

**From Manga to Manifesto:
Youth Culture, Protest, and the Global Circulations of
ONE PIECE**

March 26-27, 2026

International Workshop, University of Hamburg
Organized by Nora Derbal and Kerstin Fooken

All times listed in the program are in the local time zone of Hamburg, Germany.

The program may be subject to change.

PROGRAM

DAY 1: Thursday, 26 March

8:30am **Welcome Remarks**, Nora Derbal (she/her) & Kerstin Fooken (she/her)

Panel 1: Culture

9:00am *One Piece*, Hybridity, and the Global Imagination of Freedom and Decency,
Thomas Richard (he/his)

9:30am Recollection and Oblivion in Characters: Amnesiac for Virtual Communality,
Kohki Watabe (he/his)

10:00am “Nakama” Beyond Translation: Friendship and Life Purpose in *One Piece*,
Alessandra Moura (she/her)

10:30am Panel discussion

11:00am 30 mins break

Panel 2: Politics of Culture

11:30am Embedding Anime in the Saudi Entertainment DNA,

Sabrina Zahren (she/her)
12:00pm Between the Margins and the Center: One Piece, Youth Mobilization and the politics of cultural bias in Latin America,
Camila Alexandra Labarta Garcia (she/her)

12:30pm Panel discussion

1:00pm Lunch break

Panel 3: Protest

1:30pm Reframing Rebellion: How Manga and Anime Shaped Serbian Student Protest Culture,
Ana Došen (she/her)

2:00pm Pirates of Compassion: ONE PIECE, Buddhist Ethics, and Youth Resistance in South and Southeast Asia,
Jewel Rana Barua (he/his)

2:30pm Panel discussion

2:50pm Closing remarks of Day 1

3:00pm End of Day 1

DAY 2: Friday, 27 March

Panel 4: Religion

8:30am Flagging Resistance: From Outland Gods to One Piece in East Asian Religious and Popular Protest Imaginaries,
Tomoë I. M. Steineck (she/her)

9:00am Mindfulness in Motion: Contemporary Applications of Buddhist Awareness Practices in Global Youth Culture,
Ajit Kumar Barua (he/his)

9:30am 15 mins coffee break

9:45am *One Piece* Meets Radical Islamism: Popular Culture and Islamic Preaching in Indonesia,
Hew Wai Weng (he/his)

10:15am Rhizomatic Protest and Manga-Style Movement: Why Did the One Piece-Inspired Movement Fail in Indonesia?
Libasut Taqwa (he/his)

10:45am Panel discussion

11:15am **10 mins comfort break**

11:30am **Farewell and final thoughts**

12:00 End
(noon)

Abstracts and Speaker Bios

Ajit Kumar Barua

Mindfulness in Motion: Contemporary Applications of Buddhist Awareness Practices in Global Youth Culture

In the 2020s, mindfulness rooted in early Buddhist practices of *sati* (present-moment awareness) and *vipassanā* (insight) has emerged as a powerful modality within global youth culture, particularly among students, activists, and creative communities across Asia, Europe, and North America. This paper examines how mindfulness has expanded beyond its monastic origins to become a transnational ethical framework that informs psychological resilience, digital behavior, and socio-political engagement among younger generations. By tracing the movement of mindfulness from traditional Buddhist contexts into secular wellness culture, educational programs, and online platforms, the study demonstrates a dynamic interplay between ancient contemplative traditions and contemporary youth identities.

Drawing on Buddhist principles of *anicca* (impermanence), non-attachment, and compassionate attention, I argue that mindfulness practices resonate deeply with young people navigating high-pressure environments marked by digital overload, political polarization, and ecological anxiety. For many youth practitioners, mindfulness functions not merely as a therapeutic tool but as a philosophical orientation that emphasizes ethical presence, emotional regulation, and collective well-being. The rejection of compulsive productivity mirrors Buddhist critiques of craving, while the cultivation of compassion-based mindfulness aligns with global movements for mental-health justice and non-violent communication.

