
Chinese Economic History in Comparative Perspective

Economics 4534, Spring 2025

Tue/Th ECON 119
12:30 p.m. - 1:45 p.m.

For the past three decades, China has been one of the most rapidly changing economies in the world. Yet, from another standpoint, there has been remarkable historical continuities. How can we understand the recent rise of China in light of its long-run trajectory in terms of continuities and discontinuities? What challenges face China over the medium and long-run as it seeks to continue to modernize its economy? This course selectively surveys key elements of the economy, state, and society of China starting from the 17th century to today. We use a comparative approach to understand the impact of select topics: education, kinship and lineage organization, demography, living standards, property rights, foreign trade, capital and commodity markets, governance, and public finance. How do differences in the historical determinants of growth help to explain why China and Europe developed along different growth trajectories? What can China's growth experience teach us about competing explanations of economic growth? We will also consider factors that may be important for China's sustained development in the future.

Professor: Carol H. Shiue
Office: Economics 206B
Office Hours: Tuesday & Thursday 3:20-4:50 pm
Email: shiue@colorado.edu

Prerequisites: Econ 3070 or 3080, Intermediate Micro or Intermediate Macro.

Required Textbooks:

- *Modern China: Continuity and Change, 1644 to Present*, 2nd edition, by Elleman and Paine (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). Provides a historical background of the Qing (1644-1911) with a political/military focus; useful tables, maps, and figures describing major events.
- *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection*, 3rd edition, by Chen et al. (W.W. Norton, 2014). Selection of primary-sources, in translation.

Course goals: At the end of this course, students will be able to

- Draw on a base of knowledge of Chinese history to understand contemporary China
- Be familiar with hypotheses or questions that have been asked about China's development
- Apply economic analysis to historical data
- Understand "how to think historically"

Communication: Please check your Canvas website and emails for class announcements, links to readings, media content, and information about upcoming assignments.

Course Evaluation: Classes will be a combination of lecture, student presentations, and in-class discussion and group exercises. The following will be used in determining course grades.

Student presentation of readings	10 %
Data analysis paper (5% draft, 25% final paper)	30 %
Final exam	20 %
Assignments	30 %
Participation	10 %

Student presentations: Students take turns preparing short (10-15 minutes) oral and written summaries of the readings, many from the Chen et al. text. Email me your slides, as a *PDF or Powerpoint attachment*, at least 1 hour before the start of class.

Data analysis paper: Using historical data on China, propose a hypothesis and an empirical strategy to test your hypothesis. Aim to examine patterns or trends in the data, demonstrate knowledge of context, present your findings in a coherent fashion, and discuss what your results imply about China's economy during the relevant period. I will be providing a variety of data sources for you, downloadable on Canvas, but you may also propose a research topic based on a dataset you have identified from outside sources. Students should work with two other classmates on this project. A preliminary 5-page draft is due on March 11. I will be scheduling meetings with everyone in late March to discuss the preliminary draft and give feedback. The paper should be about 10 (double-spaced) typed pages in length, including Tables and Figures. The final draft is due in class on **April 29**, and students will give a 5-minute summary of the findings in their paper.

Assignments: There will be short assignments that support the learning objectives of the class, for example, discussion prompts, viewing films, short quizzes, in-class group activities, in-class small-group discussion and response sessions, or assignments to be completed at home. In-class assignments are only accepted if completed and turned in during class on the day of the activity and will not be accepted if turned in at a later date.

Final Exam: The final exam will be a take-home exam, due on May 3 at 4:00 p.m., which is the time of the final exam for this class scheduled by CU registrar.

Class Attendance and Participation: Class attendance and participation is crucial for the success of this class. Attendance will be taken at frequent intervals.

Policy on Late Work: In-class Assignments cannot be submitted after the class has concluded. Late papers and exams submitted after the deadline will see a deduction of 15% per day late, for up to three days. E.g., a paper that would have received 100% had it been handed in on time will receive 85% if is submitted any time in the 24-hour interval after the deadline, and 70% if it is late by another 48 hours. After three days, the maximum achievable score is 55%.

