

No Such Thing as True Heroism:  
An Analysis of the Underdogs in 芳华 Youth  
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by

Jessie Chen

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Best of luck to you next year when you write your EALC thesis!

## ABSTRACT

China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) represented a period in which principles of government, education, and even day-to-day living were challenged. Heroism and virtue were not free from scrutiny. These two concepts only became more relevant and complicated during a time in which self-preservation was not guaranteed. For some Chinese citizens, heroism and virtue served as the sole pathway of achieving self-preservation. The promotion of individual and collective goodness, or virtue, became the formula for model citizenship under Chairman Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and the Chinese Communist Party. A person's devotion and subservience to the government could render them a Revolutionary hero, as shown through the immortalization of nationalist icon Lei Feng (1940–1962). However, modern filmmakers focusing on the Maoist era (1949–1976) have their own ideas of what heroism is and are unafraid of expressing anti-Party sentiment by using humble characters that live tragic storylines. These films focus on the hardship and survival of more unconventional heroes that would not have been recognized by the Party. For directors like Zhang Yimou (b. 1950) and Feng Xiaogang (b. 1958), heroes can be ordinary people simply trying to survive the difficulties of their own lives, and they do not have to agree with the government. In my examination of Feng Xiaogang's 2017 film *Youth*, I argue that true heroism is not possible during a time in which morality was fragile, suffering was rampant, and self-interest was compromised. In my analysis of Party-backed heroism versus Feng's discourse on heroism I contend that the heroism achieved by the film's protagonists is devoid of meaning relative to the amount of suffering they experience. I also discuss the film's reception and issues regarding modern China's societal struggle with the Communist Party government, and how today's youth also struggle with self-preservation, virtue, and heroism.

## INTRODUCTION

芳华 (Fāng huá) or *Youth*, 2017 is Chinese film directed by the highly successful commercial filmmaker Feng Xiaogang (b. 1958), produced in collaboration with and based on the 2017 novel *You Touched Me* written by author Yan Geling (b. 1958). *Youth* examines the day-to-day lives of young dancers in a performing arts troupe affiliated with the 1970s' People's Liberation Army. Although this thesis will only be analyzing the film and not the novel, it is significant to note the collaboration between director Feng Xiaogang and writer Yan Geling. Not only are both born in the same year and raised during the same generation, but in an interview with reporter Jonah Greenberg, it is revealed that both worked in the army's arts troupe. Feng, who had worked in the film industry for over two decades, had approached Yan (who had had many of her published novels adapted into films) first, asking to work together to tell a story about the experience of what that was like. The interview goes on to reveal that Feng actually waited for Yan to produce a screenplay of the film itself, and so unlike film adaptations where the novelist is minimally or not at all involved in the creation of the movie, Yan actually had a direct role in retelling her book as a film. Yan describes her experiences during the Cultural Revolution, how special the creation of *Youth* was to both her and Feng, and what the movie was meant to express.

“We dropped out of school. I joined the army dance troupe when I was 12 and didn't get much education. Some might call this experience challenging—a youth without a normal family environment to grow up in—and a pretty bad situation, but we gained a lot of what other kids, other young people, didn't have. So when I finished writing, both

Xiaogang and I felt ecstatic, because youth is a very unforgettable and important time of life for everyone. And our youth seemed especially precious”<sup>1</sup>.

The film’s historical narrative follows China’s pre through post-Cultural Revolution and Reform period.<sup>2</sup> This coming-of-age film explores themes of adulthood, friendship, love, lust, desire, and freedom; as well as suffering, jealousy, betrayal, discrimination, and loss. The narrator is the troupe member Xiao Suizi, whose presence never takes center stage despite her crucial role in telling the story; and her character remains in the background for much of the film. Instead, Suizi casts spotlight on the storylines of two different outcasts of the troupe, Liu Feng and He Xiaoping, whom are shown to be the movie’s main characters. Throughout the plot, they are ostracized by their peers, mistreated by superiors, and subject to trauma. Yet both remain committed to an innate sense of morality. Even amidst hardship, these two protagonists strive to do what they consider to be the right thing in order to be virtuous. Somehow, their commitment to virtue becomes the very driving force that helps them survive the turbulence of their lives, and is an essential part of their character development.

“结冤與人謂。”<sup>3</sup> A famous ancient Chinese proverb translated by author Brian Brown states, “Putting aside virtuous deeds, instead of practicing them, may be called ‘robbing oneself’.”<sup>4</sup> The practice of virtue is necessary for self-cultivation in order to become a useful

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Landreth. “Reflections on ‘Youth’ and Freedom—A Conversation with Feng Xiaogang and Yan Geling.” *ChinaFile* (January 05, 2018). Accessed December 17, 2019. <http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/culture/reflections-youth-and-freedom-conversation-feng-xiaogang-and-yan-geling>

<sup>2</sup> Allison Chen, “Film Review: Feng Xiaogang's Youth.” *The Politic* (February 6, 2018). Accessed May 1, 2019, <http://thepolitic.org/film-review-feng-xiaogangs-youth/>.

<sup>3</sup> John Francis Davis, *Hien Wun Shoo Chinese Moral Maxims, with a Free and Verbal Translation; Affording Examples of the Grammatical Structure of the Language* (London: J. Murray, 1823), 61.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Brown, *Wisdom of the Chinese: Their Philosophy in Sayings and Proverbs* (Place

person to both oneself and to society. In *Youth*, the recurring theme of Liu Feng and He Xiaoping's intentions centered around virtue. For the purposes of this paper, I am defining virtue as "a quality or qualities that display moral excellence and intend to promote individual and collective greatness." The pursuit of virtue within Chinese culture has traditionally been honored immensely, with those who are successful becoming exemplary role models for others. Beyond virtue's authoritative appearance in ancient philosophical thought in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist teachings, virtue also served as a socio-political platform advocating for heroism during the Maoist period (1949–1976). Under Communist Party ruler Mao Zedong (1893–1976), virtue was manifested into a human icon Lei Feng (1940–1962), a celebrated role model and revolutionary hero of his time. His reputation as a heroic figure in Chinese history is tied to his willingness to do good deeds for society as a blue-collar worker and dedication to studying Maoist ideology, and after his death he was iconized and celebrated by the Chinese Communist Party, earning recognition as a hero for essentially being obedient to the Party. In this paper, heroism and its ties to virtue will raise important issues and discussions about the context of heroism during the Maoist period, and then specifically within the context *Youth*, and whether true heroism existed and continues to exist.

