

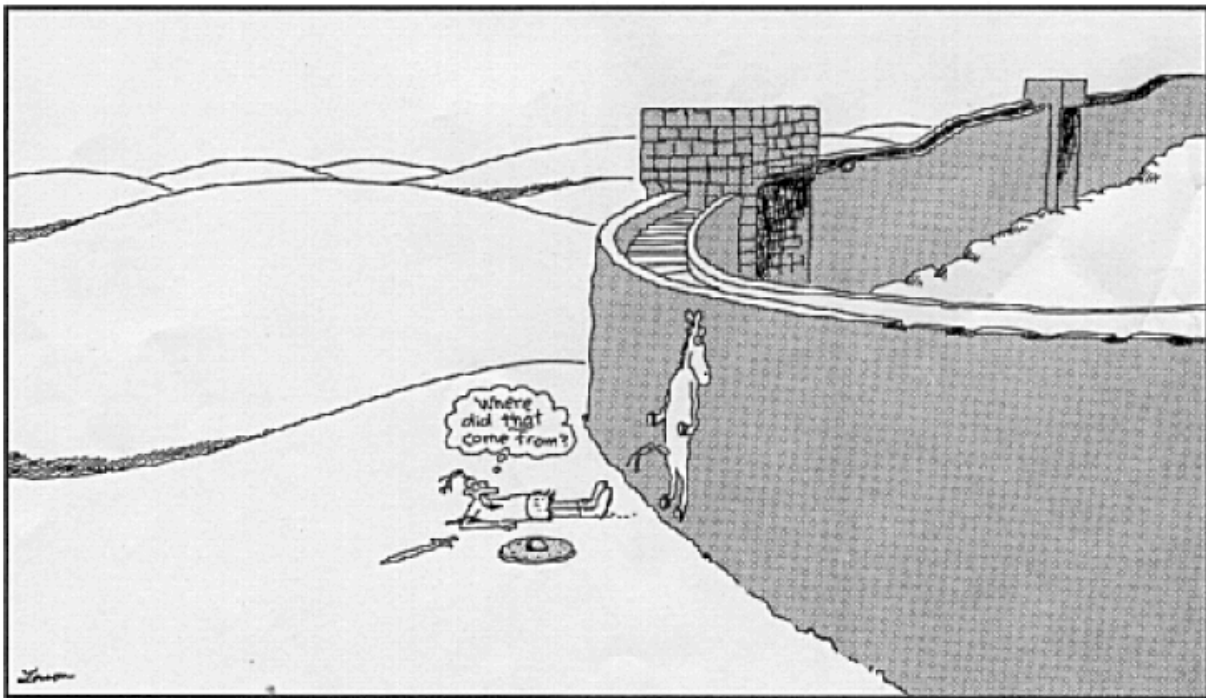
Oberlin College  
Department of Politics

**Politics 313: Seminar on  
The Transition to Capitalist Society in China (3.0)**

Fall 2023  
Professor Marc Blecher

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Tuesdays 1:00-2:50 PM,  
AJLC 102A



Circa 300 B.C.: The first barbarian invader reaches the Great Wall of China

We can forgive Larson's hapless equestrian. China has surprised so many — both its own leaders and people as well as foreign observers, including your humble professor — more often than most of them care to remember. So its recent history poses a profound set of puzzles. The Chinese Communist Party and its government, the People's Republic of China, comprise the largest surviving Communist Party-run state in the world, one of only a handful of any size. It is a

rather unlikely survivor. Between 1949 and 1976, it presided over perhaps the most tempestuous of the world's state socialisms. Nowhere — not in Eastern Europe, the USSR, Cuba, Vietnam or North Korea — did anything occur like the Great Leap Forward, when the country tried to jump headlong into communism, or the Cultural Revolution, when some leaders of the socialist state called on the people to rise up against the socialist state's own bureaucracy. Indeed, the Cultural Revolution brought China to the brink of civil war. The radical policies of the Maoist period were extremely innovative and iconoclastic, and they accomplished a great deal; but they also severely undermined the foundations of Chinese state socialism. Yet somehow it survived.

Then in 1979 the Chinese state switched course, pioneering broad-gauged structural reform way ahead of any other state socialist country. Economic forms that were inconsistent historically and theoretically with rule by a communist party and its government proliferated, taking mixed “market socialist” forms in the 1980s, the social reaction to which almost overcame the socialist state in the famous 1989 protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and across the country. Indeed, the comparison with Russia and Eastern Europe was stunning: in China a huge phalanx of furious citizens engaged in massive demonstrations across the country lasting almost two months. Nothing like this occurred in Russia and Eastern Europe, where gradual political openings were being contemplated and embarked upon. Yet state socialism there would be brought down amidst popular movements that were minuscule in scope and duration compared with the Chinese. But again the People's Republic of China managed to survive, this time by moving more sternly, decisively and successfully against popular demands for reform than any other socialist state did at the time.

