

The Resurrection of Lei Feng:

Rebuilding the Chinese Party-State's Infrastructure of Volunteer Mobilization

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Abstract: The year 2008, marked by mass volunteer mobilization after the Sichuan Earthquake and during the Beijing Olympics, is hailed in official discourse as “Year One” of volunteering in China, when volunteering became integrated into mainstream Chinese culture and society and began to enjoy high-level official support and recognition. Since then, the Communist Party Youth League, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and other state agencies have rolled out several programmes at the local, regional and national levels to recruit and mobilize volunteers for a wide range of forms of social service. In fact, the irruption of volunteering into the public sphere in 2008 was not as sudden as it appeared. A Party-state organizational and propaganda infrastructure of popular mobilization, inherited from the Mao era, had continued to function, albeit in low gear, throughout the three decades following the Cultural Revolution, transforming its discourses and practices to adopt neo-liberal models of volunteerism introduced from Hong Kong and the West, featuring depoliticized, individualized and market service approaches. After 2008, the Party-State's volunteering infrastructure was ramped up, and it was re-politicised at two levels: at a

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symbolic level, the filiation with the Party's revolutionary heritage became increasingly explicit in volunteering propaganda, and at an organizational level, the purpose of volunteer mobilization became explicitly oriented to counter the rise of independent NGOs and civil society organizations, creating an infrastructure to enable the Party to channel and control popular energies to serve society within its own parameters. This article traces the evolution of state-sponsored volunteer practices, discourses and organizational forms from the Mao era until today, paying attention to the shifting representations of the revolutionary hero and model volunteer, Lei Feng. We conclude that state-led volunteering in contemporary China paradoxically redeploys discursive and organizational legacies of revolutionary mobilization to attain the opposite goal of de-mobilization or de-politicization, channeling popular altruism and energies into forms of social service that reinforce market-driven neoliberal governmentality and Party-led nation-building.

Introduction

Following the Sichuan earthquake of 12 May 2008, hundreds of thousands of volunteers spontaneously joined the relief effort – a loosely organized grassroots movement that caught both the Chinese government and international observers by surprise. A few months later, at the Beijing Olympic games, over a hundred thousand well-organized volunteers efficiently catered to the needs of visitors. With these two events, volunteerism became visible as a mass phenomenon in China. From then on, the state gave volunteering an unprecedented level of support and legitimacy, and

expanded the construction and deployment of ideological and organizational infrastructures to promote and channel volunteering as a form of social action and service.

Volunteering in China presents the co-existence of two realities of popular spontaneity and high levels of state mobilization. At one level, volunteering in China can be seen as a poorly organized phenomenon, a movement in which individuals perform acts of service in a rather unstructured way. Many volunteers operate at an even more “grassroots” level than NGOs and civil society movements, since their actions might be temporary, they might form loose networks that would rarely organize formally, and since the same individual might get involved in several groups simultaneously or consecutively, their volunteer trajectories might not be encapsulated within a single organization or institutional formation.

At another level, however, volunteering is highly organized and institutionalized. Notably, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Communist Party Youth League have been playing a significant role in mobilizing volunteers. Official discourse and policy reflects a strong will to organize and to institutionalize volunteers, to convert the Party-state’s network of mass mobilization and surveillance of youth and neighbourhood residents, notably through the Youth League and neighbourhood committees, into the institutional framework of volunteering. The deployment of the institutional network aims to channel this engagement, in ways that show both continuities and ruptures with revolutionary-era campaigns, in order to contribute to Chinese nation-building and reinforce the presence of the Party-state at the grassroots.

As part of a broader sociological research project on volunteering in

contemporary China,³ this paper specifically focuses on the latter, state-organised process of volunteer mobilisation, rather than other organisations and forms of volunteer social engagement. It is based primarily on official discourses, documents and press reports, and reflects primarily the top-down perspective of the state. The discourses and experiences of volunteers themselves, based on interviews and ethnographic participant observation among educational volunteers organised in a wide range of programmes and organisations, both within and outside the Party-state, are the subject of a series of forthcoming articles.⁴

In her work on volunteering in the United States, Nina Eliasoph has highlighted the contrast between volunteering, which tends to be apolitical, and more politicized forms of activism.⁵ While volunteering has a long history in the West and elsewhere, it has been actively promoted since the 1990s as part of a neo-liberal agenda of drawing on the goodwill of grassroots volunteer efforts, in which individual and community “self-help” are seen as the solution to social problems, rather than state interventions. While volunteers often consciously avoid discussing and acting on the political dimensions of the problems that they are trying to alleviate through their altruistic efforts, volunteering can lead to a deeper awareness of the structural political roots of social issues, and draw volunteers into more activist and politicized forms of social action. Thus, while volunteering and contentious political activism are distinct categories, the boundaries between them can be fluid and ambiguous.

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⁴ Forthcoming articles include “Intimate Utopias: Volunteer Spaces, Individualization and the Civil Sphere in China;” “Altruism as Individualism: The Moral Anxieties of Chinese Volunteers;” “Imagining the Nation, Encountering the Other, Transforming the Self: Educational Volunteering as a Political Rite of Passage in China;” “Educating the Yi: Volunteering, Development and the Construction of Ethnicity in China;” “The Labour of Righteousness: Integrating Revolutionary and Traditional Moral Practices in a Confucian Volunteer Movement.”

⁵ Nina Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers: Civic Life After Welfare's End*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011; *The Politics of Volunteering*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

The promotion of volunteering in China is, to some degree, simultaneous to and parallel to the rise of neo-liberalism in the West since the 1990s. But its genealogy and development are closely tied with the evolution and transformations of state-led mobilization, from the revolutionary era until today. In the 1990s, the promotion of modern forms of volunteering represented an attempt to move away from the politicised flavor of revolutionary forms of mass mobilization widely perceived as ritualistic and ineffective, and thus is aligned with a global trend towards depoliticized volunteering and social engagement in the context of rising neo-liberalism. But “neo-liberalism” in China, if the term can even be used, has always been state-led, even when the state was ostensibly shrinking in the first two decades of “reforms and opening up” in the 1980s and 90s.⁶ By the early 20th century, however, and increasingly in the past few years, this “neo-liberal” programme has been promoted by a Party-state that is once again expanding its reach and increasingly drawing on and adapting the symbols, discourses and techniques of control and mobilization of the revolutionary era. In the case of volunteering, the goal is to activate and channel non-political forms of altruism and social service, while preventing such engagement from slipping into contentious forms of activism. What we then witness, then, is a ramping up of the revolutionary legacy of the propaganda and infrastructure of political mobilization, in order to attain the goal of a *depoliticizing* and *non-contentious* mobilization.

⁶ See Breslin, Shaun (2006) 'Serving the Market or Serving the Party: Neo-liberalism in China', in R. Robison (ed.) *The Neo-liberal Revolution: Forging the Market State*, pp. 114-34. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Donald M. Nonini, "Is China Becoming Neoliberal?" *Critique of Anthropology* 28:2 (2008), pp. 145 – 176; Yue Zhizhao, "Neoliberal Strategies, Socialist Legacies: Communication and State Transformation in China", in Paula Chakravartty and Yue Zhizhao eds., *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, pp. 23-50.

