

SOSC1510 Politics through Film
Fall 2026

Friday 3pm—5:50pm

Room: 6573

(No. of Credits: 4, no pre or co-requisites)

Instructor: Professor Yue HOU (Associate Professor, Division of Social Science)
Office Hour: Friday 2:00-3:00pm or by appointment (office 3348)

TA: XXX (@connect.ust.hk)

Office Hour: Wednesday 3-4pm or by appointment
(Room 3001-3 Lift 4)

Weekly Film Showing: Room X, Sunday 7:00pm

This version: Aug 15, 2026

This is a preliminary syllabus; both the content and the order of readings and materials might change prior to the first day of class.

Course Description

Films provide a unique perspective to help us view political, economic, social, and cultural issues. Films also transport viewers into the real world and back in history. This course will pair films with readings that provide political science theories as well as relevant social and political context. In most weeks, you are expected to view one film carefully and complete one reading.

We will explore some of these topics and themes in political science together: state and power; non-competitive elections; democratization; information control and repression; economic reform; etc. Throughout the course, we will also build empirical knowledge about the politics of particular regimes.

Readings and Screenings

- All required reading materials will be uploaded on Canvas.
- Film showing: Our course TA will arrange a showing **on Sunday evenings** on campus. If you have access to a given film, you are welcome to watch it on your own. If you have seen a film before, you are still expected to watch it again right before class. You are required to finish viewing each week's film *before class*.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) this course gives students an opportunity to

- Understand foundational concepts in social science
- Analyze how institutions and history shape politics and public policy today
- Appreciate how films reflect politics and the larger society
- Observe political phenomenon both locally and internationally using an analytical lens

Warning: Some of the films we watch contain disturbing images, violence and other subjects you might find uncomfortable. If you are a freshman, younger than your cohort mates, have other concerns or simply feel uncomfortable, please consult with the instructor and/or the TA.

Assignment, Assessment and Grading

Class participation (15%), Group Presentations (10% news +15% film +15% reading), Final Project (30%), Editorial (15%).

Late assignments will be penalized one third of a grade (e.g., from A- to B+) for every 24 hours.

- **Attendance and Participation**

Regular class attendance is essential. We will hand out a sign-in attendance sheet at the beginning of each class. Given that there may be times when you are unable to attend class (for whatever reason—excused or unexcused), you may **miss one class** over the course of the semester without incurring any penalty. You should not miss the weeks you are scheduled for presentations. If you will be missing more than one class, please talk to the course TA.

This is a **discussion-intensive** course and active participation is required for this course. Participation includes both regular attendance in class and thoughtful contribution to in-class discussion. Thoughtful contribution can only be achieved by completing required readings and carefully viewing the required film prior to class.

After our second meeting, you will be assigned to a group. You will complete the following tasks with your group members.

- **Group Presentation 1 – News report**

In each week, one group will discuss one piece of news that is relevant to the topic of that week in any part of the world. This presentation should be no more than 10 minutes.

- Group Presentation 2 – Film

Each group will choose one topic/film to present in class. The presentation should start with a brief description of the context of the film (e.g., For *The Lives of Others*, what was the political system like in East Germany right before 1990?), followed by a **short** synopsis of the film (everyone should have watched the film already so no need for a long summary).

The focus of the presentation should be analytical, and the presenter should focus on the theme of the week (e.g., surveillance, media and censorship for *The Lives of Others*). Below are a few questions that the presenter can try to address, but you should feel free to raise any question or topic you find relevant or interesting.

This presentation should be no more than 25 minutes.

Some questions:

- What is the film's main message regarding the political context?
- How much of the film is about that particular country? How much of it is about politics in general? How much of it is about human nature?
- How does film compare to other ways of understanding politics? What unique perspectives does this film bring to understand that specific context?
- Can we understand certain aspects of Asian politics through the lens of these films?
- Which part in the film left the strongest impression in you?

- Group Presentation 3 – Reading

Each group will present one reading in class. The required reading, paired with the film, is not always about the same country depicted in the film, but it touches on the same issue/theme listed on the agenda below. The readings will introduce you to state-of-the-art social science research, and the instructor has chosen these readings based on their innovative research design.

The presentation should (i) clearly and briefly summarize the main claims made in the reading, (ii) discuss how the reading is linked to the film. You do not need to get into the technical details of the reading—our goal is to understand its main message. Do not worry about the “identification strategy” or “regression results,” although we can talk about those in class if you are interested.

This presentation should be no more than 25 minutes.

- Final Group Project – A Short Film

Your final group project will be a **five to ten minutes** short film project that delves into any topic that is relevant to the content of our course. For example, it could be a short film about politics on HKUST campus (e.g., race and ethnicity on campus, student elections), a video about

local HK social issue (e.g., inequality, symbolic politics, local election, etc.), or an international political issue that you would like to discuss.

Individual Assignment:

- Editorial: Each student will write an op-ed (an opinion piece) on a contemporary topic regarding the politics of Asia. For example, “Hong Kong budget: city must continue to resist magic money temptation” by Mike Rowse, appeared on *the South China Morning Post*, or “China’s Property Market to see short-term boom” by Zhang Dawei appeared on the *Caixin Global*, would qualify. The editorial is aimed for a major outlet such as the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), *Caixin*, the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*.

You can turn this assignment in as early as you wish, but **no later than December 1st**.

