



**Politics of Love: Love as a Religious and Political Discourse
in Modern China through the Lens of Political Leaders**

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Abstract:	As part of a larger project, this paper serves as an overview to examine how “ai” (love) as an affective concept made its way into the Chinese vocabulary, how it gained popularity at specific junctures in modern Chinese history, and the ways in which it has been adapted as a marker of modernity and a political discourse. My paper makes a fresh contribution in three aspects. First, I take a longer historical perspective, from the 1910s to the 2010s, and dedicate, secondly, a large part of my study to the decisive impact from revolutionary radicalism on the formation of the discourse of state propaganda and everyday politics, rather than manifestations in literature and sources from Christianity. Third, I study some of the most controversial political figures in modern China, including Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), Mao Zedong (1893-1976), and Xi Jinping (1953-), rather than intellectuals and writers only.

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Politics of Love: Love as a Religious and Political Discourse in Modern China
through the Lens of Political Leaders¹

“Love is the heart’s native language,” writes Nathaniel Hawthorne, the famous American novelist of Dark Romanticism.¹ However, as Haiyan Lee, a scholar of comparative literature points out, love is always spoken in borrowed tongues (Lee 2010, 298). Lee suggests love is an articulatory category that defies naturalistic, universalistic, essentialist reduction, as well as a practice of cultural authenticity and political legitimacy, and the means by which institutions are created and renewed. Studies on love in this regard have been abundant, but as Jan Plamper admits in *The History of Emotions* (2015), the focus has most commonly been on European and American societies. In the case of China, although literary scholars have noted the significance of the shaping of love as an affective concept for the project of Chinese modernity, they mainly focus on the conceptions and interpretations of love in literature, and with a timeframe from late imperial (1368-1911) to Maoist China (1949-1978) (see Lee 2010, Pan 2016). The few studies about love in the post-Mao era usually attribute the origin of such affect to Christianity, which necessarily restricts the scope of inquiry and neglects alternative sources for the meaning of love, a powerful mechanism of politics in shaping Chinese modernity (Wielander 2011).

My article makes a fresh contribution in three aspects. First, I focus on the very term *ai* 愛, rather than other expressions of love in general, for it is this term that has been more commonly adopted as a political discourse including *aiguo* (愛國