As seen in the story of Lei Feng which will be discussed more thoroughly later on, if the successful pursuit of virtue results in heroism, this begs the question: what exactly was heroism? Under Chairman Mao's ideology, revolutionary heroism was dependent on labor and service to the Party. "As a peace-time soldier, Lei Feng committed his life to alleviating the hardships experienced by the Chinese people. Anecdotes about him indicate that he worked hard, lived frugally and, apart from buying and reading Mao's publications, gave his earnings to local Party

projects and helped people in need.”<sup>6</sup> People like Lei Feng rose to fame because their efforts protected the interests of Mao and supported the Communist Party’s status as the ruling party.

Conversely, with the rise of films on the Cultural Revolution in Chinese cinema, heroism became a concept for filmmakers to use for discourse. Due to *Youth*’s recent release in 2017, no scholarship on this specific film has been published thus far. However, there is an abundance of literature on director Feng Xiaogang, who is renowned for producing controversial films. Described as an “emblematic figure, ... Feng Xiaogang established himself as the most commercially successful mainland Chinese filmmaker ever. Three of his late 1990s films ... rank in the top five grossing Chinese films of the twentieth century.”<sup>7</sup> Because he is successful domestically and internationally acclaimed, Feng’s position as a globally celebrated filmmaker allows him to use the big screen as a medium for sociopolitical commentary and activism. A later discussion regarding reception of this film can further illustrate his influence in the industry as well as the important messages his storytelling strives to express.

Feng’s motivations are not unique to just himself. Other directors also further nuanced their heroic characters and often even used them to channel opinions about authorities or attack Chinese Communist Party ideology. This was especially the case for commercial filmmakers who knew they had a firm grip on a large audience. Famous albeit controversial filmmakers such as Tian Zhuangzhuang (b. 1952) and Zhang Yimou (b. 1950) used the medium of cinema to express the true horrors of the Cultural Revolution and to jab at the irony of heroism. Works such

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Jeffreys and S. U. Xuezhong, "3 Governing through Lei Feng." *New mentalities of government in China* (2016): 7.

<sup>7</sup> Jason McGrath, "Metacinema for the Masses: Three Films by Feng Xiaogang." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 17, no. 2 (2005): 90.

as Tian Zhuangzhuang's 1993 film *The Blue Kite*<sup>8</sup> and Zhang Yimou's 1994 film *To Live*<sup>9</sup> render those who opposed and survived the Revolutionary movement and were oppressed by Maoist ideology as the true heroes of the Maoist era. Scholar Yomi Braester namedrops Feng Xiaogang and Zhang Yimou's films as explicit examples of the commercial turn with great interest in crowd-pleasing genres<sup>10</sup>. Although not all their films touched upon heavy topics such as the Cultural Revolution, these directors had long standing reputations of telling stories for the sake of exciting or shocking the crowd. Additionally, these were directors who took advantage of their influence in creating blockbuster cinema and so used the big screen as a mode of political and social activism, spreading messages far and wide through their storytelling.

In these renowned older films, we see ordinary civilians subject to capture, torture, and even death by the Party; yet these are the characters that emerge as the protagonists. These heroes can be described more accurately as antiheroes: protagonists who lack "stereotypical" attributes of heroic figures, and fall into the grey area between superhero and villain because they are "ordinary." Liu Feng, while given spotlight as if he is the hero of *Youth*, is shown to be more ordinary, naïve, and relatable, thus rendering him an antihero. An excellent example of a literary foil to Communist icon Lei Feng, and not-so-coincidentally named Liu Feng, his story is representative of the clash between these two notions of heroism. In *Youth*, Liu Feng is initially complicit with Party orders, and prioritizes the interests of the collective over his own as a

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Ebert, "The Blue Kite Movie Review & Film Summary (1993): Roger Ebert." *RogerEbert.com* (January 5, 2003). Accessed Nov. 17, 2019. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-blue-kite-1993>.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Ebert, "To Live Movie Review & Film Summary (1994): Roger Ebert." *RogerEbert.com* (December 23, 1994). Accessed Nov. 17, 2019. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/to-live-1994>.

<sup>10</sup> Yomi Braester, "Chinese Cinema in the Age of Advertisement: The Filmmaker as a Cultural Broker." *The China Quarterly*, no. 183 (2005): 550.

People's Liberation Army performing arts troupe member even with his life on the line. But he is only a hero by designation of the director and is never genuinely recognized for his efforts and contributions by other characters throughout the storyline. He Xiaoping, the other antihero of *Youth*, faces a similar fate: while highlighted “unambiguously [as] the noblest characters on-screen, their selfless sense of virtue seems to directly anticipate the grievous suffering they will endure over the course of this decades-spanning drama.”<sup>11</sup>

So far I have introduced two forms of heroism: the first which I will call ‘Lei Feng heroism’ or Communist Party/Maoist heroism, and the second is ‘Liu Feng heroism’ or anti-heroism. Both forms combat the interests and notions of heroism set by the other. Based on the grounds of ‘Lei Feng heroism’ and the controversial cinematic portrayals of Cultural Revolution anti-heroism, I argue that true heroism during the Maoist era did not exist. To refer back to the concept of virtue and how the achievement of virtue renders one a hero, ‘Liu Feng heroism’ or anti-heroism displays how the pursuit of virtue is exactly what results in the greatest suffering. Heroism attained through virtue that goes unrecognized, or even worse, is punished for, is not true heroism. In this thesis I will conduct a careful examination of the antiheroes in director Feng Xiaogang’s 2017 film *Youth* to prove the impossibility of achieving true heroism during the Cultural Revolution: because the sacrifices the heroes make along with the losses they endure greatly exceed what has been gained, and their virtuousness only rewards them with suffering. My argument aims to contribute a new perspective towards contemporary Chinese films (particularly those relating to the Maoist era), reevaluate the true agenda of Chinese heroism, and

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<sup>11</sup> Justin Chang, “Review: Feng Xiaogang's Stirring 'Youth' Follows a Chinese Military Arts Troupe through History.” *Los Angeles Times* (December 14, 2017). Accessed October 6, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-youth-review-20171214-story.html>

provide a deeper examination of the relationship between Chinese society and their government. Furthermore, my thesis hopes to pave the way for further questioning on how the youth of China today continue to struggle with ideas of self-preservation, attaining virtue, and achieving heroism.

