

Political Science 244D  
Contentious Politics in Contemporary China  
Kevin J. O'Brien

Spring 2024  
202 Social Sciences

Wednesday 12-2pm  
Office Hours: By appt. either in  
712 Social Sciences or by Zoom

**Course Description:**

Much political behavior, particularly in countries such as China, does not take place within institutionalized channels. This is partly because the Party/State aggregates preferences poorly and the popular classes often become frustrated with existing opportunities for participation. Moreover, honest elections occur only at the lowest levels -- if at all -- and many forms of political activity are forbidden. In these circumstances, how do ordinary Chinese press for attention to their grievances and for a modicum of responsiveness? And how do the authorities respond to popular activism, whether it appears on the streets or online? In this seminar, we will read recently published books and articles that bring to light ongoing debates and emerging topics in the literature on protest and repression. We will pay particular attention to issues prominent in the Xi Jinping era, including COVID lockdowns and protest; digital activism, repression and surveillance; and the outsourcing of repression. Efforts will also be made to introduce students to new methods, such as protest event analysis, and the application of social movement concepts, including emotions, protest leadership, and mobilizing structures and protest diffusion, to the China case. Finally, we will examine how protest unfolds in two social groups: workers and veterans.

**Course materials:**

All the articles and books are available at the modules tab in bCourses. If you want to buy the two books (Elfstrom and Ong) that we will be reading in full, they can be found at the usual places online.

**Course Requirements:**

2 seminar papers (30% of final grade) -- Due Monday at 5pm of the two weeks for which a student is responsible. Copies should be put on the bCourses site. Each paper (no more than 3-4 double-spaced pages) should critically engage the readings assigned for that week. Students may focus on gaps or conflicts in one or more of the readings and may bring in relevant material from other courses. The purpose of these papers is to stimulate class discussion. Papers should not be a summary but rather an effort to highlight an important substantive or theoretical point (or points), a methodological issue, and/or an assumption that underlies or permeates the reading(s). Efforts should

be made to explore ways in which the readings relate to each other and how they help us improve our understanding of popular contention and/or Chinese politics. You might also consider how the readings speak to other areas of political science or other areas of the world with which you are familiar. During class, each author will need to be ready to explain (and expand upon) the points he or she raised. Hint: When preparing your papers, pretend you are an overburdened student racing to figure out "why this article or book is so important" the night before your qualifying exams.

1 15–20-page research paper or a take-home essay exam (45% of final grade)

Class participation (25% of course grade) -- All students will be expected to participate in class discussions and to come to class prepared to consider the seminar papers for that week.

**Overall Grading:**

A 94-100%, A- 90%-93%, B+ 87%-89%, B 83%-86%, B- 80%-82%, C+ 77%-79%, C 73%-76%

**Jan. 17) Introduction and Ground Rules**

**PART 1 – THE VIEW FROM 30,000 FEET**

**Jan. 24) Review Essays, Data, and Typologies**

Overviews:

Peter Lorentzen, "Designing Contentious Politics in Post-1989 China," Modern China, 43:5 (September 2017): 459-493

Yongshun Cai and Chih-Jou Jay Chen, State and Social Protests in China (Cambridge Elements, 2022), pp. 1-70

Data on Protest:

Christian Göbel, "Social Unrest in China: A Bird's Eye View," Handbook of Protest and Resistance in China, ed. Teresa Wright (Elgar Publishers, 2019), pp. 27-46

Two Typologies:

Lily Tsai, "Constructive Noncompliance," Comparative Politics 47:3 (April 2015): 253-279

Susan K. McCarthy, "Serving Society, Repurposing the State: Religious Charity and Resistance in China," China Journal 70 (July 2013): 48-72

Class Discussants:

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## **PART 2 – NEW TOPICS AND METHODS**

### **Jan. 31) COVID Lockdowns and Protest**

Lockdowns:

Guobin Yang, "Online Lockdown Diaries as Endurance Art," AI and Society 38 (2023): 2061-2070

Chun Zhang, "Changing Practical Consciousness of Shanghai's Middle Class Under Covid Lockdowns: A Residential Community's Defiance and Mobilization," Cultural Studies (London) (2023): 1-26, published online October 10, 2023

