

When the Periphery Meets the Core of a Party-Press System: Remember Comrade Lei Feng in China's Shifting Media Kaleidscope

Pan Ji*

Journalism School, Center for Information and Communication Studies, Fudan University, 400 Guoding Ave, Yangpu District, Shanghai 200434, China

Abstract: At the epicenter of China's reform, media adapt their propagandist role to different extents. They present distinct images about China's Communist past. Against the backdrop, we examine media reconstructions of Lei Feng, a Communist icon CCP created in the 1960s. Drawing on media reform and collective memory literature, we find party-organ newspapers draw on altruism and loyalty in his original image to promote social stability and economic development for present purposes. Meanwhile, user generated contents in cyberspace question the authenticity of Lei Feng's official records. Different reconstructions collide in online discussions. When commemoration is linked to chronicling, Lei Feng becomes a demoralizing lie; when not, a symbol for much-needed virtues in the present. Implications for understanding China's media reform and for China's collective memorization of revolutionary heroes are discussed.

Keywords: Comrade Lei Feng, collective memory, media reform.

His (Comrade Lei Feng) short life gives concentrated expression to the noble ideal of a new people nurtured with Communist virtues in a new era.

– Editorial, *People's Daily* 5 March 1993

INTRODUCTION

Regimes erect heroes for subjects to worship. Over time, memory about these heroes adapts to survive or fades to obscurity as their creators reform themselves. In the late 1970s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) started and has since been directing such a reform. The party-directed reform aims to revitalize both China's economy and its Communist ideology. Market economy adapts in an authoritarian system, forcing the system to repair in an ad hoc fashion (Huang, 1994; Zhao, 2008). The latter sets parameters for the former; the former legitimates the latter with economic development (Lee, He, & Huang, 2007).

Against the backdrop, media, as powerful mnemonic agents, become a key arena for the tug-of-war between market and party forces. Media differently positioned in China's party-press system react differently (Huang 2001; Xin, 2010). At the core, party-organ media carefully preserve ideological authority (Pan, 2000). At the periphery, commercial media predicate profit-making privileges on fulfilling the political mission to support official ideology (He 2000; Lee *et al.* 2007). Within the camp, the Internet

empowers individuals to define the past (Zelizer, 1992), and renders information control harder and more sophisticated (Li 2010; Weber 2011).

This unique situation raises a theoretical challenge: How different media in China's party-press system reconstruct CCP's Communist heroes; and how different reconstructions collide today. To address the questions, we conduct a textual analysis to explore present reconstructions of Lei Feng by party-organ newspapers and by commercial websites. The collision of these reconstructions in user-generated comments online is also explicated. Lei Feng is a news icon created by CCP to promote its Communist ideals in the 1960s. Unlike many other government-created heroes, collective memory about him survives till today. His present images in China's media kaleidoscope reflect the core-periphery tension in China's party-press system, a key feature of China's state-directed reform.

For this inquiry, we first draw on collective memory and media reform literature to build an analytic framework. A textual analysis ensues to examine the images of Lei Feng in China's party-organ newspapers and commercial websites. We scrutinize the collision of these (re)constructions in user-generated comments before the implication of findings is discussed.

*Address correspondence to this author at the Journalism School, Center for Information and Communication Studies, Fudan University, 400 Guoding Ave, Yangpu District, Shanghai 200434, China; Tel: +86 13818004765; E-mail: panji@fudan.edu.cn

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collective Memory and its Dynamics

Collective memory is a system of signs, symbols or practices that emphasizes and interprets information about the past (Zelizer, 2008; Carlson, 2007, 2010). Collective memory constrains how people use the past in the present (Halbwachs, 1992; Zelizer, 1995); legitimates the present with historical explanations (Carlson, 2010); and helps people comprehend past or future behaviors (Hasian & Carlson, 2000; Kansteiner, 2002). It is constructed dynamically via the processes of (re)construction, continuation, and competition (Bergson, 1991).

Collective memory is constantly “under (re)construction” by present “concerns and needs” (Schwartz, 2005; Mead, 1929). Remembering subjects place fragments of the past to serve their present conceptions and needs. As the priority of a society shifts, the past is “thrust in permanent evolution, open to the dialectics of selective remembering, vulnerable to manipulation, and fluctuating between dormancy and periodical revival” (Nora, 1989, 1996; Knapp, 1989). In tandem, “knowledge of the origin of past events must be secondary if not entirely useless, for the reality of the past no longer resides in the past” (Halbwachs, 1941).

Meanwhile, memories already accumulated in a community constrain later memorization, producing continuity in remembering (Olick, 1999). Schwartz (1991) asserts that “the earliest construction of an object or personality determines the range of things subsequent generations can do with it”. Once memorization gets underway, it operates by a logic and force of its own (Schudson 1989). Even when social changes demand revision of collective memory, a common code is maintained to keep successive epochs alive (Coser, 1992). Old phrases remain intact as new ones are superimposed (Durkheim ([1893] 1964). Continuous memorization produces shared heritage; enhances a society’s “temporal integration”; links the living to the dead; and builds consensus between population sectors (Bellah, Sullivan & Tipton, 1985; Schudson, 1989).

Given the impact of collective memory, competition to tell the public one’s version of the past is fierce. Meanings of the past are negotiated as different story-tellers connect discursive elements into meaningful scripts (Carpentier, 2007). Once some scripts stabilize and dominate in a culture, discursive hegemony arises

to induce public consent to a particular social order (Laclau, 1990; Gramsci, 1976). The prevalent social order may be problematized or undermined if hegemonic memory is challenged by contenders. Highly contested memories fragment into rivaling visions about the past, supporting different present practices (Carlson, 2010).

Chronicling and Commemoration

The dynamic processes above involve two modes of remembering: commemoration and chronicling. Different knowledge types are produced thereby. From chronicling, people learn about the past from traditions and archives. It includes factual accounts about Lei Feng’s short life. Chronicling shows who he really was, and defines him with historical veracity. In contrast, commemorations “mark out significant events or personalities from the ordinary, and infuse the past with moral meaning” (Schwartz, 1991). It celebrates the present significance of past heroes (Lang & Lang, 1989). Commemoration invests what Lei Feng did with meanings for celebration and moral instruction in the present (Schwartz, 2005). It safeguards the ideals he stands for, and lifts him from a mundane flow of historical sequences to promote his present values (Schwartz, 1991).

