

## ***Politics of Contemporary China***

**Instructor(s):** Shuyuan Shen

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**Office Hours:** W/F 10am-11am (DKH 317B or Zoom)

### **Course Description:**

This course provides an in-depth introduction to the politics of contemporary China (PRC). As the world's second-largest economy, accounting for nearly 18 percent of global GDP, China plays a critical role in the global political, economic, and military landscape. With the second-largest military budget and a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, China's influence is undeniably significant.

However, China presents a striking contrast to liberal democracies, particularly through its unique authoritarian political system, which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) describes as a "whole-process people's democracy." How does this political system operate? What are the key institutions, and how do they function? What are the processes behind policy and decision-making? How do civil society and ordinary citizens interact with and perceive the system? Is the Chinese political model sustainable, or is it destined to fail? And what lessons, if any, can other countries draw from China's approach?

In this course, we will explore these critical questions and the essential aspects of China's political ecosystem. We will examine how institutions, civil society, and citizens coexist, sustain, or challenge the system. By the end of the course, students will be equipped to critically engage with and contribute to discussions on Chinese politics, backed by a solid theoretical and empirical foundation.

### **General Goals of Course:**

This course has four general goals.

1. Students will gain a substantive body of foundational knowledge on Chinese political institutions and authoritarian politics.
2. Students will understand how politicians, civil societies, and ordinary citizens navigate the Chinese political system.
3. Students will be able to critically engage in and contribute to the scholarly and public discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of the Chinese political model.
4. Students will develop the research skills required to develop a basic understanding of an issue related to Chinese politics and authoritarian politics more broadly.

### **Course Format**

Class sessions consist of lectures and discussions. At the beginning of each session, the instructor outlines the theme of the week and explains the key concepts and findings in the readings. Students will be encouraged to share their thoughts and questions on the readings. There will be small-group discussions in which students discuss some of the most important questions on the week's topic raised by the instructor or their fellow students. The latter four weeks of the course will also include short presentations by all students in the course, with unifying discussions following the presentations.

## Assessment

- Class Participation (20%)
  - o Students are expected to attend each session having read the assigned articles and prepared to discuss them.
  - o Students will be assigned to give short presentations (5 minutes each) about the required readings in groups at the beginning of each class. Each student will be randomly assigned into one of the groups and give 3 or 4 short presentations, depending on the size of the class. Presentations should include the research question, significance of the question, theoretical arguments, data and methods, and findings. The group in charge of the presentation should also propose three questions based on the reading for class and small-group discussion.
  - o The instructor will, at irregular intervals, provide non-spoken means of participation for students who are less comfortable speaking actively in class.
  
- Critical Reading Summaries (20%)
  - o Choose three weeks and one reading from each of the three weeks to write a critical summary. In total, students write three critical reading summaries.
  - o The summary should (1) summarize the research question, main arguments, data and methods, and findings; (2) evaluate the arguments and findings and raise questions and criticisms; (3) connect to other readings of the week to highlight common themes or contradictions; (4) future directions of research on the issue.
  - o Each summary should be 1-2 pages in length, 1.5 spacing, excluding references.
  - o The deadline is two days before the class in the chosen weeks.
  
- “Comparing Political Systems” Paper (20%)
  - o Choose a country that you are familiar with or interested in.
  - o Describe and compare the political institutions of China and the country of your choice.
  - o Which political system do you prefer? Justify your answer.
  - o The paper should be 3-4 pages in length, 1.5 spacing, excluding references.
  - o The deadline is Sunday of Week 7.
  
- Presentation of “Comparing Political Systems” Paper (10%)
  - o Prepare a 10-minute presentation of your critical analysis paper, to be presented in the latter four weeks of the course.
  - o For any country duplicates, the concerned students should write their papers independently but prepare to present together (max three students per group).
  - o Week 8's class time is dedicated to the presentations.
  
- Research Design Paper (30%)

- Choose a topic and research question related to Chinese politics.
- Write a 7-8 paged, 1.5 spacing, paper describing *how* you would complete a full research paper to answer this question. The paper should include an introduction, significance of the question, literature review, theory/argument, and research design.
- Students are encouraged to discuss their topic in advance with the instructor.
- The deadline is five days after the last class.