### *Methodology*

To achieve the goals of my thesis within the limits of the research and existing literature on these topics, I will first examine protagonist Liu Feng's character development in the plot through Feng Xiaogang's presentation of Liu and how his actions and attitudes align with notions of 'Lei Feng heroism'. Through director Feng Xiaogang's storytelling I will also observe the interactions between Liu and other characters to show how it is precisely Liu Feng's commitment to 'Lei Feng heroism' that leads to great consequences and sets the stage for antiheroism in *Youth*.

Next, I will compare and contrast both He Xiaoping and Liu Feng's narratives and the sufferings they face through the film's use of parallel storytelling, and then conduct a text-based structural analysis of a line-by-line transcription of He Xiaoping's father's death letter to discuss how suffering pushes their characters more towards the trajectory of an antihero than a hero. This new section aims to flesh out how the film is presenting the two protagonists as antiheroes rather than heroes of Party-supported notions of heroism.

Then I will analyze the true consequences and motivations of both He Xiaoping and Liu Feng's pursuit of heroism through the film's mise-en-scene and use of different camera filters to argue that suffering that exceeds the rewards of heroism proves the falsity of true heroism. Here, I will focus on two of the film's most poignant scenes: Liu Feng collapsed alone on the

battlefield, and He Xiaoping struggling with viewing the graphic horrors of war up close as an army nurse.

Finally, I will briefly discuss critics of the film, general reception, issues of censorship; and to question how the film speaks to generations today and the message it truly tries to convey to younger Chinese people who will struggle with virtue, heroism, and self-preservation on their own in the greater context of Chinese society.

### *Contributions*

The stakes of arguing that no true heroism existed during the Maoist era pushes forth new ways of interpreting contemporary Chinese cinema. Rather than critiquing films as either government propaganda or not, the argument of true heroism complicates the idea of what being a hero means and who gets to be a hero. This thesis aims to clearly define the differences between Chinese Communist Party government-propagandized ideas of heroism versus those of influential filmmakers', such as Feng Xiaogang who attempts to combat these oppressive ideologies through artistic and cinematic portrayals of anti-heroism. In an effort to redefine the real agenda of virtue, heroism, and self-preservation within the context of modern Chinese society, my writing conducts a deeper examination of the relationship between Chinese society and government within the more ordinary antihero protagonists of *Youth*.

Examination of true heroism and the creation of heroes itself is also important in the study of this film especially since it brings to question the issue of hero-making and who gets to take part in this, especially in China. Scholar Yingjie Guo, who also serves as a senior lecturer of Chinese Studies, problematizes this further. He describes the Communist Party as in charge of a "monopoly of official hero-making, which has made it difficult for [Chinese people] to create

heroes in the official media or contemporary heroes”<sup>12</sup> which would be more like antiheroes such as Liu Feng and He Xiaoping. Guo suggests that the situation has caused artistic gravitation towards “less controlled artistic media, most notably TV and film, for input into China’s mixing pot of hero-making”<sup>13</sup>. Of course, in doing so, filmmakers like Feng Xiaogang, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Zhang Yimou know that their work inevitably will become entangled in the re-evaluation of historical figures and events from various viewpoints; and their work will invite the discourse of what true heroism is and whether or not it existed during this period.

### **LEI FENG HEROISM IN YOUTH**

Early on in the development of Liu Feng’s character, the film introduces side characters (other troupe members) greeting and interacting with him very casually, while simultaneously speaking about him with a great air of respect. Many of the troupe members go so far as calling him and referring to him as “our very own Lei Feng”.<sup>15</sup> From his nickname, it is clear that director Feng Xiaogang intended to have this character remind viewers of the Communist Party icon. It is essential to understand the nickname of Liu Feng since it is an expression of the director’s desire to parody the original historical figure with the protagonist.<sup>14</sup> As if the similarity of the names is not enough of a dead giveaway, the script incorporates other characters directly pointing out this comparison, calling him a ‘living Lei Feng’ as a running joke. There is intent in *Youth* to create this foil of historical icon Lei Feng, but in order to examine Liu Feng further, we must understand who Lei Feng was.

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<sup>12</sup> Yingjie Guo, "National Unification Overrides All: The Heroism of The Heroism of Hero." *Media Asia* 34, no. 1 (2007): 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> Feng Xiaogang, *Fānghuá 芳华 Youth*, (China: IM Global, 2017).

Lei Feng (1940–1962) was a People’s Liberation Army soldier who was catapulted to national fame through a pro-Communist campaign in 1963 that was promoted across the nation, with his deeds recorded and filmed, preached to the population through press and media. As presented in the national emulation campaign of 1963, the story of Lei Feng begins with him born during a time of simultaneous civil war between the Nationalist and the Communist Parties (while China was engaged in national war against Japan, who occupied much of Eastern China at the time). Lei Feng’s father was killed by the Japanese, and his younger and older brothers died, with his mother committing suicide soon afterwards to escape harassment. With the establishment of the Communist regime, Lei Feng’s welfare and education were taken care of by the new authorities. He worked for the Anshan steel corporation after finishing school, and was later accepted into the People’s Liberation Army, becoming a squad leader and official member of the Communist Party. Lei Feng was famed for “studying the works of Chairman Mao assiduously, living frugally and devoting himself to serving the people, and recording his thoughts and feelings in a diary.”<sup>17</sup> He became a recipient of multiple awards for model behavior and became a local delegate to the National People’s Congress before an unfortunate truck accident that resulted in his death at the young age of 22<sup>18</sup>. Lei Feng, having been promoted as a model within the People’s Liberation Army for some time before his death, became further iconized by the Chinese Communist Party to promote socialist morality and what ideal virtuous behavior looked like. Since then Lei Feng has been a recurring heroic figure in mainland Chinese culture and politics for more than half a century.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Rosemary Roberts, "The Confucian moral foundations of socialist model man: Lei Feng and the twenty four exemplars of filial behaviour." *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014): 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

Not only is the similarity of their names intentional, Liu Feng plays his role as a virtuous icon flawlessly in the beginning of the film: for friends and acquaintances alike, he saves food, runs errands, fixes machinery, crafts lavish furniture gifts, and even going so far to lance the pus from a blister on the foot of wealthy troupe dancer and acquaintance Lin Dingding.<sup>20</sup> As a result, Liu becomes quite popular among the troupe, and both peers and higher-ups alike have no hesitation relying on him for assistance or favors. Without much progression of the storyline, viewers are already informed that his character pays homage to the highly propagandized Communist icon Lei Feng, who was commended by Chairman Mao for being “industrious, generous and irresistibly impish... China’s most endearing soldier, the sort of fellow who would darn his comrades’ socks and skip a meal so others might eat.”<sup>21</sup>

As the film progresses, it becomes clear that Liu Feng’s character does anything but parallel to the icon of Lei Feng. His ‘virtuous’ storyline becomes grim and his ‘virtues’ begin to go unrecognized. As his peers leave the troupe and move on to university or to accept more prestigious positions within the People’s Liberation Army, Liu Feng adamantly turns down promotions offered by his superiors. He insists that he is happier within the performing arts troupe, fully compliant to a life of serving the Party. His superiors warn him that the sustainability of the arts troupe is not guaranteed, and that Liu is talented enough to achieve greater things in life.