Through analysis of meditation apps, social media discourse, mindfulness-based school programs, and interviews with young practitioners in Thailand, Japan, and the United States, this research explores how Generation Z localizes mindfulness within their cultural and technological ecosystems. The paper investigates specific cases where digital communities reinterpret mindfulness as both an inner practice and a form of embodied activism, challenging consumerist appropriations by reclaiming its ethical and relational dimensions. This interdisciplinary study contributes to understanding how Buddhist contemplative traditions intersect with contemporary youth culture, offering insights into the evolving role of mindfulness in shaping personal well-being, digital citizenship, and socially engaged ethics in an increasingly uncertain world.

Venerable Ajit Kumar Barua is a Buddhist monk and dedicated scholar whose academic journey spans the fields of social science, public health, and Buddhist studies. Born in Bangladesh, he developed a strong interest in social development and community welfare from an early age. This passion led him to pursue a Master of Social Science (MSS), where he explored social structures, human behavior, and the challenges faced by communities in rapidly changing environments. Motivated by a desire to strengthen public well-being, he continued his studies by completing a Master of Public Health (MPH). Through this program, Venerable Ajit gained valuable knowledge in epidemiology, health promotion, community health, and public health policy. His academic work reflects a deep commitment to improving both physical health and social conditions, especially among vulnerable populations. Seeking to merge academic knowledge with spiritual practice, Venerable Ajit later expanded his studies into Buddhist philosophy and monastic training. He is currently pursuing a Master's Degree in Buddhist Studies at the Graduate School of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya

University (MCU), Thailand. His areas of focus include Buddhist ethics, meditation, comparative religion, and the practical application of Dhamma in contemporary society.

Jewel Rana Barua

Pirates of Compassion: ONE PIECE, Buddhist Ethics, and Youth Resistance in South and Southeast Asia

In 2025, the Straw Hat Pirates' flag from ONE PIECE emerged as a powerful symbol in youth-led protests across Nepal, Indonesia, and other Asian nations. This paper examines how the manga's core narratives of freedom, friendship, and resistance against corrupt authority resonate with Buddhist philosophical concepts deeply embedded in South and Southeast Asian societies, creating a unique synergy between Japanese popular culture and indigenous ethical frameworks.

Drawing on Buddhist principles of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (interdependence), *karuṇā* (compassion), and resistance to oppression found in *Jātaka* tales, I argue that ONE PIECE's appeal among Asian youth activists stems not merely from its entertainment value but from its philosophical alignment with Buddhist values that emphasize collective liberation over individual gain. The Straw Hat crew's rejection of hierarchical power structures mirrors Buddhist critiques of attachment to authority, while their commitment to protecting the marginalized echoes the *Bodhisattva* ideal of universal compassion.

Through analysis of protest imagery, social media discourse, and interviews with young Buddhist activists in Thailand and Bangladesh, this research explores how Generation Z in traditionally Buddhist societies reinterpret Luffy's quest for freedom through the lens of *dhamma* (righteous living) and social justice. The paper investigates specific cases where protesters explicitly connected ONE PIECE symbolism with Buddhist concepts, demonstrating how transnational popular culture becomes localized through indigenous philosophical frameworks.

Furthermore, I examine how this cultural appropriation challenges Western-centric narratives of global youth movements by highlighting Asia-to-Asia cultural flows that operate outside colonial frameworks. The circulation of Japanese manga in Buddhist-majority countries reveals alternative pathways of cultural exchange rooted in shared philosophical traditions regarding compassion, non-violence, and resistance to tyranny.

This interdisciplinary study contributes to understanding how religious philosophy, popular culture, and political activism intersect in contemporary Asian youth movements, offering insights into the role of Buddhist ethics in shaping protest aesthetics beyond traditional religious institutions.

