

Chinese Culture and Society

(ANTH 2410 / UGEA 2180)

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Term 2, 2026

Instructor: [Adam LIEBMAN](#), Ph.D. (email: adamliebman@cuhk.edu.hk)

Office Hours Mondays and Wednesdays 10am-11am

Office Hours Sign-up Sheet:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tfHyi2TsXFrUE0q77Bj28XiXEpXefVy86M_6FiFSco/edit?usp=sharing

Teaching Assistant: [Xinyu LI 李欣雨](#) (email: x.Li@cuhk.edu.hk)

Meeting times/places:

Lecture: Humanities Building (NAH) 11 Th 10:30am - 12:15pm

Tutorial 1: Tsang Shiu Tim (United) 111 Th 12:30 - 1:15pm

Tutorial 2: Tsang Shiu Tim (United) 111 Th 1:30 - 2:15pm

Description

This course provides an anthropological approach to examining Chinese cultures and societies. It focuses primarily but not exclusively on the forms of Chineseness that have taken shape within the People's Republic of China since its founding in 1949. Our emphasis will thus be on shifting cultural and countercultural practices and social structure within mainland China.

The course situates contemporary China historically within the world-system and especially examines the dramatic transformations it has undergone as a result of the post-Mao reforms beginning in the late-1970s. Because the PRC has become the world's most dynamic growth-engine since these reforms were launched, the PRC Chinese experience offers itself as a case-study of the benefits, challenges, and multiplicities of so-called "modern development." The course will thus provide students the opportunity to reflect upon the contradictions existing between what is understood to be 'development' on the one hand and 'sustainability' on the other. It will also at times suspend these types of categories in seeking to approach China and Chineseness anew from bottom-up perspectives. Readings, films, lectures, and discussions will cover topics such as revolution, village life, urban space, migration, kinship and family, gender relations, religion and belief, environmental degradation, food, morality, consumption, human-animal relations, work and leisure, and more.

Language of instruction: English

Learning Outcomes:

Upon completing this course, students will be able to:

- acquire a nuanced and rich understanding of much of the multiplicity of Chinese cultures and societies.
- be acquainted with a wide range of classic and contemporary topics, themes, and theoretical frameworks in the anthropological study of Chinese cultures and societies.

- reflect upon the challenges related to inequalities, marginality, and inclusiveness based on the analysis of the People's Republic of China.
- establish their own critical perspectives on contemporary China and Chineseness

Reading materials: All readings will be posted on Blackboard.

Assignment structure and grading:

- Film responses (3@4pts each): 12%
- Expanded film response essay (i.e., final paper): 20%
- Midterm assessment (in class): 28% (two essays @10pts each + 4 short answer questions @2pts each)
- Final assessment (in class): 30% (three essays @10pts each)
- Participation: 10%

Film Responses

We will watch a number of full films and shorter videos during lectures. Following three of the full film screenings, students will be given a film response assignment to hand write in tutorials. The film responses will provide specific questions to guide critical reflection on the films. Some of the questions will guide students to make connections with course materials as well. They will be graded based on overall effort, thoughtfulness, and the extent to which responses are informed by other course materials.

Expanded film response essay

Students will choose one of their three film response papers to expand into a polished essay. The essay must be enhanced by engaging with course readings. A detailed prompt for the assignment will be provided shortly after students complete the third and final film response. It will be due during the final exam period, exact date/time TBA. Late submissions will not be accepted.

Assessments

There will be a midterm and a final assessment given in class (week 6 and week 13).

- The *midterm* will include four short questions on factual aspects of the course material through week 5 as well as 3 essay questions of which students will choose 2 to answer. We will spend sufficient time during week 5 to clarify how best to prepare for the midterm exam. Each student will be allowed to bring in an A2 sheet of paper with notes for the exam. Only one side can be filled with the notes. The other side should be left blank and can be used for planning/outlining essays during the exam. Your teaching team will check the notes and you must submit them upon submitting the exam.
- The *final* will include 4 essay questions of which students will choose 3 to answer. The questions will focus primarily in course content after the midterm but a few key aspects will draw on earlier content as well. Students will again be allowed to bring in an A2 sheet of paper with notes.

Participation

Structured writing and discussion activities will occur every week in tutorials. The best way to receive participation credit will be to be present for the tutorials and to participate fully.

Participation during interactive lectures can also supplement participation during tutorials and therefore students should strive to attend as much as possible. Being attentive, occasionally posing or answering questions, and generally staying engaged in the lecture will thus also help to satisfy participation requirements. See appendix A for more details on different ways to satisfy participation expectations.

