

Chinese Politics

Course Syllabus

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Course Description

This course is designed as an introductory course in Chinese politics primarily for upper-level undergraduates with a strong background in political and social science, though no prior knowledge of China is required. The aim is to provide a foundation enabling non-specialists to make informed use of China as a case in general arguments, while equipping prospective China specialists with a solid footing for more advanced study.

The course emphasizes domestic politics in post-1978 China, situated within a longer historical trajectory. We begin by examining the legacies of imperial and Maoist governance that continue to shape political culture and institutions. We then turn to the formal institutions and key actors structuring political power in the PRC, as well as their interactions with society. Building on this foundation, we analyze state-led economic development and mechanisms of social control, and consider their implications for state–society relations. In the final weeks, we explore contemporary challenges for the CCP regime, including inequality, cross-Strait relations with Taiwan, and demographic change and gender tensions.

The course combines lectures with in-class discussions.

Books Used Throughout

- Kenneth Lieberthal. *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.
- Bruce J. Dickson. *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021.
- Elizabeth Perry & Mark Selden, eds. *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, and Resistance*. 3rd ed. Routledge, 2010.

Course Requirements and Grading

Component	Weight
Four quizzes	15%
News article assignment	15%
First in-class midterm exam	20%
Second in-class midterm exam	20%
Third in-class midterm exam	20%
Attendance	10%
Total	100%

Quizzes

A 10-question closed-book quiz will be given at the beginning of class on four occasions during the semester. To accommodate unexpected absences or off days, the lowest quiz grade will be dropped when calculating the final quiz score.

News Article Assignment

Each student must submit **three** news articles relevant to **three different weeks**. Assignments are due on the Sunday before the week's lecture. For example, an article due on Jan. 28 should relate to the lecture theme of Jan. 29–31, not to the prior week's theme. Students will be randomly assigned three weekly themes.

Articles may be in English or Chinese and can be historical or contemporary, but must be fact-reporting from a news outlet rather than academic or opinion sources. Grades are based on timeliness and relevance. Each week, three top submissions will be highlighted in class, and the authors will receive one bonus point toward the final grade.

Midterm Exams

Three closed-book midterm exams will be administered. Each exam will include true/false, multiple-choice, and short essay questions. All lectures, discussions, and assigned readings are subject to examination.

Class Guidelines

1. No laptop/cell phone/mobile device use during in-person sessions.
2. Make-up quizzes and exams will not be accommodated. Under special circumstances and with instructor approval, missed midterm exam weights may be reallocated.

Weekly Themes

The course is organized thematically by week. Each week includes objectives, required readings, and recommended readings.

Week 1: Historical China and Its Legacies (Pre-1949)

Objectives

- Understand how history has shaped the political culture and institutions of modern China.
- Analyze how state strength and bureaucratic traditions shaped state–society relations.

Required Readings

- Yuri Pines. *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy*, Ch. 1.
- Benjamin A. Elman. “Civil Service Examinations.” *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China* 5 (2009): 405–410.
- David Stasavage. *The Decline and Rise of Democracy* (2020), Ch. 6 “China as the Bureaucratic Alternative.”

Recommended Readings

- Mark Elvin. *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (1973), Introduction (pp. 1–20).
- Patricia Ebrey. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, Ch. 4 “The First Empire.”

Week 2: The Impacts of Pre-1978 Chinese Politics (The Maoist Era)

Objectives

- Understand how Maoist politics shaped state–society relations.
- Assess why Maoist ideology and practices continue to resonate in contemporary China.

Required Readings

- Kenneth Lieberthal. *Governing China*, Ch. 4 “The Maoist Era.”
- Iza Ding & Jeffrey Javed. “Why Maoism Still Resonates in China Today.” *Washington Post*, 2019.

