

# China's New Lei Feng

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## New role model reveals 21st-century anxieties for Chinese Communist Party

It's official: the Chinese Communist Party has a new hero. Following praise from Chinese leaders and an editorial published Wednesday by China's Xinhua news agency, a flurry of articles in official sources have praised recently deceased local bureaucrat Yang Shanzhou, describing his life of selfless dedication to the public as a model for party members.

In the face of recent calls for protests in Chinese cities and strike action in Shanghai, the CCP is responding to widespread perceptions of corruption among local officials which threaten its ruling legitimacy. Accordingly, party members are asked to imitate Yang's life of selfless and honest service to his people, revealing the growing concerns of China's top leaders about corruption among lower-tier officials. As the presumed next leader of China, Xi Jinping, ratifies current president Hu Jintao's call to emulate Yang, it may be a sign that he will continue the campaign to improve party discipline and ethics that Hu has called "The Party's Advanced Nature."

Yang, who died last October, was secretary of the party committee in his home town of Baoshan in remote southwestern Yunnan province until his retirement in 1988, after which he established a public tree farm in the same area. Chinese leaders have praised him as a servant of the people who resisted temptations to profit from his office, living in the same conditions as his district's ordinary residents.

The process of Yang's canonization began last May, when he received official recognition after donating his tree farm to the government. Following his death, top leaders including Hu and Xi have lined up to eulogize him, each telling party members to "study Yang's life as a guide to resisting the temptations of power in China's booming economy. Local officials are notorious for corruption and profiteering, giving rise to frequent embezzlement and bribery scandals.

In an April 13 speech reported by Xinhua, Xi said that party members would face "more challenges and tests" as China grows richer, and called on officials to learn from Yang's "selflessness, hard work, and clean work style." Xinhua wrote that he "gave instructions to ask the Party officials to look up to Yang as a model."

Local governments are taking heed. Wednesday's editorial was followed by a raft of stories about local party members forming groups to study Yang's life, with headlines like "80,000 Shuangfeng County Party Staff Members Study Yang Shanzhou's Advanced Deeds."

The propaganda wave closely resembles official campaigns promoting Lei, whose face still appears in posters on buses in Beijing promoting hard work and economy. Lei, a private in the People's Liberation Army when he died at age 22 in 1962, became a role model for Chinese youth in 1963 when Mao started a campaign to "learn from Comrade Lei Feng."

Lei's diary, widely viewed by Western historians as a forgery, was required reading for generations of Chinese students. They read of Lei's tireless dedication to helping others in the name of socialism, and his modesty. The diary describes him spending his evenings darning his comrade's socks and gathering manure to distribute as fertilizer. He died, they say, as he lived, when a truck struck a telephone while backing up, knocking it over and killing him.

Yang has much in common with Lei &ndash; both spent most of their lives toiling in obscurity and became posthumous models of superhuman altruism. But their differences demonstrate changes in the party's concerns. Unlike Lei, Yang was a government official, and the message of the propaganda campaign seems to aim at getting party members to do their jobs honestly rather than getting ordinary people to sacrifice for production &ndash; indeed, ordinary citizens are now being encouraged to seek self-fulfillment instead of success.

This throwback to 1960s methods follows a nationwide focus throughout the Hu Jintao era on improving the quality of lower and middle level cadres through training programs in communist ideology. It also comes as the head of the Chongqing municipality Bo Xilai has led a [high-profile campaign focusing on 'Red culture' , which also involves the use of Maoist methods to improve the governing abilities of cadres.

Wednesday's editorial, carried in official outlets around China, stressed Yang's honesty, quoting him in its headline with an implicit criticism of self-serving local leaders: "As a government official, my authority can be only exercised for public affairs."

Stories have focused on Yang's modest life, describing the run-down house he shared with his wife after retirement, "one of the worst in the village." Yang had refused a modern apartment in the Yunnan provincial capital of Kunming as a reward for his services.

Yang's career &ndash; and his temptations &ndash; are in many ways a throwback to another era. Working in a small Yunnan city in 80s, he retired before China's economic rise reached the heights of later decades, and the wealth that has provided many contemporary officials with opportunities for corruption, reached the remote inland area. His achievements include record grain harvests, and the great temptation of his story is a government-assigned apartment, a far cry from the mansions a new generation of post-reform officials are buying on the market.