

History 103

Introduction to East Asian History: China



Qingyang Palace, the Daoist center in Chengdu, the largest metropolis in Southwest China. Modernization has not prevented people from maintaining their attachment to traditions that belong to the “pre-modern” era. Credit: Dr.

Wang

Credits: 3

Instructor: Dr. Zhaoshen Wang (zwang977@wisc.edu)

Office Hours: Thursdays 12:20 PM to 2:20 PM and by appointment

Office Location: 5265 Mosse Humanities Building

Meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays 2:30 PM to 3:45 PM

Locations: 1651 Mosse Humanities Building

Canvas: <https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/469831>

All times listed are in Central Time. Please note that starting Sunday, November 2, 2025, time will switch from Central Daylight Time (CDT) to Central Standard Time (CST).

Course Description

This course provides a comprehensive survey of Chinese history from its ancient origins to the contemporary times. The primary goal is to develop a foundational understanding of the historical development of Chinese society, government, and culture across major dynasties and transformative periods. We will examine key themes including the emergence of Chinese civilization, the evolution of political systems, philosophical traditions (Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism), imperial unification and fragmentation, the impact of Buddhism, encounters with the West, and the revolutionary changes of the modern era.

Beyond mastering historical content, this course emphasizes the development of essential historical skills that will serve you throughout your academic and professional life. You will learn to ask meaningful historical questions, locate and evaluate primary and secondary sources, analyze different perspectives and their credibility, and construct well-supported arguments using appropriate evidence. The course also focuses on effective communication, requiring you to present your findings through various formats, including written assignments, class discussions, and multimedia projects.

Through engaging with diverse sources, you will develop critical thinking skills and learn to understand how historical narratives are constructed and shaped. No prior knowledge of the Chinese language or history is required, though students with Chinese language skills are welcome to incorporate Chinese sources into their work. This course fulfills breadth requirements in either Humanities or Social Science and provides valuable preparation for understanding one of the world's most influential civilizations.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- **Develop a Foundational Knowledge of Chinese Civilization:** Acquire a comprehensive understanding of Chinese history, from its ancient origins to contemporary times, including major dynasties, key historical figures, and significant events. Identify and explain the major developments that shaped Chinese civilization, including the evolution of political systems, philosophical traditions, imperial unification and fragmentation, the introduction of Buddhism, and China's encounters with modernity.
- **Understand Historical Research Methods:** Learn practical research techniques used by historians, including mastering the logic of libraries, databases, and bibliographic resources to identify primary and secondary materials, determine their perspective, credibility, and utility for historical analysis. Additionally, learn to utilize AI tools for tasks such as deciphering handwritten documents and translating unfamiliar texts.
- **Apply Regional Studies Methods:** Understand how Chinese civilization exemplifies both universal patterns and unique characteristics within the broader context of human history, developing skills in regional studies methodology.
- **Communicate Effectively:** Present findings through various formats tailored to specific audiences, including formal written assignments, class discussions, visual presentations,

and multimedia projects. Additionally, develop skills in public history communication such as storytelling, leading museum tours, and creating vlogs to share historical knowledge with broader audiences.

- **Connect Past and Present:** Apply historical knowledge to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary China's global significance and develop informed perspectives on current East Asian affairs.

This course requires no prior knowledge of Chinese history or Chinese language skills. For students who already have a basic understanding of Chinese history, the course will help develop more comprehensive and critical analytical skills through exposure to diverse sources and broader historical perspectives. For students interested in pursuing graduate studies or careers in history, this course provides foundational experience with professional research tools, academic databases, and scholarly journals, as well as an understanding of graduate-level historical methodology and academic life.

Course designation for requirements:

Breadth: Either Humanities or Social Science

Level: Elementary

L&S Credit: Counts as Liberal Arts and Science credit in L&S

Prerequisite: None

Course Workload

This 3-credit course meets twice weekly (Tuesdays and Thursdays, 75 minutes per session). Following standard credit hour policies, you should expect to spend 2-3 hours of work outside of class for every hour in the classroom. In addition to 2.5 hours of weekly class time, plan to dedicate 6-7 hours per week to course-related work, including required readings, taking notes, writing response papers, and working on major assignments. The total weekly time commitment averages around 9 hours, though this may fluctuate throughout the semester. Weeks featuring major assignments (such as the museum visit project and final project) will require more intensive preparation, while other weeks may be lighter. Successful completion of the course requires consistent engagement with course materials and timely completion of all assignments.

