

*History 340*  
*Modern China*

**Course Information**

Spring 2025  
MWF 10:30  
BRNG 301  
Course number: 14254

**Instructor**

*Dr. Tillman*  
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Office Hours: M after class or Tu online/by appointment



Feng Zikai, “War and flower” [Image of a soldier laying prone in a field holding a dandelion]

**Course description**

History 340 is a survey of modern China from the Qing dynasty to the present (1644-to the present, with greater weight given to the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Because China enjoys oldest continuous and ongoing civilization, Chinese philosophers have often stressed political continuity in the formation of a Chinese identity, but it was in moments of instability that China transformed to meet new challenges. During the height of the Qing, China was culturally and militarily dominant in East Asia, but, following the Opium Wars and the First Sino-Japanese War, had to adjust to new realities that gave naval powers an advantage over continental empires. Chinese had to confront new questions about how to modernize the army, the economy, and the polity—especially how to transition from an empire to a nation-state. This class helps students how to think historically about those questions.

## Hum-Flo skills

1. Recognize and describe humanistic, historical, or artistic works or problems and patterns of the human experience.
2. Apply disciplinary methodologies, epistemologies, and traditions of the humanities and the arts.
3. Analyze and evaluate texts, works, objects, events, or ideas in their cultural, intellectual, or historical contexts.
4. Create, interpret, or reinterpret artistic and/or humanistic works through performance, analysis, or criticism.
5. Analyze diverse narratives and evidence in order to explore the complexity of human experience across space and time.
6. Describe the history, literature, languages, arts, philosophy, religion, or traditions of other world cultures.
7. Identify the history and the basic principles and operation of government in the United States or other countries.

## Prerequisites (if needed)

*None.*

## Course website

*BrightSpace is our course management system.*

## How to succeed in this course

*Provide information on how students can best succeed in your course. For instance, you might include suggestions about completing assignments or studying for exams. You can also include resource links here. For example:*

If you want to be a successful student:

- Be self-motivated and self-disciplined.
- Be willing to “speak up” if problems arise.
- Be willing and able to commit to 4 to 15 hours per week per course.
- Be able to communicate through writing.
- Be able to meet the minimum requirements for the course.
- Accept critical thinking and decision making as part of the learning process.

In contrast, here are some common behaviors that lead to failing the course.

- Don’t read until the night before the discussion.
- Wait until the last day complete assignments.
- Forget about deadlines.
- Ignore emails from the instructor and/or your peers regarding course activities.
- Don’t get familiar with the grade book and syllabus.

## Covid policies

### *Health*

Please do not come to class or office hours if you are sick. Please make arrangements for virtual office hours if you would like to meet (so that I don’t catch whatever you have).

## Attendance

Attendance is taken in class past the first week. If you need to miss class, please (1) let the instructor know; (2) review the course materials for that day, *especially the textbook*; (3) write a short paragraph reflection on the course materials. If there is a quiz posted for that day, you can make-up the quiz on a set day for make-ups (with a different set of questions).

## Pace of assignments

*Lectures* help to schematize an outline of history. I try to draw from the textbook as well as some additional materials. Because we are devoting less time to imperial China, we are going over it more quickly, so the pace of the reading will seem faster; however, you will not be required to remember every detail. The lecture functions to help you focus on what is important in the textbook. The *textbook* is here as a backbone for the course and to make sure that we stay on track. You may simply attend lecture and understand it; you may need to go back to skim Spence afterwards to make sure that you understand everything; you may find yourself needing to read it in advance of the lectures, if you don't have a good background and need more help understanding. It is ideal to read *the primary source readings* assigned to class in advance of the class, but you will only need to demonstrate that you've read them in discussion posts and debates (so if you are pinched for time, you can read by those dates). The scholarly articles need to be read in advance of the class because we will have a very short quiz on those readings as a platform for class discussion.

## Readings

*Textbook:* Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*

*Scholarly articles:*

Frederic Wakeman, "Blueshirts"

Wen-hsin Yeh, "The Clock and the Compound"

Covell Meyskens, "Experiencing the Cold War"

Isabella Weber, "State capitalism"

*Additional primary sources on BrightSpace*

## Assessments

*Discussion Posts: 10%*

These need to be: submitted on time, show evidence that student has read the material.

*Debates & Workshops: 10%*

*Reading Quizzes (5, with the lowest one dropped): 20%*

These quizzes are meant to (1) reward you for doing the reading; (2) set the stage for a class discussion. At least one fact will be tested via multiple choice.

*Midterm: 20%*

*Project: 20%*

This project is basically a long footnote. There are a few mini-assignments to help you along the way, along with "check-in" days to help make sure that you are making progress—please speak up on at least one of these days. Select a file from one of the databases showcased in class (or one selected in consultation with the professor). Ask questions based on the file. Identify sources of information. Answer the question/create the footnote. Present that information to the class.