Grading System: A+ (98-100%); A (93%-97%); A- (90%-92%); B+ (87-89%); B (83-86%); B- (80-82%); C+ (77-79%); C (73-76%); C- (70-72%); D (60-69%); F (0-59%)

Final Grade Descriptors:

- A (Excellent): Demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of subject matter and significant creative thinking. Exhibits a high capacity for scholarship and collaboration.
- B (Good): Shows good understanding of the subject matter and the ability to analyze issues. Displays high motivation to learn and the ability to work effectively with others.
- C (Satisfactory): Possesses adequate knowledge of subject matter and some capacity for analysis and critical thinking. Shows effort to achieve learning goals.
- D (Marginal Pass): Has threshold knowledge of subject matter and the ability to make judgments. Shows some effort to achieve learning goals.
- F (Fail): Demonstrates insufficient understanding of the subject matter. Exhibits minimal effort and does not meet the threshold requirements for the course.

Policy regarding AI tools

We encourage you to use generative AI tools to copyedit written assignments and presentation scripts, but you are prohibited from using AI tools to generate your presentation scripts and the content of other assignments. The assignments that you present and turn in must be your original work. If the instructor and the course TA suspect that your work might be generated by generative AI tools, the burden will be on you to prove that your work is original.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission/completion. Feedback on assignments will include strengths/weakness of your work

and areas for improvement. Students with further questions should consult the course TA within the same week, and if not satisfied, make an appointment with the instructor.

Resubmission Policy

You may resubmit your op-ed if you submit your first version by **November 1st** so that we have enough time to grade and to provide feedback. Your new grade for resubmission could be higher or lower than your original grade and will be final.

Agenda

All readings listed here are required unless noted otherwise.

9/4 Introduction & Housekeeping

9/11 Concept and Definitions

- Short film: Ruka/The Hand (1965), 18min
 - Context: Czechoslovakia

Definitions

- Gandhi, Jennifer. 2008. *Political Institution under Dictatorship*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1. (focus on definitions of dictatorship)
- Przeworski, Adam. 2004. "Democracy and economic development", Mansfield & R. Sisson (Eds.), *The evolution of political knowledge. democracy, autonomy, and conflict in comparative and international politics* (2004). Focus on page 1-3 on definitions of democracy and non-democracy.

9/18 State and Power

- Film: The Lives of Others (2006)
 - Context: East Germany
 - UST link: <https://lbdiscover.hkust.edu.hk/bib/991009228189703412>
- Reading: Kern, Holger and Jens Hainmueller. 2017. "Opium for the Masses: How Foreign Media can Stabilize Authoritarian regime" *Political Analysis*.

9/25 Inequality

- Film: Drifting 濁水漂流 (2021)
 - UST Link: <https://lbdiscover.hkust.edu.hk/bib/991013053228803412>
 - Context: Hong Kong

- Reading: Piketty Thomas and Li Yang. 2022. “Income and Wealth Inequality in Hong Kong, 1981-2020: The Rise of Pluto-Communism” *The World Bank Economic Review* 36(4).

10/2 Censorship

- Film: Jafar Panahi’s Taxi (2015)
 - Context: Iran
 - UST Link: <https://lbdiscover.hkust.edu.hk/bib/991009635199703412>
- Reading: Esberg, Jane. 2020. “Censorship as Reward: Evidence from Pop Culture Censorship in Chile.” *American Political Science Review*.

10/9 Election

- Film: No (2012)
 - Context: Chile under Pinochet
 - UST link: <https://lbdiscover.hkust.edu.hk/bib/991009551129703412>
- Reading: Peisakhim, Leonid, Arturas Rozenas, and Sergey Sanovich. 2020. “Mobilizing Opposition Voters Under Electoral Authoritarianism: A Field Experiment in Russia” *Research and Politics*.

10/16 Socialism & Symbolic Politics

- Film: Hibiscus Town (1986) 芙蓉镇
 - UST link: <https://lbdiscover.hkust.edu.hk/bib/991009259689703412>
 - Context: Pre-reform China
- Reading: Rozenas, Arturas and Vlasenko, Anastasiia. 2022. “The Real Consequences of Symbolic Politics” *Journal of Politics*.

10/23 Corruption

- Film: Leviathan (Russia 2014)
 - Context: Russia
 - UST link: <https://lbdiscover.hkust.edu.hk/bib/991009605799703412>
- Reading: Fisman, Raymond and Edward Miguel. 2007. “Corruption, norms, and legal enforcement: Evidence from diplomatic parking tickets” *Journal of Political Economy*.

10/30 Race and Ethnicity

- Film: Do the right thing (1989)
 - Context: United States
 - UST link: <https://lbdiscover.hkust.edu.hk/bib/991009095859703412>
- Reading: Fryer and Levitt. 2004. “The Causes and Consequences of Distinctively Black Names” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*

11/6 Violence

- Film: The act of killing (2012) (TRIGGER WARNING – violence)
 - Context: Indonesia under Sukarno
 - UST link: <https://lbdiscover.hkust.edu.hk/bib/991009555519703412>
- Reading: Hsieh, C.T., E. Miguel, D. Ortega and F. Dodriguez. 2011. “The Price of Political Opposition: Evidence from Venezuela’s Maisanta” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*.

11/13 Resistance

- Film: Les Misérables (2012)
 - Context: France
 - UST Link: <https://lbdiscover.hkust.edu.hk/bib/991009514189703412>
- Reading: Cantoni, Davide, David Yang, Noam Yuchtman and Y Jane Zhang. 2019. “Protest as Strategic Game: Experimental Evidence from Hong Kong’s Antiauthoritarian Movement” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*.

11/20 Final Project Day: Meet with your group to finalize your project

11/27 Final project presentation and award ceremony