The turning point in the film comes when Liu Feng is no longer perceived and treated as the highly respected Lei Feng icon within his circle of peers. Inspired by a smuggled recording

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Jacobs, "Chinese Heroism Effort Is Met With Cynicism." *The New York Times* (March 06, 2012). Accessed May 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/world/asia/lei-feng-day-draws-chinese-cynicism.html>.

of a love song by Teresa Teng (a popular Taiwanese singer whose songs at the time were banned by the Party), he embraces his crush Lin Dingding and confesses his affection for her. He even mentions that his refusal of opportunities to be promoted out of the troupe is due to his unwillingness to be apart from her.<sup>22</sup> She is repulsed and reports him (to whom?). Witnessed by other members of the troupe, they immediately accuse Lin Dingding of “corrupting” Liu, and similarly Lin Dingding’s friends later accuse her of overreacting: “Liu Feng is like a nice old grandpa... how could someone like him feel desire and want to be with you? You let a doctor and a secretary pursue you, so what’s wrong with a living Lei Feng?”<sup>23</sup> Upon being reported, authorities who handle questioning for the incident press Liu Feng to admit to having “impure sexual behavior and thoughts”<sup>24</sup> for Lin (which he refuses to having) and strips him of his position in the troupe. They send off Liu, a performer and dancer, to serve as a foot soldier on the frontlines of the growing conflict between China and Vietnam. Liu, who thought his dedication and subservience to the Party was heroic and guaranteed comfort and support from his peers, was instead scapegoated and outcasted by the troupe almost overnight. ‘Don’t be like Liu Feng.’<sup>25</sup> This moment in the film displays how being virtuous or even completely complicit could not render one as a Communist revolutionary hero. Rather, it was the jurisdiction and judgment of authorities who could only make these decisions. Lei Feng, after all, was a celebrated icon after his death, more so than while he was still alive<sup>26</sup>.

While never explicitly mentioned in character Suizi’s narration, Liu’s initial reasons for refusal to move up or out of the troupe extend beyond his unrequited boy crush on Lin, and these

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<sup>22</sup> Feng, Fānghuá 芳华 *Youth*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, "The Confucian moral foundations of socialist model man: Lei Feng and the twenty four exemplars of filial behaviour", 25.

reasons can be inferred from his almost impulsive commitment to virtue. The initial joys of feeling like a hero and becoming attributed to Lei Feng himself along with the attention he received for being a saint became what his character held onto the most. His mentality clashes with reality: the Cultural Revolution does not last long, and the country is struck with intense warfare, famine, and poverty shortly into the midway point of the film.

Only He Xiaoping is depicted looking past Liu Feng's mistakes and recognizing his earnest intentions and love for the Party and the troupe. He, who was also seen as an outcast upon rumors being spread that her father was an enemy of the Party, was brought to the troupe by Liu, and he is the only one that looks out for her when other members refuse to interact with her kindly. She hangs on fondly to the moment that Liu danced with her when her original dance partner complained of her strong body odor, and when she is informed of Liu's removal from the troupe, she is the only one to send him off. This will be important later in discussion of the building of antiheroism in *Youth*, and how the protagonists form the support system of each other's heroism.

A film critic on social media platform Douban, popular blogger 'Xiaoyan' writes a controversial opinion piece about *Youth* in which she discusses precisely the issue of being 'virtuous': the title of her post (translated from Chinese to English) is "Tell me, even if I had to die, I would not want to be either Liu Feng or He Xiaoping."<sup>27</sup> She claims that while the film places Liu and He as protagonists, both of them are actually losers – in the sense that their lives entail greater losses than gains, and that director Feng Xiaogang produced this film in order to

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<sup>27</sup> Xiaoyan, “《芳华》告诉我们，打死不要成为刘峰何小萍这样的人。” “《Youth》 teaches us that it's better to be beat than to become the type of people that Liu Feng and He Xiaoping are.” 豆瓣 *Douban* (December 22, 2017). Accessed May 1, 2019. <https://movie.douban.com/review/9005857/>.

encourage viewers to not idolize people like them. She argues that Liu's large character flaw is his lack of motivation and drive to accomplish in the real world, and that he failed to understand that being the humble servant of his peers would not achieve what he so desired: friendship, love, and heroism. He claims to love Lin Dingding, but boyishly pursues her without much regard for what she wanted in life: financial stability and the opportunity to go abroad. She then criticizes He Xiaoping for her lack of common sense: rather than asking her roommates to borrow the troupe uniform to take a photograph, she steals it without permission (and is met with much disdain once she is discovered), and she pursues Liu ruthlessly without explicitly confessing her feelings for the sole reason that he was the only one kind enough to not treat her as an outcast. Xiaoyan argues that it is people like Liu and He who "make society worse for everyone"<sup>28</sup> and that their brainwashed compliance to the Party (the notion that the collective was more important than taking care of the individual) is what allowed the Party to stay in power.

This discourse stands out from the reviews such as Justin Chang's and Allison Chen's which celebrate *Youth*'s protagonists, as well as scholarly critics' opinions of Feng Xiaogang's works which hold his portrayal of heroism in high esteem<sup>29</sup>. However, Xiaoyan is not unique in their attack on what essentially is "Lei Feng heroism." In fact, such attitudes denouncing the actions of the Chinese Communist Party are quite common but are often censored from public platforms. In light of recent criticisms of the Party for attempting to resuscitate "learning from Lei Feng" on the 50th anniversary of his death,<sup>30</sup> the Chinese public has responded with backlash, and those who went publicly online with their opinions were censored shortly afterwards. Quoted from Lei Feng's diary by a wealthy property developer on an online forum: "My only ambition is

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> McGrath, "Metacinema for the Masses: Three Films by Feng Xiaogang." 98.