Jewel Rana Barua (Ven Ananda Priya Bikkhu) is a Theravāda Buddhist monk and graduate student at the International Buddhist Studies College (IBSC), Mahāchulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand. Originally from Bangladesh, he was ordained eight years ago under the guidance of Dhammadutta Ven. Dr. Sanghapriya Mahathero. His research interests focus on the application of Buddhist philosophy to contemporary social challenges, including peacebuilding, environmental ethics, and youth activism. He is concurrently pursuing a Diploma in Buddhist Studies through the Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong, University of Kelaniya, and is an active member of HWPL (Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light), engaging in interfaith dialogue and peace initiatives. His academic work explores intersections between traditional Buddhist

teachings and modern social movements, with particular emphasis on how spiritual values inform youth activism in Asian contexts.

Dr. Ana Došen

Reframing Rebellion: How Manga and Anime Shaped Serbian Student Protest Culture

In November 2024, students at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade (Serbia) launched a wave of protests after being assaulted while silently commemorating the victims of the Novi Sad train station canopy collapse. Shortly after, students from other faculties and universities across the country joined the movement, blocking campus buildings and suspending classes. As their demands were not met by state authorities, the students escalated their actions— blocking the RTS - National Broadcasting Service, marching hundreds of kilometers, and even cycling to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Throughout these protest activities, their inventive use of pop-culture references revealed a new generation of activists who, in an era of global mass-mediation, approach political engagement beyond rigid and strict codes of political communication. Banners, placards, and costumes inspired by *Naruto*, *Pokémon*, *One Piece* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* reshaped the traditional iconography of resistance in Serbia. These references to manga and anime serve not merely as nostalgic markers of Generation Z identity, but rather as deliberate forms of subversive and satirical symbolism. The focus of my paper is on probing key examples that show how these Japanese characters articulated local forms of rebellion and, through humor, embodied Hannah Arendt's claim that ridicule remains one of the most effective ways to undermine authority. In the line of culture-jamming strategy, the recontextualisation of Japan's globally known fictional protagonists introduces new layers of meaning within the local domain, while simultaneously resonating youth protest movements worldwide.

Dr. Ana Došen is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University (Belgrade, Serbia), where she teaches media theory, East Asian cinema, and Japanese art and culture. She also offers courses such as *Global Media & Cultures of Resistance* and *Anime*. Her published work spans the fields of literature, media, film, and cultural studies.

Camila Alexandra Labarta Garcia

Between the Margins and the Center: One Piece, Youth Mobilization and the politics of cultural bias in Latin America

This paper explores how effectively the One Piece symbol advances the perspectives of young people in Latin American protest movements, and how cultural biases influence its impact and reception. From defiantly waving the Jolly Roger flag at the Zócalo, Mexico City's main square, to protesters using it as a protective guard against armed police officers in the streets of Lima, Peru, there is no doubt that Eiichirō Oda's (1997) famed manga has cemented itself as a prominent emblem of political resistance. Despite both Mexico and Peru's shared histories of overtly suppressing public outcries against self-serving lobbying, congressional bribery and other abuses of political authority, young Latin Americans are actively coming together by means outside of their governments' control – decentralized, fueled by online connection, and through transnational media flows. The energy of young people taking to the streets, emboldened by the straw hat crew, is as unexpected as it is notable. While certainly popular as a marker against corruption, One Piece, as part of East Asian popular culture – and the fan communities that engage with it – has historically been stigmatized and stereotyped

within Mexico and Peru's larger public spheres. Within this context, *One Piece*'s position as a tool for this new era of youth-led mobilization is underscored by tension. On the one hand, Oda's work remedies the absence of locally rooted pop culture symbols for protest in Latin America; on the other, it may also limit young people's political agency in societies where governments remain biased against culturally diverse media.

Camila Alexandra Labarta Garcia is a master's student in the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies at Heidelberg University. She holds a BA in Cultural Studies from The University of British Columbia. Her most recent published research has been on the intersections of transcultural media studies, audience reception, and global popular culture, with a particular focus on how Latin American audiences engage with and interpret South Korean media. Her work examines fan cultures, globalization, and the dynamics of cultural exchange, exploring how media consumption shapes cultural identity, social practices, and negotiations of power across borders.

