

Nanyang Technological University

# HH1001: What is history?

Semester 1, 2017-18

Academic Units: 3

Pre-requisites: None

Instructor: Asst. Prof. Miles Powell

## Overview

This course provides an introduction to the study of history. There are two main aims. The first is for students to become familiar with the methods of historians. What kinds of sources do historians use? How do they use them? How do you write a historical essay? The second is to examine the different approaches to history. We will read biographies, social history, cultural history, economic history, environmental history, global history, gender history, race history, and micro-history and try to understand the advantages and disadvantages of each. The past consists of a huge amount of disorganized data. It sits around in books, manuscripts, museums, buildings, artifacts, and people. The aim of this class is to understand how we can transform all that data into stories. That is, this course is about developing the skills to turn facts into history.

## Learning Objectives

- Basic understanding of the nature of history, its methods, the major schools, and philosophies of history
- Basic understanding of the relationship of history to social memory, culture, and nation
- Ability to critically read and use primary sources in ways appropriate for writing history
- Ability to critically read and use secondary sources in ways appropriate for writing history
- Understanding of the basic rules of academic writing in history, especially the rules regarding plagiarism and citation

## Logistics:

Lectures:

Tutorials:

Email: [miles.powell@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:miles.powell@ntu.edu.sg)

Office: HSS-05-24

Tutor / Teaching Assistant:

### Required Texts:

- Tosh, John (2015). *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Harlow: Pearson-Longman). **Available for purchase at the NTU Bookshop.**
- I will post the other readings for the module on NTULearn.

### Assessment

This class has no examination. The assessment tasks aim to develop your skills as historians and ask you to read and think critically about history. The assessment structure will reward those students who work consistently over the course of the semester.

#### *Participation in Class Activities (20%):*

This component will be made up of two parts:

- 1) attendance at tutorials (10%);
- 2) performance on in-class pop quizzes. The quizzes will take place during about half the lectures (10%).

#### *Presentation (group work) (15%):*

At the beginning of the semester I will assign you to a group of three or four. You will work in this group to prepare a 15-minute presentation. The presentations will be book reports on a book related to the subject of a particular lecture. The report may include not only a report on the content of the book, but also a description of the author, the context in which the book was written, and so on. I will grade the presentations partly on their effectiveness in communicating information about the book to the class in interesting and creative ways that engage your peers. The presentations will take place in the lecture sessions, usually during the second hour. All members of the group will receive the same grade. Your group can choose which book to report on from the list provided by the professor. You may also pick your own book, subject to the approval of the professor.

#### *Primary Source Exercise (20%)*

You will select a primary source from the list provided by the professor. This exercise requires you to write an 800-1000 word analysis of this source. You should find and use at least one secondary source to provide background and context for your source. The TA and I will grade

you on the clarity of your writing, your level of critical engagement with the source, and the correct use of citation conventions.

**Due date: Monday September 12<sup>th</sup>, 12 noon (via Turn-It-In)**

*Planning an Essay (20%)*

This exercise builds on the primary source exercise. You will submit a historical question, thesis statement, essay outline, and annotated bibliography on a topic related to your primary source. In tutorials we will work on developing these skills. The annotated bibliography should contain five primary sources and five secondary sources related to your topic. Maximum length: 1500 words.

**Due date: Monday 10<sup>th</sup> October, 12 noon (via Turn-It-In)**

*Peer Commentary on Essay Plan (10%)*

You will be responsible for reading and commenting on the plan of two other members of the class. You will submit your comments both to your classmates and to the teaching staff. We will grade you on the quality and helpfulness of your feedback.

**Due date: Monday 24<sup>th</sup> October, 12 noon (on NTULearn)**

*Museum Assignment (15%):*

This will be based on your work during week XI of class. Before that week you will receive a set of questions that you must answer based on your visit to the museum.

**Due: Friday 11<sup>th</sup> November, 12 noon (via Turn-It-In).**

## **Course Policies**

### **Your Responsibilities**

You are responsible for making yourself aware of all the information in this document. Familiarize yourself with due dates, times, and so on.

It is also your responsibility to come to class prepared to participate. This means having completed the reading assignments, and having something to take notes with (either pen and paper or a laptop computer or tablet).

### **Medical Certificates**

Medical Certificates (MCs) are not “get out of jail free” cards. The presentation of a medical certificate does not automatically excuse an absence or late work. Depending on the circumstances, I will usually ask for you to complete additional work in order to “make up” for missed classes or quizzes.

### **Late Policy**

I will penalize late work at the rate of 10% of the maximum grade per 24-hour period overdue. For example, work that is 2 hours late will receive a 10% penalty, work that is 26 hours late a 20% penalty, work that is 55 hours late a 30% penalty, and so on. I may grant extensions in some special cases. However, I will not grant extensions within one week of the deadline (in other words, if you think you need an extension, ask early).