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3 patriotism). Second, I take a longer historical perspective – from 1910 to the present –
4 with attention to the contemporary era, especially post-Mao China and the Xi Jinping
5 administration for their significance in the shaping of post-socialist concept of “love”.
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8 Third, rather than looking at love’s manifestations in literature and in Christianity, I
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10 explore the decisive impact of revolutionary radicalism and popular religions on the
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12 formation of state propaganda and everyday political discourse. Fourth, I study some
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14 of the most controversial political figures of modern times, including Sun Yat-sen
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16 (1866-1925), Mao Zedong (1893-1976), and Xi Jinping (1953-), rather than only
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18 intellectuals and writers.
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24 As part of a larger project, this paper serves primarily as an overview of the
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26 history in which love has been adopted as a political language in modern China.
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28 Therefore I must ask for forgiveness for not being able to go into depth and detail in
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30 this current paper. Due to the length of this paper, I will mainly introduce key ideas
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32 that I have in mind at three major historical stages, during the administrations of Sun,
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34 Mao, and Xi.
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38 In the first half of the paper, I identify two types of love, namely *aiqing* 愛情
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40 (free, romantic love) and *aiguo* 愛國 (patriotic love) in relation to China’s transition
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42 into a modern nation-state. I then present a detailed analysis of how the key political
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44 leaders of modern China, namely Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong, as well as Li Dazhao
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46 (1888-1927) and Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), the founders of the Chinese communist
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48 party (CCP) who introduced communism into China, adapted and appropriated the
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50 language of love in terms of *bo'ai* 博愛 and *re'ai* 熱愛 for their political campaigns
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52 and ideologies. I wend with some notes on the contemporary appropriation of love as
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57 a political language in Xi’s China today.
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4 **From the Moral Condition of Benevolence (*ren'ai* 仁爱), to Romantic Love**
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7 **(*aiqing* 爱情), and Patriotism (*aiguo* 爱国)**
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13 When interpreting the etymology of *ai*, Shuowen jiezi 说文解字 (*Explaining Graphs*
14
15 *and Analyzing Characters*, compiled around 25-220 CE and finished in 100 CE)
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17 considers *ai* a synonym of *hui* 惠, that is, generosity, clemency or kindness.
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21 This meaning could be found in *The Analects of Confucius*, which includes
22
23 nine incidents that mention the very term of *ai*. Most evidently, in Chapter Yan Yuan,
24
25 Fan Chi asked about benevolence. The Master said, “It is to love all men.” A similar
26
27 meaning could be found in Chapter Yang Huo, “Formerly, Master, I heard you say,
28
29 ‘When the man of high station is well instructed, he loves men.’” Also in Chapter Xue
30
31 Er, in which the Master said, “To rule a country of a thousand chariots, there must be
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33 reverent attention to business, and sincerity; economy in expenditure, and love for
34
35 men; and the employment of the people at the proper seasons” and “A youth, when at
36
37 home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and
38
39 truthful. He should overflow in love to all, and cultivate the friendship of the good.
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41 When he has time and opportunity, after the performance of these things, he should
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43 employ them in polite studies.”
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49 *Ai* in *The Analects* could also be understood as a morally-complied Confucian
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51 structure of behaviour. For instance, in Chapter Yang Huo, “Zai Wo asked about the
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53 three years' mourning for parents, saying that one year was long enough... And the
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55 three years' mourning is universally observed throughout the empire. Did Yu enjoy
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57 the three years' love of his parents?”
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3 *Ai* further denotes a sense of preference. For instance, in Chapter Ba Yi, Zi
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5 Gong wished to do away with the offering of a sheep connected with the inauguration
6
7 of the first day of each month. The Master said, “Ci, you love the sheep; I love the
8
9 ceremony.”
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12 However, in those renditions, *ai* was not used to express interpersonal
13
14 relations, as in romantic love, which would yield subjectivity, as in patriotism (*aiguo*),
15
16 as will be discussed in later sections.
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19 Like many other modern words that emerged after the Opium War in 1840 and
20
21 the Meiji Restoration in Japan in 1868, “love” as an expression of affection and
22
23 sentiment was first introduced into China via Japan as both nations encountered
24
25 Western ideas and sought, subsequently, to translate them, primarily from Christian
26
27 philosophies and texts. In both nations, nineteenth-century missionaries adopted the
28
29 character 愛 to render the word *love* in scriptural occurrences such as “for God so
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31 loved the world”, and in doing so, added a concept of divinity and Christian
32
33 emotional engagement to Confucian morality (Doi 2009, 5). In the words of Sidney
34
35 Gulick (1860-1945), an American missionary, love is “that which to Western ears is
36
37 the sweetest word in the English language, the foundation of happiness in the home,
38
39 the only true bond between husband and wife, parents and children” (Suzuki 2009, 9),
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41 while love would have sounded like a Confucian instruction at the time.
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47 Love, however, was soon to become valued within a broader, secular context.
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49 Lin Shu 林紓 (1852-1924), a famous literary figure of late Qing and early Republican
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51 China, was the first person to coin this term *aiqing* as he brought together two
52
53 characters *ai* and *qing* that previously denoted different meanings: the former, moral
54
55 condition, while the latter, private sentiments. Public display of emotion was for Lin
56
57 “a marker of aesthetic sensibility and moral superiority”, which must be enacted as a
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3 collective aesthetic experience (Lee, 2010, 63). As a result, he was considered to have
4 exceeded “the ritualistic expectations in the Confucian framework of social religions”,
5
6 and his fellow townsmen derided him as a “wild scholar” (ibid). Although his
7
8 translation of *Joan Haste* (1897), in which the term *aiqing* first appeared, is a rather
9
10 lesser known work, Lin Shu’s version of *La dame aux camellias* (1899), along with
11
12 Wu Yanren’s novel *Henhai* 恨海 (*Sea of Regrets*, 1906), were considered to be the
13
14 founding texts of the concept of romantic love by the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly
15
16 School, an indigenous literary movement in the 1910s and 1920s that
17
18 transformed the romantic literary styles of the late Qing.
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24 The literary movement of *aiqing* (romantic love) signifies a complex
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26 movement encompassing not only anti-Confucianism or nostalgia for an overthrown
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28 dynasty, but also the hastening of the birth of a new mode of being which enacts the
29
30 sense of citizenship without losing authenticity of Chinese culture. This emergence of
31
32 modernity in terms of linguistic appropriations was not unique in China, and I make
33
34 no claims for cultural exceptionalism. If we look at the example of Japan in the same
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36 period of time, the comparative angle helps to illuminate the difficulty of translating
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38 love, and the significance of doing so, politically and culturally.
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43 Following the failure of the 1911, or Xinhai, Revolution 辛亥革命, which
44
45 attempted to overthrow China’s last imperial dynasty and establish a republican
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47 government, and the discontent with the terms of the Treaty of Versailles (1919-1920)
48
49 that concluded the First World War (1914-1918), the May Fourth Movement in 1919
50
51 (also known as the New Culture Movement) strove to adopt Western notions of
52
53 equality and democracy and to abandon Confucian hierarchy and obedience. One of
54
55 the major goals and contributions of May Fourth intellectuals was the renewal of
56
57 language and writing to counteract conventional thinking and feeling (Mitter 2004,
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3 12). Love and liberty were prominent ideas during the May Fourth Movement—as
4
5 Che Guevara puts it, “the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love”
6
7 (Guevara 1965).
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10 This romantic love was not only found between individuals, but also extended
11
12 to the larger collective. This leads us to the relationship between *aiqing* 爱情 and
13
14 *aiguo* 爱国, as evident in another popular literary genre of the time, “heroic sons and
15
16 daughters” (*ernü yingxiong* 儿女英雄). This genre “finds the heroic in exercising of
17
18 immanent virtues” (ibid, 75) by serving the nation as a citizen, and in doing so merges
19
20 love within the encompassing narrative of nationalism. Often in stories belonging to
21
22 this genre, the imaginary community of the nation becomes the unquestioned
23
24 terminus of all passionate pursuits, as writers shared an emerging feeling that love
25
26 only becomes heroic when it acknowledges the priority of patriotism and family
27
28 duties and engages in a fight with the power of its own passion (Lee 2010, 90).
29
30 Popular literature grappled with the contradictory impulses to eulogize love and to
31
32 subordinate it to something higher, so as to forge a homogenous society coterminous
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34 with the nation, with the nation conceived as an extension of family, gender, and
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36 generational hierarchies, perpetuating a generational pattern of politics, morality, and
37
38 transcendence (ibid, 91-92).
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47 On the one hand, this exposition of love is a radical departure from the
48
49 Confucian morality that emphasised filial piety and hierarchy, as it inspired a
50
51 generation of writers and thinkers with its shocking new perspective (Suzuki, 9).
52
53 However, at the same time, the sentiments of *aiqing* and *aiguo* as expressed in literary
54
55 schools, such as the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly and the Heroic Sons and Daughters,
56
57 could be as gendered and conservative as they were radical. The man tends to be
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3 heroic in those stories, embracing broad ideas of patriotism and inscribing meaning
4 and dispensing judgment, while the woman, often represented as the obstacle to the
5 man's grand trans-personal ideals or the mediator for them, must take her faithful and
6 loyal position created by her male relations and sacrifice herself for their values. In
7 this way, these narratives reproduced the patriarchal gender hierarchy and social order,
8 and showed how a man could transition from being the master of the family to a
9 citizen of the state. Lin Shu's writings and translations were also in the relatively
10 outmoded style of Classical Chinese, rather than the vernacular Chinese that the May
11 Fourth intellectuals advocated. As Lynn Pan contends, Lin was acutely aware that he
12 would fail in moving the feelings of his readers if they could not relate to the story he
13 told, or if they found the characters and conventions overly foreign (Pan 2016, 90).