<sup>30</sup> Jacobs, "Chinese Heroism Effort Is Met With Cynicism," 1.

to be a rustless screw for the great cause of revolution”. In this context a ‘rustless screw’ describes somebody who works without much resistance or difficulties; essentially the ideal citizen under a tight authoritarian regime. The forum post author accuses the legend of Lei Feng for being a naked propaganda tool “for [attempting to] turn all citizens into screws that can be willfully placed anywhere. That way, there is no need for democracy, human rights or freedom.”<sup>31</sup> Muckraking journalist and lapsed Communist Party member Dai Qing was one of many commentators who also had thoughts to share on the state of many Chinese offended by the patronizing message of moral righteousness. Many found it ridiculous that their government assumed their people would need icons like Lei Feng in order to teach good behavior and maintain an orderly and disciplined society. The following comment shows the irony of the Chinese government’s approach to controlling their people: instead of obeying orders, the people found these sorts of ‘do-good movements’ belittling and degrading. One commentator says, “Would I help a senior citizen or a child in need? Of course I would, but not because I was told to do so by a government movement. Empathy is a minimal requirement of human decency, not one that should be directed by a political party.”<sup>32</sup>

## **BUILDING THE ANTIHEROES**

For most of the beginning of the film up until Liu Feng’s reputation is ruined by a false sexual assault accusation, Liu and He’s characters subscribed to the values of ideal citizens that Lei Feng was shown to exhibit in nationalized propaganda. However, Lei Feng heroism was purposely shown to fail as the plot develops after it does not manifest in character Liu Feng and he realizes that he no longer has the support of his peers. What makes the two protagonists heroic

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 3.

if they do not subscribe to traditional views of Party heroism? While He and Liu are committed to virtue, this was certainly not the case nor the first priority for their colleagues. For them, to come to the defense and support of Liu and He would have been the riskier choice, especially after it was made clear that the Party had no inhibitions about tossing out the Liu as the bad example by sending him to the frontlines of war. Although it is easy to watch the film by antagonizing the rest of the troupe for bullying He and failing to befriend Liu beyond taking advantage of his willingness to do favors, retrospectively speaking it was more so that everyone else had their own best interests in mind. Beyond character Xiao Suizi's choice to narrate specifically on Liu Feng and He Xiaoping's story, is there strong evidence of these two serving as *Youth's* true heroes if they lacked basic comradeship such as the support of their own peers?

There is irony in the fact that filmmaker Feng Xiaogang designates the protagonists of *Youth* as the only two who lack comradeship with the rest of their performing arts troupe. Historian Thomas B. Gold discusses the importance of relationships and comradeship during a shifting period in China's time like the Cultural Revolution.

“Comradeship” is a universalistic morality in which all citizens are in important respects equal under the state, and gradations on the basis of status or degree of closeness cannot legitimately interfere with this equality. Comradeship is characterized by helpfulness, civility and concern for others. ‘Helping’ is more universalistic than the help one gives friends, and also translates in part into a willingness to criticize the shortcomings of others and so “help” them behave according to the norms of comradeship.<sup>33</sup>

If these ideas are applied to character development in *Youth*, then it can be inferred that Liu Feng and He Xiaoping are not seen as equals by their fellow troupe members. While Liu distributes

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas B. Gold, "After Comradeship: Personal Relations in China since the Cultural Revolution." *The China Quarterly*, no. 104 (1985): 657.

favors to everyone indiscriminately as a way to earn social capital, few (if any at all) attempt to reciprocate this kindness, precisely because they do not see Liu as a worthy investment.

Similarly, because He is an outcast from the start, the mere action of kindness towards her would only be downplaying one's own sense of self respect, much less an attempt to befriend her.

To further support to idea that Liu's peers were only friendly to him in order to receive favors, Gold claims that friendship itself "is tinged with instrumental considerations—'making friends out of self-interest, disbanding when the benefit is exhausted'."<sup>34</sup> While this is a cynical view, it explains why troupe members abandon Liu Feng shortly after he is falsely accused of sexual assault. Not only would it have drawn unwanted attention by Party members and the authority to support Liu, but there was also no sense of reward in return—the favors that Liu did out of virtue were exhausted and meaningless by the time his reputation had been scandalized. In the film, Liu Feng and He Xiaoping might be the only ones to share a true, 'no-strings-attached' friendship: Liu takes care of her when she is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and memory loss unconditionally and without benefit to himself, and He reciprocates this care upon her recovery and does not expect Liu to fall in love with her despite her repressed and long-lived uncommunicated feelings for him.<sup>35</sup> In essence, while these two protagonists lack the comradery that traditional heroes exhibit and receive support from, they find comradery within each other. Their roles as heroic characters are derived from each of them seeing the other as the protagonist in their own lives, thus making them antiheroes. While Liu Feng and He Xiaoping are not conventionally 'heroic' in the eyes of others, they are heroes to each other, and that sense of heroism is dependent on the existence and support of the other.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 666.

<sup>35</sup> Feng, Fānghuá 芳华 *Youth*.

With the evidence that both protagonists are antiheroes, why is it unacceptable to conclude that anti-heroism is the dominant perspective on heroism pertaining to the Cultural Revolution and Maoist era? I argue that the value and pursuit of heroism is fruitless if it results in greater suffering than success.

The following is a close analysis of the narration of the scene in which He Xiaoping reads the final letter her father writes to her before he dies while still imprisoned at a re-education camp. He Xiaoping's father never explicitly appears in the film but it is his voice that is used to narrate the letter scene when she reads. This is the first time in the film that the narration is not done by Xiao Suizi. Although this scene is brief, it sets the stage for the contrast that the director intends to highlight. *Youth*, while displaying romanticized images of youthful, beautiful arts troupe performers, is careful in how it selectively hides the true cruelty and suffering of the Cultural Revolution from view.

This letter is vital to the plot for several reasons, for the fact that scene serves many firsts in the story. It is the first time the film hints at the underlying turmoil happening outside of the comforts of their performing arts troupe, but without directly revealing imagery of suffering. Second, it is the first time the movie gives a more intimate lens into the story of He Xiaoping and allows viewers to garner sympathy for her hardship. Third, the letter reveals why many young people may have joined the People's Liberation Army—He's father expresses relief that his daughter would be safe from suspicion or capture by Party authorities by being in the military troupe. Lastly, this scene sets the stage for the very first meaningful encounter between Liu Feng and He Xiaoping, who become the film's main protagonists following this point. Although Liu Feng is the character who delivers the tragic news to He, he also takes responsibility for her well-being. Liu Feng becomes the singular person He relies on throughout the story, and Liu comes

to rely upon He as well. It is ultimately from this scene in the beginning of the film onwards that they fully develop into antiheroes.

