

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

HUMA 1677 East Asia and the West:

From the Silk Road to The Belt and Road

Monday 16:30-17:50; Friday 12:00-13:20

Room 2502

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Course Description

For over two millennia, the exchange of people, technology, culture, religions, and diseases between East and West shaped societies across Eurasia and beyond. This course explores the historical interactions between East Asia and the West, tracing the movement of goods, ideas, and people and their political, economic, and cultural impacts. Covering key empires, states, and trade hubs—such as the Roman Empire, the Mongol Empire, Macau, and Batavia—the course is structured chronologically. The first half examines the Silk Road and overland exchanges, while the second half focuses on maritime trade and globalization following the Age of Discovery. Students will develop a Eurasian and comparative perspective, analyze diverse historical sources, and critically assess today's globalized world. This introductory, lecture-oriented course requires no prior background in history, Asia, or Asian languages.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

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

1. Describe the history of East-West interactions over the past two millennia.
2. Identify major historiographical debates on globalization and cross-cultural exchanges.
3. Analyze how historians construct arguments using diverse historical sources.
4. Critically evaluate different perspectives on historical narratives and global interactions.
5. Formulate well-supported historical arguments using comparative and interdisciplinary approaches.
6. Reflect on the importance of humanities and cultural diversity in shaping today's globalized world.

Attendance policy

You should regularly attend class and actively participate in class discussions.

- (a) 1 mark will be **deducted** for one absence starting from the third absence after the add/drop period. Noted that being late or leaving early (e.g., longer than 15 mins) without permission will also result in a mark deduction.
- (b) If you cannot attend class for valid reasons, you need to get **advance** permission (that is, before class) from instructors to waive absences. Explanation and **proof** documents (e.g., medical certificates, interview notification letters, etc.) are required for permission.
- (c) According to the university policy, RVC recordings will be released only to students in need. Students should not expect to get “attendance” credit by viewing recordings.
- (d) During the class, the use of electronics (e.g., laptop) is allowed **exclusively** for notetaking. Food is not recommended in class.

Assignment policy

As a general rule, **NO** late submission will be accepted for credits unless:

- (a) You got **advance** permission (before the due) from instructors.
- (b) You could not submit the assignment on the day the assignment is due because of a serious illness or emergency. You need to contact instructors with a written explanation of the situation and provide **proof** (e.g., medical certificates).

Assessment and Grading

This course will be assessed using criterion-referencing and grades will not be assigned using a curve. Detailed rubrics for each assignment are provided below, outlining the criteria used for evaluation.

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Mid-Term Exam	28%	20/03/2026
In-class Discussion	10%	TBD *
Group Presentation	24%	TBD *
Final Essay	28%	08/05/2026
Attendance	10%	-

* Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be released within two weeks of the due date.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Mid-Term Exam	CILO-1, CILO-2, CILO-3, CILO-4, CILO-5.	This assessment evaluates students' ability to describe major patterns of East-West interaction (ILO 1), identify and explain key historiographical debates (ILO 2), and analyze how historians construct arguments using historical evidence (ILO 3). Through historiographical short essays, students are also required to critically evaluate different historical interpretations

		(ILO 4) and formulate coherent, well-supported historical arguments (ILO 5).
In-class Discussion	<i>CILO-1, CILO-2, CILO-3, CILO-4, CILO-5, CILO-6.</i>	This task assesses students' ability to demonstrate understanding of course materials and historical debates (ILO 1, ILO 2), analyze and evaluate scholarly arguments (ILO 3, ILO 4), and articulate critical perspectives through discussion questions (ILO 5). By engaging collaboratively and creatively in discussion, students also reflect on the broader significance of historical interpretation and cultural diversity (ILO 6).
Group Presentation	<i>CILO-1, CILO-2, CILO-3, CILO-4, CILO-5.</i>	The group presentation assesses students' ability to summarize and explain major historical arguments related to East-West interactions (ILO 1), situate a scholarly work within broader historiographical debates (ILO 2), and analyze how historical arguments are constructed (ILO 3). Students are further evaluated on their capacity to critically assess interpretations (ILO 4) and present structured, evidence-based arguments orally (ILO 5).
Final Essay	<i>CILO-1, CILO-2, CILO-3, CILO-4, CILO-5, CILO-6.</i>	The final essay assesses students' ability to engage deeply with major historical debates covered in the course (ILO 1, ILO 2), analyze and synthesize scholarly arguments and evidence (ILO 3), and critically evaluate competing historical interpretations (ILO 4). Through extended, well-cited written analysis, students demonstrate advanced argumentation skills (ILO 5) and reflect on the relevance of historical inquiry, humanities, and cultural diversity in understanding the modern globalized world (ILO 6).

