



## From Asia to Berlin: (im)Materiality and the Art of Migration

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Summer Semester 2026: 13 April– 17 July 2026

### CATEGORY

Cultural Heritage and Museums

### COURSE STRUCTURE

8 sessions (2-4 contact hours à 45 min per session)

### WEEKLY SCHEDULE

#### Time

**Friday, 14-18 c.t. (2:15-5:45pm)**

Please note the individual session dates:

- 24.04.2026, 14-18 c.t. (2:15-5:45pm)
- 08.05.2026, 14-18 c.t. (2:15-5:45pm)
- 15.05.2026, 14-18 c.t. (2:15-5:45pm)
- 29.05.2026, 14-18 c.t. (2:15-5:45pm)
- 05.06.2026, 14-18 c.t. (2:15-5:45pm)
- 12.06.2026, **online 2:45-4:15pm**
- 19.06.2026, 14-18 c.t. (2:15-5:45pm)
- 03.07.2026, **14-16 c.t. (2:15-3:45pm)**

#### Place

Hausvogteiplatz 5-7, room 0323-26

Some sessions take place at other locations such as museums.

### COURSE LANGUAGE

This course is taught in English, including the readings. For the understanding of the texts and the discussions in class, language-level B2 is required.

**Language requirements** (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)  
English B2

### TARGET GROUP

International exchange students of all subjects with a strong interest in the course topic. Berlin Perspectives courses are designed for undergraduate students. Master students may participate if their home university agrees. Regular degree-seeking students can select the course within the elective part of their study program (überfachlicher Wahlpflichtbereich üWP).

## **CREDITS = 5 ECTS**

The Berlin Perspectives courses are offered by the Career Center as part of the elective program üWP. Registration takes place via Agnes.

All courses are accredited according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Berlin is a multi-cultural city with a diverse cultural life and rich heritage. The course is designed to foster active learning practices while advancing complex relationships between materiality, migration, and identity formation, with particular attention to how material culture, art and cultural practices, both physical and ephemeral, mediate experiences of displacement, belonging, memory, and transformation. The excursions to museums and cultural institutions present a platform for engaged debates about current challenges of transculturality, Diaspora art or other lived realities of migration: the critical debate surrounding preserving, relocating or transforming the material and immaterial legacies of Asia includes theories of heritage and museum studies as well as provenience and archive research, concepts of outreach and material culture studies. The seminar is jointly pursued with students from the Universität Wien in Vienna. We invite students to consider how material and intangible dimensions of culture – including objects, music, religious or written heritage – and conceptual frameworks reflect and reshape the lived realities of migration and memorialization. We will discuss solutions for restitution and decolonization, the ethical value of exhibition displays, links between academic research, archives and museum stakeholders. Berlin offers rich 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 migration and memorialization what 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 how objects and cultural practices express experiences of displacement, belonging, memory, and transformation from an interdisciplinary and non-ethnocentric perspective
- account for the facts and direct empirical tests of the core theories of provenance research and heritage studies
- provide an overview of recent theoretical and empirical developments in the field of post-colonial theories and Diaspora cultural studies

Academic/Transferable Skills

- transmit practical knowledge of cultural practices, both physical and ephemeral, 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 curating take place