Official discourses on volunteering

The short book *Volunteers in Action*,⁷ published as part of the “Stories of National Conditions” series (国情故事), provides an excellent window into how volunteering is recounted within Party-state narratives of nation-building. The book begins with a chapter on “2008: Year One 元年 for volunteering in China,” with portraits of volunteers conducting disaster relief at the site of the Sichuan earthquake, and at the Beijing Olympic games. In the state narrative of the post-quake volunteers, the Chinese nation comes into expression through mutual help and compassion. The diversity of backgrounds – students, businessmen, workers, peasants, freelancers, laid-off workers – all spontaneously arise to rescue their fellow Chinese. Young people of the post-Mao generation, previously seen as selfish individualists lacking a social conscience, reveal their altruism and their courage. Taxi drivers turn off their meters, droves of volunteers climb over landslides and mountains, risking their lives, reaching out to stranded victims, carrying food and supplies, offering first aid, sanitation, and psychological counselling. Crowds of volunteers flowed into Chengdu from all over China, lining up to offer their services at the Red Cross, the Youth League, and at improvised coordination offices of a network of local and national NGOs. Altogether, the number of volunteers was estimated by the China Social Work Commission to amount to 100,000 persons who came to Sichuan from other parts of China; while one million volunteers assisted within Sichuan, and 10 million persons

⁷ Zhang Chunxia. 2009. *Zhiyuanzhe zai xingdong* [English title given as *Volunteer campaigns in China*]. Beijing Shi : Xin shijie chubanshe.

across China participated in publicity, fundraising, and contributing and transporting materials. According to the China Youth Volunteer Association, 4.91 million persons volunteered nationally.⁸

The stories of volunteers emphasize the mutual care of Chinese people from different classes, regions and ethnic groups. For example, one group of 13 peasants from a village near Tangshan, Hebei, as soon as they heard news of the quake, embarked on buses and moto-taxis to Beijing, Zhengzhou, Xi'an, Chengdu and Beichuan to rescue victims isolated behind the mountains. Another group of 10 peasants from Shandong loaded 38 cases of bottled water and 50 cases of instant noodles onto a tractor and set off for Sichuan, driving across China for 4 days and 3 nights until they joined the ranks of the on-site volunteers. Meanwhile, a millionaire entrepreneur from Jiangsu donated 8 million yuan and organized for 60 bulldozers and 120 technicians to be sent from Jiangsu and Anhui to Dujiangyan, bringing along 2300 tents, 23000 radios, 1000 TV sets, and 8000 schoolbags, saving 128 lives. A 73-year-old hospital director and his wife drove down from Yizhou in Hebei, carrying 300 types of drugs and 60 items of medical equipment. A 23-year-old Tibetan from Aba descended to Deyang, organized other volunteers to carry the wounded, examine the victims, set up the tents, lay down the cots, and, with his own hands, carried stretchers holding the critically injured up and down the stairs of a hospital whose elevators had broken down. In these stories, rich and poor, peasants and millionaires, young and old, northerners and southerners, Han and Tibetans all come together in solidarity, saving lives, tending wounds, rescuing the body of the nation in a redemptive moment, a time when the Chinese could, in the midst of disaster, celebrate their moral goodness.

⁸ Zhang Chunxia 2009: 6

In her account of the Beijing Olympics, Zhang Chunxia emphasizes the patriotic enthusiasm of the youth, displaying Chinese goodwill and friendship to the world. Over one million applied to be volunteers when only 100,000 were required; 70% of these were from the post-Mao youth generation of only children, who were now given the new monicker of the “birdsnest generation”.⁹ They were dispatched to the sports venues and to “volunteer stations” throughout the city to carry out support work for the athletic events, and to offer tourist information, translation, and first aid services. Praise for the Chinese volunteers by members of the IOC, and positive coverage by the overseas media, figures prominently. The participation of schoolchildren, the elderly, the handicapped and of scholars is highlighted, as is beautiful women: fashion models trained for the flag-raising ceremonies, and a comely young woman was caught on camera, bringing water and comfort to a handsome blond foreign boy who had fainted on a sidewalk in the summer heat -- she symbolises the humanistic spirit of the Olympics and displays the inner spiritual beauty behind the beautiful appearance of the volunteer.^{10 11}

Zhang Chunxia stresses that in 2008, volunteering acquired a level of public recognition that had never existed before, and “much volunteer service did not attain the expected result, and many popular volunteer organizations were marginalized from mainstream culture”.¹² But, she says, since the events of 2008, society has shown a greatly increased level of openness to and respect for volunteering, and more common people are now joining the ranks of volunteers. She states that, after over a decade of the development of volunteering in China, the trend is for greater regulation, organization, institutionalization of volunteering, in order to give it more “rational”

⁹ Zhang Chunxia 2009: 23

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 38-39. On Volunteers at the Beijing Olympics, see Gladys Pak Lei Chong, “[Volunteers as the 'new' model citizens: Governing citizens through soft power](#)”, *China Information* 25:1 (2011).

¹² *Ibid.*, p.6.

guidance and norms. But volunteering still lags behind the developed world: Where about 40% of Westerners take part in volunteer activities, the number of urban Chinese volunteers only amounts to 3% of the urban population.¹³ Thus, how could China gain ever-increasing numbers of volunteers, without causing social chaos? How could volunteering be better guided, regulated, organized and institutionalised?

Tan Jianguang, a scholar in the Youth League's university system, divides the historical background of volunteering in China into two parts, beginning with the development of volunteering in the West, and then looking at conditions in China, he presents the West as the model against which, positively and negatively, Chinese volunteerism is developing. Tan mentions that Chinese traditions of philanthropy and mutual help have many elements of voluntarism, and that, in modern times, Western businessmen, missionaries and religious groups introduced forms of volunteerism to China. "But, owing to war and other factors, during the formative period of voluntarism in Europe and America, Chinese volunteer service did not reach an independent form".¹⁴ The Western trajectory is briefly depicted as having occurred in three phases, beginning in the early 20th century with rescue and reconstruction efforts following World War I, followed by a new wave of voluntarism in the aftermath of World War II, creating an influential social force by the 1960's. The third phase begins in the 1980's -- with globalization, the rise of NGOs and the emergence of global civil society, volunteerism as a form of social service spread beyond the West to other parts of the world. Tan notes that voluntarism in this context is closely tied to NGOs rather than to the government or business sectors, since volunteers are the main workforce of NGOs and voluntarism cannot be forced on people by governmental fiat,

¹³ Ibid.,p. 110-111.

¹⁴ Tan Jianguang, 中国广东省志愿服务发展报告 2005, p. 5.

nor can it be promoted by economic incentives. At the same time, he stresses that international NGOs often have political objectives and hope to promote “Western-style democracy” in China. But most international NGOs, he stresses, have no political objectives and are motivated by humanism and charity. While being alert to the potential political motives of foreign NGOs, China cannot stem a global tide and should absorb their positive elements, and develop a “volunteer service with Chinese characteristics,” spread the advantages of socialist spiritual civilization, and change the current unilateral radiation of volunteer service outward from Europe and America to a diversified trend of development.¹⁵

Tan Jianguang’s account reflects the ambiguities of China’s official approach to volunteering at the turn of the century. Western models of volunteering clearly presented an attractive solution to palliating for the shortcomings of the state in a market economy. Encouraging people to do good deeds was certainly something that should be encouraged – but how could it be done without undermining the political control of the Party? How could volunteering be developed without becoming a “fifth column” of Western democratization?

Returning to Lei Feng

Party and state organs discussed these questions over the next few years, and considered the experience of the previous three decades, in which, as described below, the Party-state had already built a large infrastructure for recruiting, managing and deploying volunteers. This infrastructure had adapted and built on mobilization techniques and methods inherited from the revolutionary era – notably, the campaigns

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 4-5.

for “Learning from Lei Feng,” an altruistic soldier who had been turned into a revolutionary saint in the 1960s, as described further below. The crystallization of this emerging official discourse on “volunteer service with Chinese characteristics” can be dated to 2012, when the Politburo’s Leading Group on Spiritual Civilization Building, issued a document entitled “Notification about Promoting the Lei Feng Spirit and Energetically Launching Voluntary Service Activities”.¹⁶ The document stressed that voluntary service was closely related with and very important for promoting the “Lei Feng spirit”, which was now to be promoted at an increasingly higher pitch.

At about the same time,, the News Channel of CCTV launched a series of reports named *Xue Lei Feng, wo zhiyuan* -- “I Learn from Lei Feng, I volunteer”. This program reports on people who kindheartedly help others, such as jumping into a river to save someone who was drowning. In addition to such “ad hoc” actions of doing good deeds which were in line with the classic interpretation of the “Lei Feng spirit”, this series also reports about various kinds of more organized, systematic, and lasting actions and programmes, and more importantly, these reports make explicit use of the rubric “volunteer.” For example, the episode broadcast on April 7th, 2012 was about college student volunteers acting as guides and helpers in a hospital.¹⁷ They all wore blue waistcoats showing their volunteer identity, and were recruited directed by the hospital. In the same year, the same or slightly modified slogans of “I learn from Lei Feng, I volunteer” served as the name of numerous governmental activities. Clearly, in this most recent wave of promotion of the “Lei Feng spirit,” volunteering has taken a central place. This campaign marked the intensification of a campaign to re-integrate discourses and propaganda on the revolutionary tradition of serving the

¹⁶ 《关于弘扬雷锋精神 大力开展志愿服务活动的通知》 文明办[2012]2 号

¹⁷ <https://goo.gl/NwbMMJ>

masses with the discourses and practices of “volunteering,” which had, from the 1990s until then, been evolving in an ambiguous space between state-sponsored mobilization and neo-liberal individualism.



