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Fall 2026

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HUMA 1440: Modern China

Modern China is a concept that is frequently used but often poorly defined. This course will explore the basis for this term – what does it mean to be “modern” and how China can be defined and understood in this context. The course will examine major themes in the history of China from the “early modern” period of the Qing up to the beginning of the reform era in 1979. In doing so, we will discuss how modernity ought to be understood specifically in the context of China and how our view of the past shapes our understanding of the present.

Course Hours:

Tuesday/Thursday: 1:30pm – 2:50pm

Location:

Rm G009A, CYT Building

CILOs:

1. Paraphrase the most important political, economic, social, and cultural events in China in the past 200 years
2. Analyze the causes and significance of the important historical events in modern China
3. Summarize the general trends in modern Chinese history such as the rise of nationalism and Communism so that they may better understand what is happening in China today
4. Compare and contrast the influences of historical and revolutionary legacies to China

Assessment:

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Mid-Term examination	30%	08/10/2026
In class written reflections	30%	Various class dates
Examination question assignment	10%	26/11/2026
Final examination	30%	TBD (Registrar will assign exam date by mid October)

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This course will be assessed using criterion-referencing, and grades will not be assigned using a curve. Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Mid-Term examination	ILO 1-3	This task assesses students' ability to understand the foundations of events leading to the rapid changes in China's past 200 years (ILO1), to explain the roots of the crises and upheavals of modern China (ILO2), and to form basis for understanding of China today (ILO3).
In class written reflections	ILO 1-4	This task will be specific to each individual argument and event it's related to, and assesses the students' overall ability to discuss, analyze, and respond to China's recent past (ILO1-4).
Examination question assignment	ILO 1-4	This task assesses how students can formulate and articulate questions related to the major topics and themes of the entire semester, covering the history of China's recent past. (ILO 1-4)
Final examination	ILO 1-4	This tasks assesses the students' overall ability to synthesize the course of modern Chinese history (ILO1), explain significant events and their influence (ILO2), discuss in detail the events of 20 th century China (ILO3), and situate China's recent history with its long historical past (ILO4).

In-class writing reflections:

There will be roughly 10-12 instances where I will ask students to write a short reflection/response to something I provide during class. These range from commenting on a primary source to discussing theoretical or argumentative points mentioned in class. The assignments are to be hand-written in notebooks I provide (which will be yours to use only for the entire semester) and will be graded on a check minus/check/check plus system. No make up for this assignment is possible.

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Grading rubrics:

Final grade descriptions:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates mastery of the subject matter, being able to clearly articulate major problems and questions in the study of China's historical development towards the 20 th century. Exhibits a clear ability to explain unique features of China's modernity and use this information as the foundation to further study China today.
B	Good Performance	Demonstrates a good knowledge of the subject matter, being able to articulate major problems and questions in the study of China's historical development towards the 20 th century. Exhibits competent ability to explain unique features of China's modernity and use this information as foundation to further study China today.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Demonstrates an adequate knowledge of the subject matter, being able to somewhat articulate major problems and questions in the study of China's historical development towards the 20 th century. Exhibits fair ability to explain unique features of China's modernity and use this information as foundation to further study China today.
D	Marginal Pass	Demonstrates minimal knowledge of the subject matter, being able to articulate some awareness of the major problems and questions in the study of China's historical development towards the 20 th century. Exhibits threshold ability to explain unique features of China's modernity and use this information as foundation to further study China today.
F	Fail	Demonstrates insufficient knowledge of the subject matter, unable to demonstrate awareness of the major problems and questions in the study of China's historical development towards the 20 th century. Exhibit little ability to explain unique features of China's modernity and use this information as foundation to further study China today.

Laptops & electronic devices:

Cell phones and other devices that will make noises during the class need to be shut off.

Generative AI:

This course will not accept work done used with generative AI. Anyone detected to have used such methods to generate text for their assignment will receive an automatic zero for the assignment as it is a form of academic dishonesty by submitting work not produced by the student.

Communication and Feedback:

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Feedback on in-class writing assignment will be brief, with more comments given if asked. Students who have further questions about the feedback

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including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Academic Integrity:

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to [Academic Integrity | HKUST - Academic Registry](#) for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.

Readings:

David G. Atwill & Yurong Y. Atwill, *Sources in Chinese History: Diverse Perspectives from 1644 to the Present*, London: Prentice Hall, 2010.

Alan Lawrence, *China Since 1919: Revolution and Reform, A Sourcebook*, London: Routledge, 2004.

For reference, you can also read

William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. (This is available on JSTOR [here](#))

Items marked as "background" are optional additional reading

Class schedule:

1st Sept: What does "Modern" even mean?

