pp. 42-45.

LF spirit.⁴ Soldiers of this regiment were not especially proud of their predecessor LF. They were negative in their response to the superior's call for learning from LF.⁵ When a platoon officer did an excellent job and his superior intended to recommend him as a “LF type soldier”, he responded honestly that, "I am not learning from LF. I only do my job upon my own conscience."⁶ Under the current of market economy, this regiment also undertook local engineering projects and competed with other engineering units for these projects. In the process of competition, they engaged in common business practices such as negotiation for prices, and offering good favors to build up good human relationships, which were negations of the LF spirit.⁷

Two decades ago, learning from LF meant voluntary laboring without pay. Soldiers dared not ask for remuneration when they were involved in any kind of work, military or otherwise. Asking just for a small favor was forbidden. Today, under the market economy, the general attitude is that every work has to be paid for, either in cash or in other forms of benefits. Soldiers ask for payback when they engage in agricultural sideline production, national defense projects, or any work that could be part of their duties. Sometimes soldiers ask for payback as small as a cigarette. In a survey about learning from LF, young soldiers were asked, "To learn from Lei Feng, should we ask for remuneration?" To frame the question in such a way, the expected answer was obvious.

⁴ Zhang Lieying et al., *Chongji xia de tanshuo, kunrao zhong de xuanzhe* (Exploration under setback, choosing under agitation), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 1, 1989, pp. 11-18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 18.

Nevertheless, almost half of the respondents still asked for cash or other rewards. The details of the answers of the survey are in the following table.

Table 1
"To learn from Lei Feng, should we ask for remuneration?"

1. We should	19% (N = 38)
2. We should not	53% (N = 106)
3. We should ask for a small amount	22% (N = 44)
4. We should not but we should be given political prestige	6% (N = 12)
Total	100% (N = 200)

Source: Wang Feng, *Budui qingnian sixiang zhuangkuang ji qi yingdao* (The thinking of army youths and the approach of education), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 11, 1997, p. 24.

LF represents a spirit of unreserved selflessness, hardship endurance, and total compliance to the authority. Today, Chinese youths practice and believe in self-interest instead of altruism, self-choice instead of compliance to authority, consumerism and material fulfillment instead of self-restraint and hardship endurance. They regard the spirit of LF as foolish, outdated and impracticable. The image of LF has been over dramatized and widely publicized. It does not fit with reality. The existence of LF type people in the era of commodity and market economy is questionable. Young soldiers generally believed that LF has been a role model set up only for propaganda purpose. A soldier even argued that LF's diary was too well written and questioned whether it was an assigned writing with

political purpose.⁸ Youths made a mockery of LF: “Our times calls for LF, people look for LF, the army needs LF, nobody wants to be LF.”⁹

Another survey testified that contemporary young soldiers disagreed with the LF type of altruism. As shown in Table 2, when asked about the meaning of life, those who believed in pure "giving" or "taking" were the minority. Most young soldiers believed in concurrent "giving" and "taking", with a total percentage of 87.6% in the survey. The survey showed that young soldiers did not appreciate the PLA traditions of "giving without selfishness" (wusi fengxian) and "serving the collectivity without selfishness" (dagong wusi).¹⁰

Table 2
"What is the meaning of life to you?"

1. Giving	5.6% (N = 9)
2. More giving and less taking	25.5% (N = 41)
3. Equal giving and taking	44.1% (N = 71)
4. More taking and less giving	18.0% (N = 29)
5. Only taking and no giving	6.8% (N = 11)
Total	100% (N = 161)

Source: Shun Yanxin, *Zaodong de qingchun xuanlu* (The unrestrained youthful melody), *Qingnian tansuo* (Youth exploration), no. 2, 1994, p. 23.

⁸ Li Kaicheng and Di Yansheng, *Xue lei feng huodong de rechao yu lengsi* (The hot wave and cool thinking of the learning from Lei Feng activities), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 1, 1991, p. 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ Shun Yanxin, *Zaodong de qingchun xuanlu* (The unrestrained youthful melody), *Qingnian tansuo* (Youth exploration), no. 2, 1994, p. 23.