Fig. 1. The iconic image of Lei Feng

Learning from Lei Feng in the revolutionary era

The “Learning from Lei Feng” slogans and activities hark directly back to the Maoist era, when, starting in the early 1960s, promoting selfless sacrifice was elevated to a national campaign at the center of which stands a heroic yet mysterious soldier who died at the age of 22. In this section, we focus on the historical shifts in the official discourse on helping others by “Learning from Lei Feng” (LLF). Prominent as he is, Lei Feng has not been studied extensively. Most of the existing literature in Chinese aims at interpreting the figure of Lei Feng in different ways as an

instrument of governance.¹⁸ Sociological research has focused on the ways in which the official and popular discourse of Lei Feng has changed with the social context.¹⁹ These studies argue that Lei Feng propaganda has become de-politicized since the 1980s and now places more emphasis on such personal virtues as diligence and helping others. However, they failed to notice how the Lei Feng movement was hybridized with the new social trend of volunteerism, and has thus smoothly acquired a new life. Here we will briefly introduce the rise of LLF and its marriage with volunteer service.

Lei Feng, originally named Lei Zhengxing, was born on December 18, 1940. He was orphaned at the age of seven. He began his career in his township government in 1956, at the age of 16. In 1960, when he was 20, he was enlisted in the PLA and joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). During his service, he won numerous honorary titles and awards, including “President Mao’s good soldier”. He died on August 15th, 1962, hit on the head by a wooden column, which had fallen after a car accidentally collided with it. Most of the propaganda about him was launched after his death.

Lei Feng had already been the subject of one major article in the *People’s Daily* before his death,²⁰ in which he was described as a warm-hearted and diligent soldier who had endured a miserable childhood to become a hard-working and enthusiastic young “builder of socialism”. The article relates that Lei Feng once insisted on donating two hundred yuan to a people’s commune. When the leader of the commune

¹⁸ Numerous works feature this theme, among which is *On Lei Feng’s Spirit of Devotion* (Chen Xi, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Party School of the Central Committee of the C.P.C, 2010) and *On the Lei Feng Spirit* (Hua Qi, PLA Press, 1990). For a more detailed literature review, see *Xue Leifeng: A Study from the Perspective of National Movement* (Liu Jia, Unpublished Master Thesis, Lanzhou University, 2013). [Chinese references?]

¹⁹ Examples include *Lei Feng: Where Are You from* (Lu Yanjin, Unpublished Master Thesis, Shandong University, 2013), *The Cultural Construction of the Image of Lei Feng* (Lv Heying, Unpublished Master Thesis, Capital Normal University, 2009), and Liu Jia, 2013.

²⁰ “Kuhaizi Chengzhang wei Youxiu Renmin Zhanshi” *PD*, May 5, 1961.

finally accepted his donation and asked his name, he simply replied, “I used to be an orphan, now I’m a soldier of the PLA.” The article finished with two other short stories about him. One told about how he had accompanied an elderly woman who had lost her way back to her home; the other told of him stopping to help the workers at a construction site while on his way to hospital. Lei Feng’s remark and the two stories were constantly cited in subsequent LLF campaigns, until they became among the most widely known citations from the press in the revolutionary era.

While these acts of altruism are what Lei Feng is most remembered for today, the article also contained other stories about him, that cast him firmly into the revolutionary narratives of his time. For instance, when he had become the leader of a childrens’ group in 1950, during a struggle session against the landlord of his village, who had slashed his hands with a knife when he had tried to stop the landlord’s dog from eating his meager meal, an “intense hatred surged into the heart of this ten-year-old boy; he jumped onto the stage, stretched out his chopped hand, grabbed the neck of that landlord whose [exploitation] had caused the death of his mother; and condemned his crimes. With his own eyes, he watched as the Peoples’ Government, in accordance with the law, shot dead that evil landlord, taking revenge for him and for countless class brothers.”

Soon after his death, his deeds were publicized extensively in Liaoning province, where his army troop was stationed.²¹ But the national media were silent about him for around six months. Then, on January 21st, 1963, the Ministry of Defense approved of naming Lei Feng’s squad after him.²² During the naming ceremony, General Du Ping, the head of the Shenyang division, called on all the youth in the squad to launch a movement of to learn from Lei Feng. At the same time, an exhibition hall about Lei

²¹ “Aizengfenming Lichangjianding” *PD*, Feb..7, 1963.

²² “Guofangbu Pizhun Shouyu Shenyang Budui Gongchengbing Moubu Siban Guangrong Chenghao ‘Lei Feng Ban’” *PD*, .Jan..25, 1963.

Feng's life was inaugurated, which featured memorial inscriptions written by Luo Ruiqing, the Chief of Staff of PLA, and Song Renqiong, the Secretary-General of the Northeastern Bureau of the Central Committee of the CCP.

Despite the fact that Lei Feng was still a regional hero at this time, these inscriptions showed recognition of Lei Feng from the highest leadership in China. In February, the movement became nationwide in scope. On the 7th, a front page article of the *Peoples' Daily* detailed how influential the propaganda about Lei Feng had been in Liaoning province. An enriched article of the one published in 1961 and an editorial extolling him also appeared on the second page. Excerpts from his diary and a set of photos of him were published on page 5. In the following two months, the *Peoples' Daily* published articles every week calling on the masses to learn from Lei Feng. One of the most frequently cited phrases from Lei Feng's diary was his resolution to become a "screw that never rusts" for the revolution. This phase of the campaign culminated on March 5, when the *Peoples' Daily* reported that Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and other party and state leaders had written inscriptions to promote "Learning from Lei Feng" on the frontline. From then on, March 5 was designated as Lei Feng Memorial Day, and various activities would be held across the country on this date every year.

The content, implications, and discourses of LLF today, however, are quite different from 50 years ago. Lei Feng was all too perfect. Then what exactly did the party want the masses to learn from him? The answers have varied dramatically with the times.²³

Initially, LLF was a highly politically charged campaign. In the 1963 announcement of the campaign in the PLA, soldiers were exhorted to learn the

²³ For a more detailed description and analysis of this change, please see Lv, 2009 and Liu, 2013.

following four points from Lei Feng: 1) to be firm in one's class position, loyal to the Party, to Chairman Mao, and to the revolutionary spirit of liberating humanity; 2) to put the interest of the party first, to base oneself on the needs of the revolution, to resolutely become a "screw that never rusts" and wholeheartedly serve the people; 3) to uphold the noble communist virtues of simplicity, hard work, self-abnegation and altruism; 4) to study the works of Chairman Mao with effort and enthusiastically accept the party's indoctrination, to be strict to oneself and adopt a spirit of learning and self-improvement.²⁴ The focus was entirely on altruistic service to the Party, more than on the acts of kindness and help to others that would, much later, become the focus of LLF campaigns.

During the Cultural Revolution, the political significance of Lei Feng was most salient, and he was used as a token in political struggles.²⁵ This was most clearly shown by the fact that Lei Feng was invoked to justify two events instigated by opposing factions— the attack on former PRC President and senior party leader Liu Shaoqi in 1969, and the sacking of the "Gang of Four" in 1977. During the Cultural Revolution Lei Feng was presented not as a helping hand, but as a diligent builder of socialism who always followed the party line without question; the evocation of direct service to others was downplayed.

De-politicising Lei Feng, 1978-1981

After 1978 and the launch of the Opening-up policy, the LLF campaign was gradually de-politicized and turned into the promotion of moral deeds at a personal level. A new slogan was attached to the campaign: "Establish a new atmosphere, do

²⁴ "Jiefangjun Zongzhengzhibu he Tuanzhongyang fenbie Fachu Tongzhi" *PD*, Feb. 16, 1963.