Yan Long and Wei Luo, "Affective Lockdown: Administrative Chaos and Informal Repairing in the Local Enactment of Immobility in Urban China," China in the World Forum, November 21-22, 2023, pp. 1-38

The White Paper/A4 Movement:

Kin-man Chan, "Unwritten Endings: Revolutionary Potential of China's A4 Protest," Sociologica 17:1 (2023): 57-66

Patricia M. Thornton, "The A4 Movement: Mapping its Background and Impact," China Leadership Monitor 75 (Spring 2023): 1-13

Minxin Pei, "The Sudden End of Zero-COVID: An Investigation," China Leadership Monitor 75 (Spring 2023): 1-13

Class Discussants:

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### **Feb. 7) Digital Activism**

W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics," Information, Communication & Society 15:5 (June 2012): 739-768

Xun Cao, Runxi Zeng, and Richard Evans, "Digital Activism and Collective Mourning by Chinese Netizens During COVID-19," China Information 36:2 (July 2022): 159-179

Sara Liao and Luwei Rose Luqiu, "#MeToo in China: The Dynamic of Digital Activism Against Sexual Assault and Harassment in Higher Education," Signs 47:3 (Spring 2022): 741-764

Platforms for Philanthropy and Activism:

Ling Han, Chengpang Li and Qi Song, "From Crowdfunding to Crowd Mobilization: The Impact of Digital Philanthropy on Grassroots Organizations and Local Politics in China," China Quarterly (2023), pp. 1-19, published online November 16, 2023

Ya-wen Lei. "Delivering Solidarity: Platform Architecture and Collective Contention in China's Platform Economy," American Sociological Review 86:2 (April 2021): 279-309.

Class Discussants:

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## **Feb. 14) Digital Repression and Surveillance**

Jennifer Earl, Thomas Maher and Jennifer Pan, "The Digital Repression of Social Movements, Protest and Activism: A Synthetic View," Science Advances 8:10 (11 March 2022): 1-15

Deng Kai, David Demes and Chih-Jou Jay Chen, "The Chinese Surveillance State Under Xi Jinping," in Ashley Esarey and Rongbin Han, eds. The Xi Jinping Effect (University of Washington Press, 2024), pp. 1-32, in press

Xu Xu, "To Repress or Coopt: Authoritarian Control in the Age of Digital Surveillance," American Journal of Political Science 65:2 (April 2021): 309-321

Bei Qin, David Stromberg, and Yanhui Wu, "Why Does China Allow Freer Social Media? Protests versus Surveillance and Propaganda," Journal of Economic Perspectives 31:1 (Winter 2017): 117-140

Zheng Su, Xu Xu and Xun Cao, "What Explains Popular Support for Government Monitoring in China?" Journal of Information Technology and Politics 19:4 (2022): 377-392

Jingyang Huang and Kellee Tsai, "Securing Authoritarian Capitalism in the Digital Age: The Political Economy of Surveillance in China," China Journal 88 (July 2022): 1-28

Class Discussants:

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### **Feb. 21) Outsourcing Repression**

Xi Chen, "Origins of Informal Coercion in China," Politics & Society 45:1 (March 2017): 67-89

Kevin J. O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, "The Reach of the State: Work Units, Family Ties and 'Harmonious Demolition,'" China Journal 74 (July 2015): 1-17

Lynette Ong, Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China (Oxford, 2022), entire, (but omit pp. 154-69)

Class Discussants:

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### **Feb. 28) Big Data and Protest Event Analysis**

Christian Göbel and Christoph Steinhardt, "Protest Event Analysis Meets Autocracy: Comparing the Coverage of Chinese Protests on Social Media, Dissident Websites and in the News," Mobilization 27:3 (September 2022): 277-296

Yao Li and Manfred Elfstrom, "Does Greater Coercive Capacity Increase Overt Repression? Evidence from China," Journal of Contemporary China 30:128 (March 2021): 186-211

Christian Göbel, "The Political Logic of Protest Repression in China," Journal of Contemporary China 30:128 (March 2021): 169-185

Siyao Zheng and Tianguang Meng, "The Paradox of Responsiveness and Social Protest in China" Journal of Contemporary China 30:128 (March 2021): 212-232