To determine the effectiveness of political education, it is important to review the methods that PLA authority has used in propagating the LF spirit. Army units' approach to promulgating LF has been superficial. The "memorial type" and the "numerical type" were the two most popular types of activities. Under the "memorial type", activities such as holding seminars or studying texts of LF were held in some units around LF's birthday - March 5. Not many activities were held outside this period. A popular saying in the army was that "Uncle Lei Feng has no residence permit (in the army). He comes in March and leaves in April." (Lei Feng shushu mei hukou, shan yue lai le si yue zhou.)¹¹ Most soldiers participated in the activities not with the heart to learn from LF but with the mind to please superiors. Under the "numerical type", other army units aimed at, within a time period, pushing to set up the largest possible number of "learning from LF units", cultivate the largest possible number of "LF type soldiers", or help out masses to do the largest possible number of good things. The successfulness of learning from LF was judged by the number of cases achieved by these army units.¹² Soldiers queried whether doing good deeds and counting such cases were only a low level of emulation of LF. A higher level of learning should be studying hard to learn and do well in one's professional job and be a competent PLA soldier in modern warfare.¹³

The campaigns of learning from LF have been conducted very frequently by the CCP. In the Mao Zedong era, LF was regarded as

¹¹ Ma Chuanhui, Kunhuo yu jueze - Guanyu xue leifeng de diaocha yu sikao (Puzzle and choice - regarding the survey and thinking of the learning from Lei Feng), Qingnian yanjiu (Youth studies), no. 4, 1993, p. 8.

¹² Wang Guisheng, 1990, p. 43.

¹³ Ma Chuanhui, 1993, p. 8.

a model of socialist citizen. He was first promoted as keenly carrying out the socialist revolution and construction. During the Cultural Revolution, he was promoted as one who read Mao's works intensively and followed Mao's doctrine closely. He was portrayed as a loyal Mao follower and a leftist supporter. In the era of reform and opening to the outside world, especially after the 1989 Tiananmen incident, he was portrayed as an "anti-peaceful revolution (anti-western influence) fighter". The CCP has stretched LF's image to every imaginable possibility. This over-stretch of image explains why LF has lost his credibility among the PLA soldiers.¹⁴

Utilitarian and Materialistic Orientations of Contemporary Young Soldiers

A contemporary interpretation of the LF type soldier is one with "four requirements" (si you) - with ideals, moral standards, cultural knowledge and discipline. The political education within the army aims to cultivate the PLA soldiers into revolutionary servicemen with these "four requirements".¹⁵ A soldier with ideals is one who is dedicated to safeguarding the Party-state. One with moral standards believes in communist ideology and morality, which embodied with a spirit of selfless dedication. One with cultural knowledge has sufficient education to be proud of national inheritance and culture and is patriotic. One with discipline sticks to

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

¹⁵ Refer to Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Circular "Concerning Several Questions Related to Strengthening and Improving the Army's Political Work under the New Situation" (Central Document No. 4, 1990), translated and published in China Quarterly, no. 131, September 1992, pp. 886-887.

the fine traditions and revolutionary spirits of the Party and the army and is not tempted by material interests and "bourgeois liberalism trends".¹⁶

Soldiers before 1980s were more obedient and submissive to their authority. They respected their leading officers and did not argue against any order from above. On the forms of application for job assignment and for Party membership, soldiers often stated that, "I will do whatever the Party assigns for me." "A revolutionary soldier is like a brick. It could be moved to any place where it is needed."¹⁷ Young soldiers since the 1980s have been same as youths of their generation. They are more self-centered, independent thinking and have a stronger sense of equality and democracy. They are active in looking for chances and want to have more choices of their own. Submissiveness to authority is not viewed as a virtue anymore.¹⁸ Some dare to criticize the unfairness and suggest improvements. They are especially concerned with their superiors' impartiality in accepting soldiers' applications for membership into the Youth League and Party, helping them to locate jobs after demobilization, deciding on soldiers' applications to the military academy, giving reward and punishment, approval of annual leave and arrangement of daily job assignment, etc. They expect the leadership to be caring and pragmatic. Leaders are expected to care for soldiers' interests, speak fewer hollow words and give fewer orders. For those soldiers who like to participate in various army affairs, they feel being respected when their suggestions are accepted

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 877- 896.