Though conceptually distinct, commemoration and chronicling are linked and mutually-enhancing in collective memory. Chronicling increases the power of values commemoration celebrates. Commemoration grows more intellectually compelling when it advocates values sufficiently validated by historical accounts. Likewise, historical records grow more emotionally or morally appealing if they document events or personalities whose significance has been adequately articulated (Schwartz, 2005). By inference, separating commemoration from its related chronicling may undermine the force of collective memory among remembering subjects.

Chinese Media and Comrade Lei Feng

In modern societies, medium is a key arena for commemoration and chronicling to play out (Dijck, 2006). The past is not remembered as it was, but as how media construct it (Lang & Lang, 1989). The construction is especially dynamic in China’s media system today.

Copying the Soviet’s party-press system, China’s media were uniformly propagandists, completely owned and managed by CCP before China’s reform

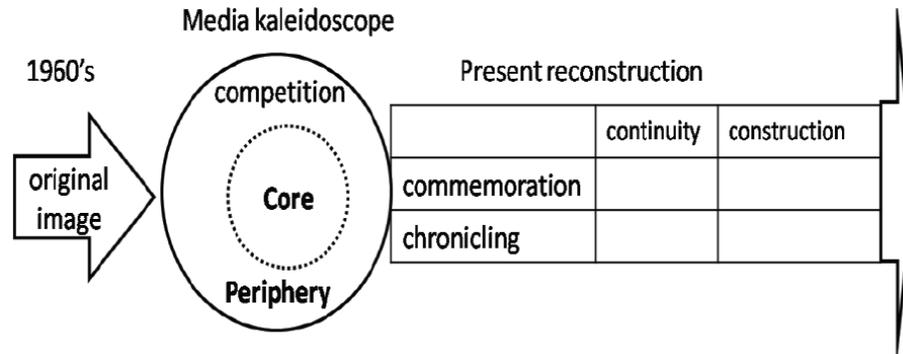


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of memorization in media kaleidoscope.

Note: This figure offers a summary of how media in history and at present re-construct the image of Comrade Lei Feng.

and open-up in the late 1970s (Cheek, 1989). The reform introduced market economy to China without challenging its political infrastructure or attendant ideology. Marketization broke media monism. State subsidies for all but hardcore party-organs dried up, and advertisers re-emerged as a critical revenue source (Song, 1994; Huang, 1994). Media differently distanced from CCP power centers receive different levels of resources and operational autonomy (Chan & Qiu, 2002). The monolithic party-press system evolves into a core-periphery structure, featuring tension and complicity between political and market forces (Li, 1995; Lee, 1994; Wang, 2001).

At the core of the party-press system are party-organ media and prominent positions (including front pages or editorials) on market-driven media. The core is heavily guarded. CCP leaders have repeatedly emphasized adherence to party leadership as a paramount principle of journalism in China (Jiang, 1993; 1996). Media at the core are fully subsidized by the state. And they remain under direct surveillance and strict control of the party propaganda apparatus (Pan, 2000). They have less tolerance for non-routine practices. Discourses from the core of the party-press system frame reforms as a means to recover the “good tradition” of party journalism (Zhang, 1992), or to strengthen party leadership (Jiang, 1993; Song, 1994). The closer a medium is located to the ‘core’, the less changeable (Pan, 2000).

On the periphery, many media (including city newspapers, fashion magazines and commercial websites) transform from “command mouthpieces” to profit-seeking “party corporations”, bowing both to the market and to the party (Liu, 2002; Chan *et al.*, 2003). They have to appeal to audience within party-imposed constraints. Improvised repairs of ideology are allowed, but systematic attacks to hegemonic ideology are

invariably penalized (Reese, 1989). In such a context, journalists become entrepreneurs. With little institutional autonomy, they turn market-party tension into opportunities for less party-press practices (Pan, 2000; Zhao, 1998). Sometimes, they link non-routine practices to the dominant ideology as a strategic ritual (Tuchman, 1972). Sometimes, they frame official norms in terms of their local particulars to integrate their professional practice with official ideology (Hall, 1980). Often, they coalesce with the Party for short-term gains. Hegemonic “conditioned power” is exercised by the state-market complex via ideological resistance and co-optation (Scott, 1990; Galbraith 1983). These practices create reform arenas otherwise inconceivable in “core” venues.

The dynamics of Lei Feng’s¹ images in media kaleidoscope (see Figure 1) reveals the core-periphery tension in China’s media ecology. In the 1960s, the CCP, under China’s late ruler Mao Zedong², used government-controlled newspapers to establish Lei Feng as a model of political loyalty and selflessness for over one-fourth of the world’s population. March 5th was set as the “Lei Feng’s Day”. Songs about him were

¹Comrade Lei Feng (1940-1962): An orphan raised by the Chinese Communist Party, he became a member of the Communist Youth Corps and joined a transportation unit of the People’s Liberation Army at the age of twenty. Lei Feng died in 1962 at 22, when a telephone pole, struck by a truck, hit him while he was directing the truck to back up. After his death, he was depicted by media as a selfless and modest person who devoted himself to the Communist Party, Chairman Mao Zedong, and the people of China. In the series of posthumous “Learn from Comrade Lei Feng” campaigns, initiated by Mao in 1963, Lei became a role model for the whole country. Since then, March 5th has become China’s official “Lei Feng’s Day”, while Lei Feng Memorial, museum and Lei Feng statues were set up all over the country. After Mao’s death, Lei Feng remained a cultural icon and his image appears on T-shirts and other memorabilia. Post-Mao Chinese leaders, including Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, have written about Lei Feng. Symbolism about him is ingrained into the everyday life of Chinese.

²Mao Zedong (1893 to 1976) was the founding father and first-generation top leader of the People’s Republic of China. His *Selected Writings of Mao Zedong* theorizes about China’s revolution, his interpretation of Communism, as well as his ideas about China’s future.

composed by government artists and broadcast nationwide. His photos appeared all over China and his service cap stayed in vogue throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1976, Mao died. China started its skid from a Soviet-style Communist regime to a fledgling market economy. Many earlier Communist heroes became irrelevant and ultimately forgotten in the process. But Lei Feng is remembered. He is frequently mentioned in everyday conversations, by mass media, and in classroom conversations nowadays. Both party-organ newspapers and commercial websites contribute to the collective memorization about Chairman Mao's best soldier today.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the conceptual framework above, we examine how commercial websites and party-organ newspapers today revise Lei Feng's original image; and how the reconstructions compete. First, we sketch Lei Feng's original image in the 1960s based on interviews of former politicians or journalists. Revisions of the original image via commemoration and chronicling by party-organ newspapers and by www.kaixin001.com are analyzed. Last, the collision between the reconstructions is explicated.

