

Work: From Factory Floor to Our Robot Future

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Wig factory. "A view of part of Gilda Fashion Ltd's modern,
airy factory in Tsun Wan, New Territories," 1970.



Synopsis

This interdisciplinary course takes post-World War II East Asia as a “site” for examining issues of industrialization, everyday working conditions, and the future world of work and careers, including work from home, artificial intelligence, and robotics.

At the center of the course is a puzzle: In 1820, Asia led the world economy, comprising one-half of global income. Yet this did not last; in fact, by the 1960s, Asia was one of the poorest regions in the world. But since the 1960s, Asia, and East Asia in particular, has seen what economists have called an economic “miracle” – startling growth that vaulted the region including Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and mainland China into the lead of the global economic race. Indeed, the *Financial Times* has declared that 2020 marked the beginning of the “Asian Century,” when Asian countries contained half of the world’s middle class, and Asian economies, for the first time since the 19th century, again contributed 50% of global income.

This course explains these shifts by tracing the development and governance of Asian economies from World War II through today, examining both cases of rapid growth and cases where Asian economies have not grown as quickly or as strongly. It is thus conceptualized as a survey of this topic that moves across time (from World War II to the present, along with some earlier “roots” of Asian industrialization) and space (East, Southeast, and South Asia).



Chinese medicine factory. Final packaging at the Hoe Hin Pak Fah Yeow Manufactory Limited. 1970s-80s.

Interdisciplinary approach

- The course is deliberately interdisciplinary, drawing on the home disciplines of the three lecturers:
 - Wong: Education Policy and Leadership — expertise in education, care work, leadership, and Hong Kong/Sinophone world
 - Cheung: Asian and Policy Studies — expertise in Hong Kong law, real world experience in business
 - Petrusis: Global History (History Programme, Literature and Cultural Studies Department) — expertise in global histories of capitalism and industrialization, especially connecting US-Asia
- Students read work in anthropology, art history, history, education studies, economics, policy, and literature, and analyze photography, advertisements, documentaries, movies, art, video clips, etc.
 - Ideas and approaches “cross-pollinate” and enable students from different backgrounds to draw on existing strengths and stretch to gain new ones
- In-class activities ask students to “cross-train” collaboratively across skills and disciplines.



Textile factory. Workers sewing, Champion Industrial Company. 1960s-70s.

Unit 1: The factory

Students were introduced to what “work” means, focusing on factories, industrialization, work and bodies, and ideas of hidden/concealed work; and how these concepts can illuminate and explain East Asian and Asian industrialization since World War II.

Students learned about early mass production techniques and how they anticipated 20th century “modern” work, and learn to understand visual and verbal discourses of work and industry.

Students learned about critical “lenses” for understanding society, including class/income, gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, ability/disability/bodies, and age/family structure.

- Week 1: Introduction: How do we think about work?
- Week 2: First factories: China, the Caribbean, the United States [19th century models of work]
- Week 3: Modern times [images and ideas about work and modernity, including Charlie Chaplin’s classic film]

Unit 2: The Asian “miracle”

An overview of the “miracle” of postwar growth and industrialization in East Asia, as seen by focusing on the “Tigers” of Hong Kong and South Korea, along with the more recent example of Mainland China after 1979.

Students also learned about the ideas of globalization and supply chains, along with the importance of empire, the Cold War, governance and “developmentalism,” and labor unions as less obvious forces in shaping postwar industrialization.

- Week 4: Hong Kong and the “factory girl” [including oral histories from “Hong Kong Memory” web site]
- Week 5: South Korea and laboring bodies
- Week 6: Made in China [the move to just-in-time+global supply chains]



Clothing factory. Hollywood Knitwear Factory in Kwun Tong in 1978.

Unit 3: Beyond the factory

This unit aimed to help students understand the modern world of work not just as shiny and hyper-industrialized, but as a system that also demands precarious labor from disempowered individual workers; and as a system where the “workplace” is not always separate from the home.

Students learned about models of work outside the large, centralized factory, including “living room factories” and outwork, outsourcing and displaced/de-placed work (such as Indian call centers, which purport to be location-less), and migrant work, including an analysis of Hong Kong’s foreign domestic worker (“Helper”) system. Students also examined work that many of them are considering -- education -- in order to understand the classroom and school as a workplace, and in order to connect course concepts to teaching as work.

- Week 7: Taiwan’s “Living room factories”
- Week 8: Precarious labor: Hong Kong’s foreign domestic workers
- Week 9: Global workshops 1: Outsourcing [Indian call centers] and smart cities
- Week 10: Education as work: Leadership, care, and community



Portraits of Southeast Asian domestic workers in Hong Kong, 2014-15.

Unit 4: The end of work?

This unit asked students to grapple with several disorienting concepts: harsh, dangerous, and deadly work, especially as it shaped the environment; the virtual work that so many of us have come to know during the pandemic; and the unknowns of the impending “revolution” in work driven by artificial intelligence and automation, including robots.

Students were asked to think through how East Asia and Asia are positioned in this new economy, and ask how the new world is built on and breaks from the habits and structures of the old world of work.

