Chinese Renaissance: History of China, 1000-1400

The Chinese civilization is the oldest civilization in the world that still exists today. But its glorious, long history has also been interpreted as a sign of its fundamental stagnation. The German philosopher Hegel, for example, once described China as “the empire of duration.” But the very fact that the Chinese empire continued to prosper for such a long period shows that its history underwent a series of significant transformations to adjust to the change of time. One of the most important of all is what scholars call the Tang-Song transition, which has been thought to be the beginning of its “early modern” era. The period witnesses the end of medieval aristocracy, the restructuring of imperial power vis-à-vis society, and the growth of vernacular culture. Woodblock printing, sailor’s compass, and gunpowder were invented in China during this period. The commercialization of the economy and the urbanization of society that took place in this period were unprecedented not only in China but also in the rest of the world. Moreover, against the prevalent Buddhist and Daoist philosophies, a new, radical reinterpretation of Confucian classics appeared and eventually established itself as a new state orthodoxy that lasted for 700 years until the early 20th century. In this class, we explore social, cultural, and intellectual changes of this important period in Chinese history.

This course is designed as a 300-level history course. Through the course, students are expected to read about 80 to 100 pages a week and to develop a skill of thinking through primary sources and of evaluating the quality of scholarly works. Some knowledge of Chinese history will definitely help, but is not imperative. Those who are not familiar with basic narrative of Chinese history during this period are strongly encouraged to read Frederick Mote’s Imperial China.

books to be purchased
*Morris Rossabi, Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)
*Sarah Schneewind, A Tale of Two Melons: Emperor and Subject in Ming China (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006)
Books under asterisk (*) are for book review