The scene begins with Liu Feng and He Xiaoping sitting in an area of the rundown woodshop where Liu Feng typically does his woodworking -- it can be assumed that Liu summoned her to the workshop space for privacy. Clad in uniform, He sits with the letter gripped tightly in both hands and reads quietly and solemnly as a concerned Liu sits in front of her watching. The narration, done in her voice, begins as the camera focuses on He Xiaoping breathing heavily and forcing back tears. The scene cuts to her walking outside in the pouring rain after she reads the line “But I couldn’t see you,”<sup>36</sup> from her father’s letter, and back again to Liu Feng entering the performance practice room with the knit sweater that He Xiaoping’s father had made for her. He then slips it into the hands of He who is sitting drenched on the edge of the stage. Liu slowly removes his coat and hangs it by the ballet bar, sitting down in front of He Xiaoping once again. The narration of the letter ends with “Find someone to care for you in my place,” with the camera focusing on Liu staring sympathetically at He, “to make your family whole,” camera panning back to He who wipes her tears<sup>37</sup>. The next scene cuts to them still sitting, but this time back at the original setting of Liu Feng’s woodworking workshop, with Liu sitting in front of He, consoling her.<sup>38</sup>

The narration style of the dialogue in this scene is powerful. While He Xiaoping sits in view of the camera while she silently reads the letter, it is her father’s voice that is used to read aloud the written words of her father. While the source of sound is the protagonist’s father who is physically absent from this scene, the sound is almost non-diegetic because He Xiaoping’s lips

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<sup>36</sup> Feng, Fānghuá 芳华 *Youth*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

are not moving, so her voice is not present in the scene itself. Rather, her father's reading of it overlays as narration of the scene.

The following is an English translated transcription of the narration.

The letter begins: "Xiaoping, all these years, I've received all of the letters you wrote to me."<sup>39</sup> The only time the film shows He Xiaoping writing to her father is after main narrator Suizi receives the good news that her own father was released from the re-education farm after ten years. The film shows He Xiaoping filled with hope as she writes under her blanket. Viewers learn much about her character from this narration of the letter she writes: it indicates who she was mailing the photo to earlier and explains that she typically writes her father when she feels lonely -- which is frequent because she feels neglected and shunned by her mother and stepfather back home.

He Xiaoping's father then goes on to explain his lack of correspondence while he was in capture. "I didn't reply, for fear I'd drag you and your mother down. I was afraid of affecting your progress in the army. Your father may not hold up until the new policies are in effect, so while I still have the energy, I've decided to write to you, as a way of saying goodbye."<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, Liu Feng had realistic concerns of He's father's reputation 'dragging her down': in the beginning of the film, he tells He that he had secretly registered her under her stepfather's name as a revolutionary cadre to protect her identity.

In the next portion of the letter, He's father expresses regret for his absence in her life. By this point viewers can infer that the reason He Xiaoping keeps to herself for much of her time with the troupe is because she is trying to keep her relationship with her father a secret while also maintaining correspondence. "What saddens me the most is not having the chance to watch you

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

grow up. When you were bullied, I couldn't protect you. I couldn't fulfill a father's duty. And I missed you so very much, but I couldn't see you. My image of you is stuck at age six. If you hadn't joined the army and sent me that photo, I don't think I'd have recognized my own daughter on the street."<sup>41</sup> In an earlier scene when He is writing to her father, viewers learn that the last time He Xiaoping saw her father was when she was six years old. (It is unclear what the ages of He and the other troupe members are, but because the film endorses a coming-of-age genre, most of the characters by this point in the film are likely to be approaching or in their twenties.) She expresses concern that her father would not be able to recognize her upon release from imprisonment and thus mails him her photo in haste.

The next line reminds viewers that outside of the romanticized lens of the film, historically speaking, beyond the performing arts troupe were thousands of innocent citizens captured and sent away to be imprisoned at re-education farms. He's father laments, "what crimes must I have committed in my past life to suffer such punishment in this one?"<sup>42</sup> While He Xiaoping was briefly comforted in earlier scenes by the fact that many of the fathers of her peers had been released, this deathbed letter reveals her own father as not one of the lucky ones. Her father, however, dies under the false impression that his daughter is lucky, writing, "the one comfort I have is that you're in the army. No one bullies the People's Liberation Army."<sup>43</sup>

Contrary to what He Xiaoping's father found comfort in upon hearing that his daughter had been accepted into the performing arts troupe, He is frequently shunned and scapegoated by her peers despite being scouted for talent and dance experience just like the rest of the dancers of the troupe and serving as a member of the People's Liberation Army.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

While He Xiaoping reads the letter distraught with grief, Liu Feng hands her a small wool sweater. This is a gift from her father. “Last year, I had a guard buy two pounds of yarn from the nearby Kazakh commune, and taught myself to knit you a sweater. I don't knit well, but knitting that sweater kept me going. I look at your photo every day, and I have the strength to carry on. But now my energy is spent, and I long for a swift death.”<sup>44</sup> He Xiaoping's father meets a similar fate as the many unfortunate ones who are captured -- after years (sometimes decades), most prisoners held at these camps eventually die from malnourishment, hunger, and exhaustion.

“In the next life, if you don't despise me, we can remain father and daughter. Find someone to care for you in my place, to make your family whole.”<sup>45</sup> Here, the director artistically has the camera cut to a close-up of Liu Feng watching He Xiaoping while she narrates the letter. Then the camera swiftly sweeps back to He, who wipes her tears quickly and then stares straight at Liu.

The delivery of her father's letter marks the beginning of the delivery of Liu Feng into He Xiaoping's life as her sole caretaker in He Xiaoping's life. The end of this scene also marks the beginning of immense hardship that each of these characters will face in their parallel storylines.

## **CHASING TRUE HEROISM**

What is the motivation behind Liu Feng and He Xiaoping's pursuit of virtue and heroism when they repeatedly encounter great amounts of loss and suffering? Is it specifically their endurance of hardship that rewards them with the status of hero, or in the context of this thesis, the status of antihero?

