Title: Sources of East Asian Modernity: China and Chinese overseas, c. 1890s-1930s

Name of convenor: Dr Rachel Leow (rl341)

Course description:

This Special Subject is situated at the turn of the twentieth century, when the history of China and the history of Chinese communities overseas, long inseparable, began to be transformed by world-historical developments of globalization, imperialism and accelerating interconnection: a nexus of conditions often referred to as a period of ‘modernity’ in Asia. Recognizing that one of the legacies of decolonization and the Cold War has been to parcel out previously interconnected regional histories into nationalist historiographies, the paper seeks to look beyond nation in attempting to understand the dimensions of cultural and intellectual change precipitated by these encounters with modernity. It takes as its historical subjects Chinese communities across China and Southeast Asia, and seeks to understand the challenges to cultural identity they faced, the ideas and visions of competing socio-political formations articulated at key moments in their shared histories, and the roots of the divergent nationalisms that would be their fates by mid-century. Amidst the great changes that characterize the globalizing fin de siecle and the early interwar years, how did Chinese men and women begin to devise new ideas of self, state, society and the world that might permit participation in projects of modernity without losing their hold on a stable sense of their cultural selves? Upon what sources -- old and new, foreign and domestic -- did they draw in order to do so? What new routes of political, personal and social action were sought to pursue and enact their modern visions, and what struggles were faced in doing so?

Michaelmas proceeds chronologically to give an overview of the period. After a series of background lectures, we will embark on a close study of several key moments in the shared histories of China and Chinese overseas, among them the 1898 reform movement, the 1911 revolution, the 1919 May Fourth movement, and the beginning of the Chinese civil war in 1927. Lent term will move to situate this trajectory in a range of broader historical contexts: among them the emergence of creole Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, the city as a site for the negotiation (and disciplining) of modern Chinese identities, the translation, transmission and evolution of Chinese communism across the region, the allure of pan-Asianism and the prelude to war, and others.

Mode of teaching:

The paper is taught through a combination of lectures and seminars. A lecture will introduce a set of sources that will then be worked on in close reading in two or three subsequent seminars. Gobbet practice classes take place throughout the paper. Conventional teaching will be complemented by experiments in digital humanities techniques; there will be an emphasis on collaborative work and learning. Guest lectures have in the past contributed to the programme, typically in Lent. Students will have the opportunity of a field trip, and there will be an accompanying film series. All reading and visual material will be on Moodle.

Please note that due to leave arrangements, this Special Subject will be taught entirely in Michaelmas and Lent; there will be no Easter classes.

Cap: This class will aim to take up to 15 students.