## Course Grade

Though adjustments may be made, the following letter grade cutoffs are used as benchmarks:

A+	97%	A	93%	A-	90%
B+	87%	B	83%	B-	80%
C+	77%	C	73%	C-	70%
D+	67%	D	63%	D-	60%

## Course Policies

Attendance in the course is required, as much of the learning will come from open and active discussion of the topics and materials. Students are permitted to use their electronic devices for notetaking and materials reference in class, but should be conscious of responsible use of those devices. As this is a shortened 8-week course, no unexcused absences are permissible. Any unexcused absence will result in a loss of half of the class participation grade (5%). Excused absences should be approved before the absence unless an emergency situation occurs.

## Schedule and Readings

Note that the topics and readings below are subject to change by the instructor as needed. All readings are required for students, and will be accessible either via the library website or via the instructor. Readings should be completed prior to the class meeting time for that week.

There is no required textbook for this course. Digital copies of all readings, including book chapters, can be found either through the university library website or links provided by the instructor. Please contact the instructor if you cannot access any of the readings.

Readings for this class come from the most cutting-edge research in this field. It is totally legitimate to feel overwhelmed or confused about the readings assigned. Group presentations as part of class participation are designed to facilitate the comprehension of the readings. In addition, instead of trying to understand every single word or the technical details of the analyses, students should try to grasp the main components of the readings. More specifically, you can focus on the following questions in your reading process:

1. What is the main question(s) the author tries to answer in this article?
2. Is this question important? Why?
3. What are some existing theories to answer the question?

4. What is the author's answer to this question and how is it different from existing theories?
5. Does the author provide any empirical evidence to support the claim? What data and methods do the author use in the empirical analysis?
6. What are the empirical findings?
7. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the theoretical and empirical arguments?
8. What are some future research directions based on this article?

### Week 1: Introduction: Chinese Politics as a Field

1. Course Syllabus
2. Doing Fieldwork in China: Evolution and Prospects. <https://bigdatachina.csis.org/doing-fieldwork-in-china/>
3. Luce/ACLS Advisory Group. 2021. *China Studies in North America*. American Council of Learned Societies. <https://www.acls.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/China-Studies-in-North-American-Report.pdf>

### Week 2: Historical and Cultural Backgrounds of the Chinese Political System

1. Lieberthal, Kenneth. 1995. *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform*. W. W. Norton & Company. Chapter 1: The Legacies of Imperial China, pp. 3-26
- 2.1. Fareed Zakaria, "Culture Is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew" *Foreign Affairs* 73:2 (March/April 1994) 109-26.
- 2.2 Kim, Dae Jung, "Is Culture Destiny?" *Foreign Affairs*. 73:6 (November/December 1994) 189-95.
3. Fukuyama, Francis. 1995. "Confucianism and Democracy." *J. Democracy* 6: 20.

### Week 3: Politics in the Mao Era

1. Jisheng, Yang. 2010. "The Fatal Politics of the PRC's Great Leap Famine: The Preface to Tombstone." *Journal of Contemporary China* 19(66): 755-76.
2. Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz and Andrew G. Walder. 2006. "The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History: An Introduction" in Esherick, Pickowicz and Walder (eds.) *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press pp. 1-28.
3. Wang, Yuhua. 2021. "The Political Legacy of Violence During China's Cultural Revolution." *British Journal of Political Science* 51(2): 463-87.

### Week 4: The Role of Politics in China's Economic Miracle

1. McMillan, John, and Barry Naughton. 1992. "How to Reform a Planned Economy: Lessons from China." *Oxford review of economic policy* 8(1): 130-43.
2. Heilmann, Sebastian. 2008. "Policy Experimentation in China's Economic Rise." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43(1): 1-26.

3. Xu, Chenggang. 2011. "The Fundamental Institutions of China's Reforms and Development." *Journal of Economic Literature* 49(4): 1076–1151.