Starting in the 1990s, China began the transition to a capitalistic economy and society — interestingly and again paradoxically, without the massive outburst of protest seen in 1989 after a decade of much more tentative change. What can be called market Leninism — China's combination of one-Party state socialist politics and free-market economics — has not just lasted a good deal longer than most observers expected, but it seems unexpectedly resilient at least for the foreseeable future. This has defied the confident theories held by western liberals, modernization theorists, and most major western politicians — known as the “Washington Consensus” — that capitalism and markets go hand in hand with democracy (even as the individualism and the rise of a middle class, which are meant to stimulate democracy, have indeed occurred). Moreover, China's market Leninism has not just survived, but has chalked up significant successes. It has produced continuous spurts of economic growth that have often surprised even its own promoters. Market Leninism has also made China a more influential force on the world stage than ever before in its history. Many scholars, policy makers and politicians have begun to speak of a “Beijing Consensus” replacing Washington's.

Yet, today Chinese market Leninism is also shot through with contradictions. The country's overall quiescence does not necessarily indicate political stability or social peace; on the contrary, protests, strikes, riots and small insurrections have become a daily fact of life. Nor do China's palpable industriousness and economic dynamism necessarily reflect the happy equilibrium of an upward spiral of development. What powers the Chinese economy today? Will the country consolidate market Leninism or break with it? If it makes a break, will the process be smooth and gradual, or rough and sudden? And what would emerge from such a break? Does China hold out the prospect of a "third way" — a hybrid combining in a new way features of state socialism and capitalism? (Hence the title of our seminar: not the transition to capitalism, but to a capitalistic social formation.) China is too complex, its present situation too unprecedented, and social science too indeterminate to permit easy or sure answers. But to make educated guesses, we need to analyze the many contradictory economic, social and political forces at play. Some of them are the subject of Politics 313. **This year's focus is on labor politics in relation to these various questions.**

The same "reform" movement that is ruining primary and secondary education is now taking aim at us, requiring faculty to list "learning goals" for all courses. These are being used to measure what we're doing, all the better to encourage still further the growing hegemony of market forces in education. Thus, I am obliged to tell you that the goal of *The Transition to Capitalist Society in China* is for you to learn about the transition to capitalist society in China, and to get some practice reading, researching, speaking, thinking and writing systematically. Duh.

During the first half of the term, we will read, contemplate, and discuss some of the best, most interesting new books on aspects of China's transition to a capitalistic economy and society and the attendant politics. In the second half we will work together on research papers on a topic of interest to you, which should connect with the question of China's transition to capitalist society but need not be directly related to the particular issues we will have studied in the first half.

Our seminar requires a strategy of active study, thinking and interchange. Three aspects of the course are designed to promote your engagement.

§ Blogging is essential to Politics 313.

§ During the first half of the semester, to encourage reflective reading, help you retain what you have read, organize and elevate class discussion, and help us calibrate what we do in class, once each week I expect you to write a short response to questions I will have posed in advance about the works we are confronting. You're also welcome to comment there on what others in the class have written. Start a debate! You may also use the blog to raise questions on which you would like help. You can find the blog linked from Blackboard.

§ One purpose of the blogs is to promote your learning, not to enable me to evaluate it. I want you to think and write your blogs freely and creatively, and to take risks. Therefore I do not grade them. But because I view them as very important for your learning, I do factor heavily into your final grade simply whether you have done them seriously and regularly. If you do 6 of them, you've got an "A" for 25% of the course. (See page 4 below on grading.)

§ Blogs are due **by 8:00 PM on the Monday before each class**. That's when we all need them to start making our final preparations for class.

§ Moreover, the blogs are a process, not a product; the whole point is to help you learn by doing them week-in, week-out, not at the end of the term in order to meet a requirement. So, while I always try my best to be flexible and accommodate students' needs, **do not plan on making them up at the end of the term — that defeats the purpose.**

§: Each late morning or early afternoon before class, please take a few moments to read what everyone has written. That'll help produce a lively, probing discussion. Students have also found that this really helps them grasp the material (and feel less insecure about their own grasp of it).