Alessandra Moura

“Nakama” Beyond Translation: Friendship and Life Purpose in *One Piece*

The Japanese term *nakama* (仲間), commonly translated as “companions,” “comrades,” or “crew,” is a central concept in *One Piece* whose semantic depth exceeds what translation can fully convey. The kanji that form the word — 仲 (close interpersonal relation) and 間 (shared space-time or relational threshold)— point to more than functional togetherness: they describe those who enter one's inner life and share a collective destiny. *Nakama* refers not merely to people “by one's side,” but to one's people— a chosen family, soul friends, those with whom one shares a life mission, a journey, and a dream. Translation alone may be insufficient when a term carries significant emotional and ethical meaning. In such cases, preserving the original word or supporting it through paratextual strategies can help prevent semantic reduction. Other works provide relevant precedents: honorific suffixes such as *-san*, *-chan*, *-kun*, and *-sama* were retained in *Sailor Moon Cosmos* at the explicit request of the author; meanwhile, translation choices regarding *daisuki* in *Evangelion*—ranging from “I like you” to “I love you”—have sparked ideological controversy, including accusations of homophobia, depending on how relational nuance is conveyed. Words—like images and symbols—shape bonds, identities, and forms of collective resistance. A mistranslation may lead to misunderstanding between individuals or even nations, while a careful one can foster shared purpose. In *One Piece*, *nakama* functions as an affective and narrative manifesto: a way of living together that bridges fiction and reality through its emotional force.

Alessandra Moura is an audiovisual translator specializing in anime since 1998, with credits including *One Piece*, *Marmalade Boy*, *Detective Conan*, *Sailor Moon*, *Evangelion*, *Aggretsuko*, and the *Rurouni Kenshin* live-action films. She is also an independent researcher in the fields of neuroeducation and adult Japanese language acquisition. Based in Japan, she continues to work on translation and intercultural communication projects.

Dr. Thomas Richard

***One Piece*, hybridity, and the global imagination of freedom and decency**

This paper aims to analyze how the manga and anime *One Piece*, while seemingly focused on entertainment, could become a global symbol of freedom, and support claims against regimes perceived as elitist and arrogant with a focus on demands for political and social decency. To do so, I will use key concepts of postcolonial theory, namely the ones developed around the notion of hybridity by Homi Bhabha, and various scapes at the core of Arjun Appadurai's understanding of globalization and emotions in politics, with a focus on mediascapes and ideoscapes.

While sometimes analyzed in how it is embedded within Japanese culture (Singh 2021), *One Piece* derives from a cultural landscape historically open to foreign products (Pruvost-Delaspre 2021, Lucken 2019), that of mangas and animes, the main success of Eiichiro Oda lying in his ability to construct a coherent universe around it, which can be compared to Tolkien's tour de force in the making of his books, with a political imagination that goes beyond mere symbolism and metaphors (Harrington 2003), so that it can be reinterpreted and appropriated by various communities, a move particularly important in the participatory aspect of the *One Piece* fan community (Merila 2020).

One Piece speaks to the global imagination of justice and freedom (Kopper 2020) as a transnational object that transcends borders and boundaries, and its appropriation by political movements is no wonder. To some extent, it answers the appropriation by political movements of super heroes and offers an alternative (Schneiker 2020) with particular acuteness as Luffy, with his shortcomings, wit, and morale principles can be seen as a tongue-in-cheek answer to the politics of histrionism, linking together global and local politics with transnational and reappropriated popular culture (Geronimo et alii 2024), from Capitole Hill in 2021 to Madagascar in 2025.

