# Call for Papers

## The Policy Inflection in China: A Cross-Disciplinary Conference

Convener: 21st Century China Center (21CCC)
Dates: April 8-9, 2027
Location: UC San Diego

### Submission and Conference Information

Please submit PDFs of your paper proposal (1-3 pages) and CV to the form found on this link **by Nov. 30, 2026**.

The conference will bring together senior and junior scholars from multiple disciplines and will include both invited papers and papers selected through this open call. We especially hope to foster exchange among scholars who approach these questions from different—and potentially contrasting—perspectives.

Conference organizers intend to produce an **edited volume** based on the project.

For participants without research or conference funding, 21CCC will provide support for economy-class airfare. Lodging and meals during the conference will be provided.

Email any questions to 21CCC@ucsd.edu.

### Theme: The Policy Inflection in China

It is obvious that China today is very different from the China of the 1990s and 2000s. In the 1990s, China's political leaders took substantial risks to establish a more open and market-oriented economy, while also permitting significant social and political liberalization. Today, political control and the dominance of the Chinese Communist Party have been steadily strengthened, and the Chinese government has invested an extraordinary volume of resources to

strengthen government steerage of the economy. These changes are often associated with the personal rule of Xi Jinping, but many changes predate the Xi administration. When did China shift from prioritizing market-oriented reforms to prioritizing political control and direction?

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the questions of how, when, and why this enormous shift in policy orientation took place. This has left many puzzles unaddressed: the direction of policy change in many domains is now180 degrees from the previous orientation, yet there has been no obvious or abrupt turning point. For this reason, this conference proposes to use the vocabulary of a gradual "inflection point," rather than a sharp "turning point." Naughton (2021) proposed 2005-2006 as an inflection point for planning, as China gradually embraced an activist industrial policy. A similar inflection point can be observed in state enterprise policy in those years, as many industrial sectors were reserved for state enterprise influence or control. However, these dates may not be appropriate for change in other policy domains.

The question of timing opens up a broader and more interesting set of questions. What policy changes were most important and how were they implemented? How do changes in policy objectives feed into the changes in political incentives and political system we observe in the Xi years? Are external shocks or popular attitudes important in shaping policy change? Most crucially, what explains such a broad and dramatic shift in policy? We propose to convene a multi-disciplinary academic conference to bring together existing knowledge, compare conditions across policy domains, and generate new understanding of these dramatic changes.

We highlight three apparent empirical regularities that throw into relief the analytic challenge:

1. The shift in policy orientation is clearly apparent before the beginning of the Xi Jinping administration in late 2012. Besides the economic policy examples mentioned above, there are apparently similar early inflection points in minorities policy, freedom of expression and information control, foreign policy, policy towards Taiwan, and many others. These policies clearly predate Xi's selection as Party leader and imply that explanations based purely on top leader preferences are inadequate.
2. The shift in policy orientation is evident at about the same time in many different policy arenas that are not closely related. No obvious linkage connects minorities policy or Taiwan policy, for example, to economic policy. This implies that analyses that explain change relying on dynamics within a given policy domain are at best incomplete.
3. There is no major party meeting or top party document that explains this dramatic policy shift. The 17th Party Congress in 2007 was seen at the time as consolidating the Hu Jintao status quo, and not as marking a major ideological turn or sharp change in economic

strategy. There is thus no sharp "turning point," and we prefer to speak of a "point of inflection." It appears that policy momentum in a liberal, or market-oriented, direction fades; and then initially modest policy initiatives gradually coalesced into a sustained new policy direction.

Without addressing these empirical challenges, we may avoid asking hard questions and take changes for granted. Yet they were hardly inevitable. China in the early 2000s was one of the most successful economies in world history, and growth was accelerating. Relations between China and the US were reasonably calm during the first decade of the century. Yet China chose to turn away from the policies that had enabled profound successes. Why?

## We Invite Two Types of Papers

### Empirical papers on specific policy domains

These papers should identify and analyze policy inflection within a particular area. Authors might consider:

- When did the direction of policy begin to change?
- What were the specific steps and instruments through which change occurred?
- What political debates, trade-offs, institutions, or other factors drove the shift?
- What were its most important consequences?
- How closely does change in this domain correspond to developments in other policy areas?

We welcome submissions across a wide range of subjects and disciplines, including political science, economics, sociology, international relations, and related fields.

### Analytic papers explaining the broader policy shift

These papers should develop and assess hypotheses about why and how China's policy orientation changed. Potential explanations include concerns about regime security, ideological change, the search for a new model of economic growth, changing domestic political incentives, popular attitudes, and external shocks or pressures.

We particularly welcome arguments that challenge conventional explanations or offer new ways of understanding the origins and development of China's policy transformation.