²⁵ See Liu, 2013.

good deeds” (*Shu Xinfeng, Zuo Haoshi*,” 树新风, 做好事).²⁶ This was originally the title of an activity for youth, proposed by the Ministry of Education and other national agencies, during the winter break and Spring Festival of 1978. The activity was aimed at pushing the Lei Feng campaign to a “new climax”, to further eliminate the “poisonous influence of the Gang of Four” and restore the lustre of the revolutionary tradition. The proposal contained three detailed components which were in stark contrast to the initial focus of the campaign in 1963: (1) during the spring festival holiday, each person, according to their personal circumstances, was encouraged to do one meaningful deed for one’s peoples’ commune, factory, school, work unit, or for the masses; (2) during the holiday, to visit and comfort relatives of revolutionary martyrs, PLA soldiers, teachers, and comrades who were still working during the festival; (3) Red Guard organizations in schools and in Party units, and teams of sent-down youth in the countryside, could organize reading meetings, singing gatherings, scientific experiments, or meet exemplars and heroes. The overtly ideological and political elements of the campaign, if not completely eliminated, became much less obvious; modest acts of direct care to others were emphasized instead of revolutionary grandstanding. In fact, the third component of the plan seemed to liberate the “red guard” groups and the sent-down youth from purely political activities.

Indeed, the reports about LLF following the appearance of the new slogan were largely about outstanding, diligent, or warm-hearted people; they no longer mentioned whether they enthusiastically read Mao’s works or if they actively criticized class enemies. The change in the presentation of the campaign, however, did not mean that LLF was no longer a political tool. The majority of LLF reports in 1978 told of how

²⁶ “Ba ‘Xiang Lei Feng Tongzhi Xuexi’ de Yundong Tuixiang Xin Gaochao” *PD*, Jan. 27, 1978.

the Lei Feng spirit influenced the soldiers of the Peoples' Liberation Army. Perhaps the CCP was using the figure of Lei Feng to reinforce the loyalty and orientation of soldiers at the starting point of the new policy on "reform and opening up" launched by Deng Xiaoping that year. Indeed, at this point, Lei Feng was still portrayed as a worker dedicated to the Party and the people. When helping behavior was mentioned in these reports, it was lauded not because it was a desirable habit *per se*, but because it reflected devotion to the nation and its people.²⁷

Since the 1980s, the LLF campaign has increasingly emphasized service to others. On March 4th, 1980, one day before the Lei Feng Memorial Day, some 30,000 middle and primary school students in Beijing went out to clean streets, help the elderly, and publicize traffic rules – activities that would be called "voluntary service" today. The *Peoples' Daily* reported the event, and cited a remark from a passerby: "the Lei Feng spirit has come back to the youth,"²⁸ which would reappear in *the Peoples' Daily* in the same period next year.²⁹ It was not until this point that the LLF campaign became less emphatic on being loyal to the Party and highlighted more, if not solely, the moral qualities related with doing good deeds.³⁰

Another step was made in the 1980s as well. Before this time, the LLF campaign referred more often to personal acts. In the 1960s, there were hardly any reports about people forming groups to help others, but they rather highlighted exemplary individuals. "LLF groups" are reported from the mid-1970s, and were extensively publicized in the 1980s. The first "LLF group" was reported in 1973. This group

²⁷ For example, see the report "Xue Lei Feng, Zuo Lei Feng, Xiang Lei Feng" in *PD*, Apr. 04, 1978.

²⁸ "Gongqingtuan Beijing Shiwei Zuzhi Kaizhan 'Xue Lei Feng' Huodongri' Huodong" *PD*, Mar. 05, 1980.

²⁹ "Dao Chezhan, Ma Tou, Dajiexiaoxiang wei Qunzhong Zuohaoshi" *PD*, Mar. 03, 1981.

³⁰ The public speeches given by political and military leaders continued to attach various virtues to Lei Feng, such as studying hard and being faithful to Marxism, but most reports of "Lei Feng cases" in this period were now about helping others.

belonged to the Guangzhou People's Trolley Bus Company and consisted of 22 members who were primarily bus attendants, and who gave testimonies on how Lei Feng inspired them to be more kind and helpful to bus passengers, to give them detailed directions, to return lost wallets, and so on.³¹ And yet the report did not describe any systematic group work done by them, so coordinated volunteering was unlikely the primary mode of their service. Moreover, "LLF groups" were rarely mentioned in the *Peoples' Daily* before 1980. In 1980, an article reported that PLA troops in Xiamen organized "LLF groups" to help with providing service to tourists. These groups also regularly helped to repair damaged buildings and to maintain parks. After this report came out, the phrase "LLF groups" showed up repeatedly in the *Peoples' Daily*. Groups with other titles emerged as well. A "Youth Service Corps" (YSC, *qingniang fuwu dui* 青年服务队), for example, was first reported in 1981.³² According to this article, the first YSC arose from branches of the Youth League in a bicycle factory in Shanghai. The members of this YSC first helped fellow workers in the factory with daily chores such as repairing bikes, hair-cutting, washing clothes, and so on. Soon other factories organized their YSCs as well and they offered their service outside the factories. They helped in hospitals, schools, army barracks, and ports. In an article published three months later, it was reported that more than 6,000 Youth Service Corps had emerged in Shanghai. These groups marked a new phase of LLF in which helping acts were carried out in groups, and this practice was recognized and vigorously publicized. This transition rendered the organizational structure of traditional LLF more powerful to mobilize and manage people to offer

³¹ "Renmin de Qinwuyuan" *PD*, Mar. 03, 1973.

³² "Tamen Zijue de wei Qunzhong Zuohaoshi" *PD*, Feb. 27, 1981.

help, and would facilitate the shift towards the volunteer movement in 1990s.³³

The category of “Labour by obligation” (*Yiwu laodong*)

Corresponding to this trend, the term “*yiwu laodong*”, once closely associated with LLF but separated from it during the Cultural Revolution, as discussed below, was resurrected. This phrase has an ambiguous meaning. Literally, it means “obligatory labor”. If the labor is obligatory, one has no choice but do it. However, the usage by no means implied compulsion. Nearly all the reports related to *yiwu laodong* suggest that, despite the obligatory implication in the name, the work was done ad hoc and out of willingness. Thus *yiwu* or “obligatory” in this term does not mean a burden or a lack of choice. Rather, such labor was an “obligation” in the sense that material or financial reward to the laborers was neither necessary nor desirable. The word implies that, out of a deep sense of obligation to serve the party, the state, and the people, one voluntarily offers help. Compared to the earlier discourse on “doing good deeds”, “labor” in this phrase also carried a subtle change. While helping an elderly person cross the street or offering someone a seat in a bus could well count as good deeds, they are hardly “labor” in the formal sense of the term. Labor implies systematic work, and usually takes place in organized groups. Specifically, *yiwu laodong* included such activities as working for construction projects, planting trees, and reaping for farmers. Therefore *yiwu laodong* was a very sophisticated expression connoting patriotism, willingness, complexity of the work, and teamwork at the same

³³ On the LLF campaigns of the early 1990s, see Li Kaicheng and Geng Yansheng, “[On the Upsurges in the Emulate Lei Feng Movement and Some Sober Reflections](#)”, *Chinese Education & Society* 26:1 (1993). On the ironic appropriations of Lei Feng in Chinese pop culture, see Elaine Jeffreys and Su Xuezhong, “[Governing through Lei Feng: A Mao-era Role Model in Reform-era China](#)”, in David Bray and Elaine Jeffreys eds., *New Mentalities of Government in China*, London: Routledge, 2016, pp.

time. It almost captured the entire essence of what would be called “volunteerism” today.

It should be noted that *yiwu laodong* came into public use much earlier than “learning from Lei Feng”. Reports about *yiwu laodong* can be found in the *Peoples’ Daily* going back to 1947. The term was also associated with the earliest reports on LLF: on March 16, 1963, when LLF was still in its first high tide, the term was first used in conjunction with LLF in the *Peoples’ Daily*. The original sentence went “...ten members of the Chinese Communist Youth League and young people spontaneously organized a *yiwu laodong* group and helped clean the workshops...”