This SNS is selected for three reasons. First, it carries a huge amount of user-generated contents. In August, 2010, www.kaixin001.com had over 86 million registered users, over 50 million active users per day, and eight billion page visits a week (Xin, 2010). Texts on it offer a fair representation of Lei Feng-related discourses in cyberspace. Second, the structural position of commercial websites in China's media landscape is paradoxical. On one hand, though party-press system remains (Lee, 1994), market pressure and the retreat of party-state from selected areas of media operation allow the Internet more operational autonomy (Chan & Qiu, 2002; Chan & Pan, 2006). On the other hand, the government is concerned with compliance of political information online (Bi, 2001). With limited leeway, an institution that challenges the concentration of power is hard to form online (Couldry, 2003). Third, this website enables users to publish different comments after posts. This novel mode of interaction online creates an arena where reconstructions from the core may meet that from the periphery of the party-press system.

We analyze party-organ newspapers as a source from the core of the party-press system. The "organ paper" system divides newspapers into six categories

based on the degree of control (party-organ, non-party organ, and non-organ) and the scope of circulation (local or national). Party-organ papers are organs of CCP committees; non-organ papers are papers of other (semi)official agencies; non-organ papers are only nominally affiliated with official organizations (Pan, 2000). We focus on party-organ papers of local or national circulation. These newspapers had more developed practices in the party-press tradition, and were more clearly defined as "organ papers" (jiguan bao) than other media (Tong, 1994).

Specifically, we download articles published on local or national party-organ newspapers from January 1st to Sept 24th in 2008, whose headlines contain "Lei Feng". This period covers the Lei Feng's Day in China (March, 5th), when articles about him are most concentrated. Newspaper texts are retrieved from the Chinese Newspaper Full-text Database³. This database includes most current Chinese newspapers. Then, we searched with the key word of "Lei Feng" on www.kaixin001.com to retrieve posts and comments that users published online from January 1st to Sept 24th in 2008. The materials of our inquiry are mostly retrieve from various publications in 2008 for it is the year when many new texts about Comrade Lei Feng were revealed for the first time to the general public. Disclosure of new information at the time significantly impacts the collective memorization of the hero.

For analyses, texts from newspapers and from the SNS are analyzed by the author and a bilingual graduate student. Treating paragraphs as unit of analysis, we first coded whether each paragraph commemorates the values Lei Feng stands for; or chronicles facts in his life. Discourses that elaborate on his meaning, significance or values with the intent to motivate present actions are categorized as commemoration. Texts about facts in Lei Feng's life are deemed chronicling. Then, content-based sub-categories are built under the commemoration-chronicling umbrella. Analysts followed the constant-comparison procedure to maximize content differences between categories and minimize variances within categories. Categories are created, dropped, divided or merged. For cross-validation, both analysts need to agree on categorization decisions. When disagreement occurs, analysts consult for resolutions. One week after

³Chinese Newspaper Full-text Database is a branch of the Chinese Databank of Periodicals, which contains full texts from 152 national and 362 local newspapers published in Mainland China from 2000 to 2008.

the first-round coding, texts are re-visited and categories are adjusted for parsimony and interpretability after further discussions. Following this procedure, we examine all the comments users published after downloaded posts to identify "situations" where distinct re-constructions of Lei Feng collide.

COMRADE LEI FENG IN THE 1960s

In the 1960s, local newspaper coverage brought Lei Feng to the attention of China's top leaders. Chairman Mao Zedong launched a series of "Learn from Comrade Lei Feng" campaigns throughout the country⁴. Authorities promoted songs to compliment the young soldier; published his stories and diaries; set a day in his name; and put his photographs in most classrooms or public spaces all over the young Republic (Zhang, 2006). These activities etched Lei Feng's image onto the memory of generations of Chinese. "Comrade Lei Feng" has become part of everyday lexicon in China ever since. Politicians and party-organ newspapers at the time played a key role in the process.

Mr. Zhang Junren, a photographer the government assigned to Lei Feng, recalled in a later interview that in the 1960s, the young Communist Republic was going through the Three-year Natural Disaster Period (1959-1961). People were starving. The exile Kuomintang government in Taiwan was posturing to

fight its way back to the Mainland; and Soviet supports were withdrawn after bilateral relationship deteriorated. In such hard times, China coveted its own heroes to promote thrift lifestyle and self-improvement (Zhang, 2006).

Comrade Lei Feng appeared timely to address these needs (Huang, 2006). Thrift in daily life, altruism inspired by comradely love, hatred for political enemies, and unlimited loyalty to the CCP and to Mao Zedong himself constituted core features of Lei Feng's image in the 1960s. Mr. Lin Ke, former secretary for Mao Zedong, recalled in a biography that he prepared several slogans for his boss to choose from, when Mao was calling upon the whole nation to follow Comrade Lei Feng's example. Among the drafted options were "Learn from Comrade Lei Feng to serve the people wholeheartedly; learn from Comrade Lei Feng's firm political positions; learn from Comrade Lei Feng's selflessness, thrifty lifestyle and determination for self improvement". Mao agreed with all the above, and added that Lei Feng's altruism, readiness to help others, and his determination to serve the Chinese people for life are his most essential qualities (Sun, 1996).

RECONSTRUCTIONS BY PARTY-ORGAN NEWSPAPERS

However, Lei Feng's image in collective memory changed since the late 1970s. These changes are reflected dynamically in China's core-periphery media kaleidoscope. At the core of the party-press system, organ newspapers revise the commemoration and chronicling of the Maoist-era hero. Prior discussions suggest that these revisions may render the icon of Lei Feng more consistent with China's prevalent ideology and more directly useful to the priority goals of China's government today. This, to some extent, also explains the abrupt rise in the number of related newspaper articles since 2006⁵.

