

Europe and Asia: Cultural Encounters and Differences (A005896)

Course size *(nominal values; actual values may depend on programme)*

Credits 5.0 **Study time 150 h**

Course offerings in academic year 2026-2027

A (semester 2) English Gent

Lecturers in academic year 2026-2027

De Roover, Jakob	LW07	lecturer-in-charge
Matthyssen, Mieke	LW21	co-lecturer

Offered in the following programmes in 2026-2027

	crdts	offering
Exchange Programme Critical Perspectives on Culture	5	A
Elective Set Critical Perspectives on Culture	5	A

Teaching languages

English

Keywords

Europe and Asia; comparative science of cultures; cultural history; cultural psychology; study of religion.

Position of the course

This course discusses central questions in the comparative study of cultures with a focus on Europe and Asia; it is part of the 'Critical Perspectives on Culture' course cluster. Together with the course teachers, students will examine background frameworks and presuppositions shared by different theories and approaches in the current humanities and social sciences. Through lectures and by reading and analyzing primary and secondary sources in the study of European and Asian cultures, they will learn to formulate research problems and questions in this domain.

Contents

The theoretical frameworks that have dominated the humanities and social sciences during the past two centuries result from the work of Western thinkers. Behind this simple fact lies a range of questions central to this course:

1. If people from different cultures have different background assumptions as to the nature of human beings and social life, how have such culture-specific assumptions shaped theory formation in the Western social sciences and humanities? Has contemporary theorizing about politics, religion, the human psyche, etc. left behind these assumptions? If not, how do certain culture-specific presuppositions continue to constrain our understanding of European and Asian cultures and of human beings in general?
2. The intellectual traditions of Asian cultures have typically been studied as the beliefs held by people in those cultures: they are considered as 'religions', 'belief systems' or 'world views' but rarely as contributions to knowledge. In contrast, many of the intellectual traditions of the Western world (in the form of the social sciences and humanities) tend to be regarded as contributions to knowledge rather than as beliefs formed by a specific cultural background. What are the foundations of this asymmetry? What happens when we reverse the asymmetry –that is, when we study today' humanities and social sciences as expressions of beliefs held by Western people and shaped by their cultural background?
3. For more than 1500 years, the dominant thinking about human beings and society in Western Europe developed within a Christian framework or, at least, with

reference to that framework. Its conceptual vocabulary emerged from (or against) this background. Did the humanities and social sciences emancipate themselves from this framework? If yes, how did they do so? To what extent have theories and concepts in these domains of study been shaped by questions and ideas inherited from centuries of Christian theorizing about human beings, human social life, and other cultures?

4. Differences between cultures manifest themselves in interactions between individuals. But which among the many kinds of differences between any two human beings are cultural differences rather than, say, biological, individual psychological, or social differences? If the goal is to examine the impact of cultural difference on (the study of) politics, society, literature, the human psyche..., we need insight into what makes certain differences into cultural differences.

5. How can we address the fact that Western thinkers have dominated theory formation in the humanities and social sciences for centuries? Today, this is being posed as a question of 'decolonization' But how can the 'decolonizing' of the humanities and social sciences be approached as a cognitive enterprise –for instance, as a challenge to uncover culture-specific assumptions and move beyond them in our understanding of human beings and societies?

Against the background of these general questions, the course will focus on different sets of issues and domains every academic year. In 2025-2026, its focus will be on a cluster of interrelated themes: emotions, experience, the self, desire, the human search for happiness, and the impact of culture on our thinking about these aspects of human life and experience. Guided by lectures, students will read and analyze primary and secondary texts concerning these themes, from different periods and cultures.

Initial competences

- Basic training in at least one of the disciplines in the humanities or social sciences.
- The ability to read social-scientific, philosophical, and historical texts in English.

Final competences

- 1 To have gained in-depth understanding of a specific set of issues in the comparative study of cultures and cultural differences and encounters, with a focus on Europe and Asia.
- 2 To be able to independently read and analyze texts in the relevant domains of study.
- 3 To have the capacity to formulate research questions and problems in the comparative study of cultures and about cultural differences between Europe and Asia.
- 4 To possess the skills required to formulate ideas based on reflection on experience in written form and further elaborate them in a conversation.

Conditions for credit contract

Access to this course unit via a credit contract is determined after successful competences assessment

Conditions for exam contract

This course unit cannot be taken via an exam contract

Teaching methods

Seminar, Lecture, Independent work

Extra information on the teaching methods

Central themes, questions, and problems will be introduced and discussed during lectures.

During seminars texts will be analysed in detail.

The independent work takes the form of reading and analysing texts with the help of reading questions, in preparation of lectures and seminars.

Study material

Type: Reader

Name: Reader course Europe and Asia: for every class the necessary texts (primary sources and scientific articles and chapters) will be provided on Ufora.

Indicative price: Free or paid by faculty

Optional: no

Language : English

Available on Ufora : Yes

Additional information: The course material will consist of texts made available on Ufora: (a) Primary sources written by Seneca, Epictetus, Benedict, Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, and others. (b) Scientific articles and chapters by several contemporary authors.

References

Course content-related study coaching

Support via Ufora. Feedback sessions concerning assignment, by appointment.

Assessment moments

end-of-term and continuous assessment

Examination methods in case of periodic assessment during the first examination period

Oral assessment, Assignment

Examination methods in case of periodic assessment during the second examination period

Oral assessment, Assignment

Examination methods in case of permanent assessment

Participation, Assignment

Possibilities of retake in case of permanent assessment

examination during the second examination period is possible

Extra information on the examination methods

For the exam, students will write a short and schematic paper, which they will have to elaborate on and discuss with the teacher during the oral assessment. The schematic paper will focus on reflection on experience: how do insights from the literature studied in the course allow the students to gain insight into their own experience?

Calculation of the examination mark

20% assignment and 80% oral assessment.