However, most of the time until the 1980s, especially during the Cultural Revolution, *yiwu laodong* referred to volunteerism in other countries in the Soviet Bloc. Starting from the 1980s, the term was used less for describing foreign activities and more for domestic ones. Indeed, *yiwu laodong* heralded the emergence of volunteerism in public discourse in the 1980s. The stress on intentional service is the first step of LLF on the road to incorporating volunteerism.

Emergence of the category of the “volunteer” in the 1990s

It was in the late 1980s that residents of Shenzhen and Guangdong imported modern discourses and practices of volunteering from Hong Kong and Macau.³⁴ In those territories, volunteering is called “yigong” 義工 – which also translates literally as “work by obligation” but, in the Hong Kong context, is the term used to convey the western category of “volunteering”, often carried out by religious groups and charities. Exchanges with Hong Kong thus played a major role in facilitating the

³⁴ United Nations Volunteers, *Zhiyuan jingshen zai Zhongguo*, 1999. This unpublished report contains a detailed description of volunteerism in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

semantic and conceptual shift from the revolutionary obligation to sacrifice for the collective, to less politicised and more individualistic conceptions of volunteering. In one source, which focuses on Guangdong, the “first” volunteer service in China is identified as a group of Lei Feng enthusiasts who, in 1987, tired of the “political movement” flavour of Lei Feng activities, and after reading books about volunteer service overseas and consulting with Hong Kong volunteer groups, decided to set up a telephone hotline, the “hand-in-hand youth hotline service (‘手拉手’青春热线电话服务) to provide psychological counselling to people in need, with the support of the Guangdong branch of the Youth League. In 1990, the first independent volunteer association, the Shenzhen Volunteer Social Service Federation, registered with the Shenzhen Civil Affairs Bureau.³⁵ This association’s founders included lawyers who were familiar with foreign experiences of NGOs and who were in touch with Hong Kong volunteer associations.³⁶ The association was, in its early years, lodged in the Municipal offices of the Youth League, and primarily offered a hot-line service. When the Municipal Party leader first met the group in 1994, he expressed strong support for the organization, which led to funds and office space being allocated, staff being hired, and the expansion of services into several new areas, including a volunteer teachers’ corps (义工讲师团), a volunteer artist troupe, and so on.³⁷

In the early 1990’s, several municipalities in Guangdong experimented with new ways to celebrate Lei Feng memorial day on March 5. In Jiangmen, groups from Hong Kong and Macau and overseas Chinese groups were invited to share the traditional culture and customs of overseas Chinese, under the theme of “caring for

³⁵ 深圳市青少年义务社会工作者联合会, name changed in 1995 to 深圳市义务工作者联合会 and again in 2005 to 深圳市义工联合会

³⁶ Tan Jianguang 2005: 10-11.

³⁷ Ding Yuanzhu and Jiang Xunqing. 2001. Zhi yuan huo dong yan jiu : lei xing, ping jia yu guan li [Research on volunteer activities: types, evaluation and management]. Tianjin Shi : Tianjin ren min chu ban she, pp. 146-149).

our overseas relatives,” and also to provide examples and models of volunteer service, leading to the establishment of first rural youth volunteer service centre, in the Xinhui district of Jiangmen. Similarly, Zhuhai invited volunteer groups from Hong Kong and Macau to establish pilot projects. Shantou used the visits of overseas Chinese to promote philanthropy and volunteer service.³⁸

Meanwhile, in north China, the term of *zhiyuan*, started to acquire the connotations associated with the modern concept of “volunteering”, and would become the preferred term in official discourse to designate the practice. The first “volunteer organization” in China is traced in the official literature as having been formed in March 1989 by 13 members of the residents’ committee of a lane in Tianjin (天津市和平区新兴街朝阳里), who organized a group of 40-50 volunteers, the “‘serve the people’ volunteer group” (“为人民服务”志愿者小组) to help with lone and widowed elderly, the handicapped, and people with special needs in the neighbourhood. The earliest activities were helping the elderly to buy and deliver vegetables and coal (Zhang Chunxia 2009: 61; Tan Jianguang 2005: 10)³⁹

In 1990, the Asian Games were held in Beijing. Of all the 17,000 staff of the organizing committee, most were actually volunteers. However, the official report used the phrase “*zhiyuan rennyuan*” (志愿人员, voluntary personnel) instead of “volunteers” (*zhiyuanzhe* 志愿者).⁴⁰ The first *Peoples’ Daily* article dedicated to “volunteers” per se (*zhiyuanzhe*) appeared in 1992. The report described volunteers

³⁸ Tan Jianguang 2005: 52.

³⁹ By the early 2000s, this “volunteer’s committee” (*zhiyuanzhe xiehui*) worked to help residents find jobs, and provided them with health training. Every year the association conducted a survey of the residents’ needs; and at the entrance to each building, a list of resident volunteers and contact information was posted.

⁴⁰ “Yayunhui Gexiang Choubai Gongzuo Jiuxu” *PD*, Aug. 17, 1990.

who were active in helping residents in need in many neighborhoods in Hangzhou.⁴¹

Citing an old member of the residents' committee, the journalist wrote "Here, 'Learning from Lei Feng' is no longer a seasonal song but a daily show!"

Indeed, this quote served as an overture for a national performance starring millions of volunteers across the nation in the following decades. The emergence of youth volunteers is traced in the official literature to 19 December 1993, when, in preparation for the spring festival peak season, 20,000 youth, holding flags with the words "youth volunteer" 青年志願者, to provide help to travellers in 33 trains and 120 stations along the Beijing-Guangzhou line.⁴² Forty thousand secondary school and university students were subsequently deployed on all major lines and stations during the Spring Festival rush. Shortly thereafter, on Lei Feng memorial day of 1994, which inaugurated the two-day weekend in China, over 10 million youth volunteers were mobilized to conduct labour in homes, farms and factories.⁴³

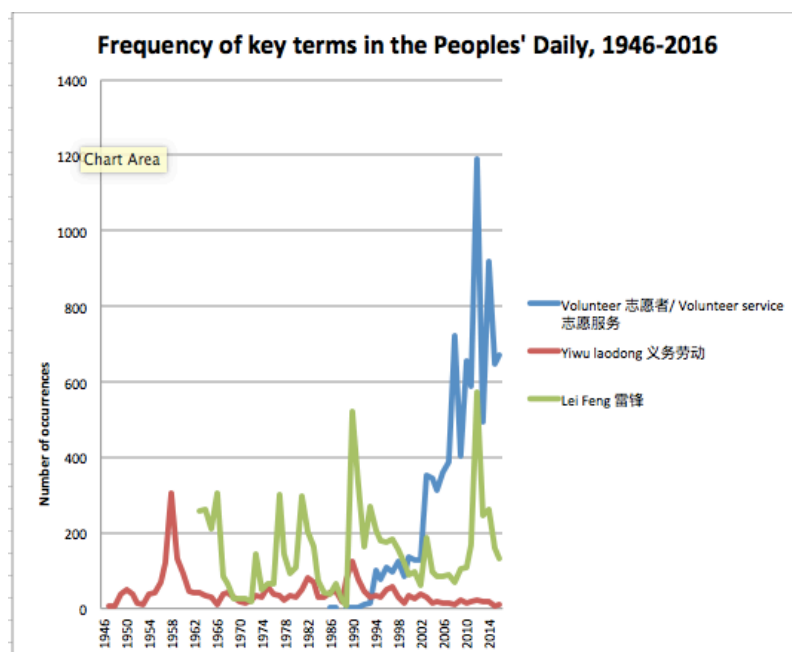


Table 1. Frequency of key terms in the *Peoples' Daily*.

⁴¹ "Hangzhou 'Zhiyuanzhe Huodong' Pengbo Xingqi" *PD*, Jun. 06, 1992.

⁴² "Rexin Xian Shehui Zhenqing Nuan Renxin" *PD*, Dec. 20, 1993.

⁴³ Zhang Chunxia 2009: 64.