Commemoration: From Loyalty to Prosperity

Unconditional loyalty to the CCP and to China's late leader Mao Zedong himself was a defining characteristic for Comrade Lei Feng in the 1960s. It is continuously celebrated today. Party-organ

⁴In November 1960, journalists from the *Qian Jin Daily*, a local newspaper in China's Shengyang province first learnt from the CCP chiefs in Lei Feng's army unit that he donated his entire subsidy to victims in a flood-hit area not far from his army. After an in-depth interview, the local newspaper published a profile titled "Chairman Mao's Good Soldier" to extol Feng's love for the CCP and for Chairman Mao himself. From December 3 to December 10, the *Qian Jin Daily* published more than 11 articles in a row to sing praises for Lei's altruism and his dedication to the socialist cause. Since December 8, the *Qian Jin Daily* started to use half a page each day to cover how local army units actively followed Lei's example. On December 11, *Wu Shun Daily*, a newspaper of higher standing in the hierarchy of official newspapers, published a feature titled "Chairman Mao's Soldier" together with excerpts from Lei Feng's diary which recorded his understanding of Mao's writings. Two days later, the *Liaoning Daily*, a newspaper of even higher political status carried a story titled "Red Soldier Lei Feng". Soon after, the highest-level national media including Xinhua News Agency and the *People's Daily* published a series of stories on Lei Feng. In August 1962, when the 22-year-old was directing a reversing truck, the vehicle hit a roadside telephone pole, which fell and killed him on the spot. Thousands voluntarily walked the streets to see off the hearses of Lei Feng. The young soldier was immortalized by his sudden death on the job. In February 1963, the *People's Daily*, the highest level party newspaper in China, carried a front-page story on how people in Liaoning Province honored Lei Feng. On the second page is an in-depth story titled "A Good Soldier for Chairman Mao". On March 5, all major newspapers in China carried Mao's inscription, calling the nation to learn from Comrade Lei Feng, setting off the nation-wide "Learn from Comrade Lei Feng" campaigns. Since then, March 5th has been officially set as the Lei Feng's Day. Songs, plays, movies and books have been published about him and his stories became part of the national curriculum in China's nine-year compulsory education system. Lei Feng, the best soldier for Mao, has become an important part of China's collective memory.

⁵Four Lei Feng-related articles were published in 2000 and in 2001; eight were published in 2002, 51 articles in 2003, 19 and 28 in 2004 and 2005 respectively. However, 209 articles were published in 2006, 151 in 2007 and 174 were published from January to Sept 24 in 2008 (retrieved on Nov 4, 2008).

newspapers openly call upon readers to “work wholeheartedly for the (CCP) party, the people and the state on ordinary jobs, just as Comrade Lei Feng once did” (*Liao Ning Daily*, March 5, 2008). It is explicitly stressed that political loyalty to the CCP party must remain the “eternal theme for any Learn from Comrade Lei Feng activities today or ever after” (*Fu Shun Daily*, March 4, 2008).

Besides continuity from the 1960’s, organ newspapers also reconstruct Lei Feng’s image by bridging his political loyalty to “socialism with Chinese characteristics⁶” to support China’s economic takeoff. In abstract, an editorial summarizes that “the CCP party, the motherland, and the socialist cause stand for Lei Feng’s ideals, which amount to socialism with Chinese characteristics as the state’s shared political vision today” (*Liao Ning Daily*, March 5, 2008). It reasoned that “Marxism is the basis of socialism as well as the essence of Comrade Lei Feng’s legacy. Socialism with Chinese characteristic, or the establishment of a prosperous state-directed market economy, is the contemporary version of socialism, therefore, the direction Lei Feng’s heritage should lead us today” (*Liao Ning Daily*, March 5, 2008). Party-organ newspapers depict Comrade Lei Feng as committed to “the cause of building a prosperous socialist state”.

Specifically, several features are integrated with Lei Feng’s image to buttress development. Newspapers advocate “industriousness and entrepreneurship” as key features for China’s young generations to learn from Lei Feng today (*Guang Ming Daily*, March 4, 2008). One story wrote “Learning from Comrade Lei Feng focuses people onto the economic development of Tielin city (a city in Lei Feng’s home province Liaoning)” (*Tie Lin Daily*, March 5, 2008). Along the same line, it is claimed that if more people are inspired by Lei Feng’s loyalty to the socialist cause, the Lianyungang city can be developed into a “cosmopolitan with modern industry much sooner” (*Lian Yungang Daily*, March 5, 2008). Moreover, newspapers link Lei Feng to better professional skills, valuable for sustained economic progress. For example, 35 troopers at Fushun city in Liaoning Province were lauded in Lei Feng’s name after they self-learned to use advanced telecommunication

technologies (*Fu Shun Daily*, March 4, 2008). Furthermore, party-organ newspapers also claim that “teamwork and performance-based incentive systems currently being installed in China’s modern corporations dovetail nicely with Lei Feng’s devotion to the collective and with his ambitiousness for work on a daily basis” (*Liao Ning Daily*, March 5, 2008). It is stated that “in the new era, China’s corporations have every reason to learn from Comrade Lei Feng. They should bear more social responsibilities and contribute more to the well-being of a society according to what Comrade Lei Feng has taught us before” (*Fu Shun Daily*, March 4, 2008).

Commemoration: From Altruism to a Harmonious Society

Apart from political loyalty, altruism to the people and hatred for political enemies used to be celebrated as two sides of Lei Feng’s another signature trait. Both are politically-based. A song popular in the 1960s chants that “Comrade Lei Feng loves his comrades as warmly as the spring breeze. He hates his political enemies as relentlessly as stinging winter wind”.

However, in party-organ newspapers today, Lei Feng’s altruism is oft de-politicized and separated from hatred for political enemies. His altruism is re-framed as an expression of humanly care; identification with the collective; and a benchmark to “refine socialist morality” (*Resolution to Enhance the Administrative Capability of the CCP*, 2006). These are “necessary qualities for citizens in a harmonious socialist society⁷; and also the essential substance of Comrade Lei Feng’s legacy” (*Fu Shun Daily*, Feb 28, 2008).

