Western expansion was global. It touched societies in East Asia, Latin America, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. This class will compare moments of encounter between Western empires and non-Western societies from the perspective of the latter. How did the peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Americas experience Western expansion?

The answer to this question leads to one of the central topics of contemporary scholarship: modernity. What is modernity? The discipline of history uses “modernity” as a temporal marker. The modern era was preceded by the premodern era, foregrounded by the early modern era and, some argue, succeeded by the postmodern era. In its transitive form, however, modernity becomes an act: modernization. As such it refers to the transformation of society from one state (premodernity) to another (modernity). Modernity, modernization, and their corollaries are central to how theorists have conceptualized Western expansion and its outcomes.

This course explores the related concepts of Western expansion and modernity in three sections. The first looks at modernity in the sense of economic development. It focuses on a question that has preoccupied historical actors as well as contemporary theorists: Why and how did the West become powerful and wealthy while the rest did not? The second part of the course traces some of the key ways of understanding the role of the West in the formation of the modern world. If the concept of the West was common in societies faced with the threat of Western arms and the attraction of Western goods and sciences, is it still useful today? The third part asks about the history of the term modernity. It goes back to a time when the word “modernity” was not used, proceeds to ask how it entered our vocabulary, and turns to ask about its usefulness today.

Course Requirements

This course is a seminar. Although I will provide a minimal amount of background and a few questions to consider at the beginning and end of each meeting, most of the class will consist of discussions about the weekly readings. We will think critically about the readings and compare them to texts advocating alternative approaches to modernity or dealing with a different part of the world.

Two things will help us do this. First, two days before class, by midnight, you will be asked to post a short 1-2 paragraph response to the readings on blackboard. This will summarize what you think are the most important points in the readings and bring questions up for discussion. Second, on the day before class, by midnight, you will post a comment to at least one of your classmates’ responses. These postings are a way to start the discussion and you should come to class ready to engage with both your understanding of the readings and your classmates’ understanding of the readings.

Regular reading, the weekly discussions, and participation are central to this class. Not only do these constitute a combined 20% of your grade, but they lay the foundation for writing the successful essays which constitute the remaining 80% of the grade. The readings have been kept as short as possible to give you time to think them over and respond to them online and in class.
REQUIRED TEXTS

The following texts have been placed on reserve at Mudd Library. Texts that have also been ordered at the Oberlin Bookstore (basement) are preceded by an asterisk. The other texts are available on blackboard.


GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS

Two Short papers (3-4 pages each) 40%
Final paper (7-9 pages) 40%
Online discussions and in class participation 20%

Responses are due by midnight on Saturday. Discussion of the responses should take place on Sunday. The two short papers are due at the beginning of class on October 11 and November 15. The final paper is due at 11 am on Wednesday December 22. Late papers will be marked down 2/3 of a grade for the first day and 1/3 of a grade for every day thereafter. One week after the due date they will no longer be accepted.

The two short papers discuss the two specific questions which are at the center of the first two parts of the course. These questions will be explained in class on the week before the paper is due. The final paper will be on the course as a whole.

FILM SCREENINGS

Two films will be shown during the course of the semester. The first, “Profound Desires of the Gods” by Director Imamura Shohei will be screened in Mudd 050 on Thursday November 28 at 7pm. The second film, “The Last Samurai” by Director Edward Zwick will be screened in Mudd 050 on Thursday December 2 at 7pm. Even if you have seen “The Last Samurai,” it is suggested that
you watch it again in the context of the course. Both films will be discussed during seminar and in conjunction with the readings for the week.

HONOR CODE
All students are expected to adhere to the Oberlin Honor Code on all written assignments.

WRITING ASSISTANCE
Students are encouraged to visit the Writing Center in Mudd Library where tutors from the Writing Associates Program can provide strategies for improving writing skills.

OFFICE HOURS
Mondays 1:00-2:30 and Wednesdays 10:00-11:30.
Students are encouraged to come see the instructor with questions about any aspect of the course.

CLASS SCHEDULE
Sept. 13 Introduction: Western Expansion and Modernity

PART I: WHY SOME MODERNIZED WHILE OTHERS DID NOT
Sept. 20 Modesty in Japan but not China: Modernization Theory vs. World Systems Theory

Sept. 27 Modernity in the West but not the Non-West: Lin Zexu, Shakib Arslan, Che Guevara
Lin Zexu, “Letter to the English Ruler” (1839) and “Letter to Wu Zixu on the Need for Western Guns and Ships” (1842) (Blackboard).

Oct. 4 Modernity in Europe and China: Environmental History and Contingency
* First short paper due at the beginning of class on Monday October 11.

**Oct. 11 Modernization Theory, World Systems Theory, Contingency, and the Archive**

**PART II: MODERNITY AND THE WEST**

**Oct. 18 The Two Faces of the West**
Sakuma Shozan, “Reflections on my Errors,” ca. 1855 (blackboard).

* Fall recess *

**Nov. 1 Modernity without the West: Proto Capitalism and Early Modernity**

**Nov. 8 Modernity with the West: But where is “the West?”**

* Second short paper due at the beginning of class on Monday November 15. 
Nov. 15 Modernity Beyond the West: Global Modernity


*Reminder: Screening of “Profound Desires of the Gods” in Mudd 050 at 7pm on Thursday Nov. 18.

PART II: WHAT IS MODERNITY?

Nov. 22 Unmodern: Before the Modern Narrative of Progress


“Memoirs of Suleyman Agha,” ca. 1690 (blackboard).

Gül İrepoglu. Levni: Painting, Poetry, Colour.

Nov. 29 The Invention of Modernity as the Mirror of Tradition


*Reminder: Screening of “The Last Samurai” in Mudd 050 at 7pm on Thursday Dec. 2.

Dec. 6 The Utility of the Concept of Modernity


Video: Sanjay Subrahmanyan. “Varieties of Modernity.” Presentation at the University of Zurich URPP Asia and Europe. Zurich: August 9, 2009 (online).

Dec. 13 What is Modernity?

Discussion of final papers

Final paper due at 11 am on Wednesday December 22