

# A “Living Lei Feng”?

## Letters from Sent-down Youth in the Chinese Cultural Revolution

### Background

In the dog days of summer. Extremely hot and stuffy. Sweat dripping through the shirts and pants, as wet as in water. Curving the spine the whole day to mow. Plain steamed buns for lunch. Then having long meetings. Living in a tent, with no electricity and no private space. Barely any entertainment. Only five hours of sleep per day...

And this a typical day of the whole summer for an educated youth, Wang Shu, in China in the 1970s during the send-down movement. For us contemporaries, his days seem to be cruelly harsh and killingly daunting. Many of his fellows, in later first-person narrations, voiced their boredom, sufferings, and traumas in the years in the rural area. But what did Wang think about it? The youth actually found it then delightful and rewarding! To the perplexity of many, how did Wang, as member of the “lost generation” (*shiluo de yida*) going through rustication, act out the meaning of his life in the remote youth military farm with satisfaction and self-motivation?



Fig. 1 Poster encouraging the educated youth to settle in the border area. “Zhen Gen Bianjiang Gan Geming” (Settle in the border for revolution). Courtesy to <https://www.zhongguofeng.com/haobao/8016.htm>, 2017.

Wang and his generation, described as the “educated youth” (*zhishi qingnian* or *zhiqing* in short), are young people working in the countryside since the late 1950s for rural development and education. In a narrower but more commonly understood sense, as used in this essay, the term refers to the students who were in or graduated from elementary, middle, or high school and were sent to the countryside under the campaign of Up to Mountain Down to Countryside Movement (*Shangshan xi下乡*) in 1968, two years after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Amid the frenzy of the Cultural Revolution and the Red Guard

movement in 1968, the Maoist leadership had to deal with the troubles caused by the Red Guards. Subsequently, since 1968, relocation to the countryside was compulsory for urban youths who had finished schooling. The campaign soon became coercive, as there was resistance to it when the reality of rural lives was exposed in the cities. Between 1968 and 1980, about 17 million Chinese urban youth, accounting about one-third of the population in the age group, were rusticated.

### Aim & Methodology

The pivotal, lasting impact on the sent-down generation received both modern Chinese and international scholars’ attentions. Aside from the typical approach of analyzing the send-down movement based on top-down politics, a careful look on individuals’ lives can recast the meaning and lessons of Cultural Revolution. In the essay, I am trying to write a history from below of the send-down movement based on a collection of private letters the educated youth sent to his family. These letters by a young male, Wang Shu, reflect the inner world of the educated youth in first person narrative. The letters may provide insights into the rustication program from a micro-perspective and complement mainstream historical narratives.

Many historians have explored primary sources like memoirs and dairies, but less have used private letters as evidence. Historians may consider As primary sources, they expand our knowledge on a historical topic with its random, arbitrary and spontaneous expressions. It bears less burden of judgement as a non-retrospective narration, and does not illustrate a planned story plot, but narrates when memories are fresh, emotions linger. It represents less of a collective consensus of a historical event, but a more personal take on and candid picture of the era. Letters are a particularly helpful source for history research around the Cultural Revolution, as they are less infiltrated with

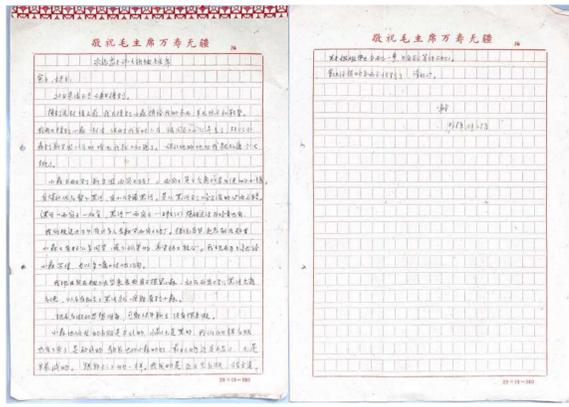


Fig. 2 The first letter written by Wang Shu. Photos taken by author.

official dogmas. In the countryside, letters writing and reading became a habit, a sacred ritual that many educated youth were committed to regularly. This letter collection particularly has a wider importance in the research of educated youth, for it seems to be rare survival of its kind, and likely the story of Wang and his parents’ response are not unique. The value of Wang’s letters lays on its richness in information of his inner world and feelings.

### Wang Shu: a “living Lei Feng”?

I acquired Wang Shu’s letters on a Chinese second-hand books trading platform. Among the countless items of letters and writings of the educated youth of different qualities, I found Wang’s collection to be most comprehensive and legible. His letters, written in between 1968 and 1975, are in good conditions, though some letters seem to be missing.

The young fellow was born on 2 November, 1948, one year before the Communist Party took over the whole country and established their regime. Twenty years later, Wang became one of the millions of educated youths who were exiled to the countryside in 1968. Wang left his home city to the Greater Khingan Range (or *Da Hinggan Range*) in Inner Mongolia, the northeast part of China. Wang wrote down his day-to-day life on those A4 single lined, grid or plain white papers in neat handwritings with ink pen to his beloved family.