Ho Ping-ti, "The Significance of the Ch'ing-Period," *Journal of Asian Studies* 26:2 (Feb 1967), 189-95. (PDF on Canvas)

3rd Sept: The Manchus

Atwill & Atwill, 6-11.

Background: Di Cosmo, Nicola, *The diary of a Manchu soldier in seventeenth-century China : My Service in the Army*, London: Routledge, 2006, 1-45. (E-book through ProQuest Ebook Central)

8th Sept: "High Qing"

Rowe, William. *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing*. Harvard University Press, 2009. Chapter 3 - High Qing, pp. 63-89. (PDF on Canvas)

10th Sept: China Marches West

Perdue, Peter. *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*. Beklnap Press, 2005. "Introduction". (PDF on Canvas)

15th Sept: Enjoying the Grand Canal

<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/tours.html>

Please also look at these two paintings be prepared to discuss them:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49251>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/41493>

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- Background: Elliott, Mark. *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World*. Longman, 2009. 68-85. (PDF on Canvas)
- 17th Sept: Tea and world trade
Atwill & Atwill, 22-31.
Background: Wong, John. *Global Trade in the Nineteenth Century: The House of Houqua and the Canton System*. Cambridge University Press, 2016. 18-31. (PDF on Canvas)
- 22nd Sept: Opium and war
Atwill & Atwill, 36-45
- 24th Sept: Internal rebellions
Atwill & Atwill, 48-58
- 29th Sept: Foreign contacts
Atwill & Atwill, 64-71.
Day, Jenny Huangfu. *Qing Travelers to the Far West: Diplomacy and the Information Order in Late Imperial China*. Cambridge University Press, 2018. Chapter 1 (PDF on Canvas)
- 1st Oct: NO CLASS (National Day)
- 6th Oct: Disaster at the turn of the century
Atwill & Atwill, 89-110.
Film: 55 Days at Peking (1963), directed by Nicholas Ray – on reserve at library
- 8th Oct: **Midterm**
- 13th Oct: Revisiting modernity
Cohen, Paul. *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*. Columbia University Press, 1984. 57-96. (PDF on Canvas)
- 15th Oct: Chinese overseas
Kuhn, Philip. “Why China Historians Should Study the Chinese Diaspora, and Vice-versa.” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 2.2 (2006): 163-72 (PDF on Canvas)
- 20th Oct: Chinese nationalism
Zou Rong, *The Revolutionary Army*, trans. John Lust, The Hauge: Mouton & Co., 1968. Chapters 1-2. (PDF on Canvas)
Chinese version also available as PDF on Canvas.
- 22nd Oct: Long Live the Republic
Atwill & Atwill, 149-155
Background: Zarrow, Peter. *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924*. Stanford University Press, 2012. “Introduction”. (Ebook through Proquest Ebook Central)

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27th Oct: The May 4th Moment

Atwill & Atwill, 163-171.

Background: Hu, Shih and Lin, Yu-Tang. China's Own Critics: A Selection of Essays. New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1931,1969. (PDF on Canvas)

29th Oct: Warlords and the KMT conquest

Kwong, Chi Man. "Finance and the Northern Expedition: From the Northeast Asian Perspective, 1925-1928". *Modern Asian Studies* 48:6 (Nov 2014): 1695-1739. (PDF on Canvas)

3rd Nov: Modernity in daily life

"[Soybean and Changing Food Culture in Chinese History](#)", in Hon-Ming Lam (ed.), *Agrobiotechnology in Perspectives: History, Economy, Science and Technology on the Plate*, World Scientific Publishing Co., pp.83-94.

5th Nov: The Nanjing Decade and the War of Resistance

Atwill & Atwill, 208-215, 223-229.

10th Nov: The Chinese Civil War

Cheng, Victor Shiu Chiang. "Modern War on an Ancient Battlefield: The Diffusion of American Military Technology and Ideas in the Chinese Civil War, 1946-1949." *Modern China* 35:1 (January 2009): 38-64. (PDF on Canvas)

12th Nov: Early years in the PRC

Film: Huozhe 活着 (1994), directed by Zhang Yimou – on reserve at library

17th Nov: Jumping into socialism

Atwill & Atwill, 248-249, 268-271

Dikotter, Frank. *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962*. Bloomsbury, 2017. Chapters 17-20. (E-book through Proquest Ebook Central)

19st Nov: The Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution

Atwill & Atwill, 283-292

Background: MacFarquhar, Roderick. *Mao's Last Revolution*, Harvard University Press, 2006. Chapters 6-7. (EBook through JSTOR)

24th Nov: Looking forward from the 1970s

Atwill & Atwill, 302-306

Listen: Nixon in China excerpt (Audio on Canvas)

26th Nov: Review/Discussion