Recommended Readings

- Lieberthal. *Governing China*, Ch. 3 “The Maoist System: Ideas and Governance.”
- Zhou, Xueguang & Liren Hou. “Children of the Cultural Revolution: The State and the Life Course in the PRC.” *American Sociological Review* 64(1) (1999): 12–36.

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- *China: A Century of Revolution*, Part Two: The Mao Years.

Week 3: Who Is in Charge? (Formal State Structure)

Objectives

- Examine the formal organization of the PRC state.
- Identify the functions of central and local institutions.

Required Readings

- Kenneth Lieberthal. *Governing China*, Ch. 6 “The Organization of Political Power and Its Consequences: The View from Outside.”
- Susan V. Lawrence. *China’s Political Institutions and Leaders in Charts* (CRS, 2013), pp. 12–19.

Week 4: Who Is Really in Charge? (The CCP and Leadership)

Objectives

- Analyze how the CCP dominates political institutions.
- Understand leadership selection and cadre management.

Required Readings

- Susan V. Lawrence. *China’s Political Institutions and Leaders in Charts* (2013), pp. 1–11.
- Lieberthal. *Governing China*, Ch. 7 “The Organization of Political Power and Its Consequences: The View from Inside.”
- The Economist. “What Party Control Means in China.” March 9, 2023.

Recommended Readings

- Bruce J. Dickson. *The Party and the People*, Ch. 1 “What Keeps the Party in Power?”

- Melanie Manion. “The Cadre Management System, Post-Mao.” *China Quarterly* 102 (1985): 203–233.
- Richard McGregor. *The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers* (2010), Chs. 1 & 3.

Week 5: A Framework for Policymaking

Objectives

- Explore how policies are made in China’s fragmented authoritarian system.
- Assess the role of bureaucratic bargaining and institutional constraints.

Required Readings

- Kenneth Lieberthal & Michel Oksenberg. *Policy Making in China* (1988), Ch. 1 “Structure and Process: An Overview.”
- Murray Scot Tanner. “How a Bill Becomes a Law in China.” *China Quarterly* 141 (1995): 39–64.

Recommended Readings

- Dickson. *The Party and the People*, Ch. 3 “How Are Policies Made?”
- Andrew Mertha. “Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0.” *China Quarterly* 200 (2009): 995–1012.

Week 6: The Political Foundations of the “China Model” (I): Industrial Policies

Objectives

- Examine the role of the state in industrialization and development.
- Compare different interpretations of the “China model.”

Required Readings

- Xiaohuan Lan. *How China Works*, Chs. 4–5 “The Role of Government in Industrialization.”
- Yuen Yuen Ang. “The Real China Model: It’s Not What You Think It Is.” *Foreign Affairs*, June 29, 2018.

Recommended Readings

- Barry Naughton. *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth* (2007), Ch. 4.
- Linda Weiss. *The Myth of the Powerless State* (1998), Introduction.

Week 7: The Political Foundations of the “China Model” (II): Local Politics and Incentives

Objectives

- Understand how cadre incentives shape local governance.
- Analyze the relationship between economic growth and political careers.

Required Readings

- “Changing Cadre Incentives: The Untold Story of China’s Economic Challenge.” *The Diplomat*, 2024.
- Li, Hongbin & Li-An Zhou. “Political Turnover and Economic Performance: The Incentive Role of Personnel Control in China.” *Journal of Public Economics* 89(9–10) (2005): 1743–1762.

- Josh Chin. “Xi Jinping’s Leadership Style: Micromanagement That Leaves Underlings Scrambling.” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 15, 2021.

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- *The Chinese Mayor* (Zhao Qi, 2015).

Week 8: Social Control (I): State Penetration into Society

Objectives

- Compare traditional and modern mechanisms of state penetration.
- Assess the role of surveillance, neighborhood committees, and party cells.