In specific, newspapers often praise deeds of neighborly good-will in Lei Feng’s name. For instance, a lady who offered her neighbors free tailoring services for years (*Zheng Zhou Daily*, Feb 27, 2008), and a group of retiree volunteers who take care of kids in the neighborhood during summer breaks (*Jin Chang Daily*, Sept 27, 2008) are applauded “living Comrade Lei Feng today”. One article elaborates that “Comrade Lei Feng views interests of the people and those of the

⁶“Socialism with Chinese characteristics” was first proposed in CPP’s 12th National Convention in 1982, and later re-emphasized in 1987 and 1992 as China’s official strategy of national development. It stressed the importance of political reform and economic prosperity, while retaining the rule of the CCP, the socialist system, and the prevalence of Marxist ideology in China.

⁷“Harmonious Society” is a concept proposed in the “Resolution to enhance the ruling capability of CCP”. Build a “harmonious society” was approved as China’s national goal by the Sixth Plenary Meeting of the 16th CCP Central Committee in 2006. In this document, the CCP acknowledges that “social problems and conflicts exist in China. They include widening regional imbalances, serious pollution, hiking unemployment, social security, inadequate health care coverage, etc.” To address these issues, the CCP advocated for a “harmonious society” officially defined by “democratic rule by law; justice and equity; trust and friendliness, active, sustainable and orderly national development”.

collective as superior to his self-interest. And this quality is essential for a harmonious society today" (*Fu Shun Daily*, March 4, 2008). The commemoration of Lei Feng's altruism to promote good-neighborliness coincides with Chinese government's current endeavors to build a "harmonious society" vis-à-vis the social conflicts (such as poverty, education etc.) emerging in the process of rapid modernization. It is stressed that "the spirit of Comrade Lei Feng consists with China's cultural tradition to nurture and maintain conflict-free interpersonal relationships" (*Yan Tai Daily*, March 10, 2008).

Moreover, Lei Feng's politically-inspired altruism is analogized to promote organized volunteerism, which addresses social issues non-existent in his day. Government newspapers name him "pioneer of today's volunteers" (*Liao Ning Daily*, March 5, 2008). *Guang Xi Daily* (March 5, 2008) wrote that:

The spirit of volunteerism equals that of Comrade Lei Feng, as both emphasize community service. Volunteers are the contemporary practitioners of Lei Feng's spirit; though volunteer movements are more professional, regular and do not completely deny the importance of one's self-interest. It alleviates social conflicts and promotes stability in China.

In fact, most of China's volunteer activities target social issues with causes deeply implicated in the structure of Chinese society today. Problems tackled by volunteers include inadequate medicare coverage for rural population; unequal access to legal services; or grave pollution resultant from rash industrialization. The distinction between individual deeds of kindness and volunteerism is apparent. Party-organ newspapers argue that "volunteer activities should be organized regularly so that Comrade Lei Feng and his altruistic deeds survive the Lei Feng's Day each year to meet needs not satisfied by the government or by the market". Higher individual morality is constructed by official newspapers as a viable solution to numerous social problems. By drawing on the symbolic resources of Lei Feng, newspapers circumvent the needs to discuss the structural causes for many of the emergent social issues.

When commemoration is view as a whole, what is selectively erased is at least as revealing as what is included. Lei Feng's thrift in everyday life and his hatred for political enemies were celebrated by

newspapers in the 1960s. Both qualities vanished conveniently from today's party organ newspapers. China has evolved from a poverty-stricken society to one eager to boost its domestic consumption. This shift in priority conflicts with Lei Feng's constant check on any unnecessary expenses. Likewise, Lei Feng's hatred for political enemies grows irrelevant or counterproductive today. Now, Chinese government desires a conflict-free society to sustain the growth of its national economy. Violent political conflicts undermine the attractiveness of China as a destination for direct foreign investments or for high-quality human capital.

Chronicling: Witness Testimony and Relics

Commemoration and chronicling are mutually enhancing. Chronicling related facts in Lei Feng's life makes the commemoration of altruism and political loyalty more convincing. Party newspapers publish witness testimonies of how he helped others to support the celebration of altruism. Relics in his political career are revisited by newspapers today to confirm his political identity as a loyal Communist soldier.

For example, two retired journalists who interviewed Lei Feng in the 1960s recalled in an article published in 2008 that "In 1960, when an unprecedentedly devastating flood hit Liaoyang city. Comrade Lei Feng donated 100 RMB to the victims." They emphasized that "Don't forget it was during the Three Year Natural Disaster Period when even food was in short supply. Comrade Lei Feng donated all his army subsidy to those he did not even know" (*People's Daily*, April 10, 2008). On the other hand, real objects or official documents about Lei Feng are often described. Such descriptions verify milestones in the formation of Lei Feng's political identity as a loyal Communist soldier. Newspapers meticulously recall how Comrade Lei Feng attended the Annual Convention of Communist Youth in Shenyang city; how he joined the CCP party; and how local CCP organization honored him as model disciple of Mao Zedong (*Shen Yang Daily*, March 17, 2008). It is elaborated that "these photos, archives and real objects provided by Comrade Lei Feng's teachers, colleagues, friends, and superiors unfold his life from a miserable orphan (working as a servant boy in a local landlord household) to the most loyal soldier for Chairman Mao in the newly-founded Republic".

Corresponding to the absence of thrift and political animosity in commemoration, today's party-organ newspapers rarely mention, as their predecessors oft

did in the 1960s, that Lei Feng repeatedly mended his socks and clothes after years of wearing. Also hardly mentioned today is the fact that Lei Feng's father was beaten to death by Japanese invaders during the Second World War. He himself was also whipped cruelly by the landlord, when he was a teenager short-hand in a local farm (Material from Lei Feng Museum). In the "*Dairy of Comrade Lei Feng*" published in 1963 by the Chinese Army Press, Lei Feng wrote: "My parents and all my siblings died in the hands of political enemies or foreign invaders. I will always keep this in mind." These facets of Lei Feng's life disappeared from today's party newspapers.

NON-OFFICIAL RECONSTRUCTION BY COMMERCIAL SNS

At the core of China's party-press system, reconstructions by party-organ newspapers exactly reflect the priorities and ideals of the state. On the periphery, the situation is more complicated. Commercial SNS's have to strike a delicate balance between their political obligation and their market goals to attract users with a sea amount of user-generated content.

