

Teaching Chinese Politics in Comparative Perspective

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Contemporary China (as well as India) poses a major challenge to social science theory, derived for the most part from the study of Western democracies. Despite having achieved the fastest rates of sustained economic growth and poverty alleviation in world history, post-Mao China remains decidedly undemocratic. (Conversely, India—its persistent poverty and relatively poor record of public goods provision notwithstanding—has retained a robust democracy.) The two biggest countries in the world defy the core claim of conventional social science wisdom positing a positive correlation between socioeconomic development and democracy. Although in many respects exceptional, China's very exceptionalism invites serious comparison with other countries. Why has the PRC's recent trajectory deviated so dramatically from mainstream social science expectations? What other cases, besides Western democracies, might productively be contrasted or compared to the seemingly unusual case of China? Equally important, what lessons drawn from the study of Chinese politics might enrich our understanding of comparative politics more broadly?

As a political scientist whose major field is comparative politics, I approach all of my teaching (and much of my research) from a comparative perspective. Over the years, some of my courses (e.g., general courses on comparative politics, state-society relations, political culture, contentious politics and the like) have included very little China material. Several other courses have compared China to a single other country. For example, early in my career I regularly taught an undergraduate lecture course in the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington contrasting the patterns of state-building in modern China and Japan. Later, in the Political Science Department of the University of California, Berkeley, I co-taught (with Ruth Berins Collier) an undergraduate seminar on labor-state relations in China and Mexico. At Harvard, I have co-taught (with Devesh Kapur) a graduate seminar entitled "Ruling the Giants: China and India Compared." The majority of my courses (e.g., "Politics and Government of China," "China's Revolutionary Traditions," "Civil Society and China" and the like) have concentrated primarily on China, but even in those courses half or more of the assigned readings are drawn from general theoretical works or studies based on non-China cases.

The course on which I will focus in this essay is a graduate seminar that I currently teach in the Harvard Department of Government entitled "China and Political Science." This is a course intended for doctoral students specializing in China/comparative politics, but which typically also enrolls Government Department doctoral students in the fields of international relations and political theory, doctoral students from other social science departments, the Law School, the Kennedy School and the School of Design, as well as a number of MA students from the interdisciplinary Regional Studies-East Asia program. Occasionally a few exceptionally well prepared and highly motivated

undergraduates are also admitted. A prerequisite for enrollment is basic familiarity with the history and politics of contemporary China (i.e., the equivalent of an undergraduate course on the history and/or politics of the PRC) and an interest in conducting an original research project on Chinese politics. Prospective students are advised that this is not really a course about Chinese politics per se, but is rather a course about *the study* of Chinese politics.

"China and Political Science" introduces students to alternative theoretical and methodological approaches in the field of domestic Chinese politics, with an eye toward assessing their respective contributions and challenges to the study of comparative politics more generally. The ultimate goal is to assist students in conceiving a research plan with significant empirical and analytical value. After an introductory session that chronicles major changes in sources, methods, and theories from the inception of the contemporary Chinese politics field in the 1950s to the present, the course proceeds thematically. The topics vary from year to year, reflecting new publications on Chinese politics as well as changing trends in the larger comparative politics field. Since the aim is to encourage a productive dialogue between the study of China and the study of other polities, the weekly themes are conceptually broad: for example, state building, comparative communism, political elites, factional politics, central-local relations, subnational comparisons, social welfare, political culture, political economy, nationalism, contentious politics, urban-rural connections, civil society, domestic-international linkages, democratization, authoritarian resilience, and so on.

Each week students read in common a book about China. They are also required each week to read a non-China book that relates to the conceptual theme for that week. Most graduate courses in political science assign journal articles or book chapters; my rationale for assigning whole books is to encourage students to reflect on the process that goes into the research and writing of a scholarly monograph. Although the weekly China reading is the same for all students, the non-China readings (which may be either general theoretical works or empirical case studies on other parts of the world) can be chosen from a lengthy list of recommendations on the syllabus or selected at the student's own discretion. For example, in a week on political elites in which Victor Shih's *Factions and Finance in China* is assigned as the required China reading, one student may choose to pair it with a theoretical overview such as Robert Putnam's *The Comparative Study of Political Elites* or Geraint Parry's *Political Elites*, while other students may select for their counterpoint book Mary Carras' *The Dynamics of Indian Political Factions* or G. William Domhoff's *Who Rules America?* Similarly, in a week on law and politics in which Mary Gallagher's *Authoritarian Legality in China* is the common reading, some students may decide to pair it with a general work such as Charles Epp's *The Rights Revolution* whereas others delve into case studies like Jodi

Finkel's *Judicial Reform as Political Insurance: Argentina, Peru and Mexico*, William Forbath's *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement*, or Alexei Trochev's *Judging Russia*.