Grading Rubrics

Mid-Term Exam (@28%) – March 20

The mid-term exam consists of five short essay questions. Students must choose and answer **two** questions. Each answer must be at least 750 words. All questions are historiographical in nature and are based on the course materials and required readings covered prior to the exam.

Responses will be assessed based on:

- (1) Relevance and focus in directly addressing the question;
- (2) Accuracy and depth of historical knowledge, including appropriate use of examples from lectures and readings;

- (3) Analytical reasoning, such as explanation of causes, consequences, comparisons, or historical significance; and
- (4) Clarity, organization, and coherence of written expression.

Take-home Final Essay (@28%) – Due May 8

The final assessment is a take-home written report consisting of five short essay questions. Students must choose and answer **two** questions. Each answer must be at least 1,000 words. All questions address major historical debates covered in the course.

Responses must demonstrate proper academic citation of course readings, present a clear and sustained argument, and be well structured and supported by historical evidence and relevant scholarly work.

Responses will be assessed based on:

- (1) Relevance and focus in addressing the question;
- (2) Accuracy and depth of historical knowledge, including engagement with course readings;
- (3) Quality of historical argumentation, including analytical reasoning and use of evidence; and
- (4) Clarity, organization, and coherence of written expression.

Group Presentation (Book Presentation) (@24%)

Students will form groups to deliver an oral presentation on a scholarly book pertinent to the course and approved by the instructor. The first presentation will be held on 23 February. Presentations will take place during the last 30 minutes of class on designated dates.

Each group is required to deliver a 15-minute presentation outlining:

- (1) the central argument of the book;
- (2) the key supporting arguments and evidence;
- (3) the overall chapter structure; and
- (4) the group's critical evaluation of the author's arguments, including whether and why they agree or disagree.

Presentations will be assessed based on:

- (1) Accuracy and clarity in presenting the book's arguments;
- (2) Depth of analysis and critical engagement with the text;

- (3) Organization, structure, and clarity of the presentation; and
- (4) Effectiveness of group collaboration and delivery.

In-Class Discussion (Assigned Discussants)

Each group will be assigned twice during the semester to serve as discussants for group presentations. Discussant roles will be assigned in advance.

For each assigned session, discussant groups are required to prepare two discussion questions and pose them to the presenting group after the presentation. The questions should demonstrate careful engagement with both the presentation and the assigned book.

Discussion performance will be assessed based on:

- (1) Quality and relevance of the questions posed;
- (2) Demonstrated understanding of the book's main arguments and evidence;
- (3) Critical evaluation of the author's claims and interpretations; and
- (4) Creativity and originality in framing discussion questions.

Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates excellent understanding of course content and historiographical debates. Work is analytical, well-structured, and clearly argued, with effective use of evidence and independent critical thinking.
B	Good Performance	Demonstrates good understanding of key themes and materials. Work is generally well organized and analytical, with sound engagement with readings and evidence, though minor weaknesses may be present.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Demonstrates adequate understanding of core course content. Work meets basic requirements and shows some analytical effort, but arguments or use of evidence may be limited or uneven.
D	Marginal Pass	Demonstrates minimal understanding of course material. Work shows limited analysis and significant weaknesses in argumentation, structure, or use of evidence, but meets the minimum pass standard.
F	Fail	Demonstrates insufficient understanding of course content. Work lacks coherent argumentation or engagement with readings and does not meet minimum academic standards.

Course AI Policy

Students may use generative artificial intelligence (AI) as a supplementary aid in preparing assessments, provided that such use is clearly declared on the front page of the submitted work. However, students may not use AI tools to directly generate the content of essays, exam answers, presentations, or discussion questions.

