

UGEA 2334 (A) China Today 今日中国

Spring 2026

Instructor: Rui SUN 孙睿

Class time: Wednesday 2:30-5:15pm

ruisun@cuhk.edu.hk

Classroom: William M W Mong Eng Bldg 407

Office Hours: After class or by appointment

China today is a society in flux, marked by rapid transformations and striking ambivalences. How do we make sense of contradictions such as global economic prominence alongside domestic job-market instability; the contrast between “involution”/ “rat race” (*neijuan* 内卷) and “lying flat” (*tangping* 躺平); cutting-edge technological innovation paired with strict digital censorship; and the pursuit of international climate leadership amid persistent local environmental challenges? How might we read and understand China in ways that help us imagine a sustainable future for humanity—one that is inclusive, equitable, and full of possibilities? This course addresses these questions from primarily an anthropological perspective—linking macro-level change to the micro-level details of daily life—while drawing on insights from sociology, political science, cultural studies, and some of the finest journalistic and policy analyses. By exploring key themes that are salient in understanding contemporary Chinese culture and society, this course moves beyond stereotypes and simplistic narratives, providing conceptual and analytical tools to grapple with the complexities of “China today” and its global entanglements.

Language of instruction: Mandarin 中文 (English will be used when necessary or upon request)

Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this course, students will

- Become familiar with major themes in the study of contemporary Chinese culture and society
- Learn to read ethnographic writings and critically engage with the concept of anthropological relativism when analyzing social realities
- Reflect on key contradictions in contemporary China, including its relations with the socialist past
- develop the analytical skills to interpret the global political economy through the lens of Chinese local contexts

Grade Descriptors

Grade	Criteria for 1) the course and 2) for coursework
A	1) Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes. 2) The work has creatively synthesized course materials and key ideas in an original way. Observations are nuanced, the argument is logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. Concrete evidence corresponds to statements and claims. The work

	responds directly to the assignment prompt.
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 handling complexity, building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence. Response to the assignment prompt may not be sufficient.
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. Understanding of course materials and key ideas has not been demonstrated.
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.

Readings

All required and recommended readings are either posted on Blackboard or available as an eBook through the University Library.

Resources

The following books are good references for this course. They are not required texts, but we will learn some chapters excerpted from them.

- Jacka, Tamara, Andrew B. Kipnis, and Sally Sargeson. 2013. *Contemporary China: Society and Social Change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bruckermann, Charlotte, and Stephan Feuchtwang. 2016. *The Anthropology of China: China as Ethnographic and Theoretical Critique*. London: Imperial College Press.

- Latham, Kevin, ed. 2020. *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Culture and Society*. Abingdon, Oxon; Routledge.

The following websites and news outlets are good locations to read and gather stories about China today.

- The China Story 中国的故事: <https://www.thechinastory.org/>
- Sixth Tone: <https://www.sixthtone.com/>
- 端传媒 Initium Media: <https://theinitium.com>

Evaluation

Component	Weight	Description
Participation	30%	Participation includes attendance, preparation, and active engagement in classes discussions. Two pop-up quizzes will be administered randomly during the semester to assess comprehension of course content.
Midterm group presentation	30%	Students form groups of 2-3 and select one required reading from the assigned Week Four to Week Thirteen to present in a 15-20 minute session. Presentation should demonstrate collaborative reading and the ability to communicate key ideas effectively. Peer learning is a central goal.
Final take-home essay	40%	Students will write a critical essay on a topic related to contemporary China. Essays should be 1200-1500 words in English or 2500-3000 characters in Chinese. The essay needs to demonstrate thoughtful analysis, with at least three references to class content. Carefully selected direct quotes from required readings are appreciated. Proper citation is required.

Course Policies

1. Reading is a vital part of the learning experience. Students are expected to complete all required readings before class to ensure meaningful participation in discussions.
2. Students must understand how to cite sources properly and avoid plagiarism—using someone else’s ideas or words without attribution. Please review the University’s guidelines on academic honesty: www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/index.htm
3. Final take-home essays must be submitted to VeriGuide. Assignments without a signed declaration from VeriGuide will not be graded. Please visit: https://academic.veriguide.org/academic/login_CUHK.aspx

4. For the two pop-up quizzes and midterm group presentations, no extension will be granted. For the final take-home essay, late submission without documented medical, personal, or family emergencies will result in a reduction of 1/3 of a letter grade (i.e. A becomes A-; B+ becomes B).
5. In assessing the level of achievement of learning outcomes and students' performance, students are expected to produce their own work independently without any collaboration with the use of AI tools.

