Chinese Culture and Society

Course description:

Over the past century, China has undergone a protracted period of extraordinary change and instability, including wars and revolutions, the founding of two modern republics, famine, reforms, and, most recently, rapidly rising levels of economic growth and inequality. While China’s growing stature and importance on the world scene has occasioned feelings of both alarm and curiosity in the West, many are largely unfamiliar with Chinese culture and society.

This course encourages students to think critically about many of the major developments in Chinese culture and society that have occurred during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with an emphasis on understanding both cultural change and continuity in China. Drawing on ethnographic material and case studies from rural and urban China over the traditional, revolutionary, and reform periods, this course examines a number of topics including family and kinship; marriage, reproduction, and death; popular religion; women and gender; the Cultural Revolution; social and economic reforms; gift exchange and guanxi networks; changing perceptions of space and place; as well as globalization and modernity. Throughout the course our discussions will focus on how an informed understanding of China’s past can help us make sense of China’s present as well as give us an inkling of where China may be headed in the future.

Required readings:


Course Requirements and Evaluation:

20% One-Page Essays (4 at 5% each)
30% Midterm Essay
  First Draft 15%
  Revised Draft 15%
30% Final Essay
20% Class Participation

Course Policies and Expectations:
One-Page Essays: For this class you will write four One-Page Essays over the course of the semester. Each essay will be based on one or more of the assigned readings for Sections 2-13 of the course. You may choose which of the sections and readings you wish to write about. One-Page Essays are due by the first class of the following section (for example, if you choose to write on a reading in Section 3 your essay will be due no later than the first class of Section 4). Each essay must have an original thesis and make use of evidence (data, quotes, examples, etc.) drawn from the readings. Each essay must fit onto one side of a standard letter-sized sheet of paper, but you may use any font size or spacing you wish (as long as your essay is legible!). You may revise each of your One-Page Essays one time and receive the higher of the two grades.

Midterm and Final Essays: Midterm and Final Essay topics will be distributed in class and posted online page several weeks before each assignment is due. You will be required to hand in a revised version of your Midterm Essay and will be graded on both your First Draft and your Final Draft. No revisions will be allowed for the Final Essay. Students are encouraged to discuss essay topics, ideas, theses, outlines, etc. with the instructor before each assignment is due.

Participation and Attendance: Class participation is an important component (20%) of your grade. Please come to each class on time, having completed any reading and/or writing assignments that are due, and ready to participate fully in class discussions and activities. Please bring hard copies of any assigned readings, along with prepared notes, questions, and comments, and be ready to share your ideas with others. To be prepared for class, you should feel comfortable with the assigned reading and be able to discuss its merits and drawbacks, i.e. have a firm grasp of what and where the author's thesis is, know the basic outline of the piece’s argument, have assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence and analysis brought to bear, and come with questions, concerns, or uncertainties. Participation and preparation will also be gauged through "pop" in-class writing responses, in which you will be asked to make critical reflections on the assigned readings. Students who repeatedly come to class unprepared to participate will be marked absent. Students who are significantly or recurrently late will be also considered absent. If you must miss a class for any reason, please notify the instructor in advance (i.e. more than 24 hours before the class you will miss) providing a reason for your absence. Students are allowed three absences per semester; every absence after your third will result in a reduction of your final grade in the course by one third a letter (a B+ grade will be lowered to a B) and your dean will be notified. Seven or more absences over the semester will result in a failing grade for the course.

Late Work: Written assignments are due in class on the day they are listed on the syllabus, unless otherwise noted. Extensions will not be granted unless there are extenuating circumstances and in any case require more than 24 hours advance notice (i.e. extensions will not be granted the night before an assignment is due for any reason). Papers will be marked down a grade for each day they are late (i.e. a B+ paper turned in a day late will receive a B).
Class schedule:

Part I. Traditional China

Section 1. Introduction to the course.

Week 1, Class 1
Course overview and self-introductions; no assigned readings.

Section 2. Family, kinship, and marriage in traditional China. Begin case study: women and the family in rural Taiwan

Week 1, Class 2

Week 2, Class 2

Week 3, Class 1

Week 3, Class 2

Section 3. Women and gender in traditional China. Finish case study: women and the family in rural Taiwan.

Week 4, Class 1

Week 4, Class 2


Week 5, Class 1

Week 5, Class 2

Section 5. Death, ritual, and mourning in traditional China.

Week 6, Class 1

Week 6, Class 2

Part II. Revolution: China under Mao


Week 7, Class 1

**Week 7, Class 2**

**Week 8, Class 1**
Film: *Morning Sun* (2003, 120 min.)

**Week 8, Class 2**
Film: *Morning Sun* (2003, 120 min.)

**Week 9, Class 1**

**Part III. Reform: moving forward, looking back**

**Section 7. Understanding China's "consumer revolution."**

**Week 9, Class 2**

**Section 8. Gifts and guanxi.**

**Week 10, Class 1**

**Section 9. Popular religion in the reform period.**

**Week 10, Class 2**


Week 11, Class 1


Week 11, Class 2

Week 12, Class 1

Week 12, Class 2
Film: Small Happiness (1984, 58 min.)

Week 13, Class 1

Section 12. Remapping space and place in reform-era China.
Week 13, Class 2

Week 14, Class 1


Week 14, Class 2

Week 15, Class 1

Section 14. Concluding discussion.

Week 15, Class 2