

# Key Issues in Contemporary Chinese Politics: A Graduate Seminar [DRAFT SYLLABUS]

Politics 261 • 51025 • Spring 2025  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
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Course web site: <https://canvas.ucsc.edu/>  
Course meetings: Tuesdays, 5:00–8:00pm, Merrill Acad 134  
Office hours: Mondays 4:00–5:00pm in Merrill Faculty Annex 157, and  
Wednesdays 12:00-1:00pm, on Zoom, and by appointment  
Sign up at <https://tinyurl.com/benreadofficehours>  
Date of this syllabus: March 1, 2025. Subject to change; check websites for latest version.

## Overview:

The purpose of this graduate seminar is to acquaint students with current academic research on major topics and questions in the politics of China. We will focus on the present day and the past couple of decades, not least because UC Santa Cruz students are fortunate enough to have access to other courses covering earlier eras of the People's Republic. We will give ample consideration to scholarship that traces today's politics to historical sources, however. The seminar addresses topics ranging from the core institutions of the party-state to local politics, economic governance, the politics of control over information, policymaking, Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and state-society interactions in multiple realms. We will consider China in its own terms while also considering possibilities for comparison with other settings and evaluating the relevance of theoretical concepts from various fields in the social sciences. One of our goals will be identifying opportunities for new research projects.

No knowledge of the Chinese language is assumed. Graduate students from all departments and disciplines are welcome. Undergraduates should contact the instructor before enrolling.

## Assignments and ground rules:

- Actively help build an enthusiastic, far-ranging, thoughtful, critical and constructive discussion.
- Do the required readings prior to each class session and come prepared to contribute to the conversation. Acquire the readings well in advance of class so as to avoid logistical problems.
- Attend each class session unless unavoidable circumstances make it impossible to do so. Given that we have only ten class meetings, please plan to attend every one and do not schedule things that conflict with class.
- In the event that you are truly unable to attend class, you must 1) email me promptly with a brief explanation; 2) Within the two weeks after the class date in question, submit an extra reading response on the readings for the class you missed. This will not count toward the regularly assigned reading responses.
- Present a reading approximately every other class, as assigned. The presentation should only very briefly summarize the reading in question (if at all), but instead should launch the group on pathways for appreciating and/or critiquing it. Participation and presentations together constitute 25% of the quarter grade.
- Write three critical reading responses, at least two double-spaced pages each (30%). My web site has a page providing guidance for these. The first should be for one of the sessions from weeks 2-4; the second, weeks 5-7; the third, 8-10. On those weeks, turn in your response paper by 9 a.m. on the day of class, sent to the entire class via email attachment (Word or PDF format).
- Students will also submit a final paper (45%). Most likely it will present a thorough review of an issue related to the course, drawing on a reasonably wide selection of material, although other formats may be discussed, such as a research proposal. Please suggest a topic to me before Week 5. The paper should be at least 10 pages in length and turned in both via email; it should be work that you have written this quarter and not used in other classes for academic credit.

## Academic integrity:

- Excerpts from UCSC's Policy on Academic Integrity for Graduate Students ([http://www.ucsc.edu/academics/academic\\_integrity/graduate\\_students/](http://www.ucsc.edu/academics/academic_integrity/graduate_students/)): "Academic misconduct includes but is not limited to cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, falsification, research fraud, or facilitating academic dishonesty or as further specified in campus policies and regulations, including the Campus Policy on Research Integrity. ... In cases in which academic misconduct has been determined to occur, sanctions may include dismissal, suspension for a specified period, and notation of academic misconduct on a student's transcript, including all external copies, for a specified period."
- I take academic integrity very seriously and I expect all students to do the same.
- Concerning the use of sources in your writing, and understanding and avoiding plagiarism, the single most thorough (though it is concise) and illuminating discussion I know of is Gordon Harvey, *Writing with Sources: A Guide for Students*, 3rd edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2017). The full text of this book is available online via the UCSC library.

## Special accommodations:

If you qualify for classroom accommodations because of a disability, please submit your Accommodation Authorization from the Disability Resource Center (DRC) to me during my office hours in a timely manner, preferably within the first two weeks of the quarter. Contact DRC at 459-2089 (voice), 459-4806 (TTY).

## Week 1: Macro-puzzles, disciplines, comparisons, and the field of Chinese politics

### Tuesday, April 1, 2025

- O'Brien, Kevin J. 2018. "Speaking to Theory and Speaking to the China Field." *Issues & Studies* 54 (4): 1–11.
- Shambaugh, David. 2024. "The Evolution of American Contemporary China Studies: Coming Full Circle?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 33 (146): 314–31.
- Fu, Hui-Zhen, and Li Shao. 2023. "Telling Our Own Story: A Bibliometrics Analysis of Mainland China's Influence on Chinese Politics Research, 2001–2020." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 56 (1): 18–28.
- Frazier, Mark W. 2018. "China and the Challenges of Comparison." In *The SAGE Handbook of Contemporary China*, edited by Weiping Wu and Mark W. Frazier, 1227–44. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

### Further reading

- Read, Benjamin L. 2021. "Problems and Possibilities of Comparison across Regime Types: Examples Involving China." In *Rethinking Comparison: Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry*, edited by Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith, 208–30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kevin J. O'Brien, "Studying Chinese Politics in an Age of Specialization," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 20/71 (2011), 535-41.

