

Class Activity: Understanding Chinese Politics through *The Chinese Mayor*

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Goal of the Activity

- To understand China's political and economic model, and understand the social inequalities and pressures that result from breakneck development and urban transformation.
- Students should also learn to compare China's political system to that of the United States and elsewhere, recognizing similarities in circumstances and differences in practices.

Pre-Requisites

Some background knowledge of China's transition to market economy, its current municipal debt crisis, and the center-local dynamics of its political system will be helpful. Awareness of concepts such as authoritarianism, urban displacement, co-optation of public opinion, and political repression will also help students contextualize the documentary's main themes.

Pre-Class Activities

Students will read "Chapter 2: Building Big" from Dan Wang's book *Breakneck: China's Quest to Engineer the Future*, which touches on themes around China's rapid industrialization and urban development that comes at the expense of other values, such as environmental protection, participatory urban development, and property rights.

Other suitable readings that may help prepare students include:

- O'Brien, Kevin J. "Rightful resistance." *World politics* 49, no. 1 (1996): 31-55.
- Lee, Ching Kwan, and Yonghong Zhang. "The power of instability: Unraveling the microfoundations of bargained authoritarianism in China." *American journal of sociology* 118, no. 6 (2013): 1475-1508.

In-Class Activities

A brief lecture and discussion of the readings listed above may be suitable to help prime students to think about these issues for the film.

Students will watch *The Chinese Mayor* (available on YouTube and Netflix) in class. The documentary focuses on the Mayor Geng Yanbo, who oversees Datong, a major city in Shanxi Province with a population of around 3 million people. A historic city, Mayor Geng decides to embark on a redevelopment plan to return the city to its former cultural glory. However, this plan requires the relocation of 30% of its residents and the demolition of many homes. The documentary follows Mayor Geng with in-depth access and watches how his decisions impact the city.

For more background, consider reading this review:

<https://variety.com/2015/film/reviews/sundance-film-review-the-chinese-mayor-1201419888/>

During the screening, students will take notes on several questions in a handout:

1. How is the Mayor of Datong portrayed in the film?
2. What are the Mayor's plans for redeveloping Datong? How does he justify his project?
3. What are some of the effects of this redevelopment for the residents of Datong?
4. What is the role of public opinion in shaping the actions of the Mayor of Datong?

If this is for a 75-minute class, consider showing the following segments, consider also showing this in 1.5x speed (60 mins at regular speed = 40 min at 1.5x speed), as the documentary has some lulls and slow cinematography. You may want to pause and discuss each segment at a time. Some discussion questions are listed.

- 1:42-23:12: The introduction of Datong and the Mayor's plans to redevelop the city. Some discontent starts to foment, and the state begins to repress affected residents.
 - How does Mayor Geng justify his redevelopment plans?
 - What are the concerns voiced by the residents of Datong about the plan?
 - How does the state react to the dissent of residents?
- 34:10-47:35: Problems arise in the redevelopment of Datong, as residents begin to voice their discontent. In order to succeed in his redevelopment plans, the Mayor must also work with a wide range of business interests.
 - What role do market actors play in the state's plan to redevelop the city?
 - What is the role of history and culture in motivating Mayor Geng's plans?
 - How do residents protest Mayor Geng's plans? Are they successful?
- 53:45-1:05:50: The reelection of Mayor Geng is relatively pro forma during the local party meeting. The limitations of Mayor Geng's powers are also seen more plainly in this segment, as he is seen beholden to the party and central authorities.
 - How would you describe the democratic process seen in the film?
 - Why did Mayor Geng say that "what I'm doing is impossible under this system"?
 - What are some of the social costs of redevelopment for the residents of Datong?
- 1:10:50-1:23:30: In the final scenes, we are informed that Mayor Geng has been reassigned to be Mayor of Taiyuan. Mayor Geng makes his final rounds to thank his supporters.
 - Why do you think Mayor Geng was reassigned to another city?
 - Why do you think the residents of Datong called for Mayor Geng to "come back"?
 - What did you think about the film overall, and the level of access that the filmmaker had to Mayor Geng?

Post-Class Activities and Assessment

During the documentary screening, students will be asked to take notes on a handout. They will be asked to turn in the notes at the end of class so that the instructor can review what they have written and their comprehension of the documentary.