Extra Credit: There will be opportunities to earn a limited number of bonus points through completing additional assignments outside of class. Students who missed In-class Assignments are encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities. However, extra credit assignments are available to everyone.

Policy on Electronic Devices: Unless we are actively using laptops as part of a class activity, electronic devices (cellphones, tablets, and laptops) should be stowed away for use until after class.

Institutional Policies: Classroom Behavior

Students and faculty are responsible for maintaining an appropriate learning environment in all instructional settings, whether in person, remote, or online. Failure to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with race, color, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, political affiliation, or political philosophy.

For more information, see the [classroom behavior policy](#), the [Student Code of Conduct](#), and the [Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance](#).

Requirements for Infectious Diseases

Members of the CU Boulder community and visitors to campus must follow university, department, and building health and safety requirements and all public health orders to reduce the risk of spreading infectious diseases.

The CU Boulder campus is currently mask optional. However, if masks are again required in classrooms, students who fail to adhere to masking requirements will be asked to leave class. Students who do not leave class when asked or who refuse to comply with these requirements will be referred to Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution. Students who require accommodation because a disability prevents them from fulfilling safety measures related to infectious disease will be asked to follow the steps in the “Accommodation for Disabilities” statement on this syllabus.

For those who feel ill and think you might have COVID-19 or if you have tested positive for COVID-19, please stay home and follow the [further guidance of the Public Health Office](#). For those who have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19 but do not have any symptoms and have not tested positive for COVID-19, you do not need to stay home.

Accommodation for Disabilities, Temporary Medical Conditions, and Medical Isolation

[Disability Services](#) determines accommodations based on documented disabilities in the academic environment. If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, submit your accommodation letter from Disability Services to your faculty member in a timely manner so your needs can be addressed. Contact Disability Services at 303-492-8671 or dsinfo@colorado.edu for further assistance.

If you have a temporary medical condition or required medical isolation for which you require accommodation, notify the instructor immediately. Also see [Temporary Medical Conditions](#) on the Disability Services website.

Preferred Student Names and Pronouns

CU Boulder recognizes that students' legal information doesn't always align with how they identify. Students may update their preferred names and pronouns via the student portal; those preferred names and pronouns are listed on instructors' class rosters. In the absence of such updates, the name that appears on the class roster is the student's legal name.

Honor Code

All students enrolled in a University of Colorado Boulder course are responsible for knowing and adhering to the [Honor Code](#). Violations of the Honor Code may include but are not limited to: plagiarism (including use of paper writing services or technology [such as essay bots]), cheating, fabrication, lying, bribery, threat, unauthorized access to academic materials, clicker fraud, submitting the same or similar work in more than one course without permission from all course instructors involved, and aiding academic dishonesty.

All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution: honor@colorado.edu, 303-492-5550. Students found responsible for violating the [Honor Code](#) will be assigned resolution outcomes from the Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution as well as be subject to academic sanctions from the faculty member. Visit [Honor Code](#) for more information on the academic integrity policy.

Sexual Misconduct, Discrimination, Harassment and/or Related Retaliation

CU Boulder is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming learning, working, and living environment. University policy prohibits [protected-class](#) discrimination and harassment, sexual misconduct (harassment, exploitation, and assault), intimate partner violence (dating or domestic violence), stalking, and related retaliation by or against members of our community on- and off-campus. These behaviors harm individuals and our community. The Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) addresses these concerns, and individuals who believe they have been subjected to misconduct can contact OIEC at 303-492-2127 or email cureport@colorado.edu. Information about university policies, [reporting options](#), and support resources can be found on the [OIEC website](#).

Please know that faculty and graduate instructors have a responsibility to inform OIEC when they are made aware of incidents related to these policies regardless of when or where something occurred. This is to ensure that individuals impacted receive an outreach from OIEC about their options for addressing a concern and the support resources available. To learn more about reporting and support resources for a variety of issues, visit [Don't Ignore It](#).

Religious Holidays

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. In this class, students should notify me as soon as possible about conflicts due to religious observance.

See the [campus policy regarding religious observances](#) for full details.

Econ 4534 Topic Outline and Reading List

Readings provided on Canvas, or during class. Additional website links and other supplementary files will be on Canvas as well. Note: Depending on the speed at which we will progress through the semester, there may be changes to the outline, as needed. **Elleman and Paine** and **Chen et al.** refer to the two required textbooks for this course.

