

ANTH 5420  
Culture and Modernity in China  
Autumn 2025

Instructor: Andrew KIPNIS

Class meeting: Monday 12:30-2:15, NAH114.

Tutorial: Monday 2:30-3:15 (NAH401).

Instructor Office Hours: by appointment, NAH 405

Teaching Assistant: TBA

**Course Description:** The remarkable economic emergence of China and Asia more broadly has transformed many impoverished and largely agricultural societies into the most dynamic region of the contemporary world. China's burgeoning middle classes, rapid urbanization, time-space compression and the shift from command economies to de-regulated markets have had profound effects on people's everyday lives and the diverse cultural practices. This course offers an introduction into anthropological approaches to the study of culture, modernity and globalization in China and Asia more broadly. Relevant themes that have attracted anthropological interest include changing traditions and popular culture, adaptive custom and cosmopolitanism, migration and citizenship, identity politics and social movements as well as the distinctive and emergent forms of governance.

Drawing on a rich corpus of social theory and ethnographic research from anthropologists past and present, the course will provide students with conceptual and analytical tools to appreciate adaptive cultural practices in comparative terms, to review and appreciate the key anthropological debates and influential works in the study of modernity, and to introduce students to ethnographic approaches for researching and writing on modernity.

**Learning Outcomes:**

1. Demonstrate understanding of theories and debates around the concepts of modernity and culture, as they relate to China.
2. Demonstrate knowledge of key concepts in anthropology and its central research method - ethnography.
3. Critically utilize Chinese case studies and relevant source material when arguing analytical points.
4. Understand the relationships between processes of modernization, cultural change and cultural reproduction in China.

**Language of Instruction:** English. Some readings in Chinese will be available but are not required

## Assessment:

1. Tutorial participation/forum posts: 15%: Attendance and active participation in tutorial meetings. Posting questions and comments on readings for tutorial on blackboard. You should post twice a week (that is, speak of two of the readings, it can be in one longer post) for at least 9 weeks and the deadline for each week is Monday morning before class at 9am.

**Forum posts:** *For nine weeks of your choice, you will need to submit at least one forum post on the assigned readings (these could be either responses to your classmates' comments or your own post if you would like to discuss something different). Your posts do not have to be long—they could be as brief as two-three sentences, but they must meet the following criteria:*

- *be pertinent to the main arguments of the readings (demonstrate that you have read the texts)*
- *be meaningful and original (demonstrate that you have thought about the texts)*
- *be polite and respectful*

*The posts should be posted to the forum "Discussion Forum" on Blackboard.*

2. Take-home midterm exam: 40%: Exam questions covering the lectures and readings for the first six weeks will be passed out after the lecture on October 6. Students will be required to answer 5 questions in approximately 2000 words. Exam responses are to be double-spaced, in 12-point font and submitted via the plagiarism detection engine VERIGUIDE and use any coherent academic style for citations. Hard copies are to be turned in to the department office. The due date is Friday October 17 at 12 noon.

3. Final exam: 45%: Exam questions covering the lectures and readings for the last six weeks will be passed out on the last day of lecture, November 17. Students will be required to answer 6 questions in approximately 2400 words. Exam responses are to be double-spaced, in 12-point font and submitted via the plagiarism detection engine VERIGUIDE and use any coherent academic style for citations. Hard copies are to be turned in to the department office. The due date is Monday December 8 at 12 noon.

## Course Schedule:

**Week One:** 01 September **Introduction: Because of Inauguration, class will start one hour late, at 1:30 in NAH 114. The second hour will be held from 2:30-3:15 in NAH 401.**

- Course Introduction
- Definitions of Modernity

**Week Two:** 16 January, **Modernity**

Required Reading/film: Watch the movie "Yellow Earth" available on blackboard and read the handout about the film. One of the purposes of watching the film is to give you a feel for the way of life that existed in pre-modern China. In other words, this film is not about modernity, but its opposite.

Readings:

Kipnis, Andrew B. 2016 *From Village to City*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 1-25.

- Criticisms of the concept of Modernity

### **Week Three: 15 September, Concept of Culture**

Required Reading:

Watch the following videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGuTfNX3iH8> “What is culture and why does it matter”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaG4MOaY2ro> “Discover your own cultural identity”

Read the following newspaper article

<https://theconversation.com/not-your-prom-dress-why-a-chinese-dress-set-off-a-cultural-debate-about-identity-and-history-96020>

Last of all read the academic journal article:

Brightman, Robert. 1995. Forget Culture: Replacement, Transcendence, Relexification. *Cultural Anthropology*10(4):509-546.

Supplementary reading:

How Japan Copied American Culture and Made it Better, by Tom Downey

[https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/how-japan-copied-american-culture-and-made-it-better-180950189/?fb\\_locale=ko\\_KR&page=1](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/how-japan-copied-american-culture-and-made-it-better-180950189/?fb_locale=ko_KR&page=1)

Those who understand Cantonese or can follow Chinese subtitles may want to watch the following 15-minute video about a Hong Kong student in France:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBxCLNkjukg>

- Debates about Culture
- Criticisms of the concept of Culture

### **Week Four: 22 September, Standardization**

Required Reading: Scott, James 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp.53-83.

Al, Stephan 2014. *Villages in the City: A Guide to South China's Informal Settlements*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 1-8.

