The Beijing Center

北 京 中 国 学 中 心

Observing China COMM 269

Accreditation through Loyola University Chicago

Please Note: ***This is a sample syllabus, subject to change. Students will receive the updated syllabus and textbook list prior to the start of each semester.***

Course Number: COMM 269

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Course Description

This course is about understanding China as it is seen and as it happens – at street-level especially – and, using the tools of journalism to write about this country where you are spending your spring semester. This course is in large part a practicum, in which students, through a mix of lectures, briefings and discussions, will delve into nature of observation and engagement with and in China, and write about what they see and what others say.

This course is intended to stimulate students to think about how one reports, writes, talks, and speaks about China, which means, fundamentally, how do we understand the China of today. Among other approaches, this means understanding what "observing" means in China; how journalists, writers and documentary film makers decide what to convey; how observers – Chinese and others based here – decide what to write about and how to write about it; and ultimately, how images of China are reflected in a body of reportage about China, its peoples, its culture, and its place locally and in the world at large.

There are a number of components in this course. For example, students are expected over the course of the semester to read every China story in the four major American newspapers: *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. We will examine how Western correspondents in China write about this country (and, importantly, how they write in general), interview several correspondents and engage in some reporting of our own.

We will also examine how Chinese journalists write about their own country, and discuss the differences between journalism in China and Western journalism, incorporating Chinese perspectives in an equal way.

Observation only means something in the telling, and for our purposes, in the writing. We will discuss at the outset the elements of good writing and the structures and contents of good journalism. And because this is an intensive writing course, students are expected to write a reported piece of journalism (800 – 1,000 words) weekly. We will read each other's work and discuss it in class with the same verve we discuss the work of Western correspondents based here. While the emphasis will be on the print media, there will be guest lecturers who will discuss documentary film-making, television journalism, and other means of looking at and into China.

Students will also take on one major project for the final four weeks of the semester. It should be either a major piece of reporting or feature writing (all subject to discussion), or a research paper on ways of observing China. Other work products are open to discussion, but all of your work must be original (not done for another course).

Readings in this course will be extensive. Students should count on approximately two hundred pages or more of reading each week. The core adage of this course – "if you don't read, you can't write" – must be taken to heart.

This course will be conducted in a seminar format, which means we will take turns leading the discussions of the readings. All students will be expected to participate in our exchanges. By its nature this course has a limited enrollment; please apply to me for admission in advance. This course is intended to be challenging, immediate and fun. Come prepared to talk, to read, and to write.

Course Outcomes

It is our intent that students will leave this course with a deeper understanding of contemporary China, and of how journalists and documentarians, both Chinese and foreign, observe and write (or film) about China. Over the course of the semester students will, through their original journalism and essay writing, grapple with some of the issues that emerge in our readings. Students will also, most importantly, emerge both with an appreciation of good writing and better writers themselves.

Through our reading, discussions and interviewing conducted for our own writing, we should develop a tactile sense of China (through the lens of Beijing primarily, but also through the two required class field trips) in a vivid and immediate fashion quite distinct from academic inquiry. It is hoped that the students in this seminar will bring to it, in some measure, the perspectives of political science, history, anthropology, and will see how these disciplines, to some extent, color the way journalism frames issues and writes about them.

Success will be reflected in their own writing.

Attendance Policy

If you don't want show up for class, don't sign up; if you do, it will be fun and you may actually learn something. Failure to attend class will, not surprisingly, have a somewhat deleterious effect on your final evaluation.

Academic Honesty Statement

Please see the following link, and read the text carefully:

http://www.luc.edu/academics/catalog/undergrad/reg_academicintegrity.shtml

Assessment

Grading will be based on your writing and your class participation. That said, the idea of this course is to do good work and not worry about grades. There will be a series of weekly reported pieces of 800 to 1,000 words required as well as a lengthier piece towards the end of the semester, either a reported piece or a research paper on some aspect of journalism in China, either to be decided on after conference. Roughly 40 percent of your grade will be based on the shorter written pieces and 50 percent on your longer project. Participation in our weekly discussions is extremely important as well and will constitute 10 percent of the final grade.