Thomas Richard holds his PhD from the University Clermont-Auvergne. His work focuses on identities and cultural problematics in the Middle East, particularly in times of conflict. His dissertation was awarded the Michel de L'Hospital Prize, and has been published by LGDJ-Lextenso and the Presses de l'Université Clermont-Auvergne under the title *Du musée au cinéma, narrations de guerre au Moyen-Orient*. He has presented his research both in France and abroad, through conferences and articles about war memories, cultural representations of the borders, and identities as seen through films. His most recent work deals with filmic images and terrorism, militant cinema in the Middle East, cinema circulation, postcolonial memories, and museums in the Middle East. He teaches political science and cinema studies at universities Paris-8, Paris-I, Lille, ICL, and Boston University.

Dr. Tomoë I. M. Steineck

Flagging Resistance: From Outland Gods to *One Piece* in East Asian Visual and Popular Protest Cultures

In 2025, the straw-hat pirate flag from *One Piece* appeared in youth-led protests across Asia and Africa. This paper argues that its appeal needs to be analysed and understood through an East Asian genealogy of superhuman heroes and travelling gods who emerge “from outside” to side with the oppressed.

Focusing first on the vessel-born hero—in a drifting or sealed container—I show how such figures are imagined as originless, superhuman agents who defeat demons tormenting communities. The sealed vessel marks a hero who owes nothing to existing genealogies of power, while the gathering of former opponents models a non-hierarchical form of political alliance. On their way to “save the world,” such heroes turn adversaries into comrades; I read

Monkey D. Luffy as a contemporary iteration of this type, a pirate saviour whose journey is less about status and bloodline than about alliance-building from the margins.

A second strand follows deities that arrive from the outside, often classified as *hayarigami*, who in historical chronicles are appropriated by those excluded from official representation to lead protest marches that shake the governing elite. Their power lies in visual and ritual presence: banners, portable shrines, and icons become vehicles for subaltern claims.

Methodologically, the paper combines folklore studies, visual analysis, image science (Bildwissenschaft), and history of religion to read protest iconography through regional story-forms that predate modern narratives of nation and public sphere. Tracing the “vessel-born” hero from medieval *setsuwa* to digital memes, it shows why *One Piece* travels so well as a manifesto-image in non-Western protest and how its circulation complicates binaries of local/global, religious/secular, and entertainment/politics. In dialogue with folklore from Japan and other East Asian contexts, and foregrounding images as sites of negotiation, the paper develops an understanding of how shared hero-myths are mobilised in distinct political terrains.

Tomoe Steineck is a curator and cultural historian whose work examines how images operate between religion, philosophy and materiality in East Asia. Her research ranges from ancient mythology and the circulation of symbols across East Asian cultures to early modern missionary collections and contemporary popular culture. At the University of Zurich, she teaches in the Department of East Asian Art History, is an affiliated researcher in Japanese Studies, and curates the digital image database JBAE; she is also affiliated with Hosei University, Tokyo. She earned her PhD from the University of Tübingen with an award-winning dissertation on missionary collections and Japanese religious imagery in a conflictual epoch of cultural imperialism and has curated major exhibitions in Germany and Switzerland.

Libasut Taqwa

Rhizomatic Protest and Manga-Style Movement: Why Did the One Piece-Inspired Movement Fail in Indonesia?

Why did the One Piece-inspired movement fail in Indonesia? What were the key factors driving its failure? To what extent does manga-style culture influence young people's perspectives on the socio-political situation in Indonesia? This study reveals the link between pop culture and the character of youth-initiated movements on socio-political issues in contemporary Indonesia.

The youth protest movements that have swept across various countries since August 2025 have transformed the political landscape of regimes and governments. In Nepal, protests successfully toppled the government. In France, the "Bloquons tout" movement sparked mass strikes and transportation blockades. Although they did not topple the ruling government, several similar movements have occurred in Southeast Asia with varying impacts, including in the Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Indonesia.