¹⁷ Li Zhanghua and Chen Fei, Guanbing jiazhi guannian de xin bianhua (The new development of officers and soldiers' values and thinking), Qingnian yanjiu (Youth studies), no. 7, 1990, pp. 1-2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

and deeds are approved. If their words and deeds are rejected, sometimes resentment might lead to open or passive resistance.¹⁹

Joining the CCP has long been seen as "political progress" (zhengzhi jingbu) in the Chinese society. Party membership was an important criterion in the evaluation of one's political status. During the Cultural Revolution, to show one's loyalty and resolution, cutting a fingertip and using blood to write the application for League or Party membership was common. A soldier would be disparaged if he were still not a Party member when he was demobilized. LF has been characterized as proud to be a Party member and willing to work as a "little cog" for the big Party machine. Today the perceptions towards the CCP in the Chinese society and army have changed. Unlike LF who was an idealist PLA soldier, contemporary young soldiers are a lot more pragmatic. Today not all PLA soldiers are interested in the application for Party membership. As a young soldier explained, "In today's society, a true hero is one with money. Who truly respect Party members?"²⁰ Those who apply for Party membership usually have utilitarian motivations. The membership is treated as a tool for personal advancement. Youths are not interested in "fighting for communism" but are more interested in pursuing individual interests. As a young soldier in a survey replied to the query of his motivation in the application for Party membership, "It would be easier to find a job if I were a member. The employers favor for Party members." Another said, "One already could not earn much money during military service. If one

¹⁹ Yin Dunping, *Jundui zhengzhi jiaoyu xue* (The military political education), Beijing: Haijun Chubanshe, 1988, p. 190.

²⁰ Wang Heping and Ying Shengqi, *Qingnian zhanshi jingji zhuangkuang fenxi* (Analysis of young soldiers' economic condition), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 5, 1996, p. 30.

furthermore could not earn a party membership, he would lose too much (i.e., a double loss)".²¹

LF was keen on studying Mao Zedong Thought in his spare time. Today young soldiers have lost interest in studying ideology, politics or military knowledge. They study with a utilitarian perspective, not considering the needs of society or army but considering their personal needs and interests. They often study with the aim of advancement in their own career path. According to a large-scale survey, 65% of young soldiers wanted to learn driving in the army and 40% wanted to learn operating a computer.²² Young soldiers who have more schooling go closer to the economic tide. They make use of their leisure time to have self-study. One popular way is through distant learning. From the same survey, 22% of soldiers asked for permission to be enrolled in distant learning. Hot programs of study included economic management, finance, accounting and law.²³ Another survey showed that 68.3% of those who registered for distant learning in an army unit studied the above subjects.²⁴ 38% of the same unit young soldiers bought books with titles such as "Introduction to Stock Exchange", "Introduction to Marketing", "Ways of Making Money", "Computer Application", "Modern Management". Only 5.4% of soldiers in this survey ever bought military-related books.²⁵

²¹ Ibid, p. 29.

²² Zheng Zu and Jie Qing, *Dui dangqiang budui qingnian zhanshi jiben tedian de diaocha yu sikao* (The survey and thinking on basic characters of contemporary young army soldiers), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 10, 1997, p. 38.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Zhou Jingsheng and Liu Fengan, *Nuli bangzhu qingnian guanbing kefu feilixing siwei* (Help the young officers and soldiers to overcome irrational thinking), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 11, 1996a, p. 39.

²⁵ Ibid.

Those who were having distant learning even tried to avoid regular military training and political education. They only considered their future careers and sometimes took the risk of infringing military discipline.²⁶ Some soldiers did not just read books of economics and investment. They found chances to practice their acquired knowledge. They used their spare time to do small business, both inside and outside military camps. This had a bad influence on military discipline and was forbidden by the army authority.²⁷

A panel survey over 13 years found that the most frequent reading in the army was popular magazines and entertainment journals. The second most widespread reading was kung-fu and love stories.²⁸ Many young servicemen just read to pass leisure time. They chose simple, entertaining and exciting readings such as love stories, kung-fu stories and pornography. Some books were considered as unhealthy and were banned by the army.²⁹ Skills and technology, business and investment were also popular readings. In a survey of 347 young soldiers in one regiment, 75% of respondents liked to read the "best-seller" books in the areas of economics as well as skills and technology. They included knowledge of stocks and finance, car driving, machine repairing, or even vegetable

²⁶ Zhou Jingsheng and Liu Fengan, Zhou chu "xiandai yishi" de xuqu (Do not commit the mistake of "being modern"), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 1, 1996b, pp. 37-38.

