

SOSC 4600 Understanding Chinese Politics
(2026 Spring)

Lecturer:
Yongshun Cai

Office Hours:
Tues. 3:00 -5:00 pm
(or by appointment)

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Course Description:

This course discusses selected topics concerning contemporary Chinese topics after 1949. It covers major events and developments over the past seventy years, including the creation and dismantling of the commune system, fiscal reform, industrial restructuring, and the rise of new social media. The course aims to introduce to students not only political development in China but also theoretical approaches to analyzing the issues that have influenced social, political, and economic development in China since the Communist Party came to power.

Expected Learning Outcomes:

- 1) to understand the economic and political developments in China before the economic reform in the late 1970s.
- 2) to understand the economic and political rationales behind China's reform and openness.
- 2) to understand the causes of China's economic success and political development; and
- 3) to understand the dynamics of socioeconomic changes in China and their implications for China's future development.

Requirements:

1. Class participation and question submission: (10 + 10)%
All the readings are available on the course Website. Students are expected to complete the assigned readings and submit a question on each of the required readings. The comments or questions should be sent to my TA Xinzhuo Huang at xhuangcb@connect.ust.hk before 5:00 pm Wednesday afternoon.
2. Two open-book in-class assessments (40%): essay questions
 - a. Mid-term assessment (20%)
 - b. Final assessment (20%)
3. Term paper (research paper)/group project: (40%)
Each student will need to write a research paper on an issue related to what has been discussed in this course. A joint paper by two students is encouraged, and the two students should agree upon their respective responsibility before they start to work on the paper.

Seminars

Readings with * are optional

1. Introduction

William Joseph, "Studying Chinese Politics," in William Joseph (ed.), *Politics in China: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 1-37.

2. Understanding Rural China

Lucy Huang. 1976. "The Communes in People's Republic of China: Retrospect and *International Review of Modern Sociology*, 6 (1): pp. 189-200

*Frederick Teiwes, "Mao Zedong in Power (1949-1976), in Joseph (ed.), *Politics in China*, pp. 76-100.

3. Institutional Background of Economic Reform

1. Jonathan Spence, "Introduction to Cultural Revolution." <http://spice.stanford.edu>

2. Frederick Teiwes, "Mao Zedong in Power (1949-1976)," in Joseph (ed.), *Politics in China*, pp. 100-120.

*Jennifer Dowland, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Historiographical Study" (manuscript 2004; a review of studies on the Cultural Revolution).

4. Reform and the Dismantling of the Commune system

Xu Zhun. 2013. "The Political Economy of De-collectivization in China," *Monthly Review* 65(1):17-35

*Bruce Gilley, "Deng Xiaoping and His Successors," in Joseph (ed.), *Politics in China*, pp. 124-141.

5. The 1994 Fiscal Reform and its Impact

Shaoguang Wang, "China's 1994 Fiscal Reform: An Initial Assessment," *Asian Survey*, vol. 37, no. 9 (1997), pp. 801-817.

* Eun Kyong Choi, "The Politics of Central Tax Collection in China since 1994: local collusion and political control," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 25, no. 97 (2016), pp. 146–159.

6. State-owned Enterprise and Industrial Restructuring

Yongshun Cai, *State and Laid-off Workers in Reform China*, Chapter 2.

* William Hurst and Kevin J. O'Brien, "China's Contentious Pensioners," *The China Quarterly*, vol. 170 (2002), pp. 345 – 360.

7. Mid-term Exam

Open-book, essay questions (week 1-6).

8. Institutions and Economic Growth

Xinhua Jian and Jiang Yu. 2019. “The fluctuations of China’s economic growth since the reform and opening up and the rational countermeasures.” *China Political Economy* 2, pp. 225-235.

*Montinola, Gabriella, Yingyi Qian, and Barry R. Weingast. 1995. “Federalism, Chinese Style: The Political Basis for Economic Success in China.” *World Politics* 48(1): 50–81.

*Li, Hongbin, and Li-An Zhou. 2005. “Political Turnover and Economic Performance: The Incentive Role of Personnel Control in China.” *Journal of Public Economics* 89(9–10): 1743–62.

9. State-business Relations in China

Dickson, Bruce, “Integrating Wealth and Power in China: The Communist Party’s Embrace of the Private Sector.” *China Quarterly*, no. 192 (2007): 827–54.

*Changdong Zhang, “A Fiscal Sociological Theory of Authoritarian Resilience,” *Sociological Theory*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2017), pp. 39-63.

10. Social Conflict and Political Participation

Yongshun Cai, “Power Structure and Regime Resilience: Contentious Politics in China,” *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2008), pp. 411-432.

*Kevin O’Brien, “Rightful resistance in China,” *World Politics*, vol. 49, no. 1 (1996), pp. 31-55.

11. New social Media in China

Zhou, Xueguang. 2020. “Social Media and Governance in China.” In *Fateful Decisions: Choices That Will Shape China’s Future*, eds. Thomas Fingar and Jean C. Oi. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 128–48.

*Yongshun Cai and Titi Zhou, “Online Political Participation in China: Local Government and Differentiated Response,” *China Quarterly*, no. 238 (2019), pp. 331-352.