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Ultimately, an abstract sense of belonging to the newly emerged Chinese nation was taken to be a higher ideal than romantic love, and the discourse of love and heroism in the late Qing and the early Republic helped to foster a new way of expressing emotions, in which patriotic emotions replaced the hierarchical value of kindness in Confucianism as the new moral cultivation.

How two opposing political parties found love in radicalism: *bo'ai* 博爱 (universal love)

This new sense of belonging to a nation-state that was then taking shape came not only from popular literary imaginaries. The rulers of China's modern Republic at the beginning of the regime in 1912 also came up with new mechanisms to create modern citizens who were devoted to loving their nation. Patriotism, love for one's nation, became a virtue of the new republic of China that was expressed through participation

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3 in ceremonies and related rituals, such as bowing to the flag. As historian Henrietta
4 Harrison (2000) remarks, schoolchildren of the Republic were taught that the national
5 flag symbolized the country and the representative of the people, and that citizens
6 should respect and *love* it. State rituals (shouting ‘Long live the Republic’) and
7 national symbols (such as the national emblem, national anthem, national day, and
8 national flag) were invented by the state in order to ‘increase the feelings of respect
9 and love for the national emblem’ (Harrison 2000, 9). Love for one’s nation-state
10 became a virtue.
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What kind of sources did the architects of the Republic draw from in order to construct this new patriotic emotion and modern nation? Scholars such as Daniel Bays, Ryan Dunch, David Palmers and Vincent Goosaert have argued that Christianity played a significant role in such transition.² Indeed, it was not uncommon among patriotic Chinese Christians to consider the decline and decay of China to be a result of idolatry, while national strength, prosperity and the prospering of civilization in the USA was attributed to the Christian religion. Most traditional gentry elites were hostile to Christianity, which they usually equated with political and cultural estrangement. New elites trained in modern schools, as well as merchants and urban professionals often considered the idea of a Christian Republic in more positive terms (Goosaert and Palmer 2010, 69). As Goosaert and Palmer point out, among the 274 members elected to the first national parliament between December 1912 and January 1913, sixty were Christians, a rather large proportion considering the fact that Christians accounted for less than 1 percent of the total population at the time (ibid, 70). Those among the new elites who were not baptized or practicing Christians

² For instance, see Daniel Bays, *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the making of a modern China, 1857-1927* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), Vincent Goosaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).