Chih-Jou Jay Chen and Yongshun Cai, "Upward Targeting and Social Protests in China" Journal of Contemporary China 30:130 (July 2021): 511-525

H. Christoph Steinhardt, "Defending Stability Under Threat: Sensitive Periods and the Repression of Protest in China," Journal of Contemporary China 30:130 (July 2021): 526-549

Student Discussants:

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### **PART 3 – SOCIAL GROUPS AND PROTEST**

#### **Mar. 6) Workers**

Manfred Elfstrom, Workers and Change in China: Resistance, Repression, Responsiveness (Cambridge, 2021)

Class Discussants:

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#### **Mar. 13) Veterans**

Neil J. Diamant and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Veterans' Political Activism in China," Modern China 41:3 (May 2015): 278-312

Kevin J. O'Brien and Neil J. Diamant, "Contentious Veterans: China's Retired Officers Speak Out," Armed Forces & Society 41:3 (July 2015): 563-81

Junyang Wang, "Behind Veterans' Protests: Passive and Piecemeal Policymaking in China," Modern China 48:2 (March 2022): 253-288

Kai Yang "Mobilizing without Solidarity: Sustained Activism among Chinese Veterans," China Journal 87 (January 2022): 1-19.

Jieren Hu and Tong Wu, "Emotional Mobilization of Chinese Veterans: Collective Activism, Flexible Governance and Dispute Resolution," Journal of Contemporary China 30:129 (May 2021): 451-464

Kai Yang, "Demobilizing Veterans: Campaign-Style Stability Maintenance in China," Modern China, published online December 5, 2023

Class Discussants:

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#### **PART 4 – SOCIAL MOVEMENT CONCEPTS AND CHINA**

##### **Mar. 20) Emotions, Protest and Repression**

Guobin Yang, "Achieving Emotions in Collective Action: Emotional Processes and Movement Mobilisation in the 1989 Chinese Student Movement," Sociological Quarterly 41:4 (2000): 593–614

Affective Governance and Control:

Jieren Hu, Tong Wu and Jingyan Fei, "Flexible Governance in China: Affective Care, Petition Social Workers, and Multi-Pronged Methods of Dispute Resolution," Asian Survey 58:4 (July/August 2018): 679-703

Rui Hou, "Maintaining Social Stability without Solving Problems: Emotional Repression in the Chinese Petition System," China Quarterly 243 (September 2020): 635-654

Jie Wu and Hanyu Chen, "Citizens' Strategic Responses to Affective Governance in China," China Information 37:2 (July 2023): 229-250

Hong Kong:

Chit Wai John Mok, "Violent Repression, Relational Positions and Emotional Mechanisms in Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Movement," Mobilization 27:3 (September 2022): 297-317

Vitrierat Ng and Kin-man Chan, "Emotion Politics: Joyous Resistance in Hong Kong," China Review 17:1 (February 2017): 83–115

Class Discussants:

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##### **Apr. 3) Protest Leadership: Organizing and Sustaining Contention**

## Protest Leaders: Motivations and Actions

Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Protest Leadership in Rural China," China Quarterly 193 (March 2008): 1-23

Xianwen Kuang and Christian Gobel, "Sustaining Collective Action in Urbanizing China," China Quarterly 216 (December 2013): 850-871

Juan Wang, "Shifting Boundaries between the State and Society: Village Cadres as New Activists in Collective Petitioning," China Quarterly 211 (September 2012): 697-717

Yongshun Cai and Zhiming Sheng, "Homeowner's Activism in Beijing: Leaders with Mixed Motivations," China Quarterly 215 (September 2013): 513-532

Zhengxu Wang, Long Sun, Liuqing Xu and Dragan Pavlicevic, "Leadership in China's Urban Middle-Class Protest: The Movement to Protect Homeowners' Rights in Beijing," China Quarterly 214 (June 2013): 411-431

## Militant and Cross-Regional Protests:

Wu Zhang, "Leadership, Organization and Moral Authority: Explaining Peasant Militancy in Contemporary China," China Journal 73 (January 2015): 59-83

Xi Chen and Kai Yang, "The Puzzle of Cross-provincial Activism in China: From Relational Dynamics to State Strategies." Comparative Politics 55:4 (July 2023): 597-615.

