

Asia in Berlin: (im)Materiality and the Art of Migration

15 June – 10 July 2026

CATEGORY

Cultural Studies & Religion

COURSE STRUCTURE

You will receive a total of **45 hours of academic lessons** (one lesson equals 45 minutes; 15 hours per week). Lessons will comprise lectures, group work, discussion sessions, and excursions.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

HUWISU courses are grouped into different time tracks. Your course will take place in **Track B**

Monday: 9.00 am – 10.30 am & 11.00 am – 12.30 pm

Wednesday: 9.00 am – 10.30 am & 11.00 am – 12.30 pm

Thursday: 1.30 pm – 3.00 pm & 3.30 pm – 5.00 pm

COURSE LANGUAGE

This course is taught in **English**, including the readings. For the understanding of the texts and the discussions in class, a language-level of B2 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) is required.

TARGET GROUP

Undergraduate students of **all disciplines**.

CREDITS & CERTIFICATES

Participants will receive **6 ECTS** credit points and a certificate if they attend regularly (at least 80% attendance), participate actively and fulfil all course assignments. Additionally, six weeks after the end of the course a Transcript of Records is issued by Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. All courses are accredited according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

In addition to the academic program, you are invited to **join our cultural and social program**. We offer a fine selection of interesting activities that aim to give you an unforgettable stay in Berlin. Through excursions, social gatherings, and sport activities, you have the opportunity to get to know the city, the university, and to meet students from all parts of the world. **Costs for these offers are included in the program fee**. Below, you find examples of previously offered cultural activities. You will be informed about the respective cultural program shortly before the start of the program via email as well as during the course period.



POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL GUIDED TOURS

- Federal Chancellery (*Bundeskanzleramt*)
- German Parliament (*Bundestag*)
- House of Representatives (*Abgeordnetenhaus*)
- Topography of Terror exhibition
- Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office

CULTURAL GUIDED TOURS

- Kreuzberg Tour
- Museum Island (*Museumsinsel*)
- Berlin Cathedral (*Berliner Dom*)
- Daytrip to Potsdam
- Exhibitions

SOCIAL GATHERINGS

- Welcome Session
- Beach Volleyball
- Farewell Get2gether

EXPECTATIONS & POLICIES

Preparation for lively discussions in the classroom: Be on time, have at least the required readings completed, and points in mind for discussion or clarification.

Assignments: Complete all assignments according to the specified requirements on the schedule including handing them over to the lecturer.

Commitment in class: Pay particular attention to the lecturer and respect differences of opinions (classmates', lecturers').

Academic guidelines: Comply with academic integrity policies (such as no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical) especially the academic honor code and the student code of conduct.

Attendance policy: No unexcused absences are permitted. Students must follow teachers' instructions to catch up on missed work – to excuse absence please contact the HUWISU office.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Berlin is a multi-cultural city with a diverse cultural life and rich heritage. At the same time, cultural heritage is contested today with ongoing debates about the rights of Indigenous communities, struggles by diaspora and minority groups for higher visibility and recognition in society as well as discussions of decolonization. The excursions to museums and cultural institutions present a platform for engaged debates about Asia's tangible and intangible culture in Berlin. The course explores nuanced and controversial facets of cultural identities, colonial legacies and museum's ethics. This fosters interdisciplinary dialogue across multilayered subjects in cultural studies and heritage preservation. The critical debate surrounding cultural heritage includes theories of museum and preservation studies as well as provenience research, concepts of outreach and educational programs. We address core conceptual questions regarding property issues, museum formations and their histories. Objects, music, religious heritage or memorialization reflect Berlin's colonial legacies and minority histories of different communities from Asia.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

The objective of this Bachelor-level course is to equip students with an in-depth understanding of heritage studies and enable them to read, understand and critically reflect on the most recent theoretical and empirical research in the field. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

Knowledge

- Understand, describe and identify the socio-political and cultural phenomena of exhibiting, managing and documenting objects and media from an interdisciplinary and non-ethnocentric perspective throughout history
- Account for the facts and direct empirical tests of the core theories of provenance research and museological studies
- Provide an overview of recent theoretical and empirical developments in the field of postcolonial theories and critical heritage studies

Academic/Transferable Skills

- Transmit practical knowledge of curating and material culture of Asia in Berlin

Competencies

- Apply the value of thinking critically and beyond various academic disciplines
- Present students with examples of different geographical, historical and cultural contexts in which critical concepts of heritage studies take place

READINGS

Reading materials will be available.

Appadurai, A., ed. (1986) *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge.

Boast, R. (2011) Neocolonial collaboration. Museum as contact zone revisited. *Museum Anthropology* 34(1) 56–70.

Dilger, H. et al., ed. (2024) *Collections as Relations: Belonging, cultural heritage, and knowledge infrastructures*. London.

Generaldirektion der Stiftung Preußischer Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg, ed. (2023) *Schlösser. Preußen. Kolonial*. Berlin.