²⁷ Chang Guodong and Li Bo, Dangqiang budui qingnian guanbing jiazhi quxiang xintedian (The new characteristics of contemporary young army officers' and soldiers' value orientations), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 3, 1994, p. 34.

²⁸ Han Jun and Li Baoqun, Qingnian guanbing dushu xianzhuang de diaocha yu sikao (The survey and thinking on young officers and soldiers' present reading situation), *Budui qingnian* (Army youths), no. 3, 1998, p. 41.

²⁹ Zhang Yuan and Ying Shengqi, Qingnian zhanshi de dushu xingqu he xuqiu ji qi shudao fanglue (Young soldiers' reading interests and demands and the way of giving them advice), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 1, 1996, pp. 40-41.

farming, pig rearing and cooking, etc. Rural youths that wished to stay in agriculture and develop their careers in their hometown had interests in the latter three subjects. Those interested in cooking would like to open a restaurant. Soldiers usually asked for the kind of job in the army that fitted their particular interests as they perceived it as a chance of job training for their own future.³⁰

Most young soldiers saw serving in the army as a way of preparation and gaining capital for future careers.³¹ They might have the luck to learn a new skill such as repairing machine or driving truck in the army. Another survey of 1000 soldiers found that 97% did ask the army to train them in one or two practical skills.³² An investigation with 500 soldiers asked a question, “what is most important to you (in the army)?” Among the three provided answers, 78.2% chose reservedly with “training personnel with both military and civilian skills;” 14.3% frankly with “job training;” and 7.5% with the standard answer of “political education.”³³

Young soldiers treated the army as a school, their works in the army as temporary and job training in nature, and their army lives as a transition to future careers. As a young soldier replied in an interview, "there is no war for a soldier for several years. No matter how good and how experienced one is in military skills, one has no chance of using them. It is more practical to learn civilian skills for

³⁰ Li Bo, Guanyu budui qingnian dushu redian de zhuizhong yu sikao (Investigation and consideration of hot topics of readings among army youths), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 6, 1996, pp. 45-46.

³¹ Ma Minshu, Qingnian guanbing zhiye quxiang suobian (The young officers and soldiers' changing career orientation), *Zhenggong Xuekan* (Liaoning), no. 9, 1995, p. 23.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

the sake of one's own future." With this in mind, they did not put much effort to learn military skills and knowledge and some even resented and rejected the learning.³⁴ Obviously young soldiers' conceptions of their own roles are different from the standard conception, which is well prepared to serve the state and defend the nation when it is necessary. LF provides a role model for this standard conception.

LF served his colleagues and strangers with altruistic orientation and did not ask for any payback. Today soldiers work eight hours a day and five days a week. They are supposed to have plenty of spare time. They use their spare time for self-interest and seldom for public benefit. Though they are forbidden to have second job, many engage in different kinds of economic activities to earn extra income. These activities include running one's own business, acting as sales for relatives or hometown enterprise, acting as middlemen between enterprises near the stationed units and hometown enterprises, working in the fields of cooking, home renovation, repairing electrical appliances, etc. Engaging in these activities takes up a lot of time and energy. Some soldiers even use the army's facilities, data and information for their second jobs. Soldier's second job directly or indirectly affects the normal operation of the army work and decreases its efficiency.³⁵

³⁴ Zhou Jingsheng and Liu Feng'an, *Nuli bangzhu qingnian guanbing kefu feilixing siwei* (Help the young officers and soldiers to overcome irrational thinking), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 11, 1996a, p. 39.

³⁵ Wang Jingzheng, *Guanyu junren canyu shehui jingji huodong jige wenti de tantao* (Discussion on several issues regarding soldiers' participation in social economic activities), *Nanjing zhengzhi xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of PLA Nanjing Institute of Politics), no. 1, 1994, pp. 24-31.

Parts of LF spirit are hard working, hardship enduring, thrift, and self-sacrifice. Today, on the contrary, young soldiers indulge in extravagant consumption. Few soldiers save their mediocre income and simply spend all for their own leisure. In a 1996 survey of 250 soldiers, it was found that only 10.4% of soldiers had barely enough monthly income to spend with. Most soldiers spent all within a few days after they received their salary. 87% of soldiers had to borrow money to make up for their leisure spending and some loans were up to RMB 3000.³⁶ It seems that soldiers' loan situation has been getting worse.