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3 nonetheless embraced Christianity as a culturally and politically advanced ideology
4 important for building modern institutions and infrastructures (see Goosaert and
5
6 Palmer 2010, Yeh 1990).
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10 Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 (1866-1925), the founding father of the Republic of
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12 China who was educated at a missionary school in China and then studied abroad, is
13 often thought as a good example of those new Christian elites. Many have argued that
14 he was not only familiar with, but also adopted the Greek word *agape*, the language
15 and rhetoric of Christian love, in his political ideas. His most famous propaganda
16 piece, *bo'ai* 博愛, translated as “universal love”, is often cited to support this
17 argument. He frequently wrote “universal love” in his calligraphic works, and many
18 of those calligraphies were made into banners in official memorial halls. Others argue
19 that *bo'ai* embraced a broader idea of human community, which, along with another
20 popular calligraphic writing of his ‘all under heaven’ (*tianxia weigong* 天下为公),
21 were Confucian ideas, which Sun equated with the universal love of Jesus when he
22 addressed Chinese audiences (Treadgold 1973, 88).
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38 While Sun publicly acknowledged that he was indebted to Protestant
39 modernism, it has also been widely observed that Sun tended to emphasise Christian
40 influence when speaking to Western reporters, funders, and missionaries about
41 financing his revolutions (Damon 1991, 161-86). If we look closely at his politics,
42 policies and political philosophy, we can see that they are mostly borrowed from and
43 inspired by radical thinkers, rather than Christian theology. One of those radical
44 thinkers was Henry George (1839-1897), an American political economist who is
45 considered to have even exercised “a more directly powerful formative and educative
46 influence over English radicalism” (Hobson 1897, 68). George’s impact on Sun, in
47 particular through his most famous work *Poverty and Progress* (1879), has been
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3 widely studied (see Trescott, 1994, 363-375, Schiffrin, 1957, 549-564). Here I wish to
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5 emphasize the kind of radicalism distinctively related to land reform and Christian
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7 rhetoric that Sun inherited from George: the former shows Sun's radical socialism,
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9 and the latter his framework for modernity, which also marks Sun's difference
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11 as a leader of the Nationalist Party (KMT) from more explicitly secular
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13 Chinese communists.
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17 At a time when China was undergoing a series of changes, America was
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19 experiencing its own profound social and cultural transformations in terms of a
20
21 growing population and industrialization. Poverty and economic crises were among
22
23 the issues that came along with those developments, which George addressed in
24
25 his landmark work *Poverty and Progress*. In this book, George proposed bold ideas
26
27 such as "the single tax", a type of taxation intended to reduce the price of land and put
28
29 all properties on the same taxation basis irrespective of their location. This idea of the
30
31 single tax is sometimes understood as nationalizing land, an idea that seemed too
32
33 radical to his contemporaries but was gladly appreciated by Sun Yat-sen. Sun even
34
35 told an interviewer that "the teachings of your single-taxer, Henry George, will
36
37 be the basis of our program of reform" (Leng and Palmer 1960, 25, cited in
38
39 Trescot, 1994, 370).
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45 Sun indeed suggested fixing land values and reverting the increase in
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47 value to the community. He also wrote extensively on economic development
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49 paired with social justice, and credited his reflections on these issues directly
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51 to George by stating that "the effect of industrial revolution on society is
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53 exactly similar to that which Henry George described in his book: *Progress*
54
55 *and Poverty*. He said that "the progress of modern civilization is like a sharp
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57 wedge suddenly driven in between the upper and lower classes" (Sun 1921, 36-
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3 7). Acknowledging the cost of industrialization, both George and Sun held a
4 socialist view of the state, critically appraised Western democracy and
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8 contended that without redistribution of wealth, political equality would
9
10 ultimately beget either the despotism of organized tyranny or, worse, the
11
12 despotism of anarchy (Sun 1943, 198, George 1960, 530-31).
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15 It is of interest to our discussion on Sun's concept of love to note that
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17 both his and George's radicalism were often tinged with the rhetoric of
18
19 Christian love. Sun acknowledged the fact that missionaries "put love into
20
21 action" by organizing schools and hospitals (Sun, 1943, 128-9), and referred to
22
23 Jesus as a "religious revolutionist" (ibid, 65-66). Henry George is also
24
25 considered to have foreshadowed the Social Gospel movement, a Protestant
26
27 movement that emphasised applying Christian ethics to social issues. His following
28
29 passage, most specifically, is often credited as the motto of the movement: "it
30
31 is blasphemy that attributes to the inscrutable decrees of Providence the
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33 suffering and brutishness that come of poverty; that turns with folded hands to
34
35 the All-Father and lays on Him the responsibility for the want and crime of our
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37 great cities" (George 1960, 549-55). Although it is hard to enter the inner
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39 landscape of George or Sun to know the degree to which they embraced
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41 Christianity personally, their writings nonetheless, in particular those that were
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43 concerned with people's livelihood, show a strong influence from Christian
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45 rhetoric.
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51 Sun went one step further and appeared to be more socialist than George
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53 in his social policies. In *Progress and Poverty*, George mentioned China and
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55 attributed China's economic ills to bad government and Western imperialism.
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57 Sun, who also sought to found a just and strong government and national
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3 independence, put the principle of nationalism above all others in his *Three*
4 *Principles of the People*. However, Sun advocated government ownership and
5 the operation of a large portion of industry and commerce, while George only
6 favored government ownership of public utilities (Trescott, 1994, 370). Sun
7 envisioned a major role for land-value increments in order to mobilize
8 domestic resources within China to pay the interest and the principal of the
9 resulting debts. He proposed selling substantial amounts of lands reclaimed
10 from swamps so that the government could obtain some of the revenue needed
11 to finance the projects. Further, he proposed that government would acquire
12 more land than the construction itself would require, selling off the excess at a
13 profit to help finance national development (Sun, 1928, Treadgold 1973, 370-
14 1).