### **Plagiarism and Cheating**

This course is partly designed to teach you about proper conventions for using and acknowledging the work of others. Universities consider using the works of others without properly acknowledging that use (that is, copying) to be “cheating.” In this course, such behavior will result in a score of zero on the assignment in question. In accordance with school policy, I will also report especially egregious cases to the university to be placed on record in your academic file. Learn how to cite the work of others properly. Do not ever copy. If in doubt, ask.

### **Course Outline and Readings**

#### ***Part I: Introduction and methods***

*Week I (August 9<sup>th</sup>): No Class Due to National Day*

*Week II (August 16<sup>th</sup>): The Uses of History*

The first lecture will mostly serve as an introduction to the class. I will introduce the history faculty and explain the aims of the class, the mechanics of how the class will work, and the assessment. There will be a brief talk introducing the question “What is history?”

Tutorial: There will be no tutorial in Week 2.

Reading:

- Tosh, Chapter 1: “Historical Awareness” and Chapter 2: “The Uses of History”

*Week III (August 23<sup>d</sup>): Archives and Historical Documents*

We will examine the main source from which historians get their data: written and printed documents. What is a historical source? What do historians do with their sources? During class

we will read and analyze one or more early modern sources. These source(s) will be concerned with medicine during the early modern period (roughly the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries) – using older sources will help to highlight some of the difficulties and problems that historians encounter when reading such sources.

Tutorial: Discussion of readings.

Reading:

- Tosh, Chapter 4: “The Raw Materials” and Chapter 5: “Using the Sources”

*Week IV (August 30<sup>th</sup>): **Oral History***

Another important source of historical material is from interview (oral histories). How should we treat such material? How is it different from written material? How is it possible to transform an oral history into a historical narrative? We will also discuss interviewing techniques in order to prepare for essays that may use oral history.

Tutorial: Interviewing within the class to construct a family tree.

- Tosh, Chapter 11: “Memory and the Spoken Word”
- Cecilia Chang (2007) Oral history interviews conducted by Victor Geraci, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (pp. 1-36 and 65-83).

*Lecture V (September 6<sup>th</sup>): **Secondary Sources***

Historians also read the work of other historians. For the most part, we don’t have time to read all the primary sources ourselves and so we must learn about the past through others’ writing. How should we treat these secondary sources? To what extent should we rely on them? How can we go about writing our own history without just copying primary sources? This lecture will also focus on the topic of plagiarism and proper citation practices.

Tutorial: Secondary source exercise

Readings:

- I.W. Mabbett (2007) *Writing History Essays: A Student’s Guide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), Chapter 4 “Knowing Your Sources” (pp. 33-42), Chapter 5 “Reading critically” (pp. 43-55), and Chapter 9 “Writing and Independent Thought” (pp. 86-94).

**Part II: Types of history**

*Week VI (September 13<sup>th</sup>): **Biography and Social History***

We now turn to looking at some of the different ‘schools’ of history. History is a big field – there are lots of different approaches and ideas about how to write history. Lecture VI – VIII provide a

kind of map for understanding some of these differences. In this week we examine two contrasting styles of historical writing: biography and social history. The two readings are about a very similar period of time and topic, yet they do not give us the same information. What are the advantages and disadvantages of biography? Social history attempts to describe social and cultural circumstances, often focusing on 'the masses' rather than 'elites' such as monarchs, politicians, or the rich. From where did this perspective arise and why is it important?

Tutorial: Discussion of readings.

Readings:

- Tosh, Chapter 3: "Mapping the Field"
- Janet Browne (2002) *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place* (Princeton University Press) [Chapter 1: Stormy Waters, pp. 3-42]
- James A. Secord (2001) *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (University of Chicago Press) [Prologue and Chapter 1, pp. 1-40]

**Week VII (September 20<sup>th</sup>): Economic History and Environmental History**

Again, the readings offer very different accounts of similar topics. At root, different historians have different ideas about what drives historical change. Economic history places economic circumstances at the center of its accounts. Economic historians use data about goods, money, and capital flows to explain events. In contrast, environmental history places emphasis on the nonhuman world. Challenging a longstanding intellectual division between "nature" and "artifice," they try to explain history as an interaction between humans and their environments. Why might some historians choose one approach over another? In what circumstances might each be appropriate?

Tutorial: Discussion of readings.

Readings:

- David G. Surdam (1997) "Union Military Superiority and New Orleans's Economic Value to the Confederacy" *Louisiana History* 38(4): 389-408.
- Mark Fiege (2004) "Gettysburg and the Organic Nature of the American Civil War" in eds. Richard P. Tucker and Edmund Russell, *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of Warfare* (Portland: Oregon State University Press): 93-109.