On one hand, it lowers the cost of information production and publication; increases the number of information sources; and diversifies the modes of information delivery. It becomes harder for authorities to censor networked communication in cyberspace. Reconstruction of Lei Feng in cyberspace more or less indicates the remembrance of common people. On the other hand, The Internet constitutes part of the party-press system. Within the system, authorities of different levels hold the sword of Damocles to sanction or kill a website as they see fit. As most regulations are improvised by governments based on perceived necessity, websites have to play with extra discretion, and self-censor potential challenges to official discourses to survive and prosper in the market.

In such a context, gatekeepers for www.kaixin001.com restrains from commemorations that directly defy Lei Feng's signature meanings, including altruism or political loyalty. These values are consistently safe-guarded by various levels of authorities and party-organ newspapers now or in the past. Confrontational challenges to these government-sponsored values will (and thereby the prevalent social order) probably incur severe negative sanctions to undermine the competitiveness or even the livelihood of a website in the Chinese market (Pan, 2000).

Consequently, commercial websites adopt a roundabout strategy to revise the official image of Lei Feng. SNS users disclosed many previously unknown facets about Lei Feng's life. New historical records are dug up and widely disseminated online to humanize Chairman Mao's flawless soldier into a fashionable man with his youthful desires and sorrows. The communist hero becomes a feeling young man in today's cyberspace. Unlike his official image as a thrifty soldier with almost Spartan lifestyle, posts published on the SNS reveal that Comrade Lei Feng was an enthusiastic fan of leather jackets, expensive watches and motorcycling. A photograph published online shows Lei Feng in a trendy black leather jacket, riding a fancy-looking motorcycle in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, an Enicar mechanic watch shining conspicuously on his wrist. In the 1960s when food was in direly short supply for ordinary Chinese, mechanic watches, leather jacket and motorcycle were luxurious items in China. Lei Feng's watch was displayed recently after decades in concealment.

More dramatic, Lei Feng's brief love affair with Miss Wang Peiling was told for the first time in cyberspace (Zhang, 2006). In the 1960s, romantic relationships without the approval of local CCP organizations were condemned as "petty bourgeoisie" in China. While working on a state-own farm, the 20-something Lei Feng fell desparately in love with his colleague Miss Wang Peiling without blessings from local CCP organizations. As his affair with Peiling went public, the CCP leadership in the farm took offence. They tried by all means to separate the infatuated couple. When Peiling wanted to work with Lei Feng on the same tractor, the local CCP party chief broke out: "Anyone is far better than Wang. We have to keep an eye on her so there can be no petty bourgeoisie scandal about Comrade Lei Feng!" Lei Feng's frustrated affair makes his image more human. His defiance with local CCP organizations fell squarely opposite to his stereotypical image as Chairman Mao's loyal soldier.

Besides exposure of humanizing chronicling, online reconstructions also question the authenticity of Lei Feng's official images. SNS users found that many of Lei Feng's most popular photos in the 1960s had been tampered by the government for publicity purposes. In a photo posted on the SNS, Lei Feng posed in the Tiananmen Square with a flower basket in his right hand. Yet, when this same photo was disseminated nation-wide by organ newspapers in the 1960s, the flower basket vanished mysteriously. In Chinese culture, flowers are regarded as feminine. Without the

flower basket, Comrade Lei Feng looks more like a strong-willed soldier. Similarly, a post on the SNS contrasts two versions of a same photo to show that a long line of pine trees and a semi-automatic gun were added post hoc to a widely-distributed picture of Lei Feng. In Chinese tradition, pine tree symbolizes loyalty and strength, while the gun marks out his identity as Chairman Mao's soldier. Both discovery of hidden facets and exposures of tampering put the established identity of Lei Feng in question.

WHEN THE PERIPHERY MEETS THE CORE

Occasions for different constructions to collide are rife today. In reaction to non-official reconstructions, the *People's Daily*, a hardcore party newspaper run by China's central government, tried to defend Lei Feng's orthodox image. They conducted in-depth interviews with Lei Feng's former colleagues and friends. The interviewees uniformly criticized the "malicious attempts to distort the image of Comrade Lei Feng; or to slander him with hear-say evidence" (*People's Daily*, April 10, 2008). Collisions between official and non-official constructions are more dramatic and involve a much larger diversity of information sources in cyberspace.

When Lei Feng-related chronicling is discussed, most non-official discourses in cyberspace present factual evidence to show Lei Feng as another hero the Chinese government deliberately created for its subjects. In response, defenders of his image insist on the truthfulness of related chronicling. Or, when insistence seems futile vis-a-vis factual evidence, they change the topic to the "true Lei Feng spirit", which they claim is more significant than the authenticity of his official chronicling.

For example, Mr. Zhang Xingji, a 72-year-old veteran rebutted a post that questions the truthfulness of Lei Feng's official image. He wrote in his post that: "I have worked with Comrade Lei Feng myself in the 1960s, and I can testify that every bit of his story is true. It is not hyped at all". The author of the starting post replied by publishing more historical records, showing that Lei Feng's monthly income as a junior trooper in the 1960's could not possibly cover the amount he supposedly donated to others, and many of his photos were arranged by government in advance. Some stout defenders of Lei Feng's official image reacted by writing that:

"Some people question Lei Feng's official images, and they suggest he has been

deified for propaganda purposes. In fact, before Lei Feng died, he was an exemplary role model established for moral education. For that purpose, the government sent professional photographers to take posed photos for Lei Feng. Yet, these photos are strictly based on facts, and should be considered true."

Furthermore, one post in the same thread claimed that:

"It is meaningless and malicious to question Comrade Lei Feng today. Even though some of Lei Feng's stories and many of his photos were deliberately created by the government in the 1960s, the spirit Lei Feng stands for remains true and noble. It is especially wanted in today's China. To learn from Comrade Lei Feng, we need to learn from his spirit, instead of mechanically copying what he did over half a century ago."

In comparison, conflicts on the present meaning of Lei Feng are more diagonal in cyberspace. On one extreme, netizens claim that promoting a fake hero may encourage dishonesty, undermine people's faith in morality; and thereby degrade morality in Chinese society. The connection between authentic chronicling and the effects of related commemoration is emphasized. On the other side, this connection is largely ignored. Instead, people emphasize the present usefulness of Lei Feng's spirit and its intrinsic nobleness to disregard the reality of the past.