Students are required to verify the accuracy of all information included in their work and take full responsibility for the content submitted. The inclusion of hallucinated, fabricated, or inaccurate information, whether generated by AI or otherwise, may result in serious mark penalties in accordance with the University's academic integrity policy.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Feedback on assignments will include [specific details, e.g., strengths, areas for improvement]. Students who have further questions about the feedback including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Required Texts and Materials

There is no single required textbook for this course. All required readings are listed in the weekly course schedule and will be made available through Canvas or the HKUST Library's electronic resources. Students are expected to complete the assigned readings prior to each class.

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.

Syllabus

Feb 2 Introduction

Feb 6 The East and the West: A Revision

Reading(s): Lewis, Martin W. *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Chapter 2, pp. 47–72.

Feb 9 Eurasia and the Silk Road

Reading(s): Cunliffe, Barry. *By Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Chapter 1, pp. 1–34.

Feb 13 The Roman Empire and Han China

Reading(s): Cunliffe, Barry. By *Steppe, Desert, and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Chapter 7, pp. 253–294.

Feb 16 The Mongol Empire and the Making of East and West

Reading(s): Crossley, Pamela Kyle. *Hammer and Anvil: Nomad Rulers at the Forge of the Modern World*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. Introduction and pp. 101–161.

Feb 20 Strange Parallels in East and West

Reading(s): Lieberman, Victor. *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830*, Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. pp. 1–6, 73–80.

Feb 23 The Journey of Marco Polo

Reading(s): Marco Polo. *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Translated by Ronald Latham. 1958. pp. 33–162.

Feb 27 Zheng He and Ming China's Age of Discovery

Reading(s): Levathes, Louise. *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–1433*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994. pp. 19–32, 75–106.

Mar 2 Europe's First Colony in China: Macau

Reading(s): Porter, Jonathan. *Macau: The Imaginary City—Culture and Society, 1557 to the Present*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1996. pp. 1–32.

Mar 6 Gunpowder and the Military Revolution

Reading(s): Andrade, Tonio. *The Gunpowder Age: China, Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West in World History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. pp. 124–135.

Mar 9 The Limits of Europeans

Reading(s): Clulow, Adam. *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. Introduction, pp. 1–21.

Mar 13 **No Class**

Watch assigned movie (TBD)

Mar 16 **No Class**

Mar 20 **Mid-Term Exam**

Mar 23 The First Wave of Globalization

Reading(s): Brook, Timothy. *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*. London: Profile Books, 2010. pp. 1–116.

Mar 27 Pirates and the Zheng Empire

Reading(s):

1. Cheng, Wei-chung. *War, Trade and Piracy in the China Seas (1622–1683)*. Leiden: Brill, 2013. Chapter 1, pp. 11–25.
2. Hang, Xing. *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia: The Zheng Family and the Shaping of the Modern World, c. 1620–1720*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. pp. 1–3, 12–21.

Mar 30 Batavia: A Confluence of East–West Maritime Trade

Reading(s): Blussé, Leonard. *Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women, and the Dutch in VOC Batavia*. Providence, RI: Foris Publications, 1988. pp. 49–73.

Apr 3 **No Class**

Apr 6 **No Class**

Apr 10 1800: The End of an Era

Reading(s): Blussé, Leonard. *Visible Cities: Canton, Nagasaki, Batavia and the Coming of the Americans*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. pp. 32–66.

Apr 13 A Presumptuous China?

Reading(s):

1. Platt, Stephen R. *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018. Introduction, pp. xviii–xxviii.
2. Andrade, Tonio. *The Last Embassy: The Dutch Mission of 1795 and the Forgotten History of Western Encounters with China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. pp. 133–159.

Apr 17 1800: The Great Divergences

Reading(s):

1. Andrade, Tonio. *The Gunpowder Age*. pp. 237–256.
2. Pomeranz, Kenneth. *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. pp. 281–297.

Apr 20 Catching Up with the West

Reading(s): Andrade, Tonio. *The Gunpowder Age*. pp. 257–296.

Apr 24 East Asia Fought Back

Reading(s): Cohen, Paul A. *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. pp. 14–56, 162–172.

Apr 27 East Asia Fought Back (II)

Reading(s): Dower, John W. *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986. pp. 1–32.

May 1 **No Class**

May 4 Today's East Asia and the West

Reading(s): **TBD**

May 8 Conclusion

Submission of Final Essay