Technology and Everyday Life in Modern East Asia: Artefact, Knowledge, Practice and Infrastructure

Syllabus for Course IHSS6003 at HKU, Jan –April, 2019
Venue: Room 201, 2/F, May Hall, HKU
Time: Thursdays 2:30-4:30 PM (except Feb 15, see details below)

Instructor: Prof. Angela K.C. Leung

This course explores new ways of understanding modern East Asian history from the 19th to the 20th centuries by focusing on changing technological engagement in people’s everyday life. It looks at East Asia as an inter-connected set of sociotechnical systems – webs of materials, practices, socio-economic relationships – where technology and society co-evolved. Instead of explaining the modern history of East Asia as a process of one-way transfer of modern, Western technology as an autonomous body of practices and knowledge, the seminar examines how East Asian societies - including China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam – chose, modified, innovated, maintained, appropriated, rejected various technologies in their quest for modernity. How did engagement with modern technology change modern East Asian societies? And how did modern East Asian societies modified new technological practices and artefacts, and produce new knowledge? We shall look at both historical sources as well as current theories to tackle these questions.

To unpack the history of technology in the modern East Asian context, this seminar investigates technology’s various constituents - artefacts and materials, practices and skills, encoded knowledge and ideas, social groups and political institutions involved, situating them in the region’s environment and infrastructures.

This course is a research & training seminar designed to enable students to develop a critical sense of the study of modern technology, to analyse and discuss collectively in class, and to deploy these thoughts in a substantial piece of academic work.
The seminar will meet regularly during the spring semester of 2019. Students will be asked to read theoretical and empirical essays (about 100 pages per week) assigned that they will discuss in class. They will also need to present a short think piece based on the readings and their own projects, and submit a final essay on a topic related to one of the main themes of the seminar that they will also present in the last class. Students should discuss the topic of their final essay with the teacher before March.

**Requirements and Evaluation**

The requirements of this class are:

1. Students should attend all classes, read all require readings before coming to class so that they can actively take part in the discussion.

2. Each student should submit a thoughtful **think-piece** and a **final essay**. Think pieces need to be uploaded to Moodle. For the presentation of the think-piece, students are free in their media choice (video, ppt, comic, blog-writing, images). The presentation of the think-piece will be on **March 21**.

3. Complete a written assignment that will include 2 (two) components:
   a. A literature review (presenting the state of the field on your chosen topic for the final essay) to be uploaded to Moodle by Thursday **March 28, 10PM. This critical analysis should be no longer than 3 pages.** Select at least one item from the bibliography of the syllabus with other related academic publications related to your study.

   b. A final essay on a research project. Choose a case elaborated in at least one framework out of the four discussed in class (artefact, knowledge, practice, infrastructure). This final essay should be uploaded to Moodle by **May 6, 10 pm** and should be no longer than 15 double-spaced pages (including references, Times New Roman 12 pt., 1-inch margins, for references use “author year: page number” format, e.g. 2006:14).

   c. **Oral presentation of your final essay will be on April 25.***
We will discuss with you the topic and other details of the final essay later in the course.

Submit on time: No late submission of assignments will be accepted.

Your performance in this course will be assessed according to the following criteria:

- Participation (active participation in discussions): 25%
- Presentation of the think piece: 15%
- Presentation of project: 20%
- Final Essay: 40%

Structure and Themes

** Primary sources will also be discussed in class. The sources will be uploaded to Moodle.

** All readings will be uploaded to Moodle in December.

1. Jan 17 Introduction 1: The sociotechnical system

We will first look at the relations between technology and society by studying together classical theoretical studies on technological systems addressing the inter-dependence, or co-evolvement of technology and society. We then look at how such discussions are relevant to East Asian societies and history. Why technology should not be considered as an autonomous body of knowledge and practice that is applicable everywhere. We will discuss why the assumption that modern Western technology has been simply “transferred” to, or copied by backward Asian societies since the 19th century was a simplification of a complex historical process. We will try to appreciate why technology and its use can be powerful conceptual tools that allow us to have a deeper understanding of the history and culture of a society.

Readings:

2. Jan 24. Theories on technology

We will discuss in the second class the various theoretical aspects of technology. How do we deconstruct the notion of technology? How do we unlearn conventional meanings of technology and take a fresh look at the notion to make it conceptually productive in its application.

Readings:
- Edgerton, David. 1999. “From innovation to use: ten eclectic theses on the historiography of technology”, History and Technology 16 (2), 111-36

3. Jan 31. Technology in cultural (Asian) contexts

In this class we shall study technology in specific Asian contexts: history, state, and society.

Readings:
- Schafer, Dagmar and Popplow, Marcus. 2015 “Technology and innovation within expanding webs of exchange” The Cambridge World


Feb 7  No class: Chinese New year

4. Feb. 14 Artefacts 1: Making a new artefact

In this class we look at a key component of technology: artefact. How do we study technology through the emergence and construction of a new artefact? How and why is it made the way it is?

Readings:

- Pinch, Trevor and Bijker, Wiebe. 2012. “The social construction of facts and artifacts: or how the sociology of science and the sociology of technology might benefit each other.” The Social Construction of Technological Systems. MIT Press, pp. 11-44 (especially after p. 28)

Feb 21  No class

5. Feb 28. Artifacts 2: Transforming traditional artefacts
In this class, we look at how “traditional” East Asian artefacts are being “transformed” into new, modern ones. Do these new artefacts retain their traditional “East Asianness”? Do they become different things? How “new” are they? What new values are created by such technology?

Readings:


Read also:


March 7: reading week

6. March 14 Knowledge and practice 1

Agriculture and mining


Also read:
• 杜新豪 2018 : “施肥技術的發展與制約“ in 《金汁: 中國傳統肥料知識與技術實踐研究 10-19 世紀》. 中國農業科學技術出版社: 144-167

7. March 21 presentation of think pieces

8. March 28 knowledge and practice 2

      Medicine and dietetics

Readings:

Also read:
https://web.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/RethinkingSciCiv/etexts/Fujimura/Trans
national%20Genomics.html

Students should submit their literature review on March 28.

9. April 4  Infrastructure: East Asian networks and connectedness

We shall study in this class the various infrastructures that affect and are created by technology: material, institutional, organizational, politico-economic. How unique are these East Asian infrastructures?

Readings:
• McDonald, Kate. 2014. “Imperial Mobility: Circulation as History in East Asia under Empire”. Transfer 4 (3): 68-87

Also read:
• Burns, Susan. 2017. “Japanese patent medicine trade in East Asia; Women medicines and the tensions of Empire”. In Leung and
Nakayama eds., *Gender, health and Medicine in Modern East Asia*. HKU Press: 139-165.


**April 11** No class.

**10. April 18 Everyday technology and East Asian economy**

In this class, we shall discuss the dialectics between technology and economy in East Asia, especially in the historical context of the 19th to the 21st centuries. To what extent is technological dynamism in terms of innovation is critical for economic development in East Asia? What kind of innovation are we talking about? What other kinds of technological engagement are more “natural” to East Asian cultures and societies.

**Readings:**

- Michele Bolton 1993 “Imitation versus Innovation: Lessons to be learned from the Japanese” *Organizational Dynamics*.21 (3):30-45

**11. April 25 Presentation of final paper**

Students should submit the final paper on or before 10 PM, May 6.