Readings

Here are some books, most written by prominent journalists who have worked here for years, that we shall read; required:

1. Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words* (Anchor Books, 2011)
2. Ian Johnson, *Wild Grass: Three Portraits of Change in Modern China* (Vintage, 2005)
3. Leslie Chang: *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (Spiegel & Grau, 2008)
4. Chen Guidi & Wu Chuntao, *Will the Boat Sink the Water: Life of China's Peasants* (PublicAffairs, 2006)
5. John Pomfret, *Chinese Lessons: Five Classmates and the Story of the New China* (Holt Paperbacks, 2007)
6. Michael Meyer, *The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed* (Walker & Company, 2008)

Given China's vast size, enormous cultural and social variegation, and complex political history, the six books listed above scarcely scratch the surface in explaining this country. Below I have listed books that are **very highly recommended** and to which we are likely to

refer as the semester progresses.

1. Philip P. Pan, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China* (Simon & Schuster, 2008)
2. Sang Ye: *China Candid: The People on the People's Republic* (University of California Press, 2006)
3. Richard McGregor, *The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* (Harper Collins, New York 2010)
4. James Kynge, *China Shakes the World: A Titan's Rise and Troubled Future -- and the Challenge for America* (Mariner Books, 2007)
5. Craig Simons, *The Devouring Dragon: How China's Rise Threatens Our Natural World* (St. Martin's Press, March 2013)
6. Rob Gifford, *China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power* (Random House, 2008)
7. Jen Lin-liu, *Serve the People: A Stir-fried Journey Through China* (Harcourt 2008)
8. Jan Wong, *Red China Blues: My Long March from Mao to Now* (Anchor, 1997)
9. Lijia Zhang, *"Socialism is Great": A Worker's Memoir of the New China* (Anchor 2009)
10. Jan Wong, *A Comrade Lost and Found: A Beijing Memoir* (Mariner Books, 2010)
11. Evan Osnos, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth and Faith in the New China* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux 2015)
12. And, for fun, and not inconsiderable insight: Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop* (Bay Back Books, 1999); originally published 1938.

Class Schedule

Journalism does not come to us in neatly packaged modules, unlike your other courses in history or political science. Our goals over the coming twelve or so weeks are to read widely the China coverage from western newspapers and magazines, discuss with increasing knowledge the work of specific journalists, and write regular pieces based on your own efforts exploring China.

The rhythm of the semester will depend in some measure on my presentations of journalism's basic principles and approaches to reporting in China, and to some extent on your own interests and perspectives. This is intended to be a collaborative effort among us all. I will, each week, assign reading from our suggested texts, and encourage wider reading where appropriate. Every week, students will be expected to submit a short, perhaps 800- to 1,000-word, original piece of reporting that tells us something interesting about China. We will discuss each other's work in class and I will return each piece with extensive, and constructive, comments and editing.

Broadly, however, the semester will be segmented as follows:

- An introduction to the practice of journalism – gathering material, figuring out what you have, and using it to produce a piece of good writing – as well as the practice of journalism in China.

- An exploration of Beijing, what goes on in this city of 17 million people and how journalists wrote about China's capital.
- A broad and deep look at the nature of Chinese society, how it is changing and how some of the best journalists report this staggering social transformation.
- A careful exploration of political repression and how, despite occasional dangers, journalists cover delicate and risky subjects
- China's rapid economic is reshaping not just itself but the world; we shall examine this profound reordering of economic life.

Students will also be required to read sections from the required books each week, and, from time to time, also delve into the recommended readings. The assigned readings are for the most part by journalists with a wide range of experience in China and each has a distinct perspective on China, and on reporting about China.

About mid-way through the semester I expect students to settle on an idea or subject for a longer piece of reporting, or research paper, on which we jointly agree.

Over the course of the semester we will examine how correspondents cover breaking news and how they report and write longer feature and investigative pieces; we will invite several correspondents, as well as documentary film makers, to our class to discuss their work. We will also look at how Chinese journalists report on their own country and how it differs from the work of western journalists.

Now, for those considering this course: if you are serious you'll be expected, in addition to what you write in Beijing, to write a piece from each of the class excursions. This means, for example, that, on your trip to Yunnan this month, I would like you to find someone or something that strikes you as interesting – for example, a potter, a monk, a kite-maker, a musician, a polluted river, a shanty town, a boat-man, a fortune-teller, a tea shop, a pipa player, a calligrapher, a cricket fighter, a noodle maker – and spend an hour or so (or more, should you wish) doing interviews and taking notes, and when you get back to campus, take another hour or so writing an 800-word piece based on your reporting and bring it to class on day one. We're off and running. It will be grand.