

Modern China

HIST 35203 | Reform, Revolution, and Rivalry

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Adapted from the Spring 2026 syllabus for this portfolio. This excerpt preserves the course's thematic sequence and selected materials; calendar dates, grading weights, administrative policies, and full daily reading lists are omitted.

Course description

How have images of China been formed through politics, popular culture, commerce, and encounters with the wider world? This course follows Chinese history from the early Ming through the late twentieth century, examining imperial government, reform, revolution, war, and everyday life. Cities provide a recurring point of entry: capitals, treaty ports, and commercial centers connect political authority to geography, social relations, and global exchange.

Students compare primary sources and historical interpretations to investigate how people understood the changes around them. Attention to mainland China and Taiwan, religious communities, and international networks encourages comparison across political and cultural boundaries.

Learning outcomes

1. Explain major transformations in Chinese history within regional and global contexts.
2. Analyze a primary source in relation to its author, audience, purpose, and historical circumstances.
3. Compare representations of China and evaluate the assumptions behind them.
4. Use maps and spatial evidence to investigate political, economic, and social change.
5. Develop a historical argument supported by evidence and communicate it clearly in writing or another approved format.

Core books

Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories* (University of California Press, 2003).
Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Global Shanghai, 1850-2010: A History in Fragments* (Routledge, 2009).

Coursework and Selected Readings

Modern China | Abridged syllabus

Course format

The original course combines lectures earlier in the week with a Friday discussion. Students prepare questions, analyze sources, and participate in collaborative exercises. The following summary identifies the principal forms of coursework; assignment descriptions and the writing rubric appear on pages 8-11.

Coursework	Purpose and format
Participation	Prepared discussion, attentive listening, and collaborative source analysis.
Weekly Question Notes	A historical question, at least two relevant primary sources, and a brief explanation of the question's significance.
Mapping assignment	Identification and contextualization of places, routes, and geopolitical relationships.
Three section papers	Short analytical papers that use course materials to develop an evidence-based argument.
Group project	A simulation of Grant's encounter with China, supported by historical research and discussion.
Final project	An approved paper, presentation, documentary-style video, or digital exhibit using primary and secondary sources.

Additional selected readings

Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (University of Washington Press, 1997).

Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo's Son: Chiang Ching-kuo and the Revolutions in China and Taiwan* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink* (Columbia Global Reports, 2020).

The schedule on the following pages summarizes the original sequence and provides representative materials and analytical questions. It is not a complete list of assigned readings.

Course Sequence: Imperial Foundations

Weeks 1-5 | Selected materials and historical questions

1 | Introduction and historical methods

Course orientation, geography, and the construction of “modern China.”

Selected materials: Dong, *Republican Beijing*, introduction.

Historical practice: How do historians turn a representation of China into a question for investigation?

2 | Imperial legacies and spatial order

Geography, imperial government, and the organization of Beijing.

Selected materials: Maps and images of the imperial city.

Historical practice: Read walls, gates, and palace complexes as evidence of political authority.

3 | The Ming empire and capital politics

The founding of the Ming, Nanjing, and the Yongle emperor's move to Beijing.

Selected materials: A Hongwu imperial edict; Dong on the historical city.

Historical practice: Compare capital relocation as a response to questions of legitimacy, security, and government.

4 | Late Ming society and dynastic collapse

Commercial and social life, rebellion, and the transition of 1644.

Selected materials: Selected passages from *Jin Ping Mei*.

Historical practice: What can fiction reveal about social relations, and what limits apply to its use as historical evidence?

5 | High Qing rule and urban governance

Manchu rule, the imperial capital, commercial cities, and urban government.

Selected materials: The Kangxi emperor's Sacred Edict; Justus Doolittle on city life; Dong on imperial Beijing.

Historical practice: Compare the perspectives of imperial prescriptions and observations of everyday urban life.

Course Sequence: Crisis and Transformation

Weeks 6-10 | Selected materials and historical questions

6 | Global trade and the Opium crisis

The Canton trade system, opium, silver, and the crisis of 1839.

Selected materials: Qianlong's communication to George III; Lin Zexu's letter to Queen Victoria.

Historical practice: Compare the interests and assumptions of Qing officials, merchants, and local elites.

7 | Rebellion, religion, and urban warfare

The Taiping, Hui, and Nian rebellions; Nanjing and Shanghai in an age of conflict.

Selected materials: Selections on Hong Xiuquan; Lipman, *Familiar Strangers*; Wasserstrom, *Global Shanghai*.

Historical practice: Examine how religious and political claims could challenge existing forms of social organization.

8 | Late Qing reform and the Boxer crisis

Self-strengthening, foreign intervention, the Boxer movement, and the conflict of 1900.

Selected materials: Newspaper reports, siege diaries, imperial proclamations, and Boxer placards.

Historical practice: Compare the construction of violence, rumor, and political legitimacy across sources.

9 | The end of empire and the Republic

The 1911 Revolution, warlord politics, the New Culture Movement, and May Fourth.

Selected materials: Chen Duxiu's essays; Dong on Republican Beijing.

Historical practice: Compare political language and investigate connections between revolutionary change and urban space.

10 | Nationalist China and urban modernity

The Northern Expedition, the Nanjing decade, and contrasting urban experiences.

Selected materials: Dong, *Republican Beijing*; Wasserstrom, "1925: In the Streets."

Historical practice: Use images and texts to compare accounts of modernity in Shanghai, Nanjing, and Beiping.

Course Sequence: War, Revolution, Reform

Weeks 11-16 | Selected materials and historical questions

Week 11: Spring break in the original course calendar.

12 | War, survival, and the nation

The Xi'an Incident, the war with Japan, wartime capitals, and civilian experience.

Selected materials: Accounts of the Xi'an Incident; diaries and testimony concerning the Nanjing Massacre.

Historical practice: Distinguish experience, memory, and historical interpretation in wartime sources.

13 | Civil war and competing claims

The Chinese Civil War, Taiwan's February 28 Incident, and the founding of the PRC.

Selected materials: George H. Kerr, *Formosa Betrayed*; Mao, "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship."

Historical practice: Compare claims to political legitimacy and consider whose experiences official narratives omit.

14 | Two regimes and developmental paths

Early PRC campaigns, the Great Leap Forward, and Taiwan's land reform and development.

Selected materials: Mao's political writings; readings on Taiwan's reform and U.S. aid.

Historical practice: Examine development, state power, and social change across contrasting political systems.

15 | Cultural Revolution and Cold War politics

Mass mobilization, cultural destruction, international alignments, and representation at the UN.

Selected materials: *Morning Sun*; UN General Assembly Resolution 2758; Chen Jian on the Cold War.

Historical practice: Relate domestic political movements to competing international claims and historical memories.

16 | Reform and course conclusion

Post-Mao reform, literary change, and final presentations.

Selected materials: Poetry by Bei Dao and Shu Ting; Wasserstrom, "2000: A City in a Hurry."

Historical practice: Present a sustained historical interpretation and connect it to the course's larger questions.