Wang’s experience in the rural area is not a particularly exciting one. Unlike many best-selling educated youth fictions or memoirs, Wang’s writings recorded no rebellions, no killing, no sneaky underground activities. Of course, it does not mean that he did not witness any, nor those did not happen. It is beyond doubt that the experience of the sent-down youth varied greatly and mostly did not conform with official intensions and narratives. It is under this historical context that Wang’s experience became interesting – interestingly boring. He fits comfortably into the state narrative of an ideal educated youth – passionate about revolutions and political education, very hardworking, devoting the heart and soul to national modernization... Wang saw himself, just as how Mao wanted, as a revolutionary successor.

Wang’s generation grew up in the “New China,” in which they received a political socialization and education that centered around the glorification of Mao, loyalty to the Party, and patriotism. A major education method was propagating “heroic models” (*yingmo*). The state constructed these model soldiers, model workers, model peasants and model youth to be celebrities, and their accomplishments and qualities served as the ideological and moral guidance for the nation. Among the heroic models, Lei Feng (1940-62) have been the most widely known figure since the 60s till present day. Lei Feng, a PLA soldier died of protecting the public properties in 1962, was hugely publicized by the state since 1963 as a human embodiment of the ideal youth under Mao. He was selfless,

loyal to Mao, modest, and dedicated. His aspiration, written in his diary, was to be “ nothing more than a small but essential screw in the collective engine of the revolution. In localities, “living Lei Feng” and “active elements of learning from Lei Feng” were selected to award those who were idealistic socialists, and some outstanding ones were publicized as local models through their speeches, publications, movies, and operas. Wang’s letters allow us to imagine: How and why did adolescents like Wang Shu try to live like to the national hero, Lei Feng?



Fig. 3 Photo of Lei Feng (right) reading the Collection of Mao Zedong. Courtesy to Lei Feng Memorial Hall Photo.

### The sent-down years: some notable days

Wang’s first letter was written on 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1969, when he was assigned to the horse unit, then later the cooking unit, in the battalion in the military farm. Amid the repetitive days and tiresome tasks, an intriguing assignment was taken by his company – they were responsible for artistic performances in regiment meetings in March, 1970. The opera they performed was not the eight model operas, as ubiquitously as they were in the Cultural Revolution, but an opera that was written by their regiment. “Ode of Jin Xuehe” was a short opera celebrating Jin Xuehe, a male educated youth from Harbin also exiled to Wang’s regiment. In a rainy morning in May, 1969, some big wood trunks slipped from a car trunk accidentally. In this critical moment, Jin used his body to block the trunks from falling onto the other six educated youths in front of the car. The heavy trunks hit his chest, and blood spilled from Jin’s mouth – he died immediately. Like other Chinese who self-sacrificed their life for their comrades, Jing was heroized, reported on local news and was promoted as a model soldier in the regiment. Jin was only one among many of the state-endorsed local variations of Lei Feng, who shared a similar ordinary background, did good deeds in their everyday lives, and died heroically for the people and the Party. As an adolescent grew up under the state-dominated socialization and education, it is no surprise that Wang internalized the official glorification of Jin’s death. Wang did not grieve for Jin’s death, nor felt angry about the man-made tragedy. Instead, he felt educated and inspired by the deceased. When he performed in the opera and praised Jin, Wang learned from and immortalized him. “Every time we act,” Wang wrote, “it’s like Jin Xuehe standing next to me like it used to, tapping my shoulder and leading me to progress!” The death of Jin perhaps fueled Wang’s aspiration to be a “living Lei Feng”. Ordinary youth in normal circumstances could not imagine to emulate any god-like heroes. But when they were put in military production farms, got their soldier uniforms, digging tunnels to defend against the Soviet, they were one-step closer to becoming a military model. Additionally, the ones who had been chosen to be public heroes were once ordinary people, just like them, and what they did were achievable by these ordinary youth in the rural area as long as they were altruistic and not afraid to sacrifice themselves. The publicity machinery evaluated those “just-like-you-and-me” individuals into national models, and there was no reason for Wang Shu not wanting to become a local celebrity when he definitely had the chance to become one, and saw his comrade – Jin Xuehe – already made to be one.

In mid-summer, his assignment changed from feeding horses overnight to mowing in the field along with 30 youths in his company. Unfortunately, it did not start well – on the first day, as they were setting up the tents, there was a rainstorm. The rain lingered for days, hindering their labor progress. Surprisingly, Wang thought that it was the most fruitful time by far in his life, and described the days of heavy labor as delightful. While his work was mostly monotonous, he never once complain about it. It is not because that the labor wasn’t high intensity enough, but it is because Wang believed that the nation needs his tasks for economic development and military defense, as the “revolutionary machine” cannot ran without every “screw”. His satisfaction and sense of validity were based on his perception of contributions he made to the revolutionary progress of the nation. Thus, the tougher the working process was, the more self-fulfilling he was, regardless of the actual result of his tasks.