§ Research papers:

§ During the second half of the semester, you will research and write a 3,000 to 4,000 word research paper on a subject of your choice related broadly to China's structural reform. It can venture beyond the themes of the books we will have read. In the first several weeks, I will meet with each of you individually to help you work up your paper. In our final weeks, you will present to the seminar a preliminary draft, to be circulated in advance. You will also read classmates' drafts and contribute to discussions that will help all of us learn about the subject matter of the various papers, while also providing suggestions to each author about ways to develop the research paper in progress. As a member of the seminar, I will present some of my own work in progress as well. At the end of the semester, you will submit finished seminar papers revised on the basis of class discussion and my comments.

I object to grading on principle, since it one more way to commodify human beings in bourgeois society — *i.e.*, grades are just a price tag to indicate what someone is worth on the graduate school or labor markets. I wish everyone would take their courses pass/fail. But I know that we are all stuck with capitalism for the foreseeable future. So I will hold my nose and evaluate your work according to the following weightings:

Weekly blogs	25%
Discussion preparation and leadership; class participation	25%
Paper preparation and workshopping	20%
Paper	30%

*Please take careful note of these proportions.* They reflect my conviction that the week-to-week process of participating in the course through reading, thinking and contributing to everyone else's learning in discussion, and of working incrementally on your research paper, is as important to your learning as the quality of the final paper you will write. In the past students who assumed that the paper was their only responsibility for the course were surprised at the end of the semester. 😊

Please consult the schematic chronology (starting on page 9) and, if you are not a student of Chinese, the guide to the rudiments of Chinese pronunciation (page II). The latter will help you discharge your responsibility as advanced students of China to pronounce Chinese words and names properly — a responsibility that broadcast media regularly shirk.

You should keep up with the news from China. There are many resources.<sup>1</sup>

- ♦ Western journalism:
  - ♦ *The Guardian, The Financial Times, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The New Yorker, and The Washington Post.*
  - ♦ The BBC provides comprehensive, accurate reporting at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world/asia/china/>
- ♦ State organs
  - ♦ Chinese White Papers (those the State Council Information Office don't care if English speakers read): <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/>
  - ♦ Central Committee's **Qiushi** (good place to read about post-Plenum work): <http://english.qstheory.cn/>
  - ♦ Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements and updates: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/>
  - ♦ Ministry of National Defense: <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>
  - ♦ Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST): <http://www.most.gov.cn/eng/>
  - ♦ State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC): <http://www.sasac.gov.cn/n2963340/index.html>
  - ♦ National Bureau of Corruption Prevention: <http://www.nbc.gov.cn/article/English/>
  - ♦ State Oceanic Administration (Chinese only, but anybody looking at maritime issues needs to at least read a Google translation): <http://www.soa.gov.cn/>

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to Jason Weinberg, '04, a veteran of our course, for invaluable help compiling this list. Please advise me of any dead links or suggestions for additions.

- ♦ Chinese government think tanks
  - ♦ Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS): <http://english.cssn.cn/>
  - ♦ Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS): <http://english.cas.cn/>
  - ♦ China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR): <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/english/>
  - ♦ Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS): <http://en.siis.org.cn/>
- ♦ Chinese state media
  - ♦ Xinhua: <http://www.news.cn/english/>
  - ♦ People's Daily: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/>
  - ♦ Global Times: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/index.html>
  - ♦ PLA Daily: <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>
- ♦ Private Chinese media
  - ♦ Caixin: <http://english.caixin.com/>
  - ♦ South China Morning Post (has a paywall, but available through OBIS): <http://www.scmp.com/frontpage/international>
- ♦ English language blogs, websites, and reports
  - ♦ SupChina: <https://supchina.com> Broad-scale, lively coverage of news, society, economy, politics and culture.
  - ♦ The Wire China: <https://www.thewirechina.com> Weekly coverage of China's economic rise, and its influence on global business, finance, trade, labor and the environment, run by Pulitzer Prizewinner David Barboza
  - ♦ ChinaScope: <http://chinascope.org/main/index.php> Excellent translations of a wide range of key Chinese sources. The authors have excellent taste, and this is a good first stop for news items.
  - ♦ Global Voices: <http://globalvoicesonline.org/-/world/east-asia/china/> Global Voices translates social media, so this is a good place to go for understanding what Chinese people are talking about through those platforms.
  - ♦ Sinocism: <https://sinocism.com> Really excellent news compendium with terrific analysis.
  - ♦ GreatFire: <https://en.greatfire.org/> Online censorship reports and tracking data. Best place to find out what is being censored through the Great Firewall.
  - ♦ China Digital Times/Ministry of Truth: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/ministry-of-truth/> CDT is a great blog for popular issues in China, and the MoT is an excellent subsection for social issues and regulations.
  - ♦ The Diplomat: <http://thediplomat.com/> The Diplomat has exploded to be one of the best blogs on Asia Pacific regional issues. There isn't much domestic China content, but this is a good place to get perspectives on China's position in the region.
  - ♦ China Media Project: <http://cmp.hku.hk/> Run out of the University of Hong Kong, it offers an excellent primer on Chinese political discourse.
  - ♦ China Dialogue: <https://www.chinadialogue.net/> Good bilingual source for

opinions on environmental issues.

