The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

UG Course Syllabus

China Through Time and Space: Chinese Historical Geography (Fall 2026)

HUMA 1412

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Office Hours: Fridays 14:30-16:30, Room 3332 (by appointment)

Course Description

This course introduces an important area of research in history and culture that is playing an increasingly significant role in modern humanities and social sciences. It guides students in exploring the geographical dimensions of Chinese history—an essential aspect of China studies—while also examining human-environment interactions and their influence on the development of Chinese history and culture. Students will engage with a variety of research methods and tools, with a particular focus on digital humanities approaches, such as Quantum GIS. The course will also equip students with valuable skills for both academic and professional development.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Identify the changes in climate, vegetation, water systems, coastlines, deserts, territories, population, and administrative divisions throughout Chinese history, and analyze the relationship between these geographical phenomena and human activities.
2. Describe the agricultural, industrial, and commercial development processes during the historical periods of China, and critically analyze the impact of these activities on the landscape and the natural environment.
3. Evaluate past sources about the historical geography of China.
4. Present historical geographical phenomena analytically in the project report and presentation, and conduct original academic research.
5. Develop a strong sense of social responsibility by valuing humanity and society from diverse perspectives.

Assessment and Grading

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Group Presentation	1, 2, 4	The group presentation allows students to analyze historical geographical phenomena, show understanding of human-

		environment interactions, and present findings clearly and analytically.
Written Assignment	1, 2, 3, 4	The written assignment assesses students' ability to evaluate sources, analyze geographical and human activity relationships, and conduct original research.
Attendance	5	Regular attendance encourages engagement with course content and discussion, helping students develop awareness of social responsibility and diverse perspectives.

Final Grade Descriptors

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates an exceptional and insightful understanding of China's historical geography. A student at this level can identify and analyze changes in climate, vegetation, water systems, coastlines, deserts, territories, population, and administrative divisions (ILO1), critically evaluate agricultural, industrial, and commercial development (ILO2), assess historical sources effectively (ILO3), and present original research in reports and presentations (ILO4). The student shows strong social awareness and considers diverse perspectives in their analyses (ILO5). Work is thorough, accurate, and demonstrates high-level analytical and research skills.
B	Good Performance	Shows a solid understanding of China's historical geography and human-environment interactions (ILO1, ILO2). Can evaluate sources and complete research-based assignments with clear analysis (ILO3, ILO4). Demonstrates awareness of social responsibility and diverse perspectives (ILO5). Work is generally accurate and coherent, with minor gaps in depth or insight.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Displays basic knowledge of historical geography concepts (ILO1, ILO2) and complete assignments with sufficient understanding of sources and research methods (ILO3, ILO4). Shows some consideration of social and human aspects (ILO5). Work meets minimum requirements but may lack depth, clarity, or critical analysis.
D	Marginal Pass	Has limited understanding of historical geography and human-environment relationships (ILO1, ILO2). Assignments show minimal analysis or source evaluation (ILO3, ILO4). Shows little awareness of social perspectives (ILO5). Work is incomplete, unclear, or only partially meets learning objectives.
F	Fail	Does not demonstrate sufficient understanding of China's historical geography (ILO1, ILO2), cannot critically evaluate sources or conduct research (ILO3, ILO4), and fails to show awareness of social responsibility (ILO5). Work is inadequate, missing, or fails to meet course requirements.

The following assignments will count toward your final grade and be included in the assessment:

Group Presentation (35%)

Students need to form groups of 4-5 people; each group needs to give one group presentation. The topic of the group presentation can be any topic related to historical geography or the history of a region or any geographically related subject. Each group's presentation should not exceed 20 minutes. Please register your group members and the order of presentations using the link below. The registration deadline is September 15.

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1QX5GBxR7gxu-NJ8b049gwOs5yo0UGI4bPua4SSGJvQ0/edit?usp=sharing

Grading criteria for Group Presentation:

Criterion	**Developing**	**Accomplished**	**Exemplary**
Completeness 50%	Introduces multiple historical geography topics, or introduces a topic that is off-focus, or fails to explain the basic historical context, geographical changes, and human-environment interactions, or is seriously under/over the 20-minute limit.	Smoothly introduces one historical geography topic and helps classmates understand its basic context.	Fully explains the historical geography topic, and its connections with society, while offering critical reflections.
Academic Quality 25%	Contains factual errors about the historical geography topic, or entirely copies other sources.	Able to cite references to support arguments and explanations.	Able to correctly apply historical geography methods, critically evaluate historical sources, or discuss human-environment relationships from social and interdisciplinary perspectives.
Collaboration 25%	The group did not collaborate well.	The group completed the presentation through cooperation.	The group members actively helped each other, shared tasks effectively, and ensured a well-organized and coherent presentation.

Notes:

1. For the convenience of the Q&A section, please send your group presentation materials at **least two days** in advance to the instructor **via email**.