15
16 We need to consider the impact of the International Socialist Movement on
17 Sun's ideas in addition to the Christian radicalism of George. During his years of
18 drifting in the US and the UK, Sun witnessed the harsh living conditions of
19 Chinese immigrants, and also learned Marxist socialist rhetoric on class
20 conflict. The influence from Marxism is distinct in his writing: for instance,
21 passages such as: "since the invention of machinery, the world has undergone a
22 revolution in production ... Machinery has usurped the place of human labor,
23 and men who possessed machinery have taken wealth away from those who did
24 not have machinery" bear a direct resemblance to *Capital* (1867-1894) (Sun,
25 1943, 367-8).

26
27 Although the Chinese civil war later left the Nationalists and the Communists
28 as arch-enemies, early *Kuomintang* (Nationalist Party, KMT) revolutionaries
29 including Sun were sympathetic to Russian Communism (Treadgold, 73). Sun Yat-
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3 sen's Revolutionary Alliance (*Tongmenghui* 同盟会) advocated for a republican
4
5 revolution against constitutional monarchy. As Arif Dirlik argues, the anarchism and
6
7 socialism advocated by the Revolutionary Alliance were the two currents in Chinese
8
9 socialist thinking that dominated social revolutionary thought before 1919 (Dirlik and
10
11 Krebs, 1981, 117-151). Revolutionary Alliance socialism was a social-policy
12
13 socialism that sought a revolutionary transformation of society through state policy.
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15 As mentioned earlier, the social divisions Sun had observed in Europe made a strong
16
17 impression on him, and he believed them to be products of the unbridled development
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19 of the capitalist market economy. His objective in advocating socialism was to take
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21 precautions against the emergence of such divisions in China as it industrialized.
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27 By that time the KMT had worked out its own relationship to Communism as
28
29 a doctrine and a system, it was largely cut off from the further evolution of advanced
30
31 Protestant political theology. In other words, although Sun's initial point of contact
32
33 with progressive ideas was Protestantism, he had not developed an evolving political
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35 theology or Christian democratic theory, but rather sought a combination of radical
36
37 ideas for his approach to China's modernization. In other words, although *bo'ai*
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39 appears to be an adaptation from Christian vocabulary, its meaning had more to do
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41 with the socialist sense of universalism and radical affect.
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45 Sun was not alone in advocating the rhetoric of love for the project of
46
47 nationalism and China's modernity. In the words of Li Dazhao 李大钊 (1888-1927),
48
49 one of the founders of Chinese communism, the idea of communism was also *bo'ai*,
50
51 interpreted as love among brothers and compatriots. The ideology of revolution was
52
53 understood and introduced as anarcho-communism, freedom, equality and universal
54
55 love. Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1897-1942), co-founder and General Secretary of the
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57 Chinese Communist Party (CCP), also proclaimed that the task facing China's
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3 intellectuals was to create a society that was sincere, progressive, activist, free,
4
5 egalitarian and full of universal love (See Smith, 2000, 9).
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8 Such expressions and ideas were common among the radical youngsters who
9
10 were seeking ways to oppose not only Confucian traditions, but also the Nationalist
11
12 government led by Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), Sun's successor who rejected Sun's
13
14 democratic socialism and was regarded as a corrupted, authoritarian and repressive
15
16 leader. Those radical youngsters included the author Ding Ling 丁玲 (1094-1986), a
17
18 female writer who came to fame during the Republican era. In her novel *Miss*
19
20 *Sophie's Diary* (1928), Sophie, the protagonist, doubts "what the world calls love...
21
22 and the love she's received". Ding's quest for love was answered in the Communist
23
24 revolutions and was later radicalized by the execution of her lover by the Nationalist
25
26 government in 1931. She moved on to writing more fiction and texts in favor of the
27
28 CCP's ideals (ibid). For revolutionaries like Ding Ling, those of old who advocated
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30 revolution spoke only of its political dimensions, but not of society, or of freedom of
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32 livelihood and social and economic equality. Passionate rebellious young women like
33
34 her found the left-wing discourse of sentiment not merely a representation or
35
36 expression of inner emotions, but a powerful practice that would allow her to
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38 participate in redefining the social order and producing forms of self and sociality.
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45 Among the early communist revolutionaries who later parted ways with Sun,
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47 the love for China as a nation took a diverged form as the CCP's secular radicalism
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49 eventually led to a strong anti-Christian and anti-foreign influence agenda. As Sun
50
51 discovered the merits of the Soviet system, he sought kinship between Communism
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53 and Christianity. When he suggested that the West needed radical social and political
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55 change into the 1930s and later, he was referring to the emergence of communism in
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57 Christian democratic societies. Although we have discussed that Sun's adoption of
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3 Christianity was largely for pragmatic reasons such as fundraising and social reform,
4 his Christian or Western appearance was enough for later CCP members to see him as
5 the leader of an opposing camp. Donald Treadgold, a scholar of Russian history, is
6 correct in assuming that Sun never convinced Chinese intellectuals to trust
7 wholeheartedly his world-view or particular doctrines, as history later proves that