- ♦ Wall Street Journal China Real Time Blog: <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/> Good coverage of all the key issues, but very much focuses on issues of interest to WSJ editors/readers. Can overlook some of the fundamental issues covered in places like ChinaScope.

Newspapers and cyberspace can provide timely information and rough and ready analysis, but we also need old-fashioned research monographs to plumb the depths. Each year Americans spend five times as much on dog food as on college books. Politics 313 is doing its part to help us get priorities right. We will read the following books. All are available for purchase at the Oberlin Bookstore, and in e-book versions from (the loved and hated) Amazon. Some are available in electronic editions from Mudd.

Elfstrom, Manfred, *Workers and Change in China*

Franceschini, Ivan and Christian Sorace, eds., *Proletarian China*

Li Zhonglin, *China on Strike*

Roberts, Dexter, *The Myth of China Capitalism*

Roberts, Margaret, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*

Strunk, William, and E. B. White, *Elements of Style*

**CRUCIAL ADVICE:** Social science should be read differently than other kinds of material. **Don't be a dumb reader**, by which I mean don't let the author (including me) lead you around by the nose.

- § Don't start with the first word and continue to the last word. Try to figure out the overall argument before you begin reading, by looking for summaries at the end of the introduction and/or the beginning and end of each section or chapter. This isn't a detective novel, so it's better to know the conclusion before you set out; this will make you a better critical reader.
- § Have questions in mind whose answers you are seeking out. The blog questions will help you in this respect by providing them, though you should of course add your own.
- § Don't get bogged down. Once you know what you're looking for, it'll be easier to choose which paragraphs and sections to read carefully and which you can skim. Yes, skim. And if there's material you can't apprehend after a serious try, jot down your question to ask in class or on the blog — or send me an e-mail — and then move on.

## Schedule of Classes, Topics and Assignments

September 6: Introduction

Marc Blecher, *China's Structural Reform* (on Blackboard)

September 19: Marc Blecher, *A World to Lose, Introduction and Chapter 3*

September 26: Roberts, Dexter, *The Myth of Chinese Capitalism*

October 3: Li Zhonglin, *China on Strike*

October 10: Franceschini, Ivan and Christian Sorace, eds., *Proletarian China*

October 24: Elfstrom, Manfred, *Workers and Change in China* (N.b. We will meet [on Zoom](#). I need your questions and blogs for Manfred **by the end of the day on Monday without fail**, since I will be sending them to him first thing Tuesday morning. Also, in addition to his book, please tune in [to this podcast interview](#).)

October 31: Roberts, Margaret, *Censored*

November 7: Individual meetings to discuss research proposals (due that morning)

November 14: Individual meetings to discuss preliminary bibliographies (due that morning)

November 21: Individual meetings to discuss detailed outlines (due that morning)

November 28: Individual meetings to discuss drafts (due that morning)

December 5 and 12: Workshopping of research paper drafts

December 17, 11 AM: Papers due



## Schematic Chronology of Chinese Politics Since 1978

- 1978 Deng in charge at Third Plenum; “democracy wall”; Carter-Hua Communique (US-PRC relations)
- 1979 “Rightists” exonerated: rural reforms extend; Vietnam invasion
- 1980 “Gang of Four” tried: some communes become townships; Zhao Ziyang Premier
- 1981 Rural incomes up, amid urban shortages: Hu Yaobang replaces Hua Guofeng as Party Chair
- 1982 US defense weapons to Taiwan, but US-China agreement on fewer future sales
- 1983 Spiritual Pollution Campaign stirs doubts in Communist Party, but campaign ends soon
- 1984 Industrial reforms announced; Hong Kong accord
- 1985 Old cadres retired at autumn congress; Gorbachev heads USSR
- 1986 Students protest delay of political reforms, but Communist Party is slow to accommodate them.
- 1987 Dismissal of Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang; movement against bourgeois liberalization
- 1988 Abortive price reform; inflation; beginning of economic austerity
- 1989 Broad popular protests followed by repression and martial law; rise of hard-line leadership
- 1990 Hard-liners in power
- 1991 Consolidation of post-1989 leadership; economic austerity
- 1992 Economic austerity ends; debate on appropriate pace of growth
- 1993 Some releases from prison of 1989 protesters; economic overheating; rural discontent erupts
- 1994 High inflation; continuing expressions of discontent
- 1995 Corruption a major issue; death of Chen Yun; economic soft landing; Taiwan Straits heat up
- 1996 Economy stabilizes; Taiwan Straits hot; US-China relations difficult
- 1997 Death of Deng Xiaoping; return of Hong Kong; Jiang Zemin consolidates the country's leadership at the 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, and then visits US
- 1998 At the National People's Congress, Premier Li Peng is the first top Chinese leader in history to vacate his position in accordance with the Constitution; President Clinton visits China; hard-liners rise at end of the year