Required Readings

- “Private Enterprise under Xiconomics: How Party Cells and Golden Shares Work.” *China Observers*, 2023.
- “Grid Management: China’s Latest Institutional Tool of Social Control.” *PRC Leader*, 2023.
- The Economist. “China’s Enormous Surveillance State Is Still Growing.” Nov. 23, 2023.

Week 9: Social Control (II): State Corporatism

Objectives

- Understand corporatist structures in labor, religion, and NGOs.
- Evaluate the limits of state-led social organization.

Required Readings

- Elizabeth Perry & Sebastian Heilmann. “From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns.” In *Mao’s Invisible Hand* (2011), pp. 30–61.
- Eli Friedman. *Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Postsocialist China*. Cornell University Press, 2014, Ch. 1.
- Dickson. *The Party and the People*, Ch. 6 “Why Does the Party Fear Religion?”
- *Civil Society under Authoritarianism: The China Model*, Introduction.

Week 10: How Do Ordinary Citizens Exert Political Influence?

Objectives

- Explore channels of participation and their constraints.
- Assess the role of petitions, protests, and the internet.

Required Readings

- Dickson. *The Party and the People*, Ch. 5 “Do Political Protests Threaten Political Stability?”
- Maria Repnikova. “How Chinese Authorities and Individuals Use the Internet.” Hoover Institution, 2018.
- Li, Lianjiang. “The Magnitude and Resilience of Trust in the Center.” *Modern China* 39(1) (2013): 3–36.

Recommended Readings

- Ya-Wen Lei. “The Political Consequences of the Rise of the Internet.” *Political Communication* 28(3) (2012): 291–322.
- Christian Göbel & Lynette Ong. “Social Unrest in China.” ECRAN Report (2012), Executive Summary.

Week 11: Regime Support, Legitimacy, and Nationalism

Objectives

- Understand how the CCP maintains legitimacy without competitive elections.
- Examine how nationalism, ideology, and performance shape regime support.

Required Readings

- Dickson. *The Party and the People*, Ch. 2 “Why Do People Support the CCP?”
- Jennifer Pan & Yiqing Xu. “China’s Ideological Spectrum.” *Journal of Politics* 80(1) (2018): 254–273.

Week 12: Challenges Facing the CCP (I): Inequality

Objectives

- Examine rising inequality and its implications for stability.
- Understand why inequality does not always lead to unrest.

Required Readings

- Martin Whyte. *Myth of the Social Volcano* (2010), Introduction & Ch. 1.
- Wang, Feng. “Boundaries and Categories: Rising Inequality in Post-Socialist Urban China.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 473–497.
- Yu Xie & Xiang Zhou. “Income Inequality in Today’s China.” *PNAS* 111(19) (2014): 6928–6933.

Recommended Readings

- Ching Kwan Lee. *Against the Law* (2007), Ch. 1.
- Li Shi et al. “Income Inequality and Poverty in China.” *China Economic Journal* 6(1) (2013): 75–92.
- Carl Minzner. *End of an Era* (2018), Ch. 3.

Week 13: Challenges Facing the CCP (II): Taiwan and Mainland China

Objectives

- Understand the historical context of cross-Strait tensions.
- Assess the domestic and international dimensions of Taiwan–China relations.

Required Readings

- The Economist. “A Short History of Taiwan and China, in Maps.” July 10, 2024.
- Council on Foreign Relations. “Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense.”
- Syaru Shirley Lin. “Taiwan’s China Dilemma.” *Foreign Affairs* (2016).

Week 14: Challenges Facing the CCP (III): Birth Rate and Gender Tensions

Objectives

- Trace PRC demographic and gender policies from the One-Child Policy to pronatalism.
- Analyze persistent gender inequality and feminist activism.

Required Readings

- Sara L. Friedman. “Women, Marriage and the State in Contemporary China.” In *Chinese Society* (2010), pp. 166–188.
- The Economist Podcast. “Why the One-Child Policy Still Affects China’s Birth Rate.”
- Film: *One Child Nation* (excerpts will be played in class).