8 other revolutionaries eventually chose to affiliate with the CCP and more
9 “aggressively secular teachings of the West” or “a syncretic combination of them with
10 Chinese traditional doctrines without substantial debt to Christianity”, and left the
11 KMT (Treadgold 1973, 98).
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24 We can see that *bo'ai*, an intuitively Christian concept that nonetheless
25 has its roots in Soviet radicalism, had not only informed the founder of the
26 Republican China and KMT leader Sun Yat-sen's *Three Principles of the*
27 *People*, but also shaped the ways in which the founders of the CCP, the
28 opposing party of the KMT, characterized the concept of communism as they
29 introduced it from Soviet Russia to China. Although Sun Yat-sen's *bo'ai* appears
30 to be an adaptation of Christian vocabulary, its meaning, later development, and
31 application throughout the revolutionary course of China from 1912 onwards had
32 more to do with the socialist sense of universalism and radical affect. Despite the
33 fact that the CCP and KMT would eventually enter a ten-year-long civil war
34 that preceded the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, during
35 the early twentieth century their paths crossed within the same political
36 territory of universal love, *bo'ai*.
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56 **Love in the politics of the People's Republic of China (PRC): *re'ai* 热爱 (ardent**
57 **love)**
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6 It is generally agreed that when the CCP took power during the Maoist revolutions,
7
8 love became diminished, because valuing any aspect of personal life, romantic
9
10 relationships or sex was considered bourgeois and hence taboo, though Emiy Honig
11
12 (2003) has pointed out the historical complexity regarding love and sex in Maoist
13
14 China. More importantly, love as a spontaneous expression of individual emotions
15
16 was heavily regulated during that time. One illustrative example from 1972, for
17
18 instance, highlights a young man who tried to express his feelings to a young woman,
19
20 but stuttered, taking half a minute to say “Let me help sharpen your sickle” (Yan 2003,
21
22 53). The spontaneous radicalism shown by early revolutionaries such as Ding Ling
23
24 withered, as the ruling regime began to regulate and control individuals’ expressions,
25
26 including revolutionary sentiments and affections.
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31 However, this period was also the era when love became a key political
32
33 language, which the CCP continues to use to shape patriotic devotion, and even to
34
35 transform patriotism into a personal cult. Primary schools across the nation taught the
36
37 slogans “Chairman Mao loves us. Chairman Mao asks us to study hard ... We need to
38
39 listen to Chairman Mao and be the Chairman’s good Children”. During that time,
40
41 among the few English sentences for students to memorize was “We love Chairman
42
43 Mao. Long live Chairman Mao!” (Yeung 2009, 42). This collective love acted as a
44
45 means to strengthen the leadership through a personal cult of Chairman Mao.
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50 Scholars including Elizabeth Perry (2002) and Liu Yu (2010) have discussed
51
52 the mobilization of emotions in Chinese political discourse, accompanied by various
53
54 rituals and ritual-like campaigns to reinforce the connection between passion and
55
56 politics expressed through a specific term, *re'ai* 熱愛 (ardent love). According to Mao
57
58 himself, “Love happens for a reason in this world. So does hatred” (Mao, [1942]
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3 1991). *Ai* was used to express both private and political sentiments, even in a
4 “competing” way, as Liu (2010) observes. In a most vivid and direct manner, *re'ai*
5
6 was practiced in terms of the personal cult of Mao, in which emotions of the masses
7
8 were mobilized under a grand discourse with techniques of discourse propagation,
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10 personalization, magnification, and moralization (Liu 2010, 358). As a political
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12 religion, the Mao cult was composed of a totalitarian set of political arrangements led
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14 by a series of campaigns, movements, and everyday rituals that proclaimed Mao as
15
16 the charismatic supreme leader and national savior, fully embodying the will of the
17
18 community, and expected to command leadership of the nation for life. The
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20 movements and campaigns under Mao’s leadership were infused by a faith in his
21
22 supreme qualities and virtue that allowed no opposition or reservation. Thorough
23
24 obedience from the people was also required as the prerequisite for the movements to
25
26 succeed. For instance, two repeated propaganda campaigns during Mao’s time were
27
28 the “Three Loyalties” (*sanzhongyu* 三忠于) and the “Four Boundlesses” (*siwuxian* 四
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30 无限), namely boundless worship of, boundless *love* for, boundless belief in, and
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32 boundless loyalty to Chairman Mao, Mao Zedong Thought, and Mao’s proletarian
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34 revolution route.
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43 Although the Mao cult was practiced in political form rather than as traditional
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45 religious observation, for instance through incense burning or praying, the party re-
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47 appropriated rituals, languages and images familiar to the masses. In communist
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49 dramas and official portraits of Mao, Mao was often portrayed as a supreme being, a
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51 force from the cosmos that generated life and growth, in a type of deification that
52
53 accorded with the beliefs and practices of Chinese folk religions. As Edgar Snow, the
54
55 American journalist who is known for being the first from the West to report on
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57 China’s communist revolutions, wrote in the early 1960s, what made Mao formidable
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3 is that he was not only a party leader, but revered as a teacher, philosopher, poet,
4 national hero, head of the family, and the greatest liberator in human history—overall,
5 he was considered as “Confucius plus Lao-tzu plus Rousseau plus Marx plus Buddha”
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10 (Snow 1962, 151).