Part I. Overview

Introduction

Why study history? Why is the subject interesting but challenging at the same time? What are the tools and methods of the historian? What are the steps that constitute the historical approach, and what is meant by "historical narrativity"?

- Hansen, "The Mystery of the Qing Ming Scroll and Its Subject: The Case Against Kaifeng," *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies*, 26, 1996.

1—A Framework for Understanding Growth

What can we learn from economic history and the methodological approach of comparing cross-country performance? What can China teach us about "Why are some nations so rich and others so poor"? What is modern economic growth? When did Western Europe forge ahead of other countries of the world? What does human development indices reveal about China's level of development in the recent past?

- <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china>
- Naughton, Ch. 6. "Growth and Structural Change"
- Zhu, "Understanding China's Growth: Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 26(4), Fall 2012. [[Link](#)]

2—Governance and the Qing Empire

How was society organized? Who were the "actors" in this society and what roles did they have? What are some of the intellectual traditions of China? When did the Chinese state emerge? How was the government of the last dynasty of China, the Qing state, structured? What was the geographic reach of the Qing empire? What factors contributed to the stability and longevity of dynastic rule?

- Text: Elleman and Paine, Ch. 1,2 [[Link Ch1+2](#)]
- Chen et al. Ch. 2&3, "The Manchu Conquest" & "Kangxi's Consolidation"

Part II. Determinants of Economic Development

3—Education and Human Capital Accumulation

The tradition of learning has deep roots in Chinese history. What is the origin of the examination system that formed the scholarly official class? Who took the civil service examinations? What were the levels of the exam system? What was the content of the curriculum and the examinations? Was it a meritocratic system that promoted social mobility, or, was it a rarified system that admitted only

elites? What is the relationship between the civil service examinations, the wealthy gentry class, and the state?

- Text: Elleman and Paine, Ch. 4.
 - * Documents: Chen et al. Ch 4.
 - * Selections from Confucius and Classical texts. [\[Link\]](#)
- Exploring genealogies: data download from Canvas.
 - Chang, “The Chinese Gentry” [\[Link\]](#)
 - Selections from: Genealogy Rules
 - *Shiue, “Human Capital and Fertility in Chinese Clans Before Modern Growth”, *Journal of Economic Growth*, 2017, 22(4), 351-396. [\[Link\]](#)
- Ma, Knowledge Diffusion and Intellectual Change: When Chinese Literati Met European Jesuits”, *Journal of Economic History*, 81(4): 1052-1097.

4—Lineage and Clan Organization

What functions did the lineage have? What implications might household organization and structure have for trade? How might labor markets be affected under lineage versus non-lineage regimes? What has happened to the clan and lineage since the Communist Revolution? Is there any counterpart to the idea of the extended family in Europe?

- *Yang, “The Chinese Family in the Communist Revolution”[\[Link\]](#)
- * Hajnal, "Two kinds of pre-industrial household formation systems," *Population Development Review*, Sept 1982. [\[Link\]](#)
- * “Merchant Lineage in Coastal Jinjiang, Quanzhou Prefecture during the Qing Dynasty” *Frontiers of History in China*, 2010 5(3): 425-452. [\[Link\]](#)

5—Law and Property Rights in Imperial China and the Qing Legal code

Secure property rights are considered critical for economic transactions to take place—what was the nature of property rights in the traditional economy? What is the sense in which the rights were secure?

- Chen et al. 5 “Chinese Society and the Reign of Qianlong”
- Documents: The Great Qing Code
- Jing, “Legislation Related to the Civil Economy of the Qing Dynasty,” in *Civil Law in Qing and Republican China* [\[Link\]](#)

6—Capital Markets and Commodity Market Integration

What is the significance of commerce? What types of Chinese institutions were responsible for supporting trade? What does the Law of One Price say about trade and market integration? Were Chinese markets as integrated as European ones as late as 1800, and what might this imply about the causes of growth?