*Xiaokun Wu, “Online public opinion in China: Topics and dynamics of contention,” in Lisheng Dong, Kánsper Kriesi, and Daniel Kubler (eds.), *Urban Mobilizations and new Media in Contemporary China* (UK: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 33-47.

12. Political development of China

Andrew Walder, “China’s National Trajectory.” In *Fateful Decisions: Choices That Will Shape China’s Future*, eds. Thomas Fingar and Jean C. Oi (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 335–57.

*An Chen, “Capitalist Development, entrepreneurial class, and democratization in China,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 117, no. 3 (2002), pp. 401-422.

*Wang, Changjiang. 2014. “Transition from a Revolutionary Party to a Governing Party.” In *China’s Political Development: Chinese and American Perspectives*, eds. Kenneth G. Lieberthal, Cheng Li, and Keping Yu. Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 73–92. (*Comment by Larry Diamond*, 93-102)

13. Dealing with Economic Issues

Liu, Adam, Jean Oi and Yi Zhang. 2022. “China’s local government debt: the grand bargain.” *China Journal* 87 (1), 40–71.

Final Exam

Open-book, essay questions (week 8-13).

Assessments:
Summary Table

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Question submission	10	
Class participation	10	
First in-class assessment	20	Week 7
Second in-class assessment	20	Week 13
Term paper	40	May 22, 2026

1. Question submission and class participation

Students are expected to submit one or more questions before class (i.e., before Thursday evening) per week. They are also expected to participate in class group discussion per week.

2. First in-class assessment

The first in-class assessment will be conducted in class in the 7th week. Students will answer two out of three essay questions based on materials covered between Week 1 and Week 6. It is an open-book exercise.

3. Second in-class assessment

The first in-class assessment will be conducted in class in the 13th week. Students will answer two out of three essay questions based on materials covered between Week 8 and Week 13. It is an open-book exercise.

4. Term paper

Students are expected to complete a group research project (i.e., two students). The paper should address an (economic, political, or social) issue, or a puzzle related to contemporary China and present an explanation of the issue with evidence.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Question submission and class discussions	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3, ILO4]	This task assesses students' knowledge and understanding of China's socioeconomic and political situations before the reform (ILO1); the rational for reform (ILO2), and the dynamics of China's socioeconomic and political development (ILO3 and ILO4).
First in-class assessment	ILO1, ILO2	This task assesses students' understanding of the background of China's reform and reform measures (ILO1; ILO2).

Second in-class assessment	ILO3; ILO4	This task assesses students' understanding of the causes for China's economic growth and political development after reform and openness started (ILO3; ILO4).
Final exam	IL01; ILO2; ILO3; ILO4]	This task assesses students' understanding of China's development history based on their own research (ILO1; ILO2; ILO3; ILO4). Depending on their research topic, students' focus can be different

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Grading Rubrics

	Understanding context and concepts	Application of concepts and analysis
Excellent	Have a very clear understanding of the socioeconomic and political developments in contemporary China.	Have a very clear understanding of different explanations of and theories on socioeconomic and political changes in China.
Good	Have a clear understanding of the socioeconomic and political developments in contemporary China.	Can understand well different explanations of and theories on socioeconomic and political changes in China.
Satisfactory	Know the socioeconomic and political developments in contemporary China.	Can understand reasonably well different explanations and theories about the socioeconomic and political developments in contemporary China.
Marginal	Have a basic knowledge about the socioeconomic and political developments in contemporary China.	Understand different explanations and theories about the socioeconomic and political developments in contemporary China.

Fail	Fail to understand the socioeconomic and political developments in contemporary China.	Unable to understand different explanations and theories about the socioeconomic and political developments in contemporary China.
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Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates a deep understanding of socioeconomic and political issues in China. Exhibits excellent critical thinking skills in understanding and analysing socioeconomic and political issues using relevant theoretical frameworks and concepts. Effectively communicates complex ideas about discussed topics.
B	Good Performance	Shows good knowledge and understanding of the main issues, concepts, theories, and ability to analyse and evaluate issues. Shows good critical thinking skills in understanding and analysing socioeconomic and political issues using relevant theoretical frameworks.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Shows an adequate understanding of the main issues, concepts, theories, and ability to analyse and evaluate issues. Displays satisfactory critical thinking skills in understanding and analysing socioeconomic and political issues using relevant theoretical frameworks. May lack depth in analysis and application.
D	Marginal Pass	Has basic knowledge of the main issues, concepts, theories, and ability to analyse and evaluate issues. Shows limited critical thinking skills in analysing socioeconomic and political issues. Benefits from the course and has the potential to develop in the discipline.
F	Fail	Demonstrates insufficient understanding of the main issues, concepts, theories, and ability to analyse and evaluate issues. Shows inadequate ability to think critically or analytically and exhibits minimal effort towards achieving learning goals.

Course AI Policy

No use of AI in all exams.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Feedback on assignments will include [specific details, e.g., strengths, areas for improvement]. Students who have further questions about the feedback including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Required Texts and Materials

[all readings are uploaded to the course website]

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to [Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry](#) for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.