Grading Scale

A	93+
A-	90-92.9
B+	87-89.9
B	83-86.9
B-	80-82.9
C+	77-79.9
C	73-76.9
C-	70-72.9
D+	67-69.9
D	63-66.9
D-	60-62.9
F	<60

Please note that:

A, A- grades reflect achievement of exceptionally high merit (excellent)

B+, B, B- grades reflect achievement at a level superior to the basic level (above average)

C+, C, C- grades reflect basic achievement (average)

D+, D, D- grades reflect achievement that falls short of satisfying expectations yet still warrants credit (below average)

SCHEDULE

Jan 8 (Week 1): Introducing the class

Watch in class





China: A Century of Revolution Part II The Mao Years: “Catch the Moon and the Stars” (2007), 59 min

Jan 15 (Week 2): Urban and rural revolutions


Required to read before class


 Mao, Zedong (1927). "Report on an investigation of the peasant movement in Hunan" selection (first 9 pages) **Reading questions provided**

 Chan, Anita, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger (1984). "Chen Village and Its Leaders" in *Chen Village: Revolution to Globalization*, U of California P, p.13-40. **Reading questions provided**

 Whyte, Martin King and William L. Parish (1984). "Chinese Urban Structure", in *Urban Life in Contemporary China*, U of Chicago P, p.9-26. **Reading questions provided**

Recommended

 "Introduction" (2013). In *Contemporary China: Society and Social Change*, by Tamara Jacka, Andrew B. Kipnis, and Sally Sargeson, p.6–22. Cambridge UP.

 Ruckus, Ralf (2021). *The Communist Road to Capitalism: How Unrest and Containment Have Pushed China's (R)Evolution since 1949*. PM Press. (especially Chapters 1 (p.34-55) and 2 (p.56-92))


 Hinton, William H. (1966). *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village*.


Watch in class

 *China: A Century of Revolution Part II The Mao Years: "It is Right to Rebel!"* (2007), 55 min

Jan 22 (Week 3)

Required to read before class

 Chan, Anita, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger (1984). "The New Era" in *Chen Village: Revolution to Globalization*, U of California P, p.267-287. **Reading questions provided**


 Yan, Yunxiang (1997). "The Triumph of Conjuality: Structural Transformation of Family Relations in a Chinese Village," *Ethnology* 36(3): p.191-212. **Reading questions provided**

Recommended

 *Yellow Earth* (1984)

Jan 29 (Week 4)


Required to read before class


 Osburg, John (2013). Chapter 1 in *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China's New Rich*, Stanford UP, p.1-36. **Reading questions provided**

Watch in class

 *Small Happiness: Women of a Chinese Village* (1984), 59 min
Complete corresponding **film response #1** in tutorial


Recommended

 Kipnis, Andrew B. (1996). "The language of gifts: managing *guanxi* in a north China village" *Modern China* 22(3), 285-314.


 Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui (1994). *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*. Cornell UP.

Feb 5 (Week 5)


Required to read before class

 Osburg, John (2013). Chapters 2 and 3 in *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China's New Rich*, Stanford UP, p.37-112. **Reading questions provided**

Recommended

 Osburg, John (2013). Chapter 5 in *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China's New Rich*, Stanford UP, p.143-182.

 Zheng, Tiantian (2010). Complexity of Female Sex Workers' Collective Actions in Postsocialist China, *Wagadu, A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, 8, p.34-70.


 Zheng, Tiantian (2014) Contesting Heteronormality: Recasting Same-sex Desire in China's Past and Present, *Wagadu, A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, 12, p.15-40.

Feb 12 (Week 6) Midterm exam


–Lunar New Year–

Feb 26 (Week 7)


Required to read before class


 Perry, Elizabeth and Xiaobo Lu (1997). *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. M.E. Sharpe. (selection TBA - Chapter 7?)

Watch in class

 *24 City* (2008), 112 min
Film response #2 in tutorial

Recommended

 Lee, Ching Kwan (2007). "Life After Danwei," in *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*, U of California P, p.123-153.

 Zhang, Li (2010). *In Search of Paradise: Middle Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Cornell UP.

–Reading Week–

March 12 (Week 8) Religion

Required to read before class



Johnson, Ian (2017). *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao*. Penguin Random House. Selections: p.3-15; 33-51; 304-317.

Recommended



Kipnis, Andrew B. (2021). *The Funeral of Mr. Wang: Life, Death, and Ghosts in Urbanizing China*. U California P.



Mueggler, Erik (2017). *Songs for Dead Parents: Corpse, Text, and World in Southwest China*. Chicago UP.



Rooms With Mao's Images (138 min)

March 19 (Week 9) Regimes of labor

Required to read before class



Sun, Wanning (2010). Narrating Translocality: Dagong Poetry and the Subaltern Imagination, *Mobilities* 5(3): 291-309. **Reading questions provided**



Xiang, Biao (2021). "Reproduction-driven labor migration from China" *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* 7, 34-43.



Dong, Yige (2023). "The Dilemma of Foxconn Moms: Social Reproduction and the Rise of 'Gig Manufacturing' in China" *Critical Sociology* 49(7-8), 1231-1249

Watch in class



select scenes from *Manufactured Landscapes* and [We were smart](#) (*ShaMaTe I love you*)

Recommended



Zhang, Li (2002). *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks Within China's Floating Population*. Stanford UP.



Huang, Hui (2024). "Demanding dignity for delivery drivers in China's precarious gig economy" *East Asia Forum*. [here](#)




["The 18 Year Old Assembly Line"](#)

March 26 (Week 10) Environment


Required to read before class




Liao, Yiwu (2009). "The Public Restroom Manager" in *The Corpse Walker*, Anchor, p.20-27.