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

To answer these questions, it is important to first understand the thoughts and motivations of those who were active supporters of the Party. Much of the driving force behind the Chinese Communist Party's agenda was backed by the encouragement of ordinary civilians to lust after heroism and revolution. According to scholar Wai-Chung Ho, "Mao delineated four targets for the Communist Revolution: to replace party members with leaders who were faithful to his teaching; to re-energize the Chinese Communist Party; to provide China's youth with revolutionary spirit and experience; to force all institutions and culture to become less elitist. Consequently, all schools were closed and their students were encouraged to take part in the revolution."<sup>46</sup>

*Youth* invites viewers into the highly exclusive setting of a performing arts troupe whose sole mission was to entertain the Red Army. The arts, particularly dance and music, became a means of not only solidifying the feelings of collectivism and comradeship, but also a form of marketing the Party. As scholar Wai-Chung Ho says, "music and the other arts were required, according to Marxist–Leninist–Maoist ideology, to serve the interests of the workers, peasants and soldiers and to convey the messages of China's Communist government."<sup>47</sup> The troupe receives praise by the government for their talents in arts education, but this praise becomes more meaningless as the Party collapses and Mao scrambles to maintain power. Their anthems, synchronized marches, and dance performances are only a distraction from the true suffering of China around them. While those in the People's Liberation Army live comfortably and are proud of their "dedication to the nation," the China that surrounds figures such as Liu Feng and He Xiaoping may very well include their parents, who are not protected from the grievances of

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<sup>46</sup> Wai-Chung Ho and Wing-Wah Law, "Values, Music and Education in China." *Music education research*. 6, no. 2 (July 2004): 152.

<sup>47</sup> Ho, "Values, Music and Education in China," 152.

giving up private property land ownership, starvation, and capture by the government, and is sent to fight a war they do not necessarily agree with. When the troupe disbands, there is a feeling of emptiness—the sense of purpose each of them desired was immediately taken out from under them, forcing them into the real world.

This loss of purpose can be felt directly from the *mise-en-scene* work that Feng Xiaogang uses to slowly reveal the pain of each character. Liu Feng is sent to the frontlines and presumably forgotten about by the rest of the troupe, but he quickly regains stamina as he is recognized for being a war hero in the Sino-Vietnamese conflict. The film does not show this progression, but rather skips straight to a scene of a warzone where his fellow soldiers call out to him for orders. At last, Liu Feng seems to experience comradery, but it is short-lived beyond the unity of their identical army uniforms and the support of each other on the battlefield. The heroism he longed for is ultimately disappointing once achieved. The director cuts to a scene in which the Chinese are losing the conflict, and Liu Feng lays the ground helpless and fatigued. In the scene, he laments the worthlessness of being a war hero if nobody is alive to recognize it. Although not explicitly shown in the film, at the end of the film Liu Feng is shown with a fake arm under his sleeve, and viewers can assume that he lost it during the Sino-Vietnamese conflict. Disabled by war, his soldier friends have mostly died, and after the war came to a close, so did the existence of his name as a hero. As a disabled war veteran in post-Mao era China, Liu struggles to make ends meet and is disrespected in society for lacking an arm.

Similarly, when He Xiaoping leaves the troupe to serve as a nurse for the same war, she struggles immensely with the crippling trauma she is exposed to. In the second half of the film, the director places her in the midst of the bloodiness of war. The saturation of the cinematography changes sharply here from the previous warm tinted yellow that the beginning

of the film featured in all the scenes that the troupe members were either performing or idling around, to a highly exposed cold and sharpened filter. The sharp color change from warmer, hazier tones to colder, highly exposed shots of the characters shifts the mood of the plot. He Xiaoping is shown carrying piles of burning corpses and trying to save dying soldiers who no longer have a home to look forward to, and this exposure to war horrors eventually traumatizes her. Although she becomes recognized as a war hero for her great service as a nurse, the viewers cannot help but wonder if it is worth the amnesia and post-traumatic stress disorder she is affected by in the latter half of the film. Virtue, the initial motivation of heroism, and later the antiheroism that they achieve, end up becoming the greatest sources of their pain.

The parallelism of the main character's stories in *Youth* is deliberate. Although the main characters are separated for about half of the film, the events affecting the characters are nearly identical. Both are members of the People's Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), later followed by Liu Feng serving as a frontrunner soldier and He Xiaoping as a military nurse during the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979), and then reuniting at last during Reform-era China (post-1978). Throughout the plot, both characters are victims of scapegoating and become outcasts, with the perpetrators often being their own peers, bringing up the question of whether the film even displays authentic comradeship. The movie concludes on an unfulfilling, bittersweet note: an older, widowed, disabled veteran Liu Feng wraps his arm around a worn-down, lonely, but optimistic He Xiaoping.

The characters' progression from Party-obeying heroes to depiction as antiheroes begs the question of why they chased heroism in the first place. The rampant suffering that they both faced was not coincidental, and if anything, only exacerbated their desire to be heroes. While their commitment to virtue through hardship was 'heroic' in the sense that they were promoting

collective goodness, by the middle of the plot neither Liu Feng and He Xiaoping were in positions where they could even consider self-interest and individual goodness. Heroism carries an air of self-interest to it – the notion that one has to intend to be heroic, and have supporters/comrades, and be recognized for achievements. But from beginning to the end it is shown that both characters' drive towards heroism was out of survival. Liu Feng's role from the start was to serve as a good example, so there were strong expectations for him to be similar to Communist icon Lei Feng. Since Lei Feng was tied so closely to his reputation, Liu Feng's commitment to the troupe was partly out of self-preservation. After this illusion is dismantled and his troupe shuns him, his newfound motivation to be a war hero stems deeply from his struggle to rebuild his identity and his innate primal desire to survive on the frontlines of battle. For He Xiaoping, her story is based much in self-preservation and survival too: she joins the troupe partially out of her captured father's desire to protect her from harm. After he dies, she becomes responsible for her own safety, and survival becomes the way she honors her father's death wishes. So while it may seem that both antiheroes were obsessed with heroism, the truth is that both simply wanted survival, and recognition for their troupe and war efforts was simply a contributory factor. That is why true heroism could not have existed – for these two characters to have exhibited both Party-supported 'Lei Feng' heroism and later filmmaker-discourse 'anti-heroism' and to have been only rewarded suffering for their efforts, it is obvious that there was no solidity and guarantee of comradeship, recognition, or even life with any sort of heroism. Lei Feng was iconized for his dedication to the Party, but most of his legacy carries on without much of his control. After his unfortunate passing during a truck accident, he became known as a Communist martyr and used for propagandic measures, but his story was ultimately out of his

own hands since he did not survive. There was only truth in survival, and to make it through and last was the real goal of Liu Feng and He Xiaoping.