Table 1 compares the currency of the three key terms of “volunteer”, “*yiwu laodong*” and Lei Feng in official discourse in the history of the Peoples’ Republic of China, by counting the number of occurrences of the terms in the *Peoples’ Daily*. Peaks on the graph correspond to political campaigns. *Yiwu laodong* was most frequently used during the Great Leap Forward in 1958, and reached a second peak, together with Lei Feng, in 1990, in the year following the crackdown on the Tiananmen student movement and a reinforcement of political control. The first peak for the term “volunteer” was in 2008, associated with the Olympics and the Sichuan earthquake, while the second peak, for both “volunteer” and Lei Feng, was in 2012, corresponding to the campaign to promote the Lei Feng spirit through volunteer service.

Institutionalising voluntarism

Volunteering was not only a category deployed in official discourses and large-scale event mobilisation; increasingly systematic efforts began to organise volunteers on a permanent basis. The establishment of the above-mentioned Tianjin volunteer group in 1989 was followed by the successive establishment of neighbourhood volunteer organizations throughout China until, in 2005, the Commission on Community Volunteers of the China Association of Social Work was formally established. According to figures compiled by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, by December 2007, over 270,000 volunteer organizations had been established, triple the number from the year before. The number of community volunteers was estimated at 20 million, including over 5.67 million “registered volunteers.” In December 2007,

a system of registration and management of volunteers began to be implemented nationally.⁴⁴

At present, in spite of the large number of volunteer organizations with little or no background in the party or the government, state-driven volunteering programs are still among the most influential and most popular ones in China. The Chinese Communist Youth League (*gongqingtuan* 共青团, Youth League hereafter), the Ministry of Civil Affairs (*minzhengbu* 民政部, MCA hereafter), and the CPC Central Committee's Central Commission for Guiding the Construction of Spiritual Civilization (official English name: Central Commission for Guiding Cultural and Ethical Progress) (*Zhongyang Jingshen Wenming Jianshe Zhidao Weiyuanhui* 中央精神文明建设指导委员会 or 中央文明委, CCC hereafter) are the main state agencies promoting volunteerism. The first, an affiliate of the Chinese Communist Party, aims to govern, organize, and train the youth of China as future party members and cadres. The second is a branch of Chinese government, focusing on the management of social work, social welfare and social organizations. The third is a ministry-level organ of the Central Committee of the CCP, which, since its establishment in 1997, has been tasked with civilizing missions such as enhancing the civility of towns and cities, embellishing the rural and ethnic character of villages, promoting “civilized families”, “civilized work units” and “civilized campuses”, improving the civilized behavior of tourists, enhancing trust between people, and promoting volunteering.⁴⁵ These three agencies are in charge of several national volunteer organizations and programs, as summarized in Table 1.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Zhang Chunxia 2009: 58; Ding & Jiang 2001: 126; see also Tan & Zhou 2008: 18-23.

⁴⁵ “中央文明办确定今年 10 项重点工作”, 15 Jan. 2016, http://www.wenming.cn/specials/zxdj/2016wmbzrh/yw_wmbzrh/201601/t20160115_3089937.shtml, accessed 26 Dec. 2016.

⁴⁶ Information in the table is collected from various sources, including the official sites of relevant

There is also often a parallel infrastructure of agencies and programs at the provincial, municipal, county (*xian* 县), and even more local levels of government. Local governments may have their own versions that follow the general ideas of the centrally promoted programs. Therefore, there is an effervescence of volunteer programs with different names, aims, and types of people under the same banner of a central program.

Volunteers are a major component in the organization of major events and sports meets. This practice began with the Beijing Womens' Summit in 1995, for which the Youth League recruited thousands of volunteers from schools, universities and work units in Beijing; this was the first time this approach was used to welcome foreign visitors and give a smiling image of China. Other major events have included the Kunming World Horticulture Exhibition of 1999, the *Fortune* forum in Shanghai in 2001, the Beijing Olympics of 2008, and the Shanghai Expo of 2010.⁴⁷ Overseas volunteer service began in 2002, with youth volunteers being sent to Laos. By 2009, 300 volunteers had been sent to Myanmar, Ethiopia, Guyana and other developing countries, for periods of six months to one year, to serve in the areas of Chinese-language education, health, computer training, etc.⁴⁸

While neighbourhood volunteers are organized under the supervision of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, it is the Communist Party Youth League that takes the responsibility to organise youth volunteers, especially in schools and universities. On 5 December 1994, the Youth League established the China Youth Volunteer Association – laying the foundation for an institutionalized system of youth

organizations, other online resources, published academic works, and relevant official documents. Note that for a specific organization, it can be supervised by both CCYL and MCA. In this table, categorizing an organization in the CCYL row or MCA row only means that it is primarily but not exclusively led by the corresponding agency. This also applies for specific programs.

⁴⁷ Zhang Chunxia 2009: 75-76; Ding & Jiang 2001: 149-154.

⁴⁸ Zhang Chunxia 2009: 78

volunteering which, by 2009, included 35 provincial Associations, local associations in two thirds of China's municipalities, districts and counties, 2000 institutions of higher education, and 190,000 "volunteer service stations."⁴⁹ In Guangdong, for example, the Provincial Youth Volunteer Association was established in 1995; by 2005, there were 180 local Youth Volunteer Associations and 5500 "youth volunteer service stations" 青年志愿者服务站 and 64708 "Youth Volunteer Teams" 青年志愿者服务队.⁵⁰ In this system, the provincial association is responsible for establishing the legal status of volunteers and providing broad guidance, while municipal-level associations and "service stations" at the county level or below have a coordinating role, to link volunteers with service recipients, gradually establishing a broad-based service network (see Tan & Zhou 2008: 31-38). There are local variations in the system: the provincial association and the municipal associations of Guangzhou, Foshan, Zhuhai, Shantou and other areas have followed the national model with "Youth Volunteer Associations," with an emphasis on combining large-scale campaigns with specific service activities, while Shenzhen, taking inspiration from Hong Kong, spearheaded another model, of the "Volunteer Federation" (义务工作者联合会), which tries to coordinate government and non-governmental initiatives. There has been some competition between the two models.⁵¹ The Central Committee of the Youth League sent representatives several times to try to persuade Shenzhen to adopt the national nomenclature, but Shenzhen persisted in retaining its name; other cities such as Panyu, Nanhai, Shunde and Lianzhou even adopted the "Yigonglian" name, in order to match the language used in Hong Kong.⁵²

The organization of youth volunteers was quickly followed by regulation. In

⁴⁹ Zhang Chunxia 2009: 65.

⁵⁰ Tan Jianguang 2005: 3.

⁵¹ Tan Jianguang 2005: 53.

⁵² Tan & Zhou 2008: 58

August 1999, the Guangdong Peoples' Congress passed the first set of "regulations for youth volunteer service" (青年志愿者服务条例), an example which was followed at the provincial and municipal levels by Shandong, Nanjing, Fujian, Henan, and so on.⁵³ The Guangdong regulations guarantee the right of citizens to participate in volunteer activities; that they enjoy normal rights during volunteer service and can sue for compensation in cases of abuse; that volunteers' resources cannot be misappropriated or volunteers forced to do unreasonable work; that volunteers deserve social recognition; and prohibit volunteers from engaging in illegal activities or from harming the interests of the recipients of their services.⁵⁴ In 2000, the Youth League announced that Lei Feng memorial day would be designated as the "Chinese Youth Volunteer Service Day" (中国青年志愿者服务日). The following year, a system of youth volunteer registration was put into place by the Youth League Central Committee, in which youth aged 14 or above could acquire the status of a volunteer, provided that they did at least 48 hours of volunteer service per year. Thus, by 2007, 25.1 million youth were registered as volunteers.⁵⁵

Youth volunteer work is organized into a series of areas: poverty alleviation in rural areas; urban community building; environmental protection; large events; emergency rescue and disaster relief; and public interest (shehui gongyi). Organizational models include "one-to-one" 一助一 assistance (started in 1995), in which a long-term relationship is established between a volunteer individual or volunteer group with an individual or area, to provide service at regular intervals and places. The targets of this type of service include isolated and widowed elders; the handicapped; and retirees, laid-off workers and students with special difficulties.

⁵³ Zhang Chunxi 2009: 65.

⁵⁴ Tan Jianguang 2005: 11.

⁵⁵ Zhang Chunxi 2009: 67.