## READINGS

- Appadurai, A. (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, C., 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/>
- Macdonald, S., G. Fyfe (1996) *Theorizing museums. Representing identity and diversity in a changing world*. Cambridge.
- Macdonald, S. et al. ed (2021) *Reframing Islam? Potentials and challenges of participatory initiatives in museums and heritage*.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351888237\\_Reframing\\_Islam\\_Potentials\\_and\\_challenges\\_of\\_participatory\\_initiatives\\_in\\_museums\\_and\\_heritage](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351888237_Reframing_Islam_Potentials_and_challenges_of_participatory_initiatives_in_museums_and_heritage)
- Osterhammel, J. (2014) *The transformation of the world*. Princeton.
- Raad for Culture (2024) *Dealing with shared sources from colonial history: Advice on redress and restitution in relation to colonial archives*, Report of the Dutch national Council for Culture <https://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/documenten/2024/03/25/dealing-with-shared-sources-from-colonial-history>
- Sabel, C. C. (2023) ‘Glass Worke’: Precious Minerals and the Archives of Early Modern Earth Sciences, in A. Bashford et al. (eds.) *New Earth Histories: Geo-Cosmologies and the Making of the Modern World*. Chicago, 145–162.
- 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).
- 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. (2024) Nautische Geräte und Schiffsteile aus dem Meer, kuratieren und bewahren, in S. Gross et al. (eds.) *Technisches Kulturgut. Provenienzforschung zu Handel und Entzug*, 282–288.
- Tjoa-Bonatz, M. L. (2024) Provenance research: Entangled histories of objects from Asia and Oceania in the missionary museum “Forum der Völker”, in: *ICOFOM Study Series* 52(1), 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.4000/11zlv>
- Trouillot, M.-R, ed. (1995) *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston.
- Troelenberg, E.-M. et al., ed. (2021) *Reading objects in the contact zone*. Heidelberg.

## ASSIGNMENT INFO

### Workload and assignments

In order to be granted 5 ECTS, participants will be asked to

- actively attend all sessions (a minimum of 75% attendance is required for classroom and online sessions)
- collaborative work with students from the Universität Wien
- prepare and revise the classroom/online sessions
- pursue the following **assignments**:
  - hand in three one-page written homeworks (collaborative written essays to create a “visual exhibition”)
  - and give two smaller presentations (3-minutes pitch and group-presentations up to 10 minutes)
- Failure to fulfil one of the mentioned components results in failure of the class.

### Assessment Components

The final grade will be composed of the above-mentioned assignments.

## YOUR INSTRUCTOR

**Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz**, PhD, is teaching on Southeast Asia’s culture and history at several German universities. 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, Singapore 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 and institutions she worked as provenance researcher and coordinator.

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## COURSE SCHEDULE

2 hours à 45 min per week (summer semester: 14 weeks)

### **Week 1: Introducing in provenience research, diversity and identity formation**

Focusing on the paradox of migration looks at the search for stability amid movement, and the forging of identity in unfamiliar or impermanent terrain. This also highlights tasks within the wider frames of heritage studies and provenience research. Arjun Appadurai’s concept of

object biographies is essential to understand the “social life of an object” and its commodification. It also speaks to the nature of an object, which may be materially grounded yet shaped by immaterial forces such as memory, trauma, diaspora, socio-economic changes.

Appadurai, A. (1986) *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge.  
Dilger, H. et al. ed (2024) *Collections as Relations: Belonging, Cultural Heritage, and Knowledge Infrastructures*. London.

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

## **Week 2: Excursion: Keeping heritage alive – playing music at the Indonesian House of Culture and archive studies**

After a guided tour we will play the traditional ensemble music of Indonesia called “gamelan” made up predominantly of percussive instruments. This session gives first insights into Indonesia’s most famous immaterial cultural heritage – awarded by UNESCO – and develops an understanding of diasporic music in Berlin. Historian Dr. Claire Sabel will give a talk about archival research and early modern earth sciences.

Sabel, C. C. (2023) ‘Glass Worke’: Precious Minerals and the Archives of Early Modern Earth Sciences, in A. Bashford et al. (eds.) *New Earth Histories: Geo-Cosmologies and the Making of the Modern World*. Chicago, 145–162.

## **Week 3: Excursion: The “collaborative museum” – Humboldt Forum, Museum of Asian Arts and Ethnological Museum**

Proposed since 2025, this initiative offers new paths in transcultural museum work together with indigenous communities on their cultural belongings. To realize multi-perspective approaches, the museum tests new formats of international collaboration with representatives of communities of origin or co-produced exhibitions with contemporary artists and international curators. Osterhammel’s concept of Asia’s transformation is essential to understand these postcolonial perspectives.