## CONCLUSION AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

Similar to the fates of other controversial Cultural Revolution films such as *The Blue Kite* and *To Live*, *Youth*'s release was initially delayed and then later banned by the government shortly afterwards due to political concerns of anti-Party sentiment surrounding the time of the national holiday. Film Critic Allison Chen described the government as “too sensitive for a Chinese Independence Day release,”<sup>48</sup> since the film intentionally fails to portray Lei Feng ideals and moral actions in a good light and rather came across as mocking Lei Feng by introducing a protagonist with a similar name but who becomes a nobody in society who is disabled despite his efforts. The ban of the movie was not before it had already become a box office success in theaters and then later widely circulated through much of the Internet through illegal streaming services. Similar to *The Blue Kite* and *To Live*, *Youth* shortly became internationally renowned.<sup>49</sup> Although it was already highly anticipated due to Feng's acclaimed reputation, the censorship only added to its original fame and notoriety, and now it is easy to find full subtitled versions of the film outside of China. Some critics even suggest that it was censorship by the Party that sparked global attention to the film, far beyond mainland China<sup>50</sup>.

A film that goes against the current interests of the national government but is celebrated by both young and old Chinese is worth watching and has credibility as accurately representative

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<sup>48</sup> Chen, “Film Review: Feng Xiaogang's *Youth*.”

<sup>49</sup> Richard Yu, “Is Feng Xiaogang's ‘*Youth*’ Really That Controversial?” *Cinema Escapist* (February 17, 2019). Accessed October 6, 2019. <https://www.cinemaescapist.com/2017/12/feng-xiaogang-youth-movie-controversial/>.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

of its time. *Youth* does not tell any special story, and Liu Feng and He Xiaoping are heroic but also ordinary, pitiful, and relatable to viewers. The film speaks to a generation that mourns the loss of their youth and the pressure on ordinary young people to grow up too fast; their hastening of maturity matching the rapid-fire changes China underwent. *Youth*, with its romanticized visuals and tragic character development does not praise the Mao era. It is a critical piece that points fingers at the devastation wreaked upon the Mao generation through physical disability, PTSD, and even the lack of modern society's care toward its veterans. Moreover, *Youth* was meant to reach those who were young during the Cultural Revolution, and how the turmoil stripped their youthful naivety from them<sup>51</sup>. As film critic Allison Chen concludes, "*Youth* is about the youth lost within [the Mao era]."<sup>52</sup> What was once a picturesque dream—a strong collective Red Army, beaming with pride as everyone sang to nationalistic tunes—was only a cheap cloak concealing the separation of loved ones, burning piles of corpses, and the unbearable hunger for not just the bare necessities but acknowledgement of suffering. *Youth* does an incredible job of dismantling this disguise.

The clash of 'Lei Feng heroism' versus 'Liu Feng heroism,' (also coined in this thesis as Communist Party heroism versus anti-heroism in contemporary Chinese cinema), alongside my argument that true heroism failed to exist, greatly extends beyond the Maoist era. Today, with the growth of technology and wider access to Internet microblogging platforms across the globe, both younger and older generations have become increasingly vocal in expressing their views against Communist Party propaganda. The government has noticed, and its tightening grip on the nation by attempting to delete and silence social commentary that is "harmful to national

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<sup>51</sup> Geling Yan, interviewed by Yang Rui, "Dialogue: Feng Xiaogang's movie 'Youth' ignites debate about heroism, patriotism," Accessed October 6, 2019. *YouTube* video, 29:07, posted by "CGTN," September 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTVsWo0mYvc>

<sup>52</sup> Chen, "Film Review: Feng Xiaogang's *Youth*."

interests”<sup>53</sup> has only been met with greater efforts by mainland citizens to circumvent these measures. Lei Feng, the honorable Communist icon that Feng Xiaogang designates as the foil of Liu Feng’s character, has become a new topic of debate amidst anti-Party sentiments. Scholars and non-scholars alike have taken it upon themselves to peruse through his popularized and greatly propagandized diary entries and biographies, claiming that while there may have been a real Lei Feng, his actions were not reasonable for a person of his time. Weibo bloggers say “Lei Feng is a good guy but he doesn’t have critical thinking skills, doesn’t reflect on things and only follows marching orders.”<sup>54</sup> Many Chinese people nowadays openly disapprove of the ‘Lei Feng mentality’ because it reinforces the brainwashing notion that the people should be ‘virtuous’ by upholding Party ideals when in reality it is a political tool of maintaining control and asserting authority over individualism.

Anti-heroism remains controversial in China because this form of heroism is based on grounds of self-preservation and defending oneself against pervasive actions of the Party. However, it is the controversy of these heroic archetypes that spark interest in younger generations in a time where government censorship of public criticism is prevalent. While Liu Feng is deceptively similar to Communist Party icon Lei Feng in the beginning of the film, that perception of him is quickly dismantled. As evidenced by both characters’ storylines, one does not have to be strong, exceptionally smart, well-liked, or even talented to become a hero. However, as also evidenced by their storylines, becoming a hero does not have to result in happy endings either—it could well result in isolation, depression, lifelong trauma, or even death. *Youth*’s protagonists became heroes of the storyline simply through their own pursuit of virtue, but at the cost of their own suffering. However, it was their sole commitment and dedication to

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<sup>53</sup> Jacobs, "Chinese Heroism Effort Is Met With Cynicism," 4.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

preserving their morals and achieving heroism that kept them going when they had nothing else. To refer back to the proverb translated by author Brian Brown, “Putting aside virtuous deeds, instead of practicing them, may be called ‘robbing oneself’<sup>55</sup>,” in the case of Liu Feng and He Xiaoping, putting aside their virtue may have had horrendous consequences and could have potentially robbed themselves of their own lives. The importance of the ending of the film is that above all else, they had survived. Perhaps the cost of suffering does not exceed the rewards of self-preservation through heroism, simply because the reward of survival is crucial.

Although the year of the film’s release, 2017, marked over 50 years since the Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the ideas that have remained from this portion of history continue to be sensitive topics today. The censorship of media and the arts in China today signals the suppression of stories and heroes that the Chinese government chooses to not acknowledge. But as with Liu Feng and He Xiaoping, although they are not acknowledged by their peers, they are acknowledged by director Feng Xiaogang and author Yan Geling as critical protagonists that embody traits that are not only antiheroic but accessible. The true message of *Youth* is that there is nothing wrong with seeking heroism, even if there is no one to support you and no one to live for. This is important for the masses of young Chinese who have seen or will see this film. Within a context of a new generation of young Chinese, who will grow up and continue to struggle with a government that silences their voices through various outlets, it is vital to evaluate if the illusion of true heroism is worth the damage we take upon ourselves. More importantly, it is vital to understand that survival is part of the heroic story we ourselves are the protagonists of.

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<sup>55</sup> Davis, 61.

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