Assignments and Grading

Attendance and Participation (10%)

Your participation grade is based on regular attendance and active in-class engagement. To be considered “present and engaged,” you should bring assigned reading materials (digital or paper) to class, contribute to discussions, and participate in group activities. **All readings listed under each lecture in the syllabus must be completed before class.** Attendance will be taken randomly

through various methods, including attendance sheets and in-class quiz questions.

You are allowed a maximum of two unexcused absences, which will not affect your grade. Starting from the third unexcused absence, each additional absence will reduce your participation grade by 10 percentage points (equivalent to 1% of your total course grade). If you accumulate eight unexcused absences, you will fail the course.

If any circumstances could impact your class participation or performance, such as a religious holiday, illness, or a mahjong team tournament, please notify Dr. Wang **in advance via email** so that appropriate accommodations can be made, such as writing reflection papers to compensate for missed attendance.

10 (out of 14) Weekly Response Posts (20%)

Throughout our 15-week semester, you'll engage with weekly discussion questions posted on Canvas. Each response should be 150-200 words in length, incorporating at least one properly cited passage from that week's readings. You need to complete 10 responses (2% each), submitting them by Sunday at 11:59 PM of the same week. Questions will be posted on Thursdays. While you have the flexibility to choose which weeks to respond to—for example, you may choose to skip Thanksgiving week or weeks with multiple assignments—additional responses beyond 10 will not earn extra credit, and late submissions cannot be accepted. All citations should be cited in a consistent format (such as Chicago Style or APA, your choice).

Each assignment will be graded based on four equally weighted criteria (25% each): addressing the discussion question, expressing convincing viewpoints, providing historical evidence, and using correct citations.

Midterm Exam (20%)

The midterm exam is scheduled for October 21 during class time. It will be a closed-book exam. The exam will cover material from the first 7 weeks of the course (up to and including China under Mongol rule). During the previous lecture on October 16, a Q&A session will be allocated.

Museum Trip Assignment (15%)

The regular lecture on October 7 will be replaced by a Museum Trip. Your assignment begins during Week 5 (September 29 to October 5), when you must visit the Chazen Museum of Art independently to conduct preliminary observations and complete your initial written observations according to the assignment requirements. During the October 7 lecture period, we will divide into three groups and visit the museum together, where Dr. Wang will provide commentary and respond to your questions.

For this assignment, you must select one artwork that you find striking and conduct research on it. You will draw the selected piece for your assignment (a photograph of your sketch is acceptable), then write a 450-600-word commentary aimed at high school students or college students not enrolled in this course to explain this artwork. Your commentary should particularly emphasize connecting this piece to broader historical contexts (such as Buddhism's entry into China, China's encounter with Europe, centralization, etc.). You must include at least one citation from this semester's assigned readings. Detailed requirements, including the grading rubric for this assignment, will be released in Week 4. Assignment due by October 12 at 11:59 pm.

Library Trip Assignment (10%)

The regular lecture on November 6 will be replaced by a library visit to Memorial Library. Librarian Ms. Yang will give us a presentation introducing the library's collections and databases related to Chinese studies. During the last 30 minutes of the regular lecture on November 4, I will also introduce how to utilize databases for historical research. In the Library Assignment, you will be required to explore the collections and databases following specific instructions, and ultimately submit your completed worksheet. Detailed requirements, including the grading rubric for this assignment, will be released in Week 9. Assignment due by November 9 at 11:59 pm.

Final Project (25%)

This course does not have a final examination. Instead, you will complete a final project. You may choose between two options: Option 1 is an 8-10 minute vlog (which should include subtitles) aimed at a general audience (such as college-level audiences who are not history majors), introducing an interesting and specific topic in Chinese history (the more specific the better, rather than repeating Wikipedia content) and accompanied by appropriate illustrations or video materials; Option 2 is an in-depth analytical essay (1,500-2,000 words). Regardless of which format you choose, you should cite at least three scholarly articles beyond the assigned readings to demonstrate your deep understanding of course themes. Your project should showcase the analytical skills you've developed throughout the course.