They also include relationships with old age homes, welfare homes, orphanages, health rehabilitation centres, etc. The youth provide company, medical care, culture and entertainment, repairs of electrical appliances, internet training, legal advice, etc.⁵⁶

According to Tan Jianguang, in the early stages of the development of volunteer organizations, the role of the Youth League in mobilizing resources was crucial. Most groups evolved from “a model of management by league cadres, assisted by League members, and the participation of youth, to a model of support by league cadres, management by volunteer activists (gugan), and participation in service by league members and youth.” Early efforts continued LLF activities of helping poor families, the handicapped, lonely and widowed elders with daily chores and moral support; as well as propaganda for public morality (obeying traffic regulations, hygiene, etc). Later, the Guangdong Youth League promoted youth volunteerism in new areas such as environmental action and technological literacy. The Youth League also acts as a bridge between the Party and government and youth volunteers, consulting with the Party and government to launch volunteer projects which dovetail with government policies, such as support for poor rural areas.⁵⁷

The Go West Programme

One of the most high-profile programmes sponsored by the Youth League involves sending university graduates to as volunteer teachers in rural regions of West Chin. Initial, small-scale experiments began in 1996; these were consolidated in 2003 under the name of the “Go West Plan” (*xibu jihua*). In June of that year, the Youth

⁵⁶ Ding & Jiang 2001: 114-115; Zhang Chunxia 2009: 71.

⁵⁷ Tan Jianguang 2005: 21-22.

League, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Personnel co-issued a document which announced the commencement of the program, which makes use of the category of volunteerism to mobilize fresh college graduates to serve in western China in the fields of education, medical care, and agricultural technology. The official document was issued to relevant governmental branches on June 8, and little more than two months later in the late August, the groups of college students set out for their volunteerism service. At an internal meeting about the Go West plan in 2003, Zhao Yong, the then standing secretary of the Secretariat of the Youth League, remarked: “This year we have fought a sudden fight; [we] finished a series of work including recruitment and dispatch within a very short time.”⁵⁸

While the reason for this hasty action is unclear, the urgency of this program may be related to the special situation of college graduates in 2003. In 1999, under the influence of the new policy of “expanding enrollment” (扩招), the number of the students admitted into college increased by 44% compared to the previous year, whereas the annual rate of increase had averaged at 3.3% in the period from 1993 to 1998.⁵⁹ This dramatic change in the scale of admission resulted in a huge wave of inexperienced new job-seekers in 2003. To make things worse, in 2003 China’s major cities were severely stricken by SARS, an acute and frequently fatal infectious disease. Both factors led to uncertain prospects in the job market for college graduates in that year. The Go West program, born in such unusual circumstances, might well be understood as a way to channel the surplus of college-level labor from the cities to the

⁵⁸ Tuanzhongyang qingnian zhiyuanzhe gongzuobu (Youth Volunteers Work Office of the Central Committee of the CCP Youth League, 团中央青年志愿者工作部), *Xibu Jihua Wanli Caifeng Zhiyuan Xingdong Cankao Ziliao* (Reference Materials on the Volunteer Action of the Go West Program, 西部计划万里采风志愿行动参考资料), 2006, p.72

⁵⁹ Calculated from the data in the website of the National Bureau of Statistics of China, <http://goo.gl/v8VKgS>, retrieved on Feb. 24, 2015.

countryside and thus temper the urgent issue of youth employment. In fact, a 2003 governmental notification about the employment of college students issued by the State Council listed as the first point the encouragement of college students to work “at the grassroots” (基层) and in areas in hard conditions. Moreover, this notification explicitly expressed the governmental support of the Go West program and the career advantages the volunteers would enjoy after they finished their service.⁶⁰ The document about the implementation of the Go West program cited this notification and claimed that the aims of the program included “widening the channel of employment and entrepreneurship of college students.”⁶¹ Apart from the pressing problem of employment, training of new talents with working experiences at the “grassroots” was another basic aim of the Go West Plan. Therefore, Go West is a program as much for helping volunteers as it is for the helping the western areas. Although promoting the development of western China is still a key component of the guiding aims, the channeling and training of volunteers carry equal, if not more importance.

Another program, the “triple rustication (*san xiexiang*” 三下乡), launched in 1997 and jointly sponsored by the Central Propaganda Department, the Ministry of Education and the Youth League Central Committee, involves sending hundreds of thousands of students at professional schools (大中專) down to the countryside during their summer holidays, to conduct literacy, cultural, technological and health work, and to “promote applied agricultural technology and health, and civilized

⁶⁰ “Guowuyuan Bangongting guanyu zuohao 2003 nian putong gaodeng xuexiao biyesheng jiuye gongzuo de tongzhi” (Notification about effectively working on the employment of graduates of regular universities and colleges in 2003 by the Office of the State Council, 国务院办公厅关于做好2003年普通高等学校毕业生就业工作的通知).

⁶¹ “Guanyu shishi daxuesheng zhiyuan fuwu xibu jihua de tongzhi”.

lifestyles”.⁶²

The “Go West” and “Triple Rustication” programmes both evoke the movement to send urban youth to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976. The latter programme employs the same term of *xiaxiang* – “going down to the villages,” denoting an explicit and unambiguous link with the Mao-era campaign, while the slogan of the Go West programme employs a slogan that is almost identical to one associated with the Cultural Revolution. The following two images illustrate both the continuities and the changes in the presentation of these campaigns to send educated urban youth to “serve the people” in the countryside. The first image is a propaganda poster for sent-down youth in the Cultural Revolution, showing showing zealous young revolutionaries, holding Mao’s *Little Red Book*, departing on the train from Shanghai en route to their remote inland destination. On the red banner, educated youth are told of the necessity to be re-educated by the poor, lower and middle peasants. And the vertical slogan on the right of the poster states, “Go to the countryside, Go to the frontier areas, Go wherever the fatherland needs you most!”

⁶² Zhang Chunxia 2009: 72; Ding & Jiang 2001: 116-119.



(Fig. 2)

An almost identical slogan can be found on the banner for the Go West programme's website in 2015: "Go to the West, Go to the grassroots, Go wherever the fatherland needs you most!". But this time, the cheering youth portrayed beside the slogan are not heading off to be re-educated by the peasants, but to bring education to the peasants as volunteer teachers. And the militant aesthetics of the revolutionary poster are replaced by alluring images of grasslands and snow-capped mountains, as well as China's official logo for volunteering, showing a dove/helping hand inside a heart, conveying a message of peace and love.



(fig. 3)

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an overview of the official discourse and institutionalization of volunteering in China. It reveals a process of conversion of the Party's network of mass mobilization of youth and neighbourhood residents, notably through the Community Party Youth League and neighbourhood committees, into the institutional framework of volunteering. With their growing affluence and sophistication, urban residents have a greater desire to contribute and participate in society through engagement as volunteers. The deployment of the institutional network aims to channel this engagement, in ways that show both continuities and ruptures with the campaigns of the revolutionary era, in order to contribute to Chinese nation-building, and to prevent the emergence of Western-style civil society by co-opting the altruistic impulses of the people into Party-led programmes.

Using the comparative framework of this volume, contemporary state-sponsored discourses and institutions of volunteering in China can be considered as a form of “pre-emptive mobilisation”, which aims to actively organise and structure social service and engagement in order to prevent and pre-empt mobilisation by other actors or for other causes. This complicates Juan Linz's characterisation of forms of mobilisation and political regimes in his comparative study of totalitarian and

authoritarian regimes:⁶³ Chinese state-sponsored volunteering does not reflect a totalitarian state's efforts to mobilise citizens into pro-regime *political action*; nor can it be characterised as an authoritarian state's efforts to actively *demobilise* citizens. Rather, what we find is an effort to actively *mobilise* citizens, but towards pro-regime *depoliticised action*. Perhaps it can be considered a form of “quasi-mobilisation” as defined by Hankiss 1988 in his study of post-socialist Hungary, in which the elite simultaneously fosters and curbs self-mobilisation among the population.⁶⁴

Institutionally and ideologically, contemporary Chinese volunteerism can trace its genealogy to the LLF movement, as well as other movements and campaigns. From “Learning from Lei Feng” to *yiwu laodong* to volunteerism and back to “Learning from Lei Feng”, the official discourse on helping others has changed greatly in different times. But no matter how it changes, the state has always been a central player in promoting helping behaviour. In this way, a tinge of the collectivism of the socialist era continues to be felt in the institutions of state-led volunteering. As Yan Hairong has argued, “the emerging hegemony of capitalism in China must deal with living socialist legacies, claims, and structures of feeling that surround the current relations of production and sociality.”⁶⁵ Similarly, the emerging volunteerism cannot be fully separated with LLF, and volunteers' experience and practice are influenced by this socialist legacy.