**Mid-Semester Break**

**Week VIII (October 4<sup>th</sup>): Microhistory, Global History, Big History**

This week explores some of the more recent trends in history. Microhistory takes single events or small episodes in history and describes and analyzes them in microscopic detail. Ideally, such histories reveal something not just about the isolated event but about the larger culture in

which it is embedded. Global history (otherwise known as ‘world history’ or ‘transnational history’) takes almost the opposite approach. Rather than focusing on specific events or places it attempts to tell history in broadest possible contexts, looking for large scale dynamics and trends.

Why have these approaches emerged? How are they different from older approaches? What advantages and disadvantages do they offer?

Tutorial: Discussion of readings.

Readings:

- Robert Darnton (1984) “Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin” in *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, NY: Basic Books): 75-106.
- Mark Kurlansky (2003) *Salt: A World History* (Penguin) [Introduction and Chapters 3, 13, and 24] (47pp).

#### *Week IX (October 11<sup>th</sup>): Gender and History*

Lecture VIII and IX also examine two recent developments in history: the examination of gender and the examination of race. Of course, ‘gender history’ provides accounts of women whom historians have often neglected or entirely left out of older narratives. But this field also tries to discover how ideas about sex and gender have evolved over time and how gender dynamics have shaped the course of history.

Tutorial: Discussion of readings.

Readings:

- Susan Kingsley Kent (2012) “Woman: from the imperfect male to the incommensurable female” in *Gender and history* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan): 9-27
- Elaine Tyler May (1999) “Explosive issues: sex, women, and the bomb” in *Homeward bound: American families in the cold war era* (New York, NY: Basic Books): 80-99.

#### *Week X (October 18<sup>th</sup>): Race and History*

History has traditionally been Eurocentric. A lot of history has focused on white people and their domination over other parts of the world. Some recent history has partially redressed this balance, telling the stories of other races, or including the points of view of other races in history (eg. the history of slavery from the point of view of the slaves, or the history of colonialism from the point of view of the colonized people). But, like gender history, race history also demonstrates the history of the *idea* of race itself and the importance of this idea in shaping history.

Tutorials: Discussion of readings.

## Readings:

- William B. Provine (1986) "Geneticists and race" *American Zoologist* 26: 857-887.
- Ganesan Narayanan (2004) "The political history of ethnic relations in Singapore" in *Beyond rituals and riots: ethnic pluralism and social cohesion in Singapore*, Lai Ah Eng, ed. (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press).

**Part III: History in the world****Week XI (October 25<sup>th</sup>): Performance and Film**

The last part of the course examines the importance of history for our society, culture, and politics. Lecture XI looks at the portrayal of history in films and movies. History appears not just in documentaries but also in fictional films too. Films open up different kinds of subjects for historical investigation and for providing new perspectives on familiar subjects. This week's main examples will show how we can use sports as a window onto history. We will also examine some of the challenges presented by portraying history on film and analyze the advantages and disadvantages of history in film.

Tutorial: Discussion of film.

## Readings:

- *The Act of Killing* (2012) Joshua Oppenheimer, dir.
- Robert A. Rosenstone (1995) "History in images, history in words: reflections on the possibility of really putting history into film" in *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996): 19-44.
- Maarten Pereboom (2011) "Moving pictures as a historical resource" in *History and film: moving pictures and the study of the past* (Prentice Hall): 1-14.

**Week XII (November 1<sup>st</sup>): Museums and Artifacts**

History is also on display in museums. How does the presentation of exhibits influence how we interpret history? What are museums trying to do? What role do they play in our society? Historians refer to the artifacts on display in museums as 'material culture' – material objects that are preserved from the past. Like books or oral histories, material culture can also be a historical source. How do historians treat and use these special source materials? What can we find out from them that we cannot find out from a book? This week will also serve as preparation for the second assignment.

*Museum visit:* There will be no lecture or tutorial this week. Instead, you will visit a museum in Singapore. You will be asked to complete an assignment based on your visit that will comprise 15% of your final grade (see above).

## Readings:



- “Museum Primer”
- Craig Gilborn (1981) “Pop pedagogy: looking at the Coke bottle” in *Material culture studies in America*, Thomas J. Schlereth, ed. (Rowman Altamira): 183-194.
- John T. Schlebecker (1981) “The use of objects in historical research” in *Material culture studies in America*, Thomas J. Schlereth, ed. (Rowman Altamira): 106-113.

**Week XIII (November 8<sup>th</sup>): History and Nation**

History is also crucial in forming ideas about where we come from and who we are. In other words, history is crucial for our *identity*. This is especially true for *national identity* – nations rely on history in order to encourage loyalty and patriotism. Taking examples from South-East Asia, we will explore the history of nations and nationalism and the processes through which nations construct histories for themselves.

**Readings:**

- Benedict Anderson (1991) “The last wave” in *Imagined communities* Revised ed. (London: Verso): 113-140.
- Thongchai Winichakul (1994) “Mapping: a new technology of space” and “Geo-body” in *Siam mapped: a history of the geo-body of a nation* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press): 113-139.
- Paul Rae (2013) “Performing Singapore: City/State.”

Tutorial: Discussion of readings.