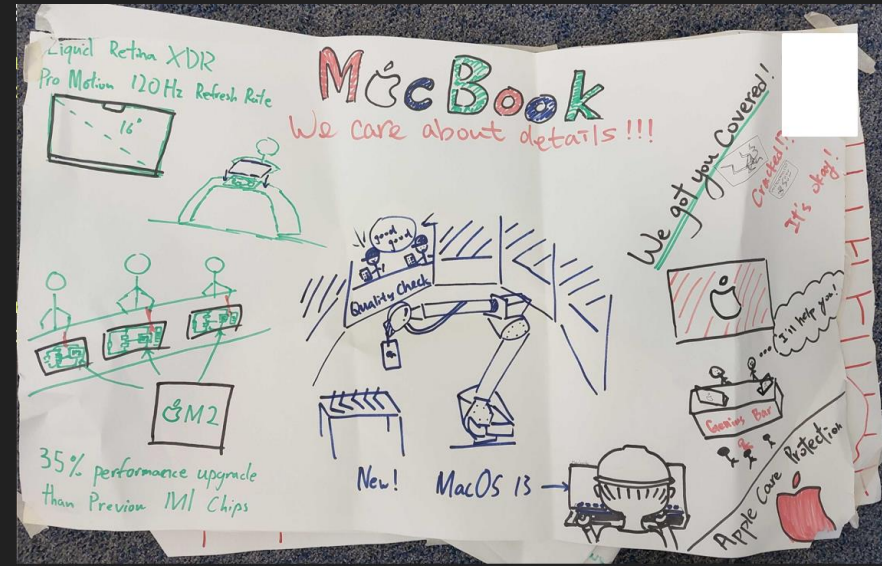
- Week 11: Global workshops 2: Dangerous work [work and the environment across SE Asia]
- Week 12: Virtual work: Behind the screen [Online content monitoring in the Philippines] and new modes of work from home
- Week 13: Conclusion: Our robot overlords [AI and automation, focused especially on Mainland China]



Digital work. Monitoring online content in the Philippines. 2010s.

Assessments: In-class work (15%)

- **In-class work:** Includes brief in-class assignments + active participation in discussion and group work
 - Students are asked to be active in class, including group work and in-class writing that reinforces course concepts and gives them a chance to practice writing, public speaking, and critical thinking in English.
 - In-class work allows lecturers to make the course into a forum where students feel comfortable trading ideas.
 - Students will be invited to help facilitate parts of the lesson, with the support of lecturers.
- **In-class activities are designed for creative collaboration among students**
 - Fun and social, while reinforcing core course ideas
 - Incentivize and reward engagement with the course
 - **Example: Shoe detective**
 - In a small group, a student takes off a shoe to see where it was made. Students use internet research to trace the supply chain of the shoe and understand working conditions in the factory drawing on reporting and brand disclosure statements.
 - **Low-stakes grading for all assignments**



In-class activity (mock ad centered on workers), Spring 2023

Assessments: Midterm project (40%)

- **Midterm project (individual):**
 - “Visit a real-life workplace (a coffee shop, a clothing store, etc.) and draw (or computer-draw) a map of the workplace. Annotate the map to analyze how “work” takes place there, and complete a short worksheet summarizing your analysis.”
 - Triple-marking for all assignments



Clothing. Interior of Chun Au Knitting Factory Limited. 1950s.

Assessments: Final project (45%)

- **Final project (group):**
 - “Imagine you are part of a team of workplace consultants. Select a specific workplace and create a concrete “plan” for how to improve that workplace in terms of a specific criterion (gender equity, health and safety, etc.)”
 - Students were evaluated on a short group presentation of that plan to the three instructors, including a brief question and answer session (worth 40%).
 - Students also submitted an individual written “reflection” on the “plan” (300 words; worth 5%).
 - Triple-marking/consensus grading after final class



Cotton textile industry. Completed singlets are ironed and backed up with cardboard and packed in cartons. 1956.

Coordinating across the group

- **Co-planning challenge: Replacement of core instructor**
 - Departure of APS teammate
 - Replaced by APS instructor with different skills and interests
 - Adapted syllabus (Openness to adjustment and feedback from all stakeholders)
- **Co-teaching challenge: Instructors cannot attend all lectures**
 - Continuous adaptation of syllabus and lecture materials
 - Co-teaching for 5 of 13 units
 - Petrulis led/co-taught 7 of 13 units, sat in on 8th unit



Paint factory. A “modern workers' canteen and recreation room” in one of the larger factories. 1956.

Coordinating across the group

- **Co-teaching challenge: Balancing instructor specialization with main “thread”/approach of course**
 - Issue: historical backbone of course contrasts with contemporary specializations of 2 of 3 teammates
 - A work in progress!
- **Co-assessing challenge: Coordinate basic administration of course**
 - Microsoft Office online tools + email
 - Shared Microsoft folder
 - (Including shared weekly course materials)
 - Common documents (gradebook)
 - Live final assessment

Coordinating across the group

- **Co-evaluating challenge: Integrate feedback into next iteration**
 - Post-course learning from student feedback, final projects
 - WONG Koon Lin (EPL) is speaking with students to understand attitudes



Wig factory. A worker making wigs in the factory of the Regina Hair Products company. 1969.

Thank you!

Hair bleaching in Hong Kong, 1967.
From my new article, "Making a Global Beauty Business: The
Rise and Fall of Hong Kong Wigs in the 1960s"