Güney, S., C. Pekman, B. Kabaş (2012) Diasporic music in transition: Turkish immigrant performers on the stage of "Multikulti" Berlin. *Popular Music and Society* 37(2), 132–151.

Hayman, R. (2021) *Chinoiserie*. Banbury.

Kollektiv Raumstation (2020) Kiaotschou, Qingdao, Berlin und wir
<https://raumstation.org/projekt/kiaotschou-qingdao-berlin-und-wir/>

Kopytoff, I. (1986) The cultural biography of things. Commoditization as process, in: A. Appadurai (ed.) *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge, 64–91.

Lowenthal, D., M. Binney, eds. (1981) *Our past before us: Why do we save it?* London.

Macdonald, S., G. Fyfe (1996) *Theorizing museums. Representing identity and diversity in a changing world*. Cambridge.

Osterhammel, J. (2014) *The transformation of the world*. Princeton.

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, ed. (2021) *Humboldt Forum Ethnologisches Museum Museums für Asiatische Kunst*. Berlin, vol. 1–2.

Steckenbiller, C. (2019) Berlin's colonial legacies and new minority histories: The case of the Humboldt Forum and colonial street names in the German capital. *Monatshefte* 111(1).

ASSIGNMENT INFO

Workload and assignments

In order to be granted 6 ECTS, participants will be asked to

- 1 participate actively all sessions (a minimum of 80% attendance is required for classroom and online sessions)
- 2 do the readings in time and preparing discussion questions on them in advance
- 3 prepare the following **assignments**:
hand in a written essay of approx. 10,000 characters including spaces
or two smaller presentations (3-minutes pitch and a presentation up to 10 minutes)

The final grade will be composed in equal measure of 1.) participation grades, this is for attendance in class discussions; 2.) preparation of the readings; 3.) the assignments.

Failure to fulfil one of the mentioned components results in failure of the class.

YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz, PhD, is teaching on Asia's culture and history. She has a PhD in Art History from Technical University of Darmstadt and an M.A. in Art History, Archaeology and Southeast Asian regional studies from Goethe Universität Frankfurt M., Germany. She was previously a research assistant and curator in Indonesia and Germany. In the Philippines he was appointed as visiting professor. She participated in excavations in Syria and Indonesia. She was employed as assistant of the director of the Ethnological Museum and Asian Art Museum at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. At several museums she co-curated exhibitions and worked as provenance researcher.

Her recent publications address the material culture, collections and provenience research:

Tjoa-Bonatz, M. L. (2009) From idol to art, in: T. D. Dubois (ed.) *Casting, Imperialism and the transformation of religion in East and Southeast Asia*. New York, 105–128.

Tjoa-Bonatz, M. L. (2016) Struggles over historic shipwrecks in Indonesia. Economic versus preservation interests, in: B. Hauser-Schäublin, L. V. Prott (eds.) *Cultural property and contested ownership. The trafficking of artefacts and the quest for restitution*. New York, 85–107.

Tjoa-Bonatz, M. L., M. Hård (2021) Creole Objects and Techniques. Gold Mining, Gold Panning and Gold Working in Colonial Indonesia. *Baessler-Archiv* 67, 67–96.

Tjoa-Bonatz, M. L. (2024) Provenance research: Entangled histories of objects from Asia and Oceania in the missionary museum "Forum der Völker". *ICOFOM Study Series* 52(1), 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.4000/11zlv>

Tjoa-Bonatz, M. L. (2024) The afterlives of gold antiquities from Southeast Asia. Digging and collecting for the art market in Indonesia, in: H. Dilger et al., ed. (2024) *Collections as Relations: Belonging, cultural heritage, and knowledge infrastructures*. London, 167–197.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introducing heritage studies

Mon 15th June: Official Welcome Session

Wed 17th June: Introduction to the course and key questions of the "social life of objects, commoditization processes, provenience research

Thur 18th June: Excursion: Collaborative museum in the Humboldt Forum, Ethnological Museum

Week 2: Representing identity and the quest of cultural property

Mon 22nd June: In-class discussion on cultural ownership of sunken treasure from ship wrecks

Wed 24th June: Excursion: Diasporic heritage and outreach in the Humboldt Forum, Museum of Asian Art

Thur 25th June: Excursion: Keeping alive immaterial heritage – playing music at the Indonesian House of Culture

Week 3: Learning from German colonial history

Mon 29th June: Making sense of street names, racism and memorialization

Wed 1st July: Excursion: Religion and museums – curating foreign objects in the protestant Berliner Mission

Thur 2nd July: Excursion: Sound Archive of the Humboldt Universität

Week 4: Trafficking of artefacts, faking and innovation

Mon 6th July: Transculturality, trafficking and technologies

Wed 8th July: Excursion: Going East – Fashion and Chinoiserie in the Arts and Craft Museum

Thur 9th July: Summary, discussion, certificates, evaluation etc.

The course and its syllabus are subject to change. Last update: January 2026