

Note: **PROSPECTIVE SYLLABUS** based on previous time course was offered. Final syllabus, including updated schedule and revised readings, will be available in late August

**Rivers, Culture, Power** (STSC 0668)  
Fall 2024  
Wednesdays, 3:30-6:29 PM, Classroom TBD

Professor: John Kanbayashi ([john.kanbayashi@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:john.kanbayashi@sas.upenn.edu))

### **Description**

Rivers provide and divide, they constrict and connect. Although a fundamental source of prosperity and transit for human societies, they resist even the most sophisticated attempts at human control. This class examines rivers as movers of history—as sites of contestation and transformation around the globe—with a focus on how diverse societies have understood and used them. Topics include: irrigation and political power, flooding and course changes, scientific measurement of river systems, the twentieth-century rise of the concrete dam, subsequent movements towards undamming, and recent efforts to grapple with climate change. For first-year students only. There are no prerequisites for this course.

This course asks students to approach rivers as political symbols, technical objects, and historical forces in their own right. Texts, visual sources, and films from diverse times and places across world history will be central to weekly class discussions. Equally, this class asks students to engage in becoming river historians, first through taking a position on a contentious issue in an op-ed and subsequently through scaffolded assignments culminating in a substantial final paper (a “river biography”) grounded in original research on a river of your choice. Course activities—including weekly postings, presentations, and in-class writing activities—support the development of requisite research and writing skills. Weather permitting, we will include a mini-field trip to the Schuylkill during one class meeting to better understand the riverine environment we all inhabit.

### **Expectations and Policies**

All students are expected to come to class fully prepared to participate. I encourage disagreement—with me, the authors of the work we read, and classmates—but ask that you engage with respect and in good faith. In keeping with Penn’s Code of Academic Integrity, all assignments for this class must be your own original work. Use of generative AI tools is permitted for final drafts but must be disclosed and described in a cover sheet submitted alongside the assignment.

Engaged participation in every class meeting is a baseline expectation. All students are additionally asked to meet with me at least once in office hours within the first month of the semester. Late submission of assignments will result in a half-letter grade deduction (e.g. A to A-) for each 24 hours past the deadline. Absences from can be excused only for illness, family emergency, or other pressing circumstance. Each unexcused absence will result in a 1.75% deduction from your overall final grade. All absences, excused or not, ought to be reported via a Path@Penn absence notice.

You may use laptops or tablets to refer to readings and notes, but I urge you to either disable your wifi for the duration of class or, if possible, take notes by hand. No browsing, messaging, or watching videos. Please put cell phones away. Repeated violations of classroom technology policy may result in a deduction from your grade.

### **Assessment**

Your grade will be determined as follows:

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Active attendance	25%
Weekly postings	10%
Op-ed	15%
Outline and bibliography	5%
Final presentation	10%
River biography	35%

**Readings and schedule** (all readings hyperlinked or posted on course website; primary sources marked with an asterisk\*). Reading schedule may shift depending on enrollment.

**August 28—Introduction: what does it mean to tell the history of a river?**

Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), selections.

**September 4—The Yangtze and the Yellow River in Premodern China**

\*“[Tribute of Yu](#)” in the “Book of Xia” in the Book of Documents, trans. James Legge

\*Li Bai, trans. Ezra Pound, “[The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter](#),” (1915 [8<sup>th</sup> Century CE])

\*Karl Wittfogel, “The Hydraulic Civilizations” (1955)

Chris Courtney, “Chapter 1—the Long River,” in *The Nature of Disaster in China* (2018).

**September 11—Three Gorges: A Dam for Development**

*In-class freewriting on debate over Three Gorges Dam*

\*Mao Zedong, “[Swimming](#)” (1956)

The Environmental Impact Assessment Department, Chinese Academy of Sciences, [Environmental Impact Statement for the Yangtze Three Gorges Project: A Brief Edition](#) (1995).

Shi-hung Luk, *Megaproject: A Case Study of China’s Three Gorges Project* (1993), Intro, Ch 4, 7.

**September 18—Three Gorges: A Dam of Displacement**

“[Up the Yangtze](#),” New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2008 (93 minutes)

Dai Qing, *The River Dragon Has Come! The Three Gorges Dam and the Fate of China’s Yangtze River and Its People* (1998), Ch 1, 5, 9, 12. Skim front matter.