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

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

Troelenberg, E.-M. et al., ed. (2021) *Reading objects in the contact zone*. Heidelberg.

## **Week 4: Excursion: Who owns maritime heritage?, Museum of Technology**

The discussion on the maritime cultural heritage of sunken ships addresses contested ownership between economic interests by salvage companies or the art market and preservation interests brought forward by museum or historians. This debate also raises quests for restitution and property ownership. We will also explore how the history of technology is curated in order to grasp the many ways how it has shaped our history and culture.

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. (2024) Nautische Geräte und Schiffsteile aus dem Meer, kuratieren und bewahren, in S. Gross et al. (eds.) *Technisches Kulturgut. Provenienzforschung zu Handel und Entzug*, 282–288.

### **Week 5: Making sense of street names, racism and memorialization**

The exhibition on Berlin's street names reflects urban legacies connected to minority histories of different communities from Asia. We will delve into the narratives that have shaped Berlin's street names, uncovering the historic agenda that lies beneath. This helps facilitate a self-critical debate around the colonial past, racism and its continuing influence within the public space.

Kollektiv Raumstation (2020) *Kiaotschou, Qingdao, Berlin und wir*

<https://raumstation.org/projekt/kiaotschou-qingdao-berlin-und-wir/>

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).

### **Week 6: Dealing with shared heritage: Decolonization and Restitution (Remote)**

Together with students of the Universität Wien, objects and archive resources will be analysed considering decolonizing and restitution claims. Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that in the writing of history lots of things and sources get lost, were not kept or have been forgotten. What is lost or has been destroyed also impacts our view of the past.

Trouillot, M.-R, ed. (1995) *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston.

Raad for Culture (2024) Dealing with shared sources from colonial history: Advice on redress and restitution in relation to colonial archives, Report of the Dutch national Council for Culture <https://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/documenten/2024/03/25/dealing-with-shared-sources-from-colonial-history>

### **Week 7: Excursion: going East – fashion and Chinoiserie in the Arts and Craft Museum**

Artists were inspired by Asian culture and arts. Fashion, crafts and the arts reflect manifold inspirations, stylistic similarities and imported goods came from the East since the 16<sup>th</sup> century until today. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Chinoiserie reflected in porcelain helped to shape a popular fantasy of the "exotic East". The museum offers a broad variety of objects such as furniture, dresses or ceramics which reflect transculturality. Prussian palace culture is considered beautiful but it includes multifaceted heritage that was also marked by racism, exotism, exploitation or violence during the colonial period.

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

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

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

## **Week 8: Final Session: conclusions, evaluation on Diasporic heritage**

This session opens up the debate between practitioners and diasporic communities on various heritage sites of Berlin e.g. the Don Yuan Centre, "Gärten der Welt", mosques, temple and other religious institutions. Communities and cultures are in the focus which have been marginalized in formulating urban cultures of Berlin. Views on the arts or graffiti of Turkish immigrants are part of Berlin's diasporic arts. An evaluation session will sum up the discourses on how Asian heritage in Berlin reflect the politics and poetics of migration.

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

## **TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS**

- Registration on Moodle (HU's e-learning platform)

### **in case of online sessions**

- Fully functional device (laptop, tablet, PC)
- Stable internet connection
- Software: Zoom (video/audio)
- *Recommended* hardware: external headset for better sound quality

## **EXPECTATIONS & POLICIES**

**Preparation for lively discussions:** 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:** pay particular attention to the lecturer and respect differences of opinions in this international classroom.

**Academic guidelines:** Comply with academic integrity policies. Plagiarism in even a small assignment will result in failing the entire course.

**Attendance policy:** Students must contact their class teachers to catch up on missed work – to excuse absence please contact the lecturer.

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The course and its syllabus are subject to change. Last update: 8.2.2026