Soldiers also indulge in different bad habits. Popular bad habits among young soldiers included smoking, drinking alcohol, attending frequent banquets, gambling, fortune telling and other superstitious activities. A survey of 586 soldiers in a unit found that 76% of the soldiers smoked and a large part of their income was spent on buying cigarettes.³⁷ In recent years, in addition to the above mentioned popular bad habits, young soldiers have been increasingly attracted to visiting karaoke, nightclub, massage parlor, underground casino and cinema and places where they enjoyed sensual pleasures and spent a fortune.³⁸

Comradeship is helping others without asking for any return. LF provided a role model for comradeship. Contemporary young soldiers' behaviors, however, defy comradeship. For example, they

³⁶ Lu Baoge, *Qingnian shibing mangmu xiaofei xingli toushi* (A psychological perspective of young soldiers' blind consumption), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 12, 1996, p. 36.

³⁷ Wang Daming, *ibid*, pp. 46-47.

³⁸ Wu Zhuqin, "Tanting" *wenhua dui qingnian guanbing de yingxiang ji duiche* (The influence of and approach to the culture of "parlor" on young officers and soldiers), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 1, 1998.

openly admit that they give out gifts to superiors for learning skills, arrangement of special leaves and personal advancement.³⁹ They were of the opinion that a good human relationship needs support with materials. It is commonly accepted in the society to buy friends cigarettes, meals and small gifts. Human relationship today is built on the basis of interests and money. If there were no "material transaction" in one's human relationship, others might blame him for lack of "sincerity" and he would even feel uncomfortable himself.⁴⁰ The above perceptions are popular among young soldiers today.

Two Generations of Soldiers

Across different generations of PLA soldiers, the PLA authority has basically been using the same political education. From the data illustrated in Table 3, the survey showed that among 348 contemporary young soldiers, those who were dissatisfied were more than those who were satisfied with the political education in the PLA. The dissatisfied soldiers expected that the contents of political education could catch up with the economic reform and open door policy and not retain the same old orthodoxy as in the Mao Zedong period. The general feeling was exemplified by the statements of a young soldier, "The contents from political education class are all known. They are continuously repeated in newspapers, television and broadcasting. They cannot answer the sensitive questions raised by us. They lack the power of generating any deep thinking. The

³⁹ Chang Guodong and Li Bo, *Dangqiang budui qingnian guanbing jiazhi quxiang xintedian* (The new characteristics of contemporary young army officers' and soldiers' value orientations), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth studies), no. 3, 1994, p. 35.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

teachers never say anything that we like to hear and we never like what they say."⁴¹

Table 3

"What is your view on your army unit's current political education (sixiang jiaoyu)?"

1. Basically satisfied	28.4% (N = 99)
2. Satisfied	19.5% (N = 68)
3. Political indoctrination, too many hollow words and not convincing	29.6% (N = 103)
4. Orthodoxy, uninteresting and boring	19.8% (N = 69)
5. Others	2.6% (N = 9)
Total	99.9% (N = 348)

Source: Wang Feng, Yanhai kaifang chengshi he jingji tequ budui qingnian de sixiang zhuangkuang diaocha (Investigation of the thinking of army youths stationed at coastal open cities and special economic zones), Qingnian yanjiu (Youth studies), no. 5, 1995, p. 39.

Lei Feng and contemporary PLA soldiers belong to two different generations of soldiers. LF belonged to the revolutionary generation, which exemplified traditional PLA norms and values. Contemporary soldiers receive their major influences from the economic reform and open door policy. They have undergone a profound generational change. This generational change also embodies a transformation in soldiers' attitudes, values and behaviors. This study finds that contemporary PLA soldiers belong to a generation with strong materialistic and utilitarian orientations.

⁴¹ Wang Feng, Yanhai kaifang chengshi he jingji tequ budui qingnian de sixiang zhuangkuang diaocha (Investigation of the thinking of army youths stationed at coastal open cities and special economic zones), Qingnian yanjiu (Youth studies), no. 5, 1995, p. 39.