- Introduction to Zouping

- Planning and Process of Urbanization

### **Week Five: 29 September, Industrialization**

Required Reading: Kipnis, Andrew B. 2015 “For the Love (and Hate) of Factory Work” *Asian Currents*, 26 June, <http://asaa.asn.au/for-the-loveand-hateof-factory-work/>

Chang, Leslie T. 2009 *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, pp.98-115.

Pun, Ngai 1999 Becoming Dagongmei (Working girls): The Politics of Identity and Difference in Reform China. *The China Journal* (42):1-18.

- Industrialization in Zouping
- Work Unit Culture

### **Week Six: 20 February, Technology, Time-Space Compression, MIDTERM HANDED OUT**

Required Reading:

Wang, Xinyuan. 2016 *Social Media in Industrial China*, UCL Press, pp. 57-96. Pages 97-127 are also recommended as a supplementary reading. The entire book may be downloaded for free.

- Technology and Time Space Compression
- Midterm handed out at the end of class. **DUE** Friday October 17 at 12 noon.

### **Week Seven: 13 October, Modernity and Education**

Required Reading:

Dore, Ronald. 1997. *The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualifications and Development*, second edition. London: Institute of Education. Pp. 1-13, 72-83. Supplementary reading pp. 14-50.

- Education in Zouping
- Education and Modernity
- Education and Culture

### **Week Eight: 20 October, Modernity and Familial Change**

Required Readings: Yan, Yunxiang. 1997 The Triumph of Conjugal Love: Structural Transformation of Family Relations in a Chinese Village. *Ethnology* 36(3):191-209.

Jankowiak, William and Xuan Li. 2017. Emergent Conjugal Love, Mutual Affection, and Female Marital Power. In *Transforming Patriarchy: Chinese Families in the Twenty-First Century*. Santos and Harrell eds. Pp.146-162.

- Kinship and Family Structure

- Arranged versus Love Marriage

### **Week Nine: 27 October, Birth Planning, Demographic Change, Sexuality**

#### Required Readings:

Fong, Vanessa. 2002. China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters. *American Anthropologist* 104(4):1098-1106.

Engelbrechtsen, Elisabeth L. 2017. Under pressure: Lesbian-Gay Contract Marriages and their Patriarchal Bargains. In *Transforming Patriarchy: Chinese Families in the Twenty-First Century*. Santos and Harrell eds. Pp. 163-181

- Chinese Policy and Demographic Change in Zouping
- Gay and Marriage, Identities

### **Week Ten: 3 November, Development and Its Failures**

#### Required Reading:

Dikotter, Frank. 2010. *Mao's Great Famine*. New York: Walker and Co. Pp. ix-xvi; 127-141; 306-317.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pp. 27-60. Pp. 60-77 are supplementary reading.

#### Supplementary Reading (in Chinese):

杨继绳。2008. 墓碑。Hong Kong: Cosmos Books. Pp. 34-88.

- Great Leap Forward
- Watch Film: Peasant Family Happiness (possible)

### **Week Eleven: 10 November, Religion and Modernization**

#### Required Reading:

Kipnis, Andrew B. 2021. *The Funeral of Mr. Wang*, Chapter One. Pp. 1-17.

Johnson, Ian. 2017. *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao*. New York: Pantheon: 34-51; 304-317

Goossaert, Vincent and David A. Palmer. 2011. *The Religious Question in Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 1-18, 225-238.

- Religion and Modernity
- Religious Modernity in China
- Contemporary Funerals

**Week Twelve:** 17 November, **Youth and Modernity: FINAL EXAM WILL BE PASSED OUT. It is due Monday December 8 at 12 NOON.**

Required Reading:

Kipnis, Andrew B. 2016 *From Village to City*, Berkeley: University of California Press, Pp. 206-222.

Pan Xiao “Why is Life’s Road Getting Narrower and Narrower.”

Weiss, Brad. 2002. Thug Realism: Inhabiting Fantasy in Urban Tanzania. *Cultural Anthropology* 17(1):93-124. The case of Tanzania presented here creates a useful contrast with China.

- Youth and Modernity
- Youth in Zouping
- Youth and Factory Work in China
- Pass out final exam

**Week Thirteen:** 24 November: There is no lecture, tutorial or reading this week. There will be a non-mandatory 1-hour meeting to answer questions about the final. If no one raises questions, the session will end early. This session might be held via zoom, though the TA will be in the class room and allow people to join the zoom meeting there.

**FINAL EXAM DUE** Monday 8 December at 12 noon

GRADE DESCRIPTORS:

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Criteria for 1) the course and 2) for coursework</i>
A	1) Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.  2) The work has creatively synthesized course materials and key ideas in an original way. The argument is logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. Concrete evidence corresponds to statements and claims.
A-	1) Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.  2) The work synthesizes course materials and key ideas in an original way, but there are areas for improvement.
B-range	1) Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.  2) The work demonstrates a solid grasp of course materials and key ideas. There are areas for improvement with respect to building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence.
C-range	1) Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.

	2) The work shows some effort, but course materials have not been sufficiently engaged. The argument and the writing is not clear, and/or there is no evidence for statements and claims made.
D-range	1) Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.  2) The work shows little effort to engage course materials. There are major problems with clarity of argument and writing.
F	1) Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.  2) The work has failed respond to the assignment prompt.