#### Week 5: Contemporary Political Institutions of China

1. Lawrence, Susan V., and Lee, Mari Y. 2021. "China's Political System in Charts: A Snapshot Before the 20th Party Congress." Congressional Research Service Report. R46977 <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46977>
2. Wang, Juan, and Sida Liu. 2019. "Ordering Power under the Party: A Relational Approach to Law and Politics in China." *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 6(01): 1–18.
3. Truex, Rory. 2020. "Authoritarian Gridlock? Understanding Delay in the Chinese Legislative System." *Comparative Political Studies* 53(9): 1455–92.

#### Week 6: Election and Selection of Chinese Officials

1. Martinez-Bravo, Monica, Gerard Padró I Miquel, Nancy Qian, and Yang Yao. 2022. "The Rise and Fall of Local Elections in China." *American Economic Review* 112(9): 2921–58.
2. Jia, Ruixue, Masayuki Kudamatsu, and David Seim. 2015. "Political Selection in China: The Complementary Roles of Connections and Performance." *Journal of the European Economic Association* 13(4): 631–68.
3. Bell, Daniel A. 2017. "Can Democracies Learn from China's Meritocratic System?" *Current History* 116(793): 315–19.

#### Week 7: Chinese Civil Societies and Their Relationship with the Government

1. Spires, Anthony J. 2011. "Contingent Symbiosis and Civil Society in an Authoritarian State: Understanding the Survival of China's Grassroots NGOs." *American Journal of Sociology* 117(1): 1–45.
2. Fu, Diana, and Greg Distelhorst. 2018. "Grassroots Participation and Repression under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping." *The China Journal* 79: 100–122.
3. Li, Guangqin, Qiao He, Shuai Shao, and Jianhua Cao. 2018. "Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations and Urban Environmental Governance: Evidence from China." *Journal of Environmental Management* 206: 1296–1307.

#### Week 8: Presentations of "Comparing Political Systems" Paper

#### Week 9: Public Opinion in China

1. Pan, Jennifer, and Yiqing Xu. 2018. "China's Ideological Spectrum." *The Journal of Politics* 80(1): 254–73.
2. Shen, Xiaoxiao, and Rory Truex. 2020. "In Search of Self-Censorship." *British Journal of Political Science*: 1–13.
3. Huang, Haifeng, Chanita Intawan, and Stephen P. Nicholson. 2022. "In Government We Trust: Implicit Political Trust and Regime Support in China." *Perspectives on Politics*: 1–19.

### Week 10: Chinese Nationalism

1. Zhao, Suisheng. 1998. "A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31(3): 287–302.
2. Zhang, Yinxian, Jiajun Liu, and Ji-Rong Wen. 2018. "Nationalism on Weibo: Towards a Multifaceted Understanding of Chinese Nationalism." *The China Quarterly* 235: 758–83.
3. Schneider, Florian. 2021. "China's Viral Villages: Digital Nationalism and the COVID-19 Crisis on Online Video-Sharing Platform Bilibili." *Communication and the Public* 6(1–4): 48–66.

### Week 11: Contentious Politics in China

1. O'Brien, Kevin J. 1996. "Rightful Resistance." *World Politics* 49(1): 31–55.
2. Lee, Ching Kwan, and Yonghong Zhang. 2013. "The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China." *American Journal of Sociology* 118(6): 1475–1508.
3. King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107(2): 326–43.

### Week 12: Human Rights and Ethnic Minorities in China

1. Chan, Joseph. 1999. "A Confucian Perspective on Human Rights for Contemporary China" in *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights* ed. by Daniel Bell and Joanne Bauer New York: Cambridge University Press. pp. 212–37.
2. Peerenboom, Randall. 2005. "Assessing Human Rights in China: Why the Double Standard." *Cornell International Law Journal* 38(1): 71–172.
3. [Video] *China Undercover*. 2020. Frontline PBS.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wM1DjkPWtjo>

### Week 13: The Future of the Chinese Political Model

1. Goldstone, Jack A. 1995. "The Coming Chinese Collapse." *Foreign Policy* (99): 35–53.
2. Huang, Yasheng. 1995. "Why China Will Not Collapse." *Foreign Policy* (99): 54–68.
3. Schuman, Michael. 2023. "The China Model Is Dead." *The Atlantic*.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/09/china-economy-slowdown-xi-jinping/675236/>