11
12 The *White-haired Girl*, a revolutionary opera popular at the time, is a good
13 example of the appropriation of folklore to dramatize revolutionary emotions and
14 glorify the ardent love devoted to the leader in revolutionary dramas. The drama tells
15 the story of a peasant girl who was abused by a landowner and retreated to a secluded
16 life in the caves. Her hair grew white overnight, which gained her the nickname “the
17 white-haired girl”. Admiring her tenacious strength and fearing her magical transition,
18 local peasants worshipped the white-haired girl as a deity. This was a story widely
19 circulated in northern China prior to the communist revolutions. The revolutionary
20 drama relies on the same language and gender images embedded in the original
21 folklore, only adding new revolutionary elements such as the CCP’s Red Army,
22 known for liberating Chinese peasants by replacing the old nexus of power in rural
23 China with CCP leadership. In this way, the CCP was able to construct a new kind of
24 political religion with languages and symbols already familiar to the people, and to
25 advocate the revolutionary slogan that “the old society turns people into ghosts, and
26 the new society led by the CCP bring ghosts back to life”. The ghostly features of the
27 white-haired girl symbolized the feminized and victimized peasant class and the
28 Chinese nation. Her salvation depended upon a young communist soldier, who
29 brought her back to a new life under the sun—the cosmic force representing the CCP
30 and Mao. As the CCP emerged as the “liberator” of the Chinese nation in the late
31 1940s, the highly gendered symbolism in the opera served to establish the CCP’s
32 legitimacy as a new embodiment of heavenly order and justice (Kang, 2014, 133-156).
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3 It remained useful for strengthening the power of the CCP over its subjects and later
4 directly contributed to the Cult of Mao. In this way, the political language of *re'ai* in
5 Mao's era inherited not only radicalism, but also vernacular expressions and aspects
6 of indigenous religions to familiarize the masses with the revolutionary agenda and
7 gain their devotion to the revolutionary hero more readily.
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15 In post-Mao China, love becomes a common language available to the private
16 sphere, but is also elevated to a propaganda level in order to encourage and strengthen
17 people's devotion to the regime and to privilege political concerns over personal
18 feelings. From the early 1980s in China, the notion of love in the romantic sense from
19 operas to pop music culture in the West, was popularized with the reform and
20 opening-up policy with the developing pop scene in China and reached almost every
21 young person in the country. This phenomenal underswell of love in pop culture
22 buoyed the political uses, as it made love (*ai*) a commonplace which, giving pop
23 cultural context to the political romanticization of President Xi Jinping and his wife
24 Peng Liyuan's marriage. Portrayals of President Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan
25 as a modern loving couple have created a new political meaning of love underneath
26 the ardent love for one's nation (*re'ai*), which directs the cultivation of domestic
27 harmony to social and national stability. Those images, along with songs dedicated to
28 their love such as "You Should Marry Someone Like President Xi", promote an ideal
29 family and domestic morality and have created a new political meaning of love.
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31 While many Chinese citizens regard having a First Lady to be politically modern and
32 fashionable, underlying this political meaning of love is a deeply conservative agenda
33 that reintroduces the Confucian patriarchal structure, where the woman is reduced to
34 an object of physical judgment and a subordinate role in domestic as well as social
35 order. This corresponds with President Xi's remark in 2013 that "traditional
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3 cultures”—Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism—would help fill the moral void
4 that has allowed corruption to flourish. This new agenda of love also strikingly
5 resembles the hierarchy in Republican-era popular literature where a man could
6 transition from master of the household to citizen of the state, as China transitioned
7 from an imperial to a modern state, except that the man is now also master of the
8 nation.
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11 Peng’s role also reflects a larger trend of the regression of gender equality in
12 China. For many women “gender violence is getting worse”, as activist Li Tingting
13 remarks.ⁱⁱ Recent studies have shown an increasing number of domestic abuse cases
14 and setbacks for feminist activism since President Xi took office. On 7 March 2015,
15 for instance, on the eve of International Women’s Day, five young women who
16 fought for gender equality were arrested on the grounds of “picking quarrels and
17 creating a disturbance” (xxx 2016). Recent studies have also found that one of the
18 barriers to women’s participation in mainstream political, socio-cultural and
19 economic life is their overload of home duties.ⁱⁱⁱ In the light of the ensuing gender gap
20 and the rise of feminist moments, a new concept of “love” concerned with social
21 stability and national strength is in reality a cover-up for the shrinking space available
22 for civil participation, gender equality and individual freedom.
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47 **Conclusion**