At the same time, there are ambiguous tensions between the discourses on Lei Feng and on volunteerism. Tan Jianguang notes that while the LLF movement's stress on “doing good deeds and helping others” (做好事, 帮助他人) is similar to the

⁶³ Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000.

⁶⁴ Elemer Hankiss, “The Second Society: Is There an Alternative Social Model Emerging in Contemporary Hungary?” *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, Volume 55, No. 1 (Spring 1988): 13-42

⁶⁵ Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) 13.

“volunteer service” stress on “serving society, serving others” (服务社会，服务他人), they differ in that the Lei Feng movement was “political, movement-oriented and collective” (政治性、运动性、集体性), while volunteer service is “personalized, routinized and individualized” (人性化、日常化、个体化).⁶⁶ There was a conscious transition from the “selfless sacrifice” of revolutionary era to the “volunteer service” and “non-profit service” of the reform era. Organisers reflected that the Cultural Revolution had overly politicized serving others, and the “movement” style of the LLF campaigns of the 1980s involved sporadic actions that lacked continuity. In an essay written by a leading youth volunteer from Guangzhou, the author noted that many people speak of Lei Feng and of volunteers as if they were the same thing, but he stressed that while “Lei Feng was a volunteer (yigong), volunteers need not be Lei Fengs, volunteers need not have such noble thoughts and spiritual awareness as Lei Feng.” “A volunteer is only an ordinary person who does ordinary things. But Lei Feng was the product of a specific age, who was fabricated as a model to imitate. He has a high level of enlightenment (觉悟), he has an attitude of sacrifice for the people, his heart is committed to the common good, he has unswerving perseverance. But a volunteer does not necessarily have these qualities and is not required to have them. The main thing that volunteers and Lei feng have in common is all have a heart that takes joy in helping others.” This author criticized media reports on volunteers that exaggerate the sacrifices of volunteers, depicting them like heroic Lei Fengs, creating the negative effect of causing people to misunderstand the notion of volunteering and even to resist it.⁶⁷

Such comments reflect the tensions between the revolutionary ethic of selfless

⁶⁶ Tan Jianguang 2005: 6.

⁶⁷ Wutuobang, 今天我们怎么样做义工, in Tan Jianguang, Li Sen & Zhu Liling eds. 2006: 155.

sacrifice and the more individualized ethic of most contemporary volunteers, who do not recognise themselves in Lei Feng, deny any pretension to heroism, and, for the most part, seek self-discovery and self-expression through their volunteering. Thus, while the Party-state is able to re-deploy discourses, practices and institutions dating from the revolutionary era, the volunteers who are mobilised pursue their own dreams, fancies and desires.⁶⁸

Table 1. Volunteer Programs of the Central Party and Government

State Agency	Sub-agencies (name in Chinese)	Affiliated Volunteer Organizations (Time of Establishment, name in Chinese)	Volunteer Programs (Time of Establishment, name in Chinese)⁶⁹	Primary Area of Service	Requirements for Participants
Communist Party	Department of	Chinese Young	“One-to-one” long-	Caring for seniors living	unclear

⁶⁸ See our other forthcoming articles for a development of this theme.

⁶⁹ For the sake of brevity, the frequent prefix of the names of CCYL-related programs, “Chinese Young Volunteers,” is omitted in both English and Chinese names, unless specific notes are made. For example, the full name of the Relay Program for Aiding the Impoverished is “Chinese Young Volunteers Relay Program for Aiding the Poor,” and its Chinese full name is 中国青年志愿者扶贫接力计划.

Youth League	Volunteer Work (志愿者工作部)	Volunteers Association (Dec. 05, 1994, 中国青年志愿者协会)	term pairing service and community volunteer service (1994, “一助一”长期结对服务与社区志愿服务)	alone, the disabled, impoverished retirees and the unemployed, students with financial difficulties, etc.	
			Relay Program for Aiding the Impoverished (1996 pilot program, 1998 nationwide execution, 扶贫接力计划, Relay Plan hereafter) ⁷⁰	basic education, medicine and hygiene, agricultural technology	Chinese citizen, professional higher education diploma or above, age 20-45
			“Triple	reducing	unclear

⁷⁰ The name of this program appears less often in recent years, and it seems that it has been subsumed by the Go West program.

			<p>Rustication” Summer Program in Culture, Science and Technology, and Health for Students of Colleges and Technical Middle Schools (1997, 大中 专学生志愿 者暑期文化 科技卫生“三 下乡”活动)</p>	<p>illiteracy, cultural service, science and technology, and health</p>	
			<p>Green Action Camp (Jun. 17, 1999, 绿 色行动营计 划)</p>	<p>tree-planting and forestry, management of deserts, control of plastic</p>	<p>Unclear, but a reportage of the first camp shows that the background</p>

				garbage, promotion of environmenta l protection	of the participants were diverse. ⁷¹
			Overseas Service Program (2002, 海外 服务计划)	Chinese language teaching, physical education, medicine, IT, agricultural technology, civil engineering, industrial technology, business management, comprehensiv e training, social development	Chinese citizen, age 20-35, undergradua te degree or higher, foreign language skills
			Voluntary	education,	fresh

⁷¹ Rujin Yao, “Geiwo yipian shatan, huan renlei yipian lvzhou: Zhongguo qingnian zhiyuanzhe lvse xingdongying jihua tebie baodao” [Give me a piece of sand, return to humankind a piece of oasis: A special report on the Chinese Young Volunteers Program of the Green Action Camp], *Zhongguo Qingnian Keji* [China Youth Science and Technology], Vol. 61, 1999.

			Service Program in the Western Area for College Students (2003, 大学生志愿服务西部计划, Go West hereafter)	hygiene, agricultural technology, poverty alleviation	graduates of a registered university in China or current postgraduate students from such universities
			CCYL Voluntary Service Action of Caring for the Children of Peasant Workers (May 4, 2010, 共青团关爱农民工子女志愿服务行动)	tutoring, accompaniment, urban orientation, education in self-protection, donation-raising	unclear

			“Sunshine Action” for Aiding the Disabled (Feb. 28, 2014, 助残“阳光行动”)	daily care, career support, education and learning, cultural and sport activities, fundraising	unclear
Ministry of Civil Affairs	Department of Personnel (Department of Social Work), (人事司 (社会工作司)) ⁷²	China Volunteers Association (中华志愿者协会, Apr. 26, 2011)	Trial Program of Volunteers Caring for the Building of Communities, Respecting Elders, and Helping the Disabled (Sep. 4, 2012, 志愿者关爱社区	caring for the seniors and the disabled	unclear

⁷² This department has two names shown on its official website, which places the “Department of Social Work” in parentheses as in this table.

			建设敬老助残试点项目)		
Office of Spiritual Civilization	Office of CCC (中央文明委办公室, CCC hereafter)	China Volunteer Service Foundation (Jul. 19, 2009, 中国志愿服务基金会)	Voluntary Service Action of Caring for Millions of “Empty-nest” Seniors ⁷³ (Dec. 5, 2009, 百万空巢老人关爱志愿服务行动)	caring for empty-nest seniors	unclear
			Voluntary Service Action of Caring for Peasant-workers (Mar. 2011, 关爱农民工	skills training, rights protection, emotional care, cultural service, personal	unclear

⁷³ Empty-nest seniors are seniors living alone whose children are away from them.

			志愿服务活 动)	<i>suzhi</i> (quality) improvement	
			Voluntary Service Action of Caring for Others, Caring for Society, and Caring for Nature (Apr. 16, 2012, 关 爱他人、关 爱社会、关 爱自然志愿 服务活动)	general	unclear
		China Volunteer Service Federation (Dec. 18, 2013, 中国 志愿服务联	Voluntary Service Action of Mutual Care in Neighborhoods (Dec. 19,	general	unclear

		合会)	2013,“邻里 守望”志愿服 务活动)		
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