

Is Lei Feng (雷锋) Still a Modern Hero?: A Consideration of Heroic Action in the
Context of Culture

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As we enter the 21st century many complex questions face us as individuals, cultures, nations, and as an international community. We are struggling with problems and opportunities never faced before – climate change, global terrorism networks, ubiquitous telecommunications, and a globalized economy. In prior generations, the values of a society were often embodied in the heroic actions of individuals, and the actions of heroes were also used as a way of preserving and teaching these values to young people.

For example, the phrase, “Learn from comrade Feng” (向雷锋同志学习) is still powerful for many people in China today. The story of Lei Feng, an altruistic soldier in the People’s Liberation Army in the 1960’s, was elevated to near legend status – to the point that his name is used as a label for people who embody the heroic traits he is said to have possessed (“huo Lei Feng”). Similar heroic figures – real ones and mythic ones – can be found in every culture. These individuals are often viewed as being larger than life. Because their achievements seem somehow superhuman, they come to represent actions beyond what can be expected of an average person (Hughes-Hallett, 2004).

As we transition into the digital age, the role of the hero as role model seems less certain. We are not as comfortable with the myths of the past, youngsters seem more moved by celebrity than ideals of filial duty, loyalty, or patriotism. The values embodied by heroes of the last century seem increasingly quaint and remote. Yet the need for heroic action is perhaps more acute than ever before. If we are to avoid catastrophic environmental problems and political turmoil, we must have individuals who are willing to take bold action to address the problems of the 21st Century.

In the past, heroes were found on the battlefield (Such as the famous Chinese General 岳飞 [Yue Fei]) or leading social movements (such as Nelson Mandela's efforts to end apartheid in South Africa; Brink, 1998). However, today's heroes may be most needed in the boardrooms of major corporations and in halls of our governments – although less dramatic than wartime heroes, such *social* heroes are more significant now than at any other point in history.

Thirty-five years ago, one of the authors of this paper (Dr. Philip Zimbardo; see for example Zimbardo, 2007) conducted a now famous study, “The Stanford Prison Experiment.” This study demonstrated that even for normal people, the line between good and evil is permeable. We like to believe that people who do terrible things are on the evil side of this line, while the rest of us are good people who could never cross it. But this experiment and a body of social psychological research revealed that everyone has the potential for evil — when in a behavioral context with powerful situational forces operating to change how individuals think and act (Milgram, 1974; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, & Zimbardo, 2002). These findings are a reminder of Hannah Arendt's (1963) concept of the “banality of evil” – the idea that even an average person can do terrible things under certain situational conditions.

Yet we have neglected to consider the opposite side of the banality of evil: Is it also possible that heroic acts are something that anyone can perform, given the right mind-set and conditions? Could there also be a “banality of heroism”? Are most heroes just ordinary men and women who at some time in their lives engage in heroic actions?

The banality of heroism concept (Zimbardo, 2006; Franco & Zimbardo, 2007) suggests that we are all potential heroes waiting for a moment in life to perform a heroic deed. The decision to act heroically is a choice that many of us will be called upon to make at some point in time. By conceiving of heroism as a universal attribute of human nature, not as a rare feature of a

few superhuman figures, heroism becomes something that seems within the realm of possibilities for every person – and through this accessibility to everyone, a more modern concept of heroism can emerge.

While we need a modern heroic ideal, it is still worth exploring the historical view of heroism. It is an idea as old as humanity itself, and some of its subtleties are becoming lost or transmuted by popular culture. Being a hero is not simply being a good role model, a celebrity, or a popular sports figure. Heroism is also different than altruism. Altruism emphasizes selfless acts that assist others, but heroism entails the potential for a much deeper personal sacrifice – and the ability to transcend the negative consequences of heroic action. The core of heroism revolves around the individual's commitment to a noble purpose and the willingness to accept the consequences of fighting for that purpose. Further, some types of social heroism can be distinguished from altruism because heroes challenge a society to consider an entirely new set of values, while those who are simply altruistic support values that are already widely held by most people.

The social sciences have not answered many of the questions about why some people act heroically in certain situations, while other people do not. However, we believe that an important factor that may encourage heroic action is the stimulation of “The Heroic Imagination”— the capacity to imagine facing physically or socially risky situations, to struggle with the hypothetical problems these situations generate, and to consider one's actions and the consequences (Franco & Zimbardo, 2007). By considering these issues in advance, the individual becomes more prepared to act when and if a moment that calls for heroism arises — a moment to act when most others are passive.

Further, we can cultivate a habit of heroic action – even in the simplest areas of our lives. These small steps can provide a framework for bolder heroic acts. Epic poems often tell of the hero visiting the underworld. This metaphorical encounter with death represents an acceptance and transcendence of one’s own mortality. To this day, some forms of heroism require paying the ultimate price of sacrificing one’s life. But we can also understand this as a hero’s willingness to accept any of the consequences of heroic action—whether the sacrifices are measured as physical peril or social sacrifice.

The larger than life heroes that emerge in times of turbulence tell us much about the culture and about the needs of the average person within that culture (Šiklová, 2004). In China’s recent memory, Lei Feng was a figure that represented an important turn in China’s history. He served as a role model for a new age. During same period in the United States, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also marked an important turn in American history, as that society finally broke the bonds of segregation. Each of these figures embodied values that were important and transformative for their societies at that moment in time.

Yet the concept of everyday heroism – the banality of heroism – suggests that this shift to a new set of values may already be present within the general public, that each individual’s small heroic action can point the way forward and define a new communal path. The time has come for the countries of the world to find, define, and create new heroes – both local and global ones. We must re-imagine what heroic activity is. And we must begin to see heroism as a natural ability that everyone can cultivate and participate in.

Finally, as psychologists, practitioners, and scientists, it is obvious that further research on heroic activity is needed. Exploring the *essence* of heroism as it differs from altruism is one important task. Identifying the personal and situational barriers to, and facilitators of, heroic

action warrants further investigation. And another avenue of research is to identify the cross-cultural similarities and differences in the heroic ideal (Colson, 2001). As educators, we need to develop new school curricula that support the training of young men and women in the heroic ideal. Ultimately, one of the most powerful roles we can play as researchers is to begin to understand how the heroic ideal can be made fresh again and transmitted to a new generation – both within and between nations. This activity, the creation of a new heroic ideal for a new age, promises to dramatically shape our collective future.

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