For instance, after comparing four pairs of photos to show that several of Lei Feng's most important pictures were pre-arranged and then revised, one netizen argued that:

"Comrade Lei Feng can be a disaster for the morality of a society. As most of his stories are not founded on facts, the credibility and power of values he stands for is grossly undermined, as people start to see it is unreal and hypocritical".

Immediately following the post, another ID argued that the moral standard of Chinese society is lowered by dirty-minded people like the author of the previous post, who refuse to accept that there are still "something noble and worth pursuing" in the world.

This post did not mention the authenticity of chronicling as a relevant issue. From the same camp, another reply to the original post acknowledged that some of Lei Feng's records are faked. But the author proceed to ask:

“Okay, his stories are not true, so what? It does not change the fact that mutual care is always right and desired. In fact, whether Lei Feng's stories are true or made-up has nothing to do with the spirit he stands for. It is wrong that when people question Lei Feng's stories, they also dismiss the spirit of Lei Feng. It becomes dubious whether these non-believers of Lei Feng are interested in truth or in justifying low morality”.

But other netizens claim that the chronicling and commemoration of Lei Feng cannot be understood in isolation. One ID asked rhetorically “why should we believe stories the government faked to fool and control its people?” (S)he expanded on the point:

“It feels bad to be cheated. No matter whether these lies are well-intended or not. For example, both American Capital and Lei Feng are heroes that encourage people to do good. However, the former is clearly marked as made-up. In contrast, the Chinese government tried to make its people believe that Lei Feng's stories are true.”

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

At the core of China's party-press system, we find that party-organ newspaper continuously commemorate Lei Feng's altruism and political loyalty; support the commemoration with related chronicling; and creatively link them to social stability and economic prosperity for present needs (see Figure 2). Thrift in life and hatred of political enemies are erased from his image, as consumption and stability become prevalent values of the day.

By implication, present needs shape how the state wants people to remember past Communist heroes (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Lei Feng's symbolism is exploited systematically by party-organ newspapers. The exploitation is path-dependent as novel meanings “grow out of” his original image (Durkheim, 1893). The past constrains present commemoration to facilitate coherent meaning production and temporal integration across generations (Shils, 1981; Freud, 1939; Olick, 1999; Schudson, 1989). However, little factual evidence is presented to bridge political loyalty and altruism to economic prosperity and to social stability. This gap yawns as past symbolic resources are stretched rather thin in a rapidly transiting society. Meanwhile, mutually-enhancing commemoration and chronicling of altruism and loyalty sponsors a particular view of history and a preferred socialist social order (Trouillot, 1995). At the core of the party-press system, China's party organs preserve the core values of socialism as an inherited

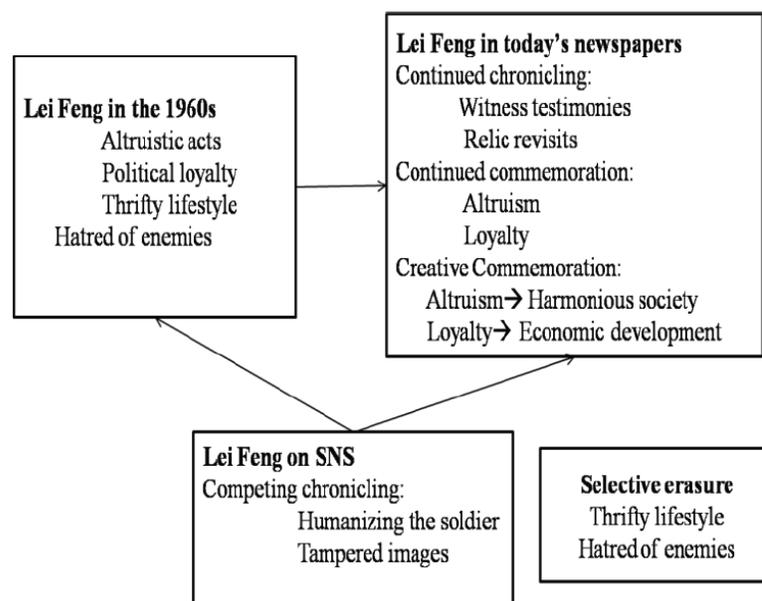


Figure 2: Collective memory of Comrade Lei Feng.

social order; and adapt to serve the present needs of ruling regimes.

At the periphery of the party-press system, commercial SNS challenges official images by introducing a human face to Lei Feng, and by questioning the credibility of his official chronicling. This strategy echoes China's appreciation of consumption and individuality (Chu & Ju, 1993). And, it deals a grave blow to Lei Feng's image in party-organ newspapers. It prompts people to scrutinize the authenticity of party media images not only of Lei Feng, but also of other government-sponsored heroes. However, as websites operate within China's party-press system, they refrain from directly contradicting official commemorations. Open defiance of orthodox values brings punishments to the SNS or to individual content providers. The former may drive webmasters to gate-keep contents that "cross the line". The latter can encourage self-censorship as users hit the publish button online.

Furthermore, when the comment function of websites allow official and non-official discourses to collide, official image defenders tend to shift discussion about factual authenticity to the present usefulness and the intrinsic nobleness of Lei Feng's "spirit". The commemoration-chronicling connection is ignored. This connection is emphasized by the other side, suggesting that Lei Feng is a fake hero and promoting his image undermines morality. The most significant difference lies in how people treat the articulation between Lei Feng's problematic official chronicling and his celebrated spirits.

In summary, we add to collective memory literature in several ways. First, we illuminate present memorization of past Communist heroes in China's party organ newspapers, which constitute the core of China's party-press system. Related to their dual missions in the system, they: a) maintain the core values of the socialist social order by consistent commemoration and chronicling; and b) satisfy present social needs by creatively commemorating symbolisms established in the 1960s. Second, we identify how commercial websites at the periphery of China's party-press system re-construct the chronicling of Lei Feng to question his official images. The confrontation between official discourses and non-official discourses in cyberspace focus on whether the connection between commemoration and chronicling is re-established. The ability of less-controlled media to erode the power of heroic images in government-controlled newspapers is

explicated against the background of China's reform in the Internet era.

DECLARATION

I confirm that I have read Springer Open's guidance on competing interests and none of the authors has any competing interests in the manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Dr. Kenneth Campbell for his support and advice during the writing process.

FUNDING

This project is supported by China's Social Science Foundation (Grant number 14CXW039).