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51 As part of a larger project, the discussion of this paper is restricted and limited.
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53 However, I hope this paper has introduced an overview of how a concept of love has
54 been introduced, adapted and engineered for the building and rebuilding of a modern
55 nation, encompassing Chinese nation-state’s modernist discourse of patriotism as well
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3 as romance and family life. My analysis of the different adaptations and usages of *ai*
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5 by three generations of political leaders, reveals the versatile nature of love as a
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7 critical mechanism within modern Chinese politics. Taking this approach to love not
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9 only revises discussions on the role of emotions in the project of Chinese modernity
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11 in literary studies, but expands the scope from literature to modern Chinese politics,
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13 and from writers and intellectuals to politicians. In particular, it reconfigures the
14
15 importance of love in revolutionary radicalism, for instance in the propaganda of early
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17 communist leaders like Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, as well as in the crucial impact of
18
19 radicalism on Republican politicians, in particular Sun Yat-sen, who is often regarded
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21 to have been influenced more heavily by Christian ideas. Understanding discursive
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23 appropriations of love in this way, offers a fresh perspective into the meaning—and
24
25 most importantly, the politics—of love in modern China, and its relation to
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27 Christianity, Confucianism and political religion.
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33 The discourse of love (*ai*) is a complex one, as the current political
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35 patriarchalism is influenced by the rise of “strongman politics” in the West and indeed
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37 around the globe, and China also inherits the tradition of feminine power in Asian
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39 religions while authoritarianism is patriarchal, so is Confucianism, which I will
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41 continue to explore in a larger project focusing on not only politicians, but also
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43 activists, including the “me too” movement, religious organizations, and LGBT
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45 activism in mainland China and Hong Kong.
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54 Notes

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57 ⁱ I am using *hanyu pinyin* to transcribe Chinese in this article, while names of well-known personages
58 will follow the established conventional spellings.

59 ⁱⁱ [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/12/five-chinese-feminists-held-international-womens-](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/12/five-chinese-feminists-held-international-womens-day)
60 [day](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/12/five-chinese-feminists-held-international-womens-day), accessed December 12, 2016.

iii All-China Women's Federation & National Bureau of Statistics of China, report on Major Results of the Third Wave Survey on The Social Status of Women in China. Available online: www.wsic.ac.cn/academicnews/78621.htm, accessed 16 May 2018. Also see Zeng Benxiang, "Women's Political Participation in China: Improved or Not?," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 15: 1 (2014), 136-150.

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