February 20—Op-ed (“Should the Three Gorges Dam be built?”) due to Canvas by 11:59 PM

**September 25—The Nile: Irrigation, Disease, and Damming**

\*Julian Rzoska, “A Controversy Reviewed,” *Nature* (1976)

Jennifer Derr, “The Dammed Body: Thinking Historically about Water Security & Public Health,” *Daedalus* (2020)

Nancy Y. Reynolds, “Building the Past: Rockscapes and the Aswan high Dam in Egypt” in *Water on Sand* (2013)

**October 2—Colonialism and Seasonality in the Bengal Delta**

*In-class discussion on river biography research strategies*

Debjani Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecocogy in the Bengal Delta* (2018), selections.

Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Gopa Samanta, *Dancing with the River*, (2013), selections.

Erica Mukherjee, “The Impermanent Settlement” (2020).

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### **October 9—Water and Riverine Violence in Fascist Europe**

David Blackbourn, Chapters 4-5 in *The Conquest of Nature* (2006)

Frank Snowden, “Creating Disaster: Nazism and Bioterror in the Pontine Marshes,” in *The Conquest of Malaria* (2006)

### **October 16—Harnessing Ukraine’s Rivers in Peace and War**

\*Zaslavskii, D. “Dnieprostroi; the Biggest Dam in the World.” Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., 1932.

\**Ballad of the Dnieper*, Ukrainian Newsreel and Documentary Film Studios (1967) 19 minutes.

Jędrzej Nowicki, “After the Deluge,” *The Atlantic* (July 2023)

Harold Dorn, “Hugh Lincoln Cooper and the First Détente” (1979).

### **October 23—Pennsylvania’s Rivers: Thinking Global and Local**

*In-class discussion of river biography topics*

\*David Beale, *Through the Johnstown Flood, by a Survivor*, selections (1890)

David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood*, selections (1968)

Christopher F. Jones, “Chapter 5—Taming the Susquehanna River” in *Routes of Power* (2014)

October 25—River biography outline and bibliography due to Canvas by 11:59 PM

### **October 30—The Mississippi: Flooding and “Perfect Storms”**

\* The Hurricane Betsy Disaster of September 1965,” Report of the Special Subcommittee to Investigate Areas of Destruction....of the Committee on Public Works, House of Representatives (October 1965) [selections] [C]

Spike Lee, *When The Levees Broke: A Requiem In Four Acts* (Documentary Film, 2006) [selections]

John McPhee, “The Control of Nature: Atchafalaya,” *New Yorker*, February 23, 1987.

Andy Horowitz, Chapters 3 and 5 in *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015* (2020)

### **November 6—Dammed if you don’t? Dam removal**

\*Timothy Egan, “Heralding a New Era, Babbit Chips Away at Harmful River Dams,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1998.

Travis Rummel and Ben Knight, *DamNation* (88 minutes).

Angela Bednarek, “Undamming Rivers: A Review of the Ecological Impacts of Dam Removal,” *Environmental Management* (2001)

Gordon Grant, “Dam Removal: Panacea or Pandora for Rivers?,” *Hydrological Processes* (2001)

### **November 13—Climate change and the Himalayan Watershed**

Yuki Akimoto, ed., *The Salween Under Threat: Damming the Longest Free River in Southeast Asia* (2004), selections.

Brian Eyler, *Last Days of the Mighty Mekong* (2019), selections.

Kenneth Pomeranz, “The Great Himalayan Watershed: Agrarian Crisis, Mega-Dams and the Environment,” *New Left Review* 58 (2009)

### **November 20—Climate Change, Colonialism and Health in Contemporary North America**

Vox, [How US corporations poisoned this Indigenous community](#) (2022), YouTube (17 minutes)

Ryan E. Emanuel, “Water in the Lumbee World: A River and Its People in a Time of Change,” *Environmental History* 24 (2019)

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Michelle Murphy, “Chemical Infrastructures of the St. Clair River,” in *Toxicants, Health and Regulation since 1945* (2013).

**November 27—Thanksgiving Break, no class**

**December 4—Final presentations**

**December 11—River biography due to Canvas by 11:59 PM**