## Discussants:

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## **Apr. 10) Mobilizing Structures and Protest Diffusion: Environmental Organizations, Senior Citizen Societies, Lineage Networks, Religion and Migrants**

Maria Bondes and Thomas Johnson, "Beyond Localized Environmental Contention: Horizontal and Vertical Diffusion in a Chinese Anti-Incinerator Campaign," Journal of Contemporary China 26:106 (July 2017): 504-520

Yao Lu and Ran Tao, "Organizational Structure and Collective Action: Lineage Networks, Semiautonomous Associations, and Collective Resistance in Rural China," American Journal of Sociology 122:6 (May 2017): 1726-1774



Yanhua Deng and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Societies of Senior Citizens and Popular Protest in Rural Zhejiang," China Journal 71 (January 2014): 172-188

William Hurst, Mingxing Liu, Yongdong Liu and Ran Tao, "Reassessing Collective Petitioning in Rural China: Civic Engagement, Extra-State Violence, and Regional Variation," Comparative Politics 46:4 (July 2014): 459-482

Qiangqiang Luo and Joel Andreas, "Using Religion to Resist Rural Dispossession: A Case Study of a Hui Muslim Community in Northwest China," China Quarterly 226 (June 2016): 477-498

Yao Lu, Wenjuan Zheng and Wei Wang, "Migration and Popular Resistance in Rural China: Wukan and Beyond," China Quarterly 229 (March 2017): 1-22

Class Discussants:

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#### **Apr. 17) China Concepts on the Road: Rightful Resistance Worldwide**

Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rightful Resistance," World Politics, 49:1 (October 1996): 31-55

*Note:* For the articles below, move through the empirics fairly quickly and focus on the application, extension and critique of the concept

Mojgan Taheri Tafti et al., "Who is Entitled to Oppose Planning Decisions? Politics of Rightful Resistance in Tehran," Antipode, published online 25 September 2023

Kurt Schock, "Rightful Radical Resistance: Mass Mobilization and Land Struggles in India and Brazil," Mobilization 20:4 (December 2015): 493-515

Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, "Protests over Land in Vietnam: Rightful Resistance and More," Journal of Vietnamese Studies 9:3 (November 2014): 19-54

Leonardo van den Berg et al., "Agroecological Peasant Territories: Resistance and Existence in the Struggle for Emancipation in Brazil," Journal of Peasant Studies 48:3 (2021): 658-679

Yue Zhang, "Rightful Squatting: Housing Movements, Citizenship and the 'Right to the City' in Brazil," Journal of Urban Affairs 43:10 (2021): 1405-1422

Sarah Turner et. al, "State Livelihood Planning and Legibility in Vietnam's Northern Borderlands: Rightful Criticism of Local Officials," Journal of Contemporary Asia 46:1 (2016): 42-70

Charlotte Lysa, "Fighting for the Right to Play: Women's Football and Regime-Loyal Resistance in Saudi Arabia," Third World Quarterly 41:5 (2020): 842-859

**Apr. 24) Are We Making Too Much of Protest? Quiescence, Hegemony and Living with Grievances**

Anna Lora-Wainwright, Yiyun Zhang, Yunmei Wu and Benjamin Van Rooij, "Learning to Live with Pollution: The Making of Environmental Subjects in a Chinese Industrialized Village," China Journal 68 (July 2012): 106-124

Wooyeal Paik and Kihyun Lee, "I Want to be Expropriated! The Politics of *Xiaochanquanfang* Land Development in Suburban China," Journal of Contemporary China 21:74 (March 2012): 261-280

Rachel E. Stern and Jonathan Hassid, "Amplifying Silence: Uncertainty and Control Parables in Contemporary China," Comparative Political Studies 45:10 (October 2012): 1230-1254

Martin King Whyte, "China's Dormant and Active Social Volcanoes," China Journal 75 (January 2016): 9-37

Marc J. Blecher, "Hegemony and Workers' Politics in China," China Quarterly 170 (June 2002): 283-303

Kevin J. O'Brien, "Neither Resistance nor Withdrawal: Adapting to Increased Repression in China," Modern China 49:1 (January 2023): 3-25.

Discussants:

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**Final Papers or Exam Due: Friday, May 3, 11:59pm**