Detailed requirements, including the grading rubric for this assignment, will be released in Week 8. This assignment includes step-by-step requirements, such as submitting your topic, materials, and first draft, as well as an In-Class Presentation on December 4. The final draft of the project is due on December 16 at 11:59 pm.

If you choose the paper option for your final project, it must be submitted as an electronic copy and uploaded to the assigned Canvas folders. The document should use one-inch margins, 12-point type, and double spacing, except in quotations, titles, and footnotes. All citations should be formatted in a consistent style (such as Chicago Style or APA). Failure to use a consistent citation format will be considered plagiarism.

Extra Credit Opportunities

It is essential to become accustomed to attending talks by visiting scholars. These can open you up to ideas and knowledge that are not well represented on campus and help you make connections. Thus, you can earn one extra point on your final grade for each talk you attend that relates to the study of East Asia (maximum of 5 points). Many students can bump up their grades by attending talks. Write a few sentences (150-200 words) about any talk you attend and submit the write-up to Canvas within three days of the talk. Tell what the main points were and something you found to be interesting. Your reflection will be graded according to the weekly post standards.

Most on-campus events are hosted by the Center for East Asian Studies, and you can follow their website for updates (<https://eastasia.wisc.edu/>). Dr. Wang will announce talks that he notices. If you see a talk you would like to attend but are unsure whether you can receive extra credit, please email Dr. Wang about it beforehand. Please note that film screenings organized by the Center for East Asian Studies do not count toward extra credit unless specifically announced by Dr. Wang.

Grading Scale

- 93-100: A
- 88-92.999999999: AB
- 83-87.999999999: B
- 78-82.999999999: BC
- 70-77.999999999: C
- 60-69.999999999: D
- Below 60: F

As you might notice from the above, you need to hit the whole-number minimum for each grade level. That means a 92.51, or a 92.97, will not be rounded up to a 93 for an “A”. If you are very keen on getting a certain grade, do the work needed to get the grade you want and don’t ask Dr. Wang to round up your grade because you were so close.

Required Materials

Required Textbook

- Harold Tanner, *China: A History* (hereafter *CAH*), Hackett Publishing, 2009. Available at the university bookstore.

Additional Materials

- All other required readings will be available on Canvas.

Course Policies

Contact and Office Hours

Email is the best way to contact me. I promise to respond to your emails within one business day. This means that any email you send me at any time will receive a reply by 6:00 PM on the next business day. I will only respond to messages that originate from either your UW email or Canvas accounts. You may find this inconvenient, but it’s to protect your privacy.

Lectures will provide me with my main opportunity to engage in regular and substantive interaction with you. During our lecture meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I will provide direct instruction, clarify course content information, facilitate discussions of the course materials, and lead research workshops. I will additionally be available during my office hours each week for one-on-one meetings. Office hours and location are listed above. Please feel free to drop in to talk with me about the course.

Diversity, Inclusion, and Accommodations

This course welcomes students of all backgrounds, identities, and learning needs. I am committed to creating an inclusive learning environment where all students can succeed. If you need any accommodations (including but not limited to the McBurney Disability Resource Center accommodations), please inform me at the beginning of the semester. For religious observances that may affect your class participation or assignment completion, please notify me in advance so we can make appropriate arrangements.

Flexibility and Communication

I understand that students may face various challenges during the semester. If you're having difficulty attending class, completing assignments, or keeping up with the course material for any reason, please reach out to me as soon as possible. We can discuss alternative arrangements or additional support to help you succeed in the course. Clear communication is key to your success in this class.