After the season of mowing, Wang devoted into the equally tiresome task of harvesting wheat. The workload was so heavy that no one was allowed to take leave to visit home. While time was tight for harvesting, Wang unfortunately got acute stomach flu. But Wang assured his parents, “My body is still very healthy! I recovered!” The youth always convinced himself that he is healthy, and disregarded any physical discomfort. This is a product of the state advocacy: Mao’s words and thoughts can transcend and overcome all weaknesses of physical bodies. Selfless socialist heroic characters whom Wang tried to live up to took no notice of the feeling of pain. But perhaps more so than his words, Wang’s torn tank top, pants and shoes were more accurate reflections of the harshness of labor.

Oddly in September, the usually energetic Wang was feeling miserable. “Today I am feeling terrible.” He started his letter after the habitual heading of “Ever-lasting loyalty to the great leader Chairmen Mao”. The day before, he fell on a harrow and had a very deep cut on his right hand. He rushed to the hospital and got three stitches. The next day, the doctor told the injured that his wound was infected and gave him an injection. The pain-stricken Wang used his right hand to write slowly and awkwardly, inking the papers with almost illegible Chinese characters.

Three days later, the usual, cheerful Wang was back, and he wrote to his family about the omnipresent topic – work. A dozen days after his hand got stitches, Wang was assigned to watch over the wheatfields overnight. The nights in the north were shivering cold, but Wang powered through whenever he thought of “Chairman Mao’s teaching.” As always, Wang deeply believed that “Mao Zedong Thoughts” could help him conquer all difficulties, including the physical fatigue, sleep deprivation, and all the issues in work. As his hand recovered, his platoon participated in the concrete mixing and casting construction project for national defense. Wang casually mentioned that he “fainted once because of the smell of gasoline.” Again, the son tried to make his discomfort sounds like nothing. Instead of complaining about the incident, Wang felt sorry for leaving the production battlefield in the key moment.

In winter, Wang told his parents bad news– his blanket and coat were all burnt down in a big fire. He simply notified his parents and apologized in advance for using up more money to buy replacements, on which he later spent his monthly salary. It was surprising, even by the standard of his time, that he did not complain nor panic when he looked at the ashes of all his important belongings, but purely stated that it was a “misfortune.” This shows how Wang cared little about his personal, private possessions.

### Concluding remarks

Every word in the letters shows how Wang Shu tried his best to emulate the heroic models in the years he spent in the northeast rural part of China. He largely lived out the Lei Feng spirit – love for the Party, for Mao, for labor, and for the people. Among the many faces of Lei Feng, he resembled the national idol the most in his aspiration to be a rustless screw in the collective – eagerly following superiors’ commands and overachieving at the most ordinary or tedious positions. The send-down movement provided a platform for Wang to actualize the ideals and channel his ceaseless energy into manual labor that socialist societies celebrate. Being given arduous military and agricultural tasks in the border area, Wang could see himself to be another “living Lei Feng” and sacrifice his life like Jin Xuehe.

However, unlike Lei Feng who was martyrize and perfected through state regulated propagation, Wang did not absolutely adhere to the state ideals. Wang was a son filled with Confucius filial piety – constantly easing the worries of his parents, caring his siblings, sending his salary back home, seeking consent from parents in romantic relationships, being humble before his parents... For his family, Wang tried to buy food from the “private markets.” Moreover, Wang’s letters display his shortcomings in acting and writing, emotions and moments of vulnerability, as well as failures in romance.

These minor flaws and personal characteristics show that he was just one of the millions of ordinary nameless dislocated youth in China inspired by the Lei Feng spirit. And for that, his story was probably too boring for any editors, publishers, and readers. Dominating educated-youth literature, which focuses on life-changing, dramatic sufferings or achievements, seems to give too little space for us to imagine boring, uncaptivating send-down experiences. Daily routines and trivial matters, perhaps most susceptible to memory loss, in fact made up the largest part of the educated youth’s realities. Wang’s letters humanized the educated youth. It bridges the gap between the two opposite popular images of educated youth – helpless victims or indoctrinated fanatics. He is an authentic example of successful state imposition of the Lei Feng model. Given bearable living conditions, relentless decade-long intense propaganda bombardment and education, and proper family background, many can dedicate their youth to state-designated missions.

From digging tunnels voluntarily to reading political books at late night, from mowing in the daunting summer for eight hours to spending his salary on his students... Wang spent seven years of his first flush of manhood in rural military production farms, living a life that cannot be closer to that of Lei Feng – a figure solely dependent on the Party from behavior to mentality. Can we then postulate, many young people in the PRC were, are, and will be willing to accept the role of a small obedient screw in the service of the Party under almost unbearable conditions even at the expense of one’s life?