

ANTH5401 Topics in Ethnography: Reading Ethnography

Spring 2026

Instructor: SUN Rui

ruisun@cuhk.edu.hk

Class time: Friday 6:30-9:15pm

Classroom: ARC_G04 (Lee Shau Kee Architecture Building)

Consultation Hours: After class and by appointment

Ethnography is both a research method and an analytical lens through which anthropology perceives and interprets the world. Learning to read ethnography is an essential entry point into the discipline and an invitation to engage with the construction of anthropological knowledge, the representation of others, and reflexive considerations of positionality. This seminar introduces postgraduate students to the craft, politics, and aesthetics of ethnographic writing. We will examine a wide range of classic and contemporary texts and engage deeply with two recent monographs for sustained analysis. Students will also conduct desk research to select a contemporary ethnographic monograph as their individual project for a book review. Through this process, students will learn to critically appreciate how anthropological holism is achieved and how specific topics open pathways to explore diverse sociocultural, economic, gendered, and political issues. Ultimately, the seminar is designed to help students develop ethnographic sensibilities, whether as future researchers, creative writers, or informed readers.

Language of Instruction: English (Mandarin will be used when necessary or upon request)

Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this course, students will

- Learn to read ethnographic writings and critically examine and understand how ethnographies are built up
- Become familiar with core themes and concepts in anthropological writing
- Appreciate what makes ethnography a distinctive way of knowing and representing the world
- Develop an anthropological imagination for approaching research topics

Grade Descriptors

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Criteria for 1) the course and 2) for coursework</i>
A	1) Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes. 2) The work has creatively synthesized course materials and key ideas in an original way. Observations are nuanced, the argument is logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. Concrete evidence corresponds to statements and claims. The work responds directly to the assignment prompt.
A-	1) Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.

	2) The work synthesizes course materials and key ideas in an original way, but there are areas for improvement.
B-range	1) Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance. 2) The work demonstrates a solid grasp of course materials and key ideas. There are areas for improvement with respect to handling complexity, building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence. Response to the assignment prompt may not be sufficient.
C-range	1) Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses. 2) The work shows some effort, but course materials have not been sufficiently engaged. The argument and the writing is not clear, and/or there is no evidence for statements and claims made. Understanding of course materials and key ideas has not been demonstrated.
D-range	1) Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes. 2) The work shows little effort to engage course materials. There are major problems with clarity of argument and writing.
F	1) Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements. 2) The work has failed respond to the assignment prompt.

Readings

All required and recommended readings are either posted on Blackboard or available as an eBook through the University Library.

Core Texts

- Park, Seo Young. 2021. *Stitching the 24-Hour City: Life, Labor, and the Problem of Speed in Seoul*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Fong, Vanessa L. 2011. *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Evaluation

Component	Weight	Description
Weekly group presentation and participation	35%	Students will form groups of 2-3 and present assigned chapters from Park (2021) or Fong (2011) in a 15–20 minute weekly session.

		Presentation should demonstrate collaborative reading and effective communication of key ideas.
Mid-term reflection note	25%	Students will conduct desk research to identify a contemporary ethnography as their individual project and write an 800–1000 notes documenting the research process. The ethnography does not need to be finalized but should be narrowed to 2–3 options. Detailed guidelines of doing desk research and how to make notes will be provided in class.
Final book review essay	40%	Students will write a critical book review (1200–1500 words) of their chosen ethnography, approved by the instructor after mid-term. The essay should demonstrate analytical depth, reference at least three class concepts, and follow proper citation standards.

Course Policies

1. Reading is a vital part of the learning experience. Students are expected to complete all required readings before class to ensure meaningful participation in discussions.
2. Students must understand how to cite sources properly and avoid plagiarism—using someone else’s ideas or words without attribution. Please review the University’s guidelines on academic honesty:
www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/index.htm
3. Mid-term and final essays must be submitted to VeriGuide. Assignments without a signed declaration from VeriGuide will not be graded. Please visit:
https://academic.veriguide.org/academic/login_CUHK.aspx
4. Late submission without documented medical, personal, or family emergencies will result in a reduction of 1/3 of a letter grade (i.e. A becomes A-; B+ becomes B).
5. In assessing the level of achievement of learning outcomes and students’ performance, students are expected to produce their own work independently without any collaboration with the use of AI tools.

Weekly Schedule

Jan. 9 Week One: Introduction: why and how to

No reading

Jan. 16 Week Two: Interpretation and “the wink”

- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books. Pp. 3-30.

Jan. 23 Week Three: Representation and “the other”

- Park 2021. “Introduction.” Pp. 5-30.
- Fabian, Johannes. 2014. “Postscript: The Other Revisited.” *Time and the Other*. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press. 167–186.

Jan. 30 Week Four: Ethnography as doing fieldwork

- Park 2021. “1. Affective Crowds and Making the 24-Hour City”. Pp. 31-51.
- Barley, Nigel. 2000. “1. The Reason Why” *The Innocent Anthropologist: Notes from a Mud Hut*. Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press. Pp.7-13.

Feb. 6 Week Five: Ethnography as writing culture

- Park 2021. “2. Intimate Networks”. Pp. 52-73.
- *Optional*
Clifford, James. 1986. “Introduction: Partial Truths”. *Writing Culture*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 1-26.

Feb. 13 Week Six: Subjectivity and positionality

- Park 2021. “3. Passionate Imitation”. Pp. 74-98.
- Narayan, Kirin. 1993. “How Native Is a “Native” Anthropologist?” *American Anthropologist* 95(3): 671-686.

Feb. 27 Week Seven: Emic/etic distinction and ethnographer’s voice

- Park 2021. “4. Redirecting the Future” & “5. Racing the Flow”. Pp. 101-140.
- *Optional*
Morris, Michael W et al. 1999. “Views from Inside and Outside: Integrating Emic and Etic Insights about Culture and Justice Judgment.” *The Academy of Management Review* 24(4): 781–796.

Mar. 6 Week Eight: Globalization and multi-sited ethnography

- Fong 2011. “1. Introduction”. Pp. 9-41.

Mar. 13 Week Nine: Ethnographic refusal

- Fong 2011. “2. Is the Moon Rounder Abroad? How Chinese Citizens See the World”. Pp. 42-66.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 1995. “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37(1): 173–193.

Mar. 20 Week Ten: Ethnographer, the performer? the outsider? Or a genderless person?

- Fong 2011. “3. Choosing the Road Less Traveled: How and Why Chinese Citizens Decide to Study Aboard.” Pp. 67-91.
- *Optional*
Fassin, Didier. 2014. “True Life, Real Lives: Revisiting the Boundaries Between Ethnography and Fiction. *American Ethnologist* 41(1): 40-55.

Mar. 27 Week Eleven: From ethnography to theory

- Fong 2011. “4. The Floating Life: Dilemmas of Education, Work, and Marriage Abroad.” Pp. 92-130.

Apr. 10 Week Twelve: Ethnography beyond academia

- Fong 2011. “5. When Migrants from the Same Hometown Meet, Tears Fill Their Eyes: Freedoms Won and Lost Through Transnational Migration.” Pp. 131-172.
- *Optional*
Owton, Helen. 2025. “An Autoethnography beyond Academia: The Embodiment of Motorcycle Maintenance.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*: n. pag.

Apr. 17 Week Thirteen: Learning to critique/appreciate

- Fong 2011. “The Road Home: Decisions About Returning to China or Staying Abroad”. Pp. 173-197.