Weekly Schedule

Jan. 7 Week One: Introduction of the course

No Required reading

Recommended reading

- News Article: “评论：人类命运不共” Initium Media 2025
<https://theinitium.com/opinion/20250904-opinion-human-community-and-world>

Jan. 14 Week Two: Transforming society

Required reading

- Xiang, Biao. 2005. “Introduction” in *Transcending Boundaries: Zhejiangcun: The Story of a Migrant Village in Beijing*. Translated by Jim Weldon. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, pp. 1-28.

Alternative Chinese version

- 项飏. 跨越边界的社区：北京“浙江村”的生活史. 第1版. 北京市：生活·读书·新知三联书店, 2000.

Jan. 21 Week Three: Chinese dream and floating population

Required reading

- Hansen, Anders Sybrandt. 2012. “Learning the Knacks of Actually Existing Capitalism: Young Beijing Migrants and the Problem of Value.” *Critique of Anthropology* 32(4): 415–434.

Activity

- Shayan Momin: Hengdian Dreaming (2021)

Jan. 28 Week Four: Chinese only children and educational desire

Required reading

- Fong, Vanessa L. 2004. “Introduction” In *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, pp. 1-30.

Feb. 4 Week Five: Consumption, aesthetics, and the new rich

Required reading

- Zhang, Li. 2012 “Introduction” in *In Search of Paradise: Middle-class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 1-25.

Feb. 11 Week Six: Gender, sexuality and popular culture

Required reading

- Rofel, Lisa. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 1-30.

Feb. 18 No class. Happy New Year!

Feb. 25 Week Seven: Chinese family and individuals: *Neijuan* vs. *Tangping*

Required reading

- Zheng, Xuegang, Changyu Jing, Yu Liu, and Yang-Yang Zhang. 2023. "Why Are People 'Lying Flat'? Personal Relative Deprivation Suppresses Self-improvement Motivation." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 62 (2): 932–48.

Recommended reading

- 阎云翔. 2021. “为自己而活”抑或“自己的活法”——中国个体化命题本土化再思考. 探索与争鸣 10: 46–59.
<https://www.tsyzm.com/CN/Y2021/V1/I10/46>

Mar. 4 No class. Reading week.

Mar. 11 Week Eight: Ethnic minorities and the other

Required reading

- Liu, Shao-hua 2011 "A Precarious Rite of Passage in Post-reform China: Heroin Use among Itinerant Nuosu Youths." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 25(3): 395-411.

Alternative Chinese version:

- 刘绍华. 我的凉山兄弟：毒品，艾滋与流动青年(第1版). 北京：中央编译出版社，2015.

Activity

- Chio, Jenny. *Peasant Family Happiness*. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Media, 2013. Film.

March. 18 Week Nine: Religion and urban revival

Required reading

- Burchardt, Marian, and Mariske Westendorp. 2018. "The Im-Materiality of Urban Religion: Towards an Ethnography of Urban Religious Aspirations." *Culture and Religion* 19(2): 160–176.

Mar. 25 Week Ten: Digitalization and censorship

Required reading

- Wang, Erika Ningxin. 2024. "Participatory Censorship with Illusory Empowerment: Algorithmic Folklore and Interpretive Labor beyond Fandom." *Social media + Society* 10(4): n. pag.

Recommended reading

- Wang, Xinyu. 2024. "Being Global and Chinese on WeChat." *Anthropology News*, February 22, 2024.
<https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/being-global-and-chinese-on-wechat/>

Apr. 1 Week Eleven: Science, technology and ecological civilization

Required reading

- Bruckermann, Charlotte. 2025. “Imagine Air: Global Commons, ‘Ecological Civilization’, and Citizen Visions beyond Carbon Markets in China.” *Critique of Anthropology* 45(1): 25–36.

Recommended reading

- Ahlers, A. L. 2024. The Communist Party’s Steering of China’s Science, Technology, and Innovation System: Aspirations and Reality. *University of California IGCC and MERICS Policy Brief*, April
5. <https://ucigcc.org/publication/the-communist-partys-steering-of-chinas-science-technology-and-innovation-system-aspirations-and-reality/>

Apr. 8 Week Twelve: Chinese overseas and flexible citizenship

Required reading

- Deng, Grazia Ting. 2024. “1. The Paradox of Chinese Espresso.” In *Chinese Espresso: Contested Race and Convivial Space in Contemporary Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 1-35.

Apr. 15 Week Thirteen: China in the world and Conclusion

Required reading

- Hubbert, Jennifer. 2019. “Chapter 4: Conjuring Commensurability and Particularity Reconfiguring Local and Global” *China in the World: An Anthropology of Confucius Institutes, Soft Power, and Globalization*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 74-101.

Apr. 29 Final paper due