REFERENCES

- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W.M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the Heart*. New York: Harper and Row, pp. 212-321.
- Chirwa, W. (1997). Collective Memory and the process of reconciliation and reconstruction. *Development in Practice*, 7(4), 479-482.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09614529754314>
- Chu, G. & Ju, Y. (1993). *The Great Wall in Ruins: Communication and Cultural Changes in China*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Coser, L. (1992). *Maurice Halbwachs on Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dijck, J. (2006). Record and hold: Popular music between personal and collective memory. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(5), 357-374.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180601046121>
- Durkheim, E. [1893] (1964). *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Free Press.
- Edy, J. (1999). Journalistic uses of collective memory. *Journal of Communication*, 49(2), 71-85.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02794.x>
- Edy, J., & Daradanova, M. (2006). Reporting through the lens of the past: From Challenger to Columbia. *Journalism*, 7(2), 131-151.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884906062602>
- Freud, S. (1939). *Moses and Monotheism*, New York: Viking.
- Funkenstein, Amos. 1993. *Perception of Jewish History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1976). *Selections from the Prison Notebook*, New York: International Publishers.
- Halbwachs, M. (1941). *La Topographie Legendair des Evangiles*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hasian, M., & Carlson, C. (2000). Revisionism and collective memory: The struggle for meaning in the Amistad affair. *Communication Monographs*, 67(1), 42-55.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750009376494>
- He, Z. (1998). From mouthpiece to Party's propaganda incorporation: The evolution of Chinese Party-press, In *The Chinese media: A new perspective*, edited by Z. He & H. Chen, 66-107. Hong Kong: The Pacific Century Press Limited (in Chinese).

- Henri, B. [1896] (1991) *Matter and Memory*. Translated by N. M. Paul & W. S. Palmer. New York: Zone Books.
- Huang, G. (2006). Comrade Lei Feng: No longer a God to worship. *Southern Personality Weekly*, 32(1).
- Huysen, A. (2000). Present pasts: Media, politics, amnesia. *Public Culture*, 12, 21–38.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-12-1-21>
- Introduction Material distributed by Lei Feng museum. Retrieved on December 10, 2008 from: http://www.china5000.org.cn/chinese/zhonghuaarenwu/200803/t20080305_61898.htm.
- Knapp, S. (1989). Collective Memory and the Actual Past. *Representation*, 26: 21-34.
- Laclau, E. (1990). *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London: Verso.
- Lang, K., & Lang, G. E. (1989). Collective Memory and the News. *Communication*, 11, 123-139.
- Lee, C. (2004). The concept of Chinese journalists: Ideological convergence and contestation. *Perspectives: Working papers in English and Communication*, 16(1), 1-23.
- Lei, F. (1963). *Diary of Comrade Lei Feng*. Beijing: Chinese Army Arts Press.
- Matt, C. (2010). Embodying deep throat: Mark felt and the collective memory of Watergate. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 27(3), 235-250.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030903583564>
- Matt, C. (2007). Making memories matter: Journalistic authority and the memorializing discourse around Mary McGrory and David Brinkley. *Journalism*, 8(2), 165-183.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884907074804>
- Mead, G. Herbert. 1929. "The nature of the past". In *Essays in Honor of John Dewey*, edited by John Coss, 235-242. New York: Henry Holt.
- Nico, C. (2007). Participation, access and interaction: Changing perspectives. In *New media worlds: Challenges for convergence*, edited by V. Nightingale & T. Dwyer, 214–230. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Nora, P. (1996). General Introduction: Between Memory and History. In *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, edited by Lawrence, Kritzman, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les Lieux de M'emoire." *Representations*, 26, 7-25.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>
- Olick, K. J. (1999). Collective memory: The two cultures. *Sociological Theories*, 17(3), 23-45.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00083>
- Olick, K. J., & Robbins, J. (1998). Social Memory Studies: From Collective Memory to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 105-140.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.105>
- Pan, Z. (2000). Improvising reform activities: Interpreting China's journalism reforms. In *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns in Cultural China*, edited by C. Lee, 68-111. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Pan, Z., & Chan, J. (2000). Building a market-based party organ: Television and national integration in the People's Republic of China". In *Television in Asia* edited by D. French and M. Richards, 232-263. New Delhi: Sage.
- Peri, Y. (1999). The Media and Collective Memory of Yitzhak Rabin's Remembrance. *Journal of Communication*, 49(3), 106-124.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02807.x>
- Schudson, M. (1989). The present in the past versus the past in the present. *Communication*, 11(2), 105-113.
- Schwartz, B. (1982). The social context of commemoration: A study in collective memory. *Social Forces*, 61(2), 34-64.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/61.2.374>
- Schwartz, B. (1991). Iconography and collective memory: Lincoln's image in the American mind. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 32(3), 301-319.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1991.tb00161.x>
- Schwartz, B. (2005). History, Commemoration, and Belief: Abraham Lincoln in American Memory, 1945-2001, *American Sociological Review*, 70 (2), 183-203.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240507000201>
- Sun, X. (1996). How Mao Zedong talked about Comrade Lei Feng. *Journal of Mao Zedong Research*, 12(1), 23-35.
- Trouillot, R. M. (1995). *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon.
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020>
- Wodak, R. R., Cillia, D., Reisiql, M., & Liebhart, K. (1999). *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Wulf, K. (2002). Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies. *History and Theory* 41, 179-197.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00198>
- Xin, Y. (2010) The growing pains of kaixin001.com. *21 Century Economic Review*, retrieved in August, 2011 from:<http://www.21cbh.com/HTML/2010-8-16/ONMDAwMDE5MjA0Ng.html>.
- Zarecka, I. (1994). *Frames of remembrance*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Zelizer, B. (1995). Reading the past against the grain: the shape of memory studies. *Critical Study of Mass Communication*, 12(1), 214-239.
- Zelizer, B. (2008). Why memory's work on journalism does not reflect journalism's work on memory. *Memory Studies*, 1(1), 79-87.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698007083891>
- Zhang, J. (2006). *Comrade Lei Feng: 1940-1962*. Beijing: San Lian Press.

Received on 19-04-2018

Accepted on 11-06-2018

Published on 31-12-2018

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6000/2371-1655.2018.04.04>

© 2018 Pan Ji; Licensee Lifescience Global.

This is an open access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits unrestricted, non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.