- Text: *von Glahn, “Maturation of the Market Economy, 1550-1800” [\[Link\]](#)
- *Ho, “The Salt Merchants of Yang-chou: A Study of Commercial Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century China.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 1954, 17: 130-68. [\[Link\]](#)
- *Shiue and Keller, “Markets in China and Europe on the Eve of the Industrial Revolution,” *The American Economic Review*, September 2007, 97(4). pp. 1189-1216.[\[Link\]](#)

- Exploring grain price data; download from Canvas.

7—Institutions and Public Finance: from Tax Revenues to Public Goods Provision

How can we describe the evolution of the Chinese state—what changed, what persisted? How does the public finance of the Chinese state during the Qing compare and contrast with European states at that time? What were the sources of tax revenue for the central and the local Qing government? What issues did the imperial state have in collecting taxes? What did this imply for public goods provision? How were public goods provided? The issues are still problematic to contemporary Chinese development.

- * Hoffman, “What do States Do? Politics and Economic History,” *Journal of Economic History*, June 2015. [[Link](#)]
- *Shiue, “Local Granaries and Central Government Disaster Relief: Moral Hazard and Intergovernmental Finance in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century China,” *Journal of Economic History*”. [[Link](#)]

8—Foreign Imperialism and the Foreign Presence in the 19th Century

What was the economic impact of the opening of China to Western trade by the British at the end of the Opium Wars? What was the Treaty Port System and how long did this system last? Did the foreign presence have long term impacts that can still be felt?

- Text: Elleman and Paine, Ch. 7, “Expanding Commercial Relations with the West”
 - *Documents: Chen et al. 7, “The First Clash with the West”
- *Keller, Li, and Shiue, “China’s Foreign Trade, Perspectives from the Last 150 Years”, *The World Economy*, June 2011, 34(6), pp. 853-892.[[Link](#)]
- Keller and Shue, "Foreign Trade and Investment", Cambridge Economic History of China.

9—Rebellion and Social Conflict

What was the nature of the conflicts that gave rise to rebellions, and how did the character of conflicts change over the late Qing? How are Chinese protests distinctive relative to Western protests? Are there any similarities to recent conflicts, such as the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989?

- Text: Elleman and Paine, Ch. 6, “Systemic Crisis and Dynastic Decline” & Ch. 9, “Quelling Domestic Rebellions”
- Yang and Chen, "Historical Traumas and the Roots of Political Distrust: Political Inference from the Great Chinese Famine"
- *King et al. "Reverse-Engineering Censorship in China: Randomized Experimentation and Participant Observation" *Science*, Aug. 2014. <https://science.sciencemag.org/node/497604.full>

Part III. Long-run Comparisons: Demographic Outcomes, Market Performance, Productivity, and Wages

10— Comparisons of Living Standards and Demographic Outcomes

- *Allen et al. “Wages, prices, and living standards in China, 1738-1925: in comparison with Europe, Japan, and India.” *Economic history review*, 64 (s1), 2011.[[Link](#)]

11—Demographic Outcomes: Population Growth and Sex Ratios

- *Zhang. 2017. “The Evolution of China’s One-Child Policy and Its Effects on Family Outcomes.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31 (1): 141–60. [[Link](#)]

Part IV. Explanations

12 and 13—Divergence in Incomes of the 18-19th Century

- **A Culture of Growth*, 16-17. “China and Europe”, Mokyr. [[Link](#)]
- *von Glahn, Economic History of China Ch. 9 [[Link](#)]
- *Brandt, Ma, and Rawski, “From Divergence to Convergence: Reevaluating the History Behind China’s Economic Boom”, *Journal of Economic Literature*, 2014, 52(1), 45-123. [[Link](#)]

Part V. Continuity and Change in the 20th century

14—Evaluation of the Reform Era

How might China’s continued development be linked to historical factors we have surveyed in this course—for example, lineage, government, education, conflict, and the historical legacy of foreign trade? Is there an Asian development path that is distinct from the Western path?

- *Chen et al. Ch. 27.
- Li et al. "Human Capital and China's Future Growth." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31 (1): 25-48. [[Link](#)]
- Wei et al. “From ‘Made in China’ to ‘Innovated in China’: Necessity, Prospect, and Challenges,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(1), Winter 2017.