

Assoc Prof Huang Jianli

Department of History



Assoc Prof Huang is an experienced teacher, who is driven by the desire to share both knowledge of Chinese history and the critical interpretation of that knowledge.

Assoc Prof Huang's self-proclaimed "passion" for his subject is more than just a slogan. It both motivates and shapes his teaching, moving him, for instance, constantly to encourage students to go beyond the confines of curriculum and set readings. The level 2000 module, "Struggle for Modern China," includes three ungraded enrichment projects – looking at documentary and fictional films, and attending scholarly talks. In the same way, the guidelines for the final essay of the same course explicitly direct students to "look for one or two additional reading materials which can sustain a good discussion." As students remark on the feedback, the aim is for them "to ask questions beyond the lectures" and to "take ownership of their work." Similar things happen in the level 4000 module, "Approaches to Chinese History." The list of previous research topics undertaken for the main CA component includes tradition and modernity, the problem of objectivity, gender, gentry, Sun Yat-Sen, Buddhism, songs and communism, the press, and the list goes on. Clearly, these are students who have taken seriously the invitation to range widely in their reading and interests.

The student ownership is more than just learning facts and dates. Assoc Prof Huang's teaching makes students attempt to understand something of the construction of knowledge and of the range of interpretations available. The "Struggle for Modern China" examination, for instance, includes a compulsory source question, in which candidates must use quotations from Sun Yat-Sen in order to answer focused questions about him. At the Honours level, "Approaches to Chinese History" emphasizes different approaches and interpretations. The first session devotes time to considering different paradigms at work in the writing of history, and to the impact of social science theories. A later session explores the possible uses of cultural studies towards the understanding of Chinese history. Again, there is the attempt to have students take the initiative and think for themselves. Three sessions are given over to student roundtable forums, and the main piece of CA is a research project.

Assoc Prof Huang's efforts to engage students intellectually are appreciated by students and peers alike. In addition to according him high scores in feedback, students commend the specificity of the advice he gives, his readiness to listen to them and to help them form their own arguments, his careful guidance and his ability to arouse interest. Peers praise not only the professionalism of his organization and presentation, but also his promotion of independent thought. "He was also able," they write, "to stimulate students' critical thinking by highlighting scholarly debates, such as the different interpretations of Zheng He's voyages, without imposing his own views on the students." That observation confirms what is evident in the module folders – that Assoc Prof Huang includes and interrogates a broad range of scholarship in his classes.