Late Work and Extensions

Assignments are expected to be submitted by their due dates. However, I recognize that unexpected situations arise. For weekly posts, submissions will automatically close at 11:59 PM each Sunday, and no late submissions will be accepted. For the other three major assignments (Museum Trip Assignment, Library Trip Assignment, and Final Project), if you need an extension, you must email me with a valid reason before the deadline and receive my permission. Without prior arrangements, late assignments will receive a grade penalty. For every 24 hours late (or any portion thereof), 1 point will be deducted from your total course grade. If an assignment is not submitted within 72 hours of the deadline, you will receive zero points for that assignment. Rather than falling behind silently, please let me know about any challenges you're facing.

Academic Integrity and AI Tools

This course strictly adheres to the University and the Department of History policies on academic integrity. Please refer to the University's Academic Integrity policies at <https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/> for more information, paying particular attention to behaviors that may result in course failure and other potentially serious consequences. By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary sanctions include, but are not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.

The artificial intelligence era has arrived, but we must interact with AI honestly and intelligently. Throughout this course, I have arranged a series of workshops, including one session specifically designed to discuss how to use artificial intelligence skillfully. Please note the following AI usage policies for course assignments:

- Weekly Posts: No AI tools may be used for any weekly response posts.
- Museum Trip Assignment and Final Project: AI usage is limited to necessary translation, helping you locate valuable secondary sources (note that AI has a poor track record in this area and often confidently provides non-existent citations, so you must rigorously trace and read any source it suggests, which will be heavily considered in grading), and correcting grammatical errors. At the end of these two assignments, you must provide an AI Statement indicating whether you used AI and specifically what AI helped you accomplish.
- Library Trip Assignment: You will use AI to complete part of the assignment according to my instructions. Beyond this designated portion, you should not use AI.

Respect for Others (Electronics and Recording)

Students are allowed to use laptops or phones to take notes or look up things related to class, but doing things unrelated to class is distracting to both the person doing it and the surrounding students. Violations will result in a reduction in your class participation grade.

You may record lectures or discussions only for the purpose of your own studying and reviewing for exams. If you or someone else makes a recording of any part of a class, you may not post it online, circulate it in any way to someone outside of class, or show it to anyone who is not in the class. You may share it with a classmate who missed lecture.

History has always been highly controversial, and even the terminology used to describe the same historical event can spark debate and conflict. We all must be able to trust that the classroom is a place for free and open discussion where we can talk about sensitive topics without having to worry about classmates publicizing what we say. Violation of this policy will result in very serious consequences.

Week 1 (Sep 4) - Introduction

Lectures and Readings

Thursday (Sep 4): Defining China

- Introductions and class information
- Student Background Sheet

Due

- Read the entire syllabus and mark your calendar with assignment due dates
- Familiarize yourself with Canvas
- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Sep 7)

Week 2 (Sep 9 & 11) – Origins of Chinese Civilization

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Sep 9): Geography and Language

- Read before class: *CAH*, ix-14 (be sure to read the prefatory materials as well as the main text)
- History Skill Workshop I: Take Notes and Do Well in a History Class

Thursday (Sep 11): Origins of Chinese Civilization

- Read before class: *CAH*, 14-30

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Sep 14)

Week 3 (Sep 16 & 18) – Three Dynasties

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Sep 16): Early States: Shang and Zhou

- Read before class: *CAH*, 31-66

Thursday (Sep 18): Confucianism

- Read before class: *CAH*, 66-78
- Read before class: *Four Books*, 11-49 (on Canvas)
- History Skill Workshop II: Primary Source and Secondary Source

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Sep 21)

Extra Credit Opportunity

- North Korean Advocacy Fellows (<https://today.wisc.edu/events/view/212158>)
- Tracking the Chinese Spy Balloon (<https://today.wisc.edu/events/view/211388>)

Week 4 (Sep 23 & 25) – Unification and Centralization

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Sep 23): Daoism and Legalism

- Read before class: *Zhuangzi*, 3-48 (on Canvas)
- History Skill Workshop III: In-class Meditation

Thursday (Sep 25): Qin Dynasty

- Read before class: *CAH*, 78-92
- Read before class: Landers, *Han Fei's Legalism and Its Impact on the History of China*, 101-111 (on Canvas)

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Sep 28)
- Read the requirements for the Museum Trip assignment