Young soldiers put individualism rather than collectivism as their first priority. They consider their own affairs ahead of others and plan well for their own future. Their considerations are more from an individual economic perspective, looking forward to improve material life and emphasizing material rewards. They are generally apathetic to public affairs and avoid involvement in it. They do not have strong sense of honor with their affiliated group. Their first priority is not to accomplish the assignment from their superiors but to consider whether the accomplishment fits with their own interests. They will participate actively if the assignment serves self-interests; if it is not, they will deal with it passively or even reject it.

Contemporary young soldiers consider themselves as "soldiers of peace time". They avoid the hardship in military training and the strict army discipline. They generally have a "taking-it-easy" attitude. Being a soldier should not deter one from enjoying life. The materialistic, utilitarian and hedonistic orientations are reflected in their motivations of joining, staying and leaving the army, their consumption behavior and their self-perceptions as PLA soldiers. These orientations are contradictory to the PLA traditions. They sometimes break the norm of the army. This research also indicates that the changing quality and character of young soldiers have undermined the internal unity and subordination to central control, which in turn would affect the effectiveness of the command and control systems of the PLA.

LF was in the era in which a PLA soldier had a low income but enjoyed a high social status. Youths felt honored to join the PLA. The society respected both the in-service and demobilized soldiers. Today, a PLA soldier has a low income as well as a low social status.

The PLA as an institution is not respected anymore. Corruption and delinquency within the army in the last two decades have shaped negative perceptions of the army. Young soldiers generally feel inferior in an environment of such negative social perceptions. Some of them hide their history of conscription after demobilization. Another indicator of inferiority feeling is that they prefer not to wear army uniforms when they leave the camps.⁴² Increasing present and future incomes and getting personal benefits become major concerns for most young soldiers. The PLA is a transitional place of future job training for these youths. This harms the PLA in its formation of a cohesive and efficient corporation and undermines its status in the society.

Conclusion

Young PLA soldiers share the same youth culture with most Chinese youths. This youth culture in contemporary China could be characterized as pragmatism, which includes materialistic and utilitarian orientations.⁴³ Different youth subgroups have different aspirations for materialism and utilitarianism. Formation of these orientations is a result of two decades of reform and opening to the outside world.

Under the reform and open door policy, there has been a continuing trend of secularization. The Chinese people's

⁴² Li Zhanghua and Chen Fei, 1990, pp. 2-3.

⁴³ Refer to Che-po Chan, "The Political Pragmatism of Chinese University Students: 10 Years after the 1989 Movement," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 8, no. 22 (1999), pp. 381-403. Although this research focused on the university students, pragmatism is a good description of today's general youth culture. Every subgroup of Chinese youths shares certain aspects of pragmatism.

catastrophic experience in the Cultural Revolution makes them disbelieve the utopian socialist principles and disdain the once charismatic supreme leaders. They realize that the utopian principles are only hollow slogans. Today they are only interested in the actual effect of reform policies, the ability of political leaders and a genuine improvement to their lives. They care for their own freedom and welfare and how soon these individual benefits could be achieved. They move away from official endorsed collectivism and towards individualism, which was once a taboo in the Mao Zedong period. In the reform era, a person's social status depends less on political achievement, which has been solely judged by the CCP, but more on economic success, which is a function of personal effort. The impact of secularization on Chinese youths has been especially strong, probably due to their rapid assimilation of knowledge of the outside world, including their exposure to western cultures. In addition, in contrast to their parents, they carry less historical burden with them. Compared with other age groups, youths tend to deny authority and become more self-centered. They only believe in and achieve for themselves. We have witnessed an intensifying secularization among Chinese youths in the last two decades. Young soldiers in the PLA have also been undergoing the same trend of secularization.

Lei Feng has been propagandized for his revolutionary spirit, in which is emphasized self-sacrifice, hardship endurance and serving the people. This study argues that contemporary young PLA soldiers have their own backgrounds and particulars of materialism and utilitarianism. Between "revolutionary spirit" and material interests, this study assumes that young PLA soldiers are

predisposed to the latter. Young soldiers adopt a pragmatic attitude with the army as their profession. They are not interested in doing work that does not bring material benefits. They are generally not interested in or even resent military training. Thus, rewards from training do not bring them happiness. Some feel that they are unfairly treated. They perceive that their income is too low in comparison with their contribution in the army. This feeling of unfairness sometimes leads to a psychology of rebellion. It is manifested in disobedience, including breaking army rules and orders. Today's young soldiers have a totally different orientation compared with Lei Feng and they have no intention to learn from their PLA role model.