

Course Code & Title	:	HH4012, Intellectual History of Modern China
Instructor	:	Els van Dongen
Academic Year	:	2025/2026, Sem 1
Academic Unit	:	4 AUs
Pre-requisite	:	Nil
Time and Venue	:	Tuesdays, 13.30-17.20, TR+92

Learning Objectives

- Investigate and explain how historical processes shaped the cultural and intellectual development of modern China;
- Critically examine and interpret primary and secondary sources related to modern Chinese intellectual history;
- Develop original historical arguments based on analysis of diverse sources;
- Effectively communicate evidence-based arguments in both writing and speech;
- Cultivate empathy for historical figures by engaging deeply with their writings and perspectives.

Content

What is the “intellectual history” of modern China and how does one study it? What do we mean by “Chinese intellectuals” and what was and is their role and position in society? Through which means did and do they express their views? In this course, we investigate the main themes, debates, and circulations of ideas in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century China, which reflect Chinese engagements with being “modern” in the economic, political, and cultural sense. After delineating the field of “intellectual history,” the course moves chronologically and thematically across the twentieth century. We begin our journey in the late 1800s, when circulations of Western ideas about “progress” and debates about reform and revolution coincided with new interpretations of Confucianism and Buddhism. We explore some of the writings of reformers Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao (1873-1929). Through the latter, we also touch upon the development of modern journalism and debates on nationalism and citizenship. The next few sessions revolve around the circulation of new ideas and worldviews, debates on the role of language in the making of the Chinese “modern” and changing views on gender during the May Fourth and New Culture Movements. We also consider some institutional changes, such as the development of modern universities during the Republican period. Although much ink has been spilled on debates between liberals and Marxists, other developments include inward-looking nationalism and conservatism, which we analyze through both individual writings and broader movements such as the New Life Movement. We then cover debates on the “Sinification” of Marxism and the meaning of Maoism. Using a more sociological lens, we ask how the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 affected the role of the Chinese intellectual and the nature of knowledge production. In the final two sessions, we focus on debates of the reform era. What did “reform” entail and to what extent did it include not only economic but also political reform? In a final session, we investigate what it means to be an intellectual in the PRC at the turn of and into the twenty-first century through the rise (and arguably decline) of the so-called “grassroots” intellectuals. The course hence intends to cover some of the main continuities and changes in debates at the role of the intellectual in Chinese society over a period of more than a century.

<i>Weeks</i>	<i>Topics</i>
1	Introduction
2	Intellectual history and China: Delineating the field
3	Reformers and ideas about “progress,” nationalism, and citizenship
4	Translating modernity: A new language
5	Gender and the May Fourth Movement
6	Institutional changes and education: The “modern” university
7	The interwar period: Nationalism and conservative movements
8	Maoism and the “Sinification” of Marxism
9	The intellectual in post- 1949 China
10	Quiz and discussion research papers – no new readings
11	Debates of the reform era: Economic and political reform
12	Into the twenty-first century: The rise (and decline?) of the “grassroots” intellectual
13	Revision and wrap up

Student Assessment: 100% Continuous Assessment

Weightage of CA components:

10% Class Participation and Discussion

20% Response Briefs

10% Quiz

20% Team Presentations

10% Guide Class

Discussion

30% Research paper

Assessment Component 1 – Class participation and discussion (10%)

In the individual contributions, you need to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the basic themes and interpretations in the readings. You need to be able to formulate your own arguments based on a critical reading of both the primary and secondary sources assigned for that week.

Assessment Component 2 – Response Briefs (20%)

You will reflect on the readings in the form of two response briefs (500 words). You can choose which weeks to write briefs based on personal interest and preference. The response briefs should discuss the readings critically from a relevant thematic angle and demonstrate awareness of different interpretations in secondary sources. The briefs should also demonstrate ability to put forward a historical argument based on the students' reading of the secondary and primary sources for that week.

Assessment Component 3 – Quiz (10%)

The quiz will test your ability to investigate and explain key processes in the cultural and intellectual formation of modern China and your ability to analyze and interpret primary and secondary sources in the form of both multiple-choice questions and key concepts.

Assessment Component 4 – Team Presentations (20%)

The idea is that each student takes part in *two team presentations*, each of which is of a different type. The presentations will be conducted in small groups (if the class size is small enough, this would be 2 students, otherwise 3 students).

In the first type of presentation, you will present a *relevant secondary source* in modern Chinese intellectual history to the class through a focus on (1) the main ideas and arguments and (2) contextualizing these ideas and arguments and placing them in the context of the course. A list of further readings to choose from will be included in the syllabus.

In the second type of presentation, you will introduce a *primary source* to the class, focusing on the context of its production and the possible ways of reading this source to guide the primary source analysis for that week. The primary source(s) for each week will also be included in the syllabus.

10% group mark (see below); 10% individual mark (individual presentation performance graded by instructors) The group mark will be based on the following components: Organization (20%); Analysis (30%); Use of sources (30%); Teamwork (10%); Presentation format (10%)

Assessment Component 5 – Guided Class Discussion (10%)

Each of the two presentations (secondary source and primary source) will be accompanied by a *guided class discussion* prepared by the presenters of that week. The discussion should last around 15 mins. and the preparation time around 10-15 mins. The idea is to ensure that the class engages critically with the material. You can be as original as you want, or you can use a more traditional approach and prepare two guiding questions for discussion. You can consult me before your presentation regarding the discussion and the quality of the proposed questions or other questions pertaining to the content and format of the discussion.

Assessment Component 6 – Research Paper (30%)

You need to submit a 2500-word essay at the end of the course in which you demonstrate your ability to formulate an original historical argument based on primary and secondary source research.

Course Readings (Selective, Subject to Change)

Brown, “Woman as Trope: Gender and Power in Lu Xun’s ‘Soap’” in Tani E. Barlow, ed. *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.

Cheek, Timothy. *Propaganda and Culture in Mao’s China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Cheek, Timothy. *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. [Selections]

Chow, Tse-tsung. *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1960. [Selections]

Fairbank, John K. ed. *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 10*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Goldman, Merle and Leo Ou-fan Lee. “Introduction.” In *An Intellectual History of Modern China*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 1-12.

Hong, Fan. “Blue Shirts, Nationalists and Nationalism: Fascism in 1930s China,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 16.4 (1999), 205-226.

Howard, R. “K’ang Yu-wei (1858-1927): His Intellectual Background and Early Thought.” In A.F. Wright and D. Twitchett, eds. *Confucian Personalities*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962, 294-316.

Huang, Philip. “The Idea of the New Citizen and the Influence of Meiji Japan.” In *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1972, 36-67.

Liu, Lydia. *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China 1900-1937*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995. [Selections]

Schwartz, Benjamin. “A Brief Defense of Political and Intellectual History: The Case of China.” In *China and Other Matters*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, 30-44.

Tsu, Jing. *Kingdom of Characters: The Language Revolution that Made China Modern*. New York: River Books, 2022.

U, Eddy. *Creating the Intellectual: Chinese Communism and the Rise of a Classification*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019.

Veg, Sebastian. *Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019 [Selections].

Wang, Zheng. *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999, 1-32.

Weston, Timothy. *The Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals, and Chinese Political Culture, 1898-1929*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.

Yeh, Wen-hsin. *The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919-1937*. Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University/Harvard University Press, 1990.

Zarrow, Peter. *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012.

Zarrow, Peter. *Educating China: Knowledge, Society, and Textbooks in a Modernizing World, 1902-1937*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.