Week 5 (Sep 30 & Oct 2) – Medieval China

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Sep 30): Han Dynasty

- Read before class: *CAH*, 92-130

Thursday (Oct 2): Buddhism and Centuries of Chaos

- Read before class: *CAH*, 135-162
- History Skill Workshop IV: How to Have a Good History Trip

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Oct 5)
- Visit the Chazen Museum of Art on your own, select a piece related to China, begin your preliminary research, and write one paragraph about your trip. (Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Oct 5))

Week 6 (Oct 7 & 9) – Tang Dynasty

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Oct 7): **MUSEUM TRIP** (meet at the Chazen Museum of Art)

Thursday (Oct 9): Tang Dynasty

- Read before class: *CAH*, 162-198

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Oct 12)
- Museum Trip Assignment: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Oct 12)
- Monday (Oct 6): Happy Mid-Autumn Festival! (*Zhongqiu jie*, fifteenth day of the eighth month on the traditional calendar)

Week 7 (Oct 14 & 16) – Song and Yuan Dynasties

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Oct 14): Song Dynasty

- Read before class: *CAH*, 201-234

Thursday (Oct 16): The Mongols and Yuan Dynasty

- Read before class: *CAH*, 239-264
- Q&A Session for Mid-term Exam

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Oct 19)

Week 8 (Oct 21 & 23) – Ming Dynasty

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Oct 21): **IN-CLASS MID-TERM EXAM** (meet at classroom)

Thursday (Oct 23): Ming Dynasty I

- Read before class: *CAH*, 281-309
- History Skill Workshop V: How to Use AI Smartly

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Oct 26)
- Read the requirements for the final project

Week 9 (Oct 28 & 30) – Qing Empire

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Oct 28): Ming Dynasty II

- Read before class: *CAH*, 310-339

Thursday (Oct 30): Qing Overview

- Read before class: *CAH*, 340-378

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Nov 2)
- Read the requirements for the Library Trip Assignment
- Friday (Oct 31): Happy Halloween!

Note: Starting Sunday, November 2, 2025, time will switch from Central Daylight Time (CDT) to Central Standard Time (CST).

Week 10 (Nov 4 & 6) – Qing Empire

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Nov 4): Opium War and Rebellions

- Read before class: *CAH*, 379-394
- History Skill Workshop VI: Database

Thursday (Nov 6): **LIBRARY TRIP** (meet at the Memorial Library Room 460)

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Nov 9)
- Library Trip Assignment: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Nov 9)

Week 11 (Nov 11 & 13) – Qing Collapse

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Nov 11): Intensification of Imperialism

- Read before class: *CAH*, 394-425

Thursday (Nov 13): Early Republic and May Fourth Movement

- Read before class: *CAH*, 425-440

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Nov 16)
- Final Project Three-Sentence Topic: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Nov 16)

Week 12 (Nov 18 & 20) – New Republic

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Nov 18): Marxism and the Rise of the CCP

- Read before class: *CAH*, 440-473
- Read before class: Farmer, “Suggestions for writing a history paper” (on Canvas)
- History Skill Workshop VII: How to Make a Good Argument

Thursday (Nov 20): China in WWII

- Read before class: *CAH*, 473-495
- History Skill Workshop VIII: How to Write a Good Paper

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Nov 23)
- Final Project secondary source: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Nov 23)

Week 13 (Nov 25) – The People’s Republic I

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Nov 25): Mao’s Era

- Read before class: *CAH*, 501-541
- History Skill Workshop IX: How to Be a Good Storyteller

Due

- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Nov 30)

Week 14 (Dec 2 & 4) – The People’s Republic II

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Dec 2): Opening and Reform

- Read before class: *CAH*, 542-583

Tuesday (Dec 4): **IN-CLASS PRESENTATION**

- In-class presentation of the final project
- wrap-up

Due

- Final Project draft: Due by Wednesday 11:59 PM (Dec 3)
- Weekly Response Post: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Dec 7)

Week 15 (Dec 9)

Lectures and Readings

Tuesday (Dec 9): **NO IN-PERSON CLASS**

Due

- Final Project: Due by Sunday 11:59 PM (Dec 14)