 Chan, J., Selden, M., & Pun, N. (2020). Chp. 9 “Confronting environmental crisis” in *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China’s Workers*. Haymarket Books.


Watch in class

 *Plastic China* (1hr 26min)
Film response #4 in tutorial

Recommended

 Litzinger, Ralph and Fan Yang (2020). “Eco-media events in China: From yellow eco-peril to media materialism” *Environmental Humanities* 12(1), 1-22.

 Liebman, Adam (2021). “Waste politics in Asia and global repercussions” *Education about Asia* 26(1), 35-40.


 *Complicit* (2019) 89 min

April 2 (Week 11) Multispecies relations


Required to read before class

 Raffles, Hugh (2010). “Generosity (the Happy Times)” in *Insectopedia*, Vintage Books, P.74-115. **Reading questions provided**


Watch in class


 Cricket Fighting YouTube clip (<10 min), Available [here](#).


Recommended

 Hathaway, Michael J. (2022). *What a Mushroom Lives For: Matsutake and the Worlds They Make*. Princeton UP.

April 9 (Week 12)

 [Tangpingist Manifesto](#) (by an anonymous Tanpingist, 2021)

 Lin, Lili and Gullotta, Diego (2022). “Disarticulating qingnian: Chinese youth beyond ‘rising tides’ and ‘lying flat’” *Made in China Journal*:
<https://madeinchinajournal.com/2022/03/06/disarticulating-qingnian/>

 Wing-Lun, Joel (2024). “The Viral Success of Chinese Village Basketball.” *Made in China Journal*:
<https://madeinchinajournal.com/2024/10/29/the-viral-success-of-chinese-village-basketball/>

Recommended

 Brossard, Marine (2023). “Lying Flat: Profiling the Tangping Attitude” *Made in China Journal*:

<https://madeinchinajournal.com/2023/01/08/lying-flat-profiling-the-tangping-attitude/>



Wei, Casey (2024). "The involution of yabi subculture" *Made in China Journal*:
<https://madeinchinajournal.com/2024/08/06/the-involution-of-freedom-in-yabi-subculture/>



Zhang, Dino Ge (2024). "On Sinopessimism, or Junkies of Futility" *Made in China Journal*:
<https://madeinchinajournal.com/2025/08/05/on-sinopessimism-or-junkies-of-futility/>

April 16 (Week 13) Final Exam in class

**An inexhaustive list of additional recommended readings that couldn't be squeezed onto the syllabus:



Chu, Julie Y. (2014). When infrastructures attack: the workings of disrepair in China, *American Ethnologist*, 41(2), p.351-367.



Driessen, Miriam (2022). "Chinese Workers in Ethiopia Caught Between Remaining and Returning" *Pacific Affairs* 94(2).



Eat Bitter 1hr 35min



Huang, Claudia (2025). *Dancing for their lives: The pursuit of meaningful aging in urban China*, Rutgers UP.



Jacka, Tamara (2019). "Inside work: The hidden exploitation of rural women in modern China" *Made in China Journal*:
<https://madeinchinajournal.com/2019/01/12/inside-work-the-hidden-exploitation-of-rural-women-in-modern-china/>



Lee, C. K. (2018). *The specter of global China: Politics, labor, and foreign investment in Africa*. University of Chicago Press. (especially Chapter 3)



Wong, Winnie Won Ying (2017). "Speculative authorship in a city of fakes" *Current Anthropology* 58(S15).



Zhan, Yang (2018). "The Urbanisation of Rural Migrants and the Making of Urban Villages in Contemporary China." *Urban Studies* 55(7), 1525–40.

please note: the syllabus is subject to revision

Appendix A: AI policy

This course adopts CUHK's "Approach 1," detailed below.

Prohibit all use of AI tools Students are not allowed to use any AI tools in any kind of learning activity or assessment that will be counted towards students' final grade of the course, or used for evaluating students' attainment of the desired learning outcomes. Students are expected to produce their own work independently without any collaboration or use of AI tools. Such information should be spelt out clearly in the course outline or learning activity/assessment guide.

Appendix B: Academic honesty and plagiarism

Please see CUHK's policies and regulations on honesty in academic work, and the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at <https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>.

The final paper for this course will be submitted via VeriGuide, which will issue a statement that students must submit along with the final paper.

Appendix C: Participation

What does it mean to participate in class and, and even more importantly, in tutorials?

An important component of this class is discussion. There are different kinds of contributions you can make to discussion, all of which you are expected to work on over the course of the semester. None of these are possible without coming to class each session having read the assigned readings:

1. Attentively listening to discussion participants to build on what has already been said
2. Asking participants to clarify unclear contributions
3. Summarizing key ideas that have emerged during the discussion
4. Articulating an answer to a posed question
5. Raising questions that help advance discussion
6. Offering an original idea related to the topic of discussion
7. Drawing on evidence (social scientific data, personal experience, popular culture) to either support or challenge ideas
8. Constructively critiquing an idea offered in the readings or by a participant
9. Pointing out how various comments complement each other or are at odds
10. Playing "devil's advocate."