

Bio

Jean C. Oi is the William Haas Professor on Chinese Politics in the department of political science and a Senior Fellow of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. She is the founding director of the Stanford China Program at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center. Professor Oi also is the founding Lee Shau Kee Director of the Stanford Center at Peking University.

A PhD in political science from the University of Michigan, Oi first taught at Lehigh University and later in the department of government at Harvard University before joining the Stanford faculty in 1997.

Her work focuses on comparative politics, with special expertise on China's political economy and institutions in the process of reform. Her first book, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China* (University of California Press, 1989) examined the core of rural politics in the Mao period—the struggle over the distribution of the grain harvest—and the clientelistic politics that ensued. Her *Rural China Takes Off* (University of California Press, 1999) examined the property rights necessary for development and showed how "local state corporatism" facilitated rapid growth of rural industry during the early reform process. A recent article, "Reflections on Forty Years of Rural Reform," in Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, eds., *To Get Rich is Glorious Challenges Facing China's Economic Reform and Opening at Forty*, (2019), brings together her insights on the continuing challenges of rural reform.

Her study of political economy also extends to the politics of corporate restructuring, where she has highlighted the institutional constraints of state actors. She has published a number of articles based on survey work and interviews with factory managers and government officials, including "*Patterns of Corporate Restructuring in China: Political Constraints on Privatization*," (2005); "Chinese Firms Under Transformation: Corporate Restructuring, Employee Layoff and Manager Turnover in 1990s," in Harland Prechel, ed., *Politics and Neoliberalism: Structure, Process and Outcome*, (2007) with Lu Zheng; "China's Corporate Restructuring: A Multi-step Process," in Jean Oi, ed., *Going Private in China: The Politics of Corporate Restructuring and System Reform* (2011), with Han Chaohua; "Creating Corporate Groups to Strengthen China's State-Owned Enterprises," with Zhang Xiaowen, in Kjeld Erik Brodsgard, ed., *Globalization and Public Sector Reform in China* (2014); and "Unpacking the Patterns of Corporate Restructuring during China's SOE Reform," co-authored with Xiaojun Li (2018).

With the goal of gaining deeper comparative insights she organized a conference on institutional complementarities in corporate restructuring in East Asia. The results were too rich for a single volume so she joined with other country experts to edit three separate country focused volumes: *Going Private in China: The Politics of Corporate Restructuring and System Reform* (2011); , *Adapt, Fragment, Transform: Corporate Restructuring and System Reform in Korea*, and *Syncretism* (2012), co-edited with Byung-Kook Kim and Eun Mee Kim; and *The Politics of Economic Restructuring and System Reform in Japan*, co-edited with Kenji E. Kushida and Kay Shimizu. Brookings Institution (2013).

Recent work has focused on fiscal politics and local governance in China. She did fieldwork on the organization of rural communities and the provision of public goods, especially affordable housing. As part of this work she followed up on her earlier interest in village elections to see how new policies to reorganize rural communities might affect these elections and the power of elected officials. A central component of the efforts to reorganize rural society was the creation of “new rural communities,” which relocated villagers into higher density housing to free up collective land. Research on China’s new housing initiative is found in “Institutional Challenges in Providing Affordable Housing in the People’s Republic of China,” with Niny Khor. This was part of a larger effort that brought together Chinese and western scholars to explore the complexities and constraints as China seeks rapid urbanization, *Challenges in the Process of China’s Urbanization*, edited with Karen Eggleston and Yiming Wang (2017).

Fiscal politics and central local relations in China has long been at the center of Oi’s research. An early work published with Zhao Shukai, “Fiscal Crisis in China’s Townships,” in *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China* (2007), Merle Goldman and Elizabeth Perry, eds., examined the fiscal predicament of lower levels of the Chinese state after the recentralization efforts and the abolition of fees and taxes on peasants. “Shifting Fiscal Control to Limit Cadre Power in China’s Townships and Villages,” in *The China Quarterly*, which was coauthored with Kim Singer Babiarz, Linxiu Zhang, Renfu Luo, Scott Rozelle further examined the consequences of recentralized control over the countryside using national survey.

More recently Oi is engaged in resolving the puzzle of growing local government debt in China. Oi has a co-authored working paper under review that examines why there is so much local government debt when law prohibits localities from borrowing and budget deficits. Based on recent memoirs by key Chinese leaders, government documents, financial sites, as well as interviews, their research shines new light the fiscal relationship between Beijing and the localities in the wake of the 1994 reforms. Contrary to existing views that the results was centralization, Oi and her co-authors find that because of a series of backstage concessions the 1994 fiscal reforms sustained and even bolstered, rather than diminished, the incentives for local state-led development, even as the new [recentralizing] fiscal reforms took much of the surplus from the localities. Localities were given new incentives and tools to grow the local economy as well as to manage the façade of fiscal discipline.

A persistent theme in all of Oi’s work is the weight of institutions. Starting with her first book, Oi has tried to unravel how they shape politics and later how they help or hinder reform. A conference volume, *Growing Pains: Tensions and Opportunities in China’s Transformation*, edited with Scott Rozelle and Xueguang Zhou (2010) brought together leading China experts to examine the problems of institutional catch up as China’s economy was outpacing the ability of the state to regulate and govern. A few years ago Oi decided to use her micro-level approach to research local level institutions to address the question of authoritarian resilience. She co-edited with Steven Goldstein, *Zouping Revisited: Adaptive Governance in a Chinese County* (2018), which explores how county governments have been able to cope as the economy has grown exponentially and demands and needs from an increasingly complex society put more strains on resources and the political system, with seemingly little or no institutional change. Following and completing the work of her advisor at the University of Michigan, who then became a colleague at Stanford, Michel Oksenberg, Oi lead a group of scholars for repeated fieldwork over

a number of years to one county in China, Zouping, Shandong. Through intensive and repeated visits to one locality, this group of scholars were able to penetrate beneath the surface to understand how institutions had evolved in the way that they operate even if on the surface there little or no change is evident. They found that through adaptive governance China's local governments were able to improvise and manage. At the heart of authoritarian resilience in China is institutional agility in the face of incomplete reform.

Following the theme of adaptive governance further she recently edited, *Fateful Decisions: Choices that will Shape China's Future*, co-edited with Tom Finger (2020), that examined how much further incomplete reform will take China. A short piece, "China's Challenges: Now it Gets Much Harder," with Thomas Finger, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 43 (Spring 2020), succinctly summarizes the key argument that China got great mileage out of its development model of the last 40 years that only tweaked the institutions that it inherited from the Mao period, i.e., incomplete reform. This allowed the reforms in the CCP to avoid thorny political problems that challenged the core principles of the CCP leading a socialist system. But the question, 40 years into the reform process, whether this same system may now become a weakness as current leaders continue to kick the can down the road, failing to complete the reform process, on the contrary, Finger and Oi argue that China seems to be "going back to the future" relying on a playbook not seen since the Mao period.

Oi's newest research project is on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Distinct from most other work on BRI, but much in line with her earlier work, Oi is trying to take an institutional and micro level approach to better understand what BRI is in practice and its impact. She begins by questioning rather than accepting that the BRI is a tightly coordinated central state effort and leaves open the possibility that it, at least in part, is another example of local state development taking advantage of global opportunities. She has done preliminary interviews with officials and is continuing to collect data on the key political actors both within China and in the countries where the projects are taking place. Using various types of sources she is trying to map the firms that are signing the contracts and the firms that are actually do the work for the various BRI projects. This project, while moving beyond domestic politics, brings together her earlier focus on local state development and central local relations.