Theories of modernization have inspired, informed, and plagued histories of middle and late imperial China. For the Song-Qing eras (roughly 10th-19th centuries), comparative studies have variously found and sought to explain modernization emerging earlier than in Europe, an absence of modernization, or alternative paths of modernization. Regional models have argued for pan-East Asian systems and patterns of modernization. Global models have argued that China had a vital role in European development as a provenance of modernizing institutions and ideas, as a source of exploited resources, or otherwise as an integral part of global systems.

In this course we explore these historiographical debates and develop critical perspectives, including approaches to escaping Eurocentric and teleological frameworks.