2. If you cannot register for the group presentation before the deadline, the instructor will randomly assign you to a group and give you a time slot.
3. To ensure fairness, groups that actively choose earlier presentation dates (Week 3 and Week 4) **will receive bonus points**, until all slots are filled.
4. With the unanimous agreement of group members, not everyone is required to stand on stage for the final presentation. Members can also contribute by preparing materials, creating slides, and other tasks.
5. To avoid disputes, any changes to the presentation time or group members must be communicated by email to the instructor or TA. In particular, if you have concerns about the workload of your group members, please also contact us by email rather than telling us directly in class.
6. You will receive your group presentation grade before the end of the semester.
7. If you need to confirm whether a topic is suitable for presentation, please consult the instructor or TA by email.
8. Any application for special circumstances should be submitted by email with official proof recognized by the university. Thank you.

Examples of topics:

You can find some good examples of group presentation topics on the slides from the first class. We encourage you to use them as inspiration to choose your own topic, and it is best if the topic can relate to your life or your field of study.

Written Assignment (40%)

*Each student must submit an essay **by December 10**, introducing a topic in historical geography that was not covered in your previous group presentation. The essay should not exceed 600 words.*

*Please submit your assignments **by email, not via Canvas**. My email is hmhma@ust.hk. There is no need to submit a hard copy.*

Grading criteria for the Written Assignment:

Criterion	**Developing**	**Accomplished**	**Exemplary**
Academic Quality 50%	Uses non-academic language or format, or violates the university's academic integrity and ethics policy, or unfairly and inappropriately uses AI tools, or chooses an inappropriate/off-focus topic.	Able to write in any recognized academic format (Chicago, APA, etc.) with basic citations and references.	Fully adheres to academic formatting without errors, and correctly applies methods from historical geography or an interdisciplinary research perspective.

Knowledge and Skills 25%	Unable to clearly describe historical geography phenomena, or contains obvious factual errors.	Able to describe historical geography phenomena, and further analyze their relationship with human activities using knowledge learned in class.	Demonstrates comprehensive understanding of historical geography, analyzes human-environment interactions, and discusses findings in social, cultural, or disciplinary contexts.
Innovation 25%	No original viewpoint	Shows thoughts and insights on the historical geography topic.	Critically engages with the topic, proposes original interpretations, and connects it to other academic research in the field.

Notes:

1. Submissions after the deadline will not be accepted.
2. Essays should not be significantly shorter or longer than 600 words; otherwise, points will be deducted. Footnotes and references are not counted in the 600-word limit.
3. According to the university's guidelines on generative AI use, you may use generative AI in this assignment, but only for the purpose of stimulating creativity. Any use of generative AI must be clearly marked or explained, including which AI tool was used and which parts of the writing were assisted by the AI tool.
   https://cei.hkust.edu.hk/en-hk/system/files?file=hkust_policy_principles_for_genai_for_tl_student_version.pdf&check_logged_in=1
4. For fairness, in accordance with university requirements, you must maintain academic integrity and comply with the university's Academic Honor Code. Violations will be handled by the Academic Registry.
   https://registry.hkust.edu.hk/resource-library/academic-honor-code-and-academic-integrity
5. If you are not sure about your final essay topic, you may schedule an office hour or contact the instructor or TA by email.

Examples of topics:

You can find some good examples of final essay topics on the slides from the first class. We encourage you to use them as inspiration to choose your own topic, and it is best if the topic can relate to your life or your field of study.

Attendance (25%)

Your participation in class is very important, and we encourage you to take part in every class.

Attendance:

1. You need to attend every class **marked as Lecture** (please check the Course Outline and Schedule section in the syllabus). Your attendance will only be counted if you sign the attendance sheet. If you stayed for more than 80% of the class but forgot to sign, please register with the instructor or TA after class.
2. Missing one Lecture will result in a 6% deduction from your Attendance grade.
3. During the Add & Drop week, we will not take attendance.

Class participation:

1. We encourage participation in class, but because there are 80 students and only one TA, it is not realistic to record everyone's comments during lectures. Therefore, we encourage you to share your opinion more in tutorial sessions. Before asking a question or making a comment, please **state your name and student number** so the TA can record it. Any comments without name and student number will not be recorded.
2. All sessions **marked as tutorial** will take attendance, but tutorials are not mandatory. Attendance at tutorials will be seen as active participation, which will improve your Attendance grade.
3. Offensive or inappropriate comments in class may affect your grade.

Leave of absence:

1. According to university policy, any leave request must be supported by official documents, such as a medical certificate from a hospital or proof of attending an event or academic conference. Please send these documents by email to the instructor or TA. Showing the documents during class or office hours will not be valid.
2. If your leave affects your group presentation, it will also affect your own group presentation grade.
3. All leave requests must be submitted before you are absent. According to university policy, we cannot accept leave requests after you are already absent.

Office Hours :

1. To be fair to everyone, communication with the instructor or TA outside of class, such as meeting in Starbucks or during booked office hours, will not affect your grade.
2. However, we still welcome your questions at any time and will do our best to support your success.