## Week 2: Historical legacies

### Tuesday, April 8, 2025

- Perry, Elizabeth J. 2012. *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Yang, Dali L. 1998. *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change since the Great Leap Famine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press). [selected chapters, TBD]
- Walder, Andrew G. 2016. "Bending the Arc of Chinese History: The Cultural Revolution's Paradoxical Legacy." *The China Quarterly* 227 (September): 613–31

### Further reading

- Wang, Yuhua. 2021. "The Political Legacy of Violence during China's Cultural Revolution." *British Journal of Political Science* 51 (2): 463–87.
- Perry, Elizabeth J. 2024. "Blurring the Boundaries of Governance: China's Work Teams in Comparative Perspective." *Comparative Political Studies* (published online).

### Week 3: Institutions and authoritarian resilience

Tuesday, April 15, 2025

- Nathan, Andrew J. "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (January 2003): 6–17.
- Pei, Minxin. 2024. *The Sentinel State: Surveillance and the Survival of Dictatorship in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. [selected chapters, TBD]
- Perry, Elizabeth J. "From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns: 'Constructing a New Socialist Countryside,'" in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), chapter 2.
- Manion, Melanie. 2023. *Political Selection in China: Rethinking Foundations and Findings*, Cambridge Elements. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dimitrov, Martin K. 2024. *The Adaptability of the Chinese Communist Party*. Cambridge Elements. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

#### Further reading

- Stromseth, Jonathan R., Edmund J. Malesky, and Dimitar D. Gueorguiev. 2017. *China's Governance Puzzle: Enabling Transparency and Participation in a Single-Party State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pierre F. Landry, Xiaobo Lü, and Haiyan Duan, "Does Performance Matter? Evaluating Political Selection along the Chinese Administrative Ladder," *Comparative Political Studies* 51:8 (2018).
- David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
- Victor C. Shih, "Getting Ahead in the Communist Party: Explaining the Advancement of Central Committee Members in China," *American Political Science Review*, 106/1 (February 2012), 166-87.
- Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- Frank N. Pieke, *The Good Communist: Elite Training and State Building in Today's China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- Minxin Pei. *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008)
- Andrew Hall Wedeman, *Double Paradox: Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012)
- Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* (New York: Harper, 2010).
- Maria Edin. "State Capacity and Local Agent Control in China: CCP Cadre Management from a Township Perspective." *The China Quarterly* 173 (March 2003): 35–52

### Week 4: Elite politics

Tuesday, April 22, 2025

- Shih, Victor C. 2022. *Coalitions of the Weak: Elite Politics in China from Mao's Strategem to the Rise of Xi*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cheek, Timothy. 2024. "Xi Jinping's Counter-Reformation: The Reassertion of Ideological Governance." In *The Xi Jinping Effect*, edited by Ashley Esarey and Rongbin Han, 49–69. University of Washington Press.

#### Further reading

- Fewsmith, Joseph. 2021. *Rethinking Chinese Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Victor C. Shih, *Factions and Finance in China: Elite Conflict and Inflation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

### Week 5: Information

Tuesday, April 29, 2025

- Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- Carter, Erin Baggott, and Brett L. Carter. 2023. *Propaganda in Autocracies: Institutions, Information, and the Politics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) [selected chapters, TBD]
- Wallace, Jeremy L. 2022. *Seeking Truth and Hiding Facts: Information, Ideology, and Authoritarianism in China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [selected chapters, TBD]

### Further reading

- Ghosh, Arunabh. 2020. *Making It Count: Statistics and Statecraft in the Early People's Republic of China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mary Gallagher and Blake Miller, "Who Not What: The Logic of China's Information Control Strategy," manuscript (2019).
- Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (May 2013): 1–18.
- Martin Dimitrov, "The Political Logic of Media Control in China," *Problems of Postcommunism* 64: 3-4 (2017), 121–127.
- Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- Susan L. Shirk, *Changing Media, Changing China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

## **Week 6: Contention, civil society, and their adversaries**

### Tuesday, May 6, 2025

- Cai, Yongshun, and Chih-Jou Jay Chen. 2022. *State and Social Protests in China*. Cambridge Elements. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Brien, Kevin J. 2023. "Neither Withdrawal nor Resistance: Adapting to Increased Repression in China." *Modern China* 49 (1): 3–25.
- Chen, Dan, and Gengsong Gao. 2023. "The Transgressive Rhetoric of Standup Comedy in China." *Critical Discourse Studies* 20 (1): 1–17.
- Lee, Ching Kwan, and Zhang Yonghong. 2013. "The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China," *American Journal of Sociology* 118(6): 1476-1508.

