

FEATURE

Aixin (loving heart):

Spirit of a new society, or a slogan put out by an old propaganda machine?

By T. K. Chu

Words have power. They can ignite the spark of hatred, stoke the feeling of beauty and the sublime, or fire up the will to action. They do so through sound, image, and affection, the last being produced by one or both of the first two, said Edmund Burke. Many Chinese words stoke emotions through their structure: they are a combination of characters, which in turn can be composites of semantic radicals (image) and phonetic parts (sound).

Seventeen days after the May 12 earthquake in Sichuan province, I traveled to China on a sightseeing trip planned long in advance. I noticed that the word *aixin* (loving heart) was used everywhere, in the context of the quake relief and rescue work, but also as a general social reminder. It was written in newspapers, spoken on television, and printed in street banners. Its pervasiveness reminded me of the messages flogging credit cards in the mail that I receive at home. During a bus ride, our tour guide was explaining to us—a Chinese-speaking group—how China tries to solve the health-care problem of the rural old and poor. Unprompted contextually, she blurted out, “But we all must have *aixin*.” That “we”, I presumed, was her fellow countrywomen and countrymen under the leadership of the Communist Party. Later, hiking up Huangshan (the Yellow Mountain) with the assistance of a cane, I was twice accosted by youngsters who offered to carry my knapsack. A third one ‘scolded’ me: “You [in the respect form *nin*, with such a big bundle of years in age, should be relaxing at home!”

Contrast this experience with that of Bertrand Russell who, after a year’s teaching at Peking University in 1920, wrote about the



The May 12 earthquake in Sichuan

callousness of the Chinese people: “While I was in China, millions were dying of famine... Very little [to relieve the famine was done] by the Chinese.” By comparison, at the end of June 2008, the total donation (I do not know the fractional sum contributed by the Chinese) to the earthquake relief fund had exceeded 55 billion RMB (\$8.1 billion), about 0.25% of China’s 2007 GDP.

The Chinese word *aixin* is made of the two characters *ai*, love or to love, and *xin*, heart, with *ai* serving as an adjective. *Xin* is also a semantic radical: in fact it is a part of *ai*. But in classical Chinese thought, *ai*, except in the concept of *jianai*(universal love) of Mozi, rarely appears. *Ai*, either as a noun or as a transitive verb, is largely an ‘action’ word, as in “*ai cai ru ming* (love[s] money like life);” what one loves reveals one’s morality. *Ai* carries no moral quality.

Mencius made *xin* the word of moral quality: “The *xin* of commiseration is possessed by all men... This *xin* pertains to benevolence.” *Xin* denotes moral principles that humans

possess. These possessions render humans capable of loving. *Xin* is the cause of *ai*.

Is China's *aixin* phenomenon a social spirit or propaganda?

I submitted several questions on *aixin* to a Beijing writer friend who, in the decades of residency there, has also been doing NGO work. Here are the Q & A:

Q. What does *aixin* mean?

A. It means a state of mind capable of feeling concerned with other people's sufferings.

Q. How did the word get started and become popularized?

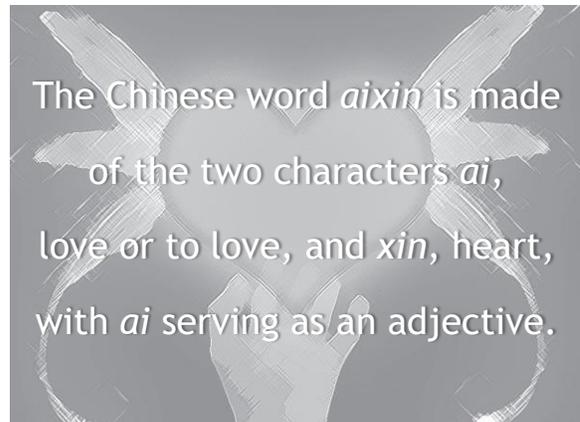
A. When *hexie* (harmony) became the principal propaganda word a few years ago, *aixin* started to appear: if there is no *aixin*, there can be no *hexie*. It became increasingly prominent since the horrific snowstorm that struck China in late January and has become more so because of the earthquake. But the events in Tibet and Xingjiang had enhanced the *aixin* response to the earthquake.

Q. Is its popularity due to a propaganda push, or reflects the dawn of a new culture?

A. Prior to the late 70's, for about three decades the most prominent word had been *douzheng* [to beat down, to denounce]. With the country's changed economic system and rising economic power, the government needs more suitable slogans. Making money in the environment of a harmonious society is an ideal of the government and the people, and taking care of the poor makes sense. Uproars from the poor would certainly damage the progress of China.

Q. When people on the street use the word, do they mean that they have a heart-felt loving feeling toward others or it is just something they say so as to make a certain kind of impression on the listener?

A. Slogans have been a powerful tool in the past, as attested by the culture of *douzheng*. Now *ren* (compassion) and *ai* are on the way back, and our Old Confucius is on the way back as well. Ha! What irony! Anyway, when people say *aixin*, they are getting closer to having *aixin*. Saying is believing, right?



Like the slogan or not, it is a good way to begin a new society.

The reply echoes Burke's observation on how words affect emotion, and tells the rationale in the utterance of our tour guide. It explains that spare money, a quantifiable difference between the China of 1920 and that of 2008, is also needed to do *aixin*-things; poverty stunts the will. It says what is unfolding is the tragic-comical dialectic of *douzheng*; this is the Dao's way.

So, *aixin* is both a social spirit and propaganda. When one says one ought to have *aixin* and does *aixin*-things, then for all earthly purposes one has *aixin*; when many people do so, the society has it. David Brooks wrote in one of his columns in the New York Times, "In a community, behavior sets off ripples. Every decision is a public contribution or a destructive activity." He was writing about how individuals' decision has shaped the country's cultural drift: from the culture of thrift of the depression era to today's culture of debt—the consuming-unto-consumed culture. The drift is brought about by the pervasive message that one can have the freedom to spend the money that one does not have. That freedom turns out to be the indentured slavery of indebtedness. Then, of course, the institution's decision can also shape the individual's morality. In ancient Greece, the law decreed by Solon the lawgiver forbade debt-bondage (albeit for Athenian citizens only).

Resolved: the next time in a Shanghai subway car when a seated young person stands up to let me have his (her) seat and says to me, “Old grandpa, you please sit,” I will whisper gently to the youngster, “Aya, little brother (sister), you have *aixin*.” Forty years ago a young person like him might be a Red Guard, doing the party’s bidding to *douzheng* an old man like me. Today, at least for today—I know not the course of the indifferent Dao, his words bring me happiness, for him as well as for me.

###

T. K. Chu, a retired physicist at the Plasma Physics Laboratory, Princeton University, translated Qian Ning’s Chinese Students Encounter America.