*Non-cumulative Final: 20%*

## Course Schedule

### Week 1

8/25 History and geography

- Read the syllabus

8/27 Confucianism, feudalism, and meritocracy

- Optional reading *especially if you need to miss class*: Benjamin Elman, "[Civil Service Exams](#)"
- 8/29 Qing conquest (Spence, chapter 2)  
**8/29 Discussion post (self-introduction)** due on BrightSpace

### Week 2

- 9/1 Labor Day, no school  
9/3 Qing Institutions (Spence 3, 4)
  - Read Shi Lang, "Memorial on the Capture of Taiwan" [BS]9/5 Qing tribute and trade (Spence 5)
  - [Read Qianlong edicts](#)

### Week 3

- 9/8 The Opium Wars (Spence 6, 7)
  - Read court documents on opium legalization (BS)9/10 The Taping Rebellion and the Tongzhi Restoration (Spence 8, 9)  
**9/11 Discussion post due**: How were legalization and trade disputes different in the Qing than today?  
**9/12 Opium War debate**: Should the Qing court ban opium?

### Week 4

- 9/15 First Sino-Japanese War (Spence 10)  
9/17 Decline of the Qing (Spence 11)
  - Read Boxer materials (BS)**9/18 Discussion post due**: stance on Boxer Rebellion materials  
**9/19 Boxer Rebellion debate**: Should Cixi or the provincial governors support Boxers?

### Week 5

- 9/22 The Birth of the Republic (Spence 12, 13)
  - Sun Yatsen, "Chinese Nationalism"
  - [Liang Shuming, "Chinese Civilization"](#)9/24 Warlord period (Spence 14)
  - Li Dazhao, "The Victory of Bolshevism"**9/25 Discussion post due**: What was it like to be a protesting student?  
**9/26 New Culture workshop**: Why did some students choose to protest? Why were students important?

### Week 6

- 9/29 The Return of the Nationalists & Party Politics (Spence 15)  
10/1 White Terror and Underground Spies (Spence 16)
  - Read Frederic Wakeman, "Blue shirts" (**Quiz** in class)**10/3 Workshop**: Finding archival files from the United Board

### Week 7

- 10/6 Nationalists in Control  
10/8 Commercial Revolution (**Quiz** in class)
  - Read Wen-hsin Yeh, "The Clock and the Compound"**10/9**: Select and read a file; upload to BrightSpace  
**10/10: Show and Share**: What file did you select and why?

### Week 8

- 10/13: No school  
10/15: Midterm Review (class optional)  
**10/17: Midterm**

### Week 9

10/20: World War II (Chapter 17)

- Read "Bearing Witness"

10/22: World War II

- Read Feng Zikai, "Bombs in Yishan"

**10/24: Workshop:** Listening to new historiographies of war (Van de ven, Yeh, Mitter)

### Week 10

10/27: Civil War & the Fall of the Nationalists (Chapter 18)

- Read Wen Yiduo, "The Poet's Farewell"

10/29: Catch-up day / discussion of midterm

**10/31: Workshop:** Wilson Archives, UNESCO Archives

### Week 11

11/3: Birth of the PRC (Chapter 19)

- Read Mao Zedong's "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People"

11/5: Taiwan Under Martial Law (Lecture)

- Read Peng Ming-min, "The 2-28 Incident"

11/4: **Discussion post:** How did ordinary people experience war?

**11/7: Debate:** Did World War II lead to the Communist victory?

### Week 12

11/10: Campaigns (Spence 20, 21)

- Read Peter Zarrow's "Social and Political Developments: The Making of the Twentieth-Century Chinese State" (**Quiz** in class)

11/12: Campaigns (Spence 22)

- Deng Xiaoping, "Self-Criticism"

11/14: **Workshop:** visual sources; asking questions, imagining history

### Week 13

11/17: The Vietnam War and Détente (Spence 23)

11/19: What was China's military industrial complex? (Spence 24)

- Read Covell Meyskens, "Experiencing the Cold War" (**Quiz** in class)

11/20: Due: Outline resources to answer your question.

11/21: Workshop: How do you take steps to answer your question?

### Week 14

11/24: The Taiwan Strait Crisis and the ongoing Cold War

- Watch "An Island in between": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DefVP0mkHZY>
- Read Chiang Ssu-chiang, "[Two Letters](#)" trans. Dominic Yang
- Ask the Prof (optional/virtual)

11/26: Thanksgiving, no school

11/28: Thanksgiving, no school

### Week 15

12/1: Taiwan's Democratization; Discussion of "An Island in Between" (Spence 25)

- Read [Renjian Manifesto](#)

12/3: Deng's reforms (Chapter 26)

- [Deng, "Setting things right in Education"](#)
- [Wei Jingshen, "Fifth Modernization"](#)
- Read Isabella Weber, "State capitalism" (**Quiz** in class)

**Discussion post:** What factors have helped or hurt China's modernization?

**12/5: Debate:** Is liberalism possible with “Chinese characteristics”?

12/5: Due: Footnote/project.

### *Week 16*

12/8: Final reflections

12/10: Final reflections and discussion of footnote project

12/12: Make-up day for quizzes

Final exam TBD; accommodations can be made for those who need to be away at this time.

*Syllabus subject to change  
Updated August 1, 2025*