Occasionally works by China scholars in disciplines other than political science are assigned for the required China reading (for example, Prasenjit Duara's *Culture, Power and the State* on state building, Andrew Walder's *Communist Neo-Traditionalism* on comparative Communism, or Ching Kwan Lee's *Against the Law* on contentious politics) but the majority of the required China books are by political scientists. Many are revisions of doctoral dissertations. They are chosen not only to engage a wide variety of conceptual themes, but also to illustrate a broad array of methodological approaches: archival research, interviews, surveys, content analysis, process tracing, formal modeling, online experiments, and so forth. All students are expected to come to seminar prepared to share observations and questions inspired by both China and non-China readings.

Most of the weekly seminar sessions start off with brief oral presentations by one or two students (who are designated as discussion facilitators and who consult with me in advance on what to cover) concerning the general topic under consideration for the week. Their opening presentations are intended to provide a critical and provocative overview of the topic as it has been addressed inside and outside the China field – but omitting any discussion of the common China reading for the week. We then proceed as a group to dissect the China reading, assessing its theoretical and substantive contributions and limitations with respect to the broader literature. We ask whether the China book was properly framed conceptually, whether it might more productively have engaged with a different debate in the secondary literature, whether it took full advantage of available data and appropriate methods, how future scholars might design studies that build on its insights (or challenge its findings), and so on. Nancy Hearst, the Fairbank Center Librarian, also joins a class session to introduce the holdings and new acquisitions of Harvard's contemporary China collection and to discuss trends in publishing, electronic data bases, reference materials, and the like.

Each week we ask how we might better leverage China data to address the general theme for that week in ways that reinforce, refine, or refute various arguments as they have been formulated in the broader comparative literature. We also ask which comparative cases (Western democracies? communist countries? authoritarian countries more generally? big countries regardless of regime type?) may be most illuminating for which China-specific questions. The goal is neither to force the study of China into a Procrustean bed of social science theory and methods, nor to insist on the uniqueness of the Chinese case, but to explore the untapped potential as well as the real problems and constraints of a comparative perspective. We consider not only the possibilities of comparisons with other countries, but also the opportunities for intra-China comparisons across time and space.

The writing assignments for the course consist of (1) a series of short response papers that compare, contrast and

connect China and non-China readings on the weekly themes, and (2) a longer research design submitted at the end of the semester that outlines an original research project, equivalent to a doctoral dissertation, on a significant problem in the field of Chinese politics. The research design should summarize relevant theoretical debates in both the general and China-specific secondary literatures, propose several testable hypotheses that follow logically from the literature review, describe an appropriate methodology and available sources for confirming or disconfirming the proposed hypotheses, and indicate the expected contribution of the project to major puzzles in both comparative and Chinese politics fields.

I emphasize to the class that this standard "positivist" social science research design is neither the only nor necessarily the best way to undertake a study on Chinese politics, but that it demands a level of conceptual rigor and clarity that serves to focus the mind and render more transparent the purpose and processes of one's project. Having critically dissected the approaches and arguments of a wide variety of both China and non-China books throughout the course of the semester, the final assignment is the students' opportunity to envision a study of their own that self-consciously strives to build on the contributions and avoid the pitfalls of previous work. In course evaluations, students invariably highlight the research design as one of the most worthwhile aspects of the course. Somewhat to my surprise, they report overwhelmingly that they would not wish to have had the alternative option of a research paper (which they might well have chosen instead!) as it would have exempted them from the demanding and valuable experience of thinking through the elements of a hypothesis-testing research design. Although frankly I would much prefer to spend the end of semester reading papers based on completed research rather than designs proposing future projects, I am persuaded that this approach is of greater benefit to the students. In more than a few instances over the years, the designs (after revision) served as dissertation prospectuses for what eventually evolved into outstanding books.

Teaching Chinese politics from a comparative perspective means that the instructor is often forced out of her comfort zone to try to make sense of patterns far removed in time and space from contemporary China, but I can hardly think of a more stimulating way to expand the intellectual horizons of students and instructor alike!