Bonus Points (Up to 3 points)

1. To encourage comments or questions **in tutorials**, each participation recognized by the instructor or TA will earn 1 Bonus Point.
2. Each student can earn **a maximum of 3 Bonus Points**. After that, participation will still be recorded but will not receive Bonus Points.
3. Students assigned to give a group presentation or peer review in the tutorial cannot earn Bonus Points for their assignment.
4. Bonus Points will be added to the final grade and included in the conversion to the final letter grade.

Support and Assistance

- If you need any help, please contact the instructor or TA by email. We apologize that due to a busy schedule, the instructor or TA cannot guarantee an immediate reply to every email, but they will do their best to respond to each of your reasonable requests.
- To avoid your email being marked as spam, your email should at least include your name, your division/department, and the course you are enrolled in (HUMA 1412).
- Students with disabilities or special needs are encouraged to contact the instructor or TA to arrange appropriate accommodation.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via email within two weeks of submission.

Course AI Policy

** Please refer to the Written Assignment section.*

Course Outline and Schedule

** The course schedule may be adjusted according to actual needs.* ***The following academic books are provided as reference materials for this course and are not required reading.***

Week 1 1 Sep (Lecture) 3 Sep (Lecture)

Welcome and Introduction
Maps: How to lie with maps

- Butlin, R. A. “Theory and Methodology in Historical Geography.” In *Historical Geography: Progress and Prospect*, edited by R. A. Butlin. Routledge, 2011.
- Withers, Charles W. J., Mona Domosh, and Michael Heffernan. "Introduction." In *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Geography*, edited by Charles W. J. Withers, Mona Domosh, and Michael Heffernan. SAGE, 2021.

Week 2 8 Sep (Lecture) 10 Sep (Lecture)

Cities
Rivers

- Ge, Jianxiong, Yunsheng Hu, Qingyong Wang, and Lijia Yao. *A Historical Survey of the Yellow River and the River Civilizations*. Singapore: Springer, 2021.

Week 3 15 Sep (Lecture) 17 Sep (Tutorial)

Climate

- Ge, Quansheng, Zhixin Hao, Jingyun Zheng, and Yang Liu. "China: 2000 Years of Climate Reconstruction from Historical Documents." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Climate History*, edited by Sam White, Christian Pfister, and Franz Mauelshagen. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Week 4 22 Sep (Lecture) 24 Sep (Tutorial)

Migration

- Yen, Ching-huang. "Chinese Coolie Emigration, 1845–1874." In *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Diaspora*, edited by Tan Chee-Beng. Routledge, 2013.
- Ho, Ping-Ti. "Part One. The Official Population Record." In *Studies on the Population of China, 1368–1953*. Harvard University Press, 2013.

Week 5 29 Sep (Lecture)

Language

- Jiao, Liwei, Victor H. Mair, and William S-Y. Wang, eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Language and Culture*. Routledge, 2024.

Week 6 6 Oct (Lecture) 8 Oct (Tutorial)

Deserts

- Wang, Xunming, Fahu Chen, Jiawu Zhang, Yi Yang, Jijun Li, Eerdun Hasi, Caixia Zhang, and Dunsheng Xia. "Climate, Desertification, and the Rise and Collapse of China's Historical Dynasties." *Human Ecology* 38 (2010): 157–172.

Week 7 13 Oct (Lecture) 15 Oct (Tutorial)

Transportation

- Köll, Elisabeth. *Railroads and the Transformation of China*. Harvard University Press, 2019.

Week 8 20 Oct (Lecture) 22 Oct (Tutorial)

Territory and Boundaries: Early China

- Ge, Zhaoguang. "Borders: On 'Chinese' Territory." In *What Is China?: Territory, Ethnicity, Culture, and History*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

Week 9 27 Oct (Lecture) 29 Oct (Tutorial)

Territory and Boundaries: Medieval China

Week 10 3 Nov (Lecture) 5 Nov (Tutorial)

Territory and Boundaries: Pre-Modern China

- Cartier, Carolyn, and Puzhou Wu. "Chapter 2: From the Administrative Hierarchy to the System of Administrative Divisions." In *Handbook on Local Governance in China*, edited by Jianfa Shen and Roger C. K. Chan. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023.

Week 11 10 Nov (Lecture) 12 Nov (Tutorial)

Territory and Boundaries: Modern China

Week 12 17 Nov (Lecture) 19 Nov (Tutorial)

Historical Geography in the Digital Age

- Nyerges, Timothy L., Robert McMaster, and Helen Couclelis. "Geographic Information Systems and Society: A Twenty Year Research Perspective." In *The SAGE Handbook of GIS*

and Society, edited by Timothy L. Nyerges, Helen Couclelis, and Robert McMaster. SAGE Publications, 2011.

- Edney, Matthew H. "Map History: Discourse and Process." In *The Routledge Handbook of Mapping and Cartography*, edited by Martin Woods and Jeremy W. Crampton. Routledge, 2017.

Week 13 24 Nov (Tutorial) 26 Nov (Tutorial)

Only tutorials this week