1999	China tense in face of political demonstrations by workers and <i>Falungong</i> spiritual practitioners; US bombs Chinese embassy in Belgrade, provoking popular patriotic outrage and state-approved popular demonstrations; Politics 313 tries once again to grasp Chinese politics and political economy
2000	Hard-liners remain in control, keeping political atmosphere repressive
2001	US-China relations tense due to collision of military aircraft; China joins WTO
2002	In a smooth transition, Hu Jintao succeeds Jiang Zemin as Party General Secretary; massive labor protest in northeast; China joins WTO
2003	Hu consolidates power, appoints Wen Jiabao as Prime Minister
2004	Jiang Zemin resigns Military Commission chair, marking full transition to new generation of leadership; rapid economic growth continues
2005	Anti-Japanese protests; major chemical spill exposes political and policy weakness; Bush visits; economy continues to grow
2006-7	Continuing economic growth and political authoritarianism; new labor laws passed
2008	China hosts the Olympics
2009	Broad political stability amid slowed economic growth and key anniversaries; massive ethnic riot in Xinjiang
2010	Resurgent economic growth; strikes win wage increases
2011	Worsening inflation; major rail crash highlights problems of high-speed development
2012	Major political blowout around Bo Xilai and the “Chongqing model” in the run-up to a major, decennial change of the top leadership
2013	Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang promote a strongly market Leninist agenda
2014	Anti-corruption campaign targets many top élites. Pollution so bad that drove foreigners and some Chinese out of the country.
2015	Deepened hardline politics, with tough restrictions and crackdowns on NGOs and intellectual work.
2016	China commits to Paris Climate Change measures; Xi consolidates power amidst ongoing political hard line.
2017	19 <sup>th</sup> Party Congress cements an unusually powerful role for Xi.
2018	Xi abolishes term limits. Economic growth slows.
2019	US-China relations continue to deteriorate; Hong Kong demonstrations.
2020	COVID crisis; Hong Kong crackdown
2021	Triumphalism over hundredth anniversary of the Communist Party.
2022	Advancing autocracy: Xi Jinping takes third term as Party Secretary.
2023	Politics 313 tries yet again to grasp China’s transition to capitalist society and robust market Leninism.

## Guide To Chinese Pronunciation and Romanization

As a student of Chinese politics, it's your responsibility to pronounce Chinese words correctly. There are three major systems of romanization used in the general literature. The first can be called the "post office system", though it is totally unsystematic. It is mainly used for place names, such as Peking, Canton, and Amoy.

The other two are Wade-Giles, which was commonly used through the 1970s, and pinyin, which is the official system of the People's Republic, and has now almost completely replaced Wade-Giles. You will have to discern by inspection which one your source is using. (Our readings use pinyin.) The pinyin system is distinguishable by any of the following: x, q, z, zh, r, g, d, b, ong. By contrast, the Wade-Giles system contains apostrophes and hyphens.

Once you have deduced which system a text uses, you apply a few rules. The main general one is that practically all words you see, except family names, contain two syllables. Sound them as containing two syllables, even if the letters suggest three or more to you. A few system-specific rules are noted below. The left side of each equation is the romanization, as you might see it on a page; the right is a usual and approximate English equivalent sound.

### PINYIN

x = sy z = dz zh = j c = ts ong = ung ian = ien ui = way  
i is variable: "-ee" after most initials; "-r" after ch, r, sh, zh; or a deep "-uh" or no sound after c, s, & z.

### WADE-GILES

When not followed by apostrophes: k = g p = b t = d ts = dz ch = j. When followed by apostrophes, these all have English sounds.

Also: j = r ih = r ui = way yu = yo yü = yü hs = sy