The Politics of China

New York University
Graduate Program in Politics
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Course Introduction

China is the world’s most populous country (1.3 billion people) and a state that encompasses one of the world’s oldest continuous civilizations (approximately 2,800 years). It is the last major communist state, the world’s fastest growing economy, and its most closely-watched emerging international power. In addition to its importance for the world, China is also important for political science. The mixture of Marxist ideology, Chinese culture, and economic boom have created a rich laboratory for the study of politics, one in which theories of economic and political development are being fundamentally recast. If these are not reasons enough to study the politics of China, one can offer another: it is fun. China’s politics are tumultuous, unpredictable, and Baroque in their own way. Within the scope of a single day, the current general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu Jintao, will appear in a finely-tailored business suit to meet with foreign investors, and then don a drab-green military tunic for a meeting on thought unification. It is a country that, despite its image of timelessness, saw five forceful regime changes in the 20th century (in 1911, 1928, 1949, 1976, and 1989) and is almost certain to see another this century. The aim of this course is to encourage and stimulate an interest in the politics of China. By the end of this course, you should be able to offer an intelligent assessment of the politics of China. You should be able to compare and contrast China’s political experience with that of other countries.

Course Outline

This course is designed to cover the most pressing and recurrent issues in the politics of China. We begin by considering competing theories of China’s politics that will animate our discussions throughout. That is followed by four weeks on the basic historical, social, institutional, and ideological settings of China’s politics. After that, there are seven weeks of looking at particular issue areas. The penultimate week considers the evolutionary future of China’s politics. In the concluding class we will summarize the course and consider China’s politics in a comparative setting.

Week 1: Theories of China’s Politics
Week 2: Political History and the Politics of History
Week 3: Society and Social Change
Week 4: Ideology and the Party
Week 5: Institutions
Week 6: Elite Politics
Week 7: Popular Politics and Legitimacy
Week 8: Economic Policy and Political Economy
Week 9: Social Policy
Week 10: Human Rights
Week 11: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang
Week 12: Foreign Policy
Week 13: Political Reform and China’s Future
Week 14: Conclusions

Course Requirements and Grading

- Class attendance (15%)
- Class participation (15%)
- Class presentation (10%)
- Two Review Papers (30% each)

The grading of this course is designed to encourage students to be regular, active participants in the class and diligent readers of the course materials. Regular attendance is mandatory. Participation is marked subjectively, based on the quantity and quality of student interventions in class discussions throughout the course. Students will present a five to ten-minute summary and critique of one of the readings in one of the weeks, which they will be able to choose. Finally, students will write two critical review articles of 10 to 15 pages each based on any selected readings from the course, essays that reflect both the readings themselves as well as the discussion and critical comments of our class. The first will be due at mid-term and the second at the end of term. The grading of these papers will follow the following definitions.

A+ Exceptional; significantly exceeds the highest expectations.
A Outstanding; meets the highest standards.
A- Excellent; meets very high standards.
B+ Very good; meets high standards.
B Good; meets most of the standards.
B- More than adequate; shows reasonable command of the material.
C+ Acceptable; meets basic standards.
C Acceptable; meets some of the basic standards.
C- Acceptable, while falling short of basic standards in several ways.
D Minimally acceptable; lowest passing grade.

Background Readings and Films

It is helpful to approach the study of China having immersed oneself in some of the many examples of great writing and film-making from China. Here are a few suggestions.

**Novels**
Lao She (1999 (orig. 1926-1966)). *Blades of Grass: The Stories of Lao She*. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press. – persecuted to death in the Cultural Revolution, Lao wrote some of China’s most earthy and elegiac prose
Wei Hui (2001). *Shanghai Baby (Shanghai Beibei)*. New York, Pocket Books. – a look at crass life in the big city

**Memoirs**
Dai Qing (2005). *Tiananmen Follies: Prison Memoirs and Other Writings*. Norwalk, CT, EastBridge. – female journalist and gadfly of the regime recalls her days in prison

**Reportage**

**History**

**Documentary Films**
Antony Thomas (2006). *The Tank Man*. – China in an age of economic openness and political repression

**Feature Films**
Chen Kaige (1993). *Farewell My Concubine (Ba Wang Bie Ji)*. – historical sweep of China’s bloody 20th century
Zhang Yang (1999). *Shower (Xi Zao)*. – the stresses of modernity on family and friends at one of Beijing’s last great bathhouses
Zhang Yimou (1999). *Not One Less (Yi Ge Dou Bu Neng Shao)*. – rural poverty mixed with guerilla filming techniques

**Required Readings**

**Course Texts (all in paperback)**

**Course Reader**
A course reader will be available containing the readings marked [r].

**Weekly Readings**

**Week 1: Theories of China’s Politics**


**Week 2: Political History and the Politics of History**

Saich: Ch.2, Ch.3

Gilley: 15-26, 219-226


**Week 3: Society and Social Change**

Saich: 1-11

Gilley: 43-50, 68-77, 216-219


Week 4: Ideology and the Party

Saich: Ch. 4

Dickson, Bruce. Dilemmas of Party Adaptation: The CCP’s Strategies for Survival. Gries/Rosen: 141-158


[r] Constitution of the Communist Party of China, General Program (excerpts)

Week 5: Institutions

Saich: 121-145, Ch.6, 180-202

Gilley: 86-94, 158-169


Week 6: Elite Politics

Saich: 145-154, 206-212, 329-337

Gilley: 55-59


Week 7: Popular Politics and Legitimacy
Saich: 202-213, Ch. 8
Gilley: 194-198
Shue, Vivienne. Legitimacy Crisis in China?. Gries/Rosen: 24-49

Week 8: Economic Policy and Political Economy
Saich: Ch. 9
Gilley, 37-43, 60-68, 201-209

Week 9: Social Policy
Saich: 12-24, Ch. 10
Week 10: Human Rights


Week 11: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang

Gilley: 52-53, 169-172, 198-200, 237-241


Week 12: Foreign Policy

Saich: Ch. 11

Gilley: 50-55, 77-82, 227-237


Week 13: Political Reform and China’s Future

Saich: 342-347

Gilley: Ch. 1, 151-158, 172-194, 243-248


**Week 14: Conclusion**

(no readings)