### Further reading

- Diana Fu, *Mobilizing without the Masses: Control and Contention in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)
- Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010), chapters 1–3
- Deng, Yanhua and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters," *The China Quarterly* 215 (September 2013): 533–52.
- Andrew G. Walder, "Unruly Stability: Why China's Regime Has Staying Power," *Current History*, 108/719 (September 2009), 257-63
- Yu Jianrong, "Reassessing Chinese Society's 'Rigid Stability'," translated by Jason Todd, accessed on The China Story web site
- Jessica Teets, *Civil Society Under Authoritarianism: The China Model* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014)
- Anthony Spires, "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
- Karla W. Simon, *Civil Society in China: The Legal Framework from Ancient Times to the New Reform Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- Timothy Hildebrandt, *Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- Andrew C. Mertha, *China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008.)
- Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007)
- Frederic Wakeman, Jr., "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture," *Modern China*, 19/2 (April 1993), 108-38.

## Week 7: Politics at the village and neighborhood level

Tuesday, May 13, 2025

- Qiao, Shitong. 2025. *The Authoritarian Commons: Neighborhood Democratization in Urban China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Rozelle, Scott, and Natalie Hell. 2020. *Invisible China: How the Urban-Rural Divide Threatens China's Rise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). [selected chapters, TBD]
- Deng, Kai, David Demes, and Chih-Jou Jay Chen. 2024. "Xi Jinping's Surveillance State: Merging Digital Technology and Grassroots Organizations." In *The Xi Jinping Effect*, edited by Ashley Esarey and Rongbin Han, 153-79. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

### Further reading

- Daniel C. Mattingly, *The Art of Political Control in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
- Ben Hillman, *Patronage and Power: Local State Networks and Party-State Resilience in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014)
- Lily L. Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy: How Solidary Groups Provide Public Goods in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
- Graeme Smith, "The Hollow State: Rural Governance in China," *The China Quarterly*, 203 (2010), 601-18.
- Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Revolution, Resistance, and Reform in Village China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).
- Q. Forrest Zhang and John Donaldson. "From Peasants to Farmers: Peasant Differentiation, Labor Regimes, and Land-Rights Institutions in China's Agrarian Transition," *Politics & Society*, 38/4 (2010), 458-489
- Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: Revolution to Globalization* (3rd edn.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

## Week 8: Political economy

Tuesday, May 20, 2025

- Yuen Yuen Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016)
- Pearson, Margaret M., Meg Rithmire, and Kellee Tsai. 2023. *The State and Capitalism in China*. Cambridge Elements. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Further reading

- Barry J. Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Adaptation and Growth*, 2 edition (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2018).
- Kellee S. Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).
- Mary E. Gallagher, *Contagious Capitalism: Globalization and the Politics of Labor in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)
- Roselyn Hsueh, *China's Regulatory State: A New Strategy for Globalization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011)
- Dali Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan: Market Transition and the Politics of Governance in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004)
- Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- Pun Ngai and Jenny Chan, "Global Capital, the State, and Chinese Workers: The Foxconn Experience," *Modern China*, 38/4 (2012), 383-410
- Eric Thun, *Changing Lanes in China: Foreign Direct Investment, Local Governments, and Auto Sector Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- Scott Kennedy, *The Business of Lobbying in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- Henry Sanderson and Michael Forsythe, *China's Superbank* (Singapore: John Wiley and Sons, 2013)
- Margaret M. Pearson, "The Business of Governing Business in China: Institutions and Norms of the Emerging Regulatory State," *World Politics*, 57/2 (2005), 296-322
- William Hurst, *The Chinese Worker after Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

## **Week 9: Policymaking**

Tuesday, May 27, 2025

- Ma, Xiao. 2022. *Localized Bargaining: The Political Economy of China's High-Speed Railway Program* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).
- Heilmann, Sebastian. 2011. "Policy-Making through Experimentation: The Formation of a Distinctive Policy Process." In *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, edited by Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, 62–101. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Wang, Shaoda, and David Y. Yang, "Policy Experimentation in China: The Political Economy of Policy Learning," paper, May 21, 2024

Further reading

- Teets, Jessica C., and William Hurst, eds. 2014. *Local Governance Innovation in China: Experimentation, Diffusion, and Defiance* (London: Routledge).
- Andrew Mertha, "Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process." *The China Quarterly* (2009): 995-1012.

## **Week 10: Contested peripheries**

Tuesday, June 3, 2025

- Byler, Darren. 2021. *In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony*. New York, NY: Columbia Global Reports.
- Millward, James A. 2020. "Qing and Twentieth-Century Chinese Diversity Regimes." In *Culture and Order in World Politics*, edited by Andrew Phillips and Christian Reus-Smit, 71–92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, Ching Kwan. 2022. *Hong Kong: Global China's Restive Frontier*. Cambridge Elements. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Further reading

- Hung, Ho-fung. 2022. *City on the Edge: Hong Kong under Chinese Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ho, Ming-sho. 2019. *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bovingdon, Gardner. 2010. *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*. New York: Columbia University Press.