Using theories of rhizome and new social movements, this study found three main findings: first, there are differences in the goals of protest between today's young generation and senior activists from the New Order era who longed for a diametric separation between the civilian and the military. The youth protest movement tends to de-emphasize the issue and focus solely on welfare issues and the need for generational certainty, such as jobs, fair wages, and healthcare subsidies. Second, these movements are largely unstructured and rely mostly on spontaneous online solidarity, which only succeeds in encouraging movement creativity and

making it a trend but fails to add value to the fulfillment of demands and follow-up of the movement. Third, inspiration from *manga* or *anime*, especially on social media, also appears in other categories of movements related to violent extremism leading to terrorism, which not only threatens the regime but also evokes nostalgia for past terrorist figures or groups.

Libasut Taqwa is presently a research and advocacy manager at the Wahid Foundation, Jakarta. He was also involved in the Wahid Foundation's annual report on Freedom of Religion and Belief and a project on preventing Violent Extremism and Political Violence in Indonesia. He completed the MSc program in Middle Eastern Politics at the University of Indonesia, an MA program in political science at the Indonesian International Islamic University (IIU), and a postgraduate diploma in Peace and Global Diplomacy from the King Hamad Global Center for Peaceful Coexistence (KHGC) in Bahrain. Currently, Libasut is preparing two articles for publication: "*Understanding Violent Extremism on TikTok: Terrorism Nostalgia and the Menace of AI-Based Radicalization in Indonesia*" (under review, Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) and "*Regions Under God: Local Governments and the Widespread Religious-Based Policy in West Java, Indonesia*" (under review, Journal of Law and Religion, Cambridge University).

Dr. Kohki Watabe

Recollection and Oblivion in Characters: Amnesiac for Virtual Communality

This paper argues that characters in anime and manga possess, internally and inevitably, a sense of oblivion. Film theories have discussed the mechanism of subject formation through moving images, in relation to the three-dimensional space in which live-action film is grounded. On the contrary, as Thomas Lamarre has argued, in anime characterized by the aesthetics of flat planes, "suture" does not occur in principle; instead, *kyara* (Ito Go), the human figures drawn with simple lines, becomes a focal point for the subjects. Since *kyara* resides in multiple cells in anime and multiple panels in manga, the series of replicated yet distinct images of a given *kyara* necessarily embody motility. The *kyara*, thus, possesses a plasmic (Sergei Eisenstein) flesh.

The plasmatic flesh of *kyara* bears both forgetting and memory in its relation to the subject. Just as the lines traced in Sigmund Freud's "magic writing-pad" are detached from the memories inscribed on the wax layer, the *kyara*, which is by nature a multiple entity, inevitably carries oblivion within itself. At the same time, if the *kyara* is seen through the lens of Henri Bergson's "memory cone," a set of lines consisting of human figures filled with emotion also triggers recollection.

These characteristics of the *kyara* as a vessel of memory and forgetting make possible the fans' transformative works and, ultimately, underlie its functioning as a political sign that generates virtual communities. Fans would not be able to make use of *kyaras* in contexts other than the original story without pushing oblivion on them. The fact that the pirate flag in *One Piece* can be globally recognized as a political symbol is possible only because it forgets its local rootedness; yet, in a community on the outskirts of Jakarta, where local bonds are still alive, raising the flag is avoided.

Kohki Watabe is an assistant professor at University of Tsukuba, Kuala Lumpur campus, in Malaysia. He got Ph. D. In Cinema and Media Studies from University of Southern California and have been publishing articles on Japanese popular cultures, anime and manga, and fan

cultures. He recently works on transnational flow of Japanese popular cultures in Southeast Asia such as Hijab cosplay.

Dr. Hew Wai Weng

One Piece Meets Radical Islamism: Popular Culture and Islamic Preaching in Indonesia

In August 2025, the One Piece pirate flag became a symbol of political dissent in Indonesia ahead of the country's Independence Day on August 17. Felix Siau, a popular, social media-savvy preacher in Indonesia, has creatively engaged with this trend by producing and sharing an animated video on his Instagram account. The video received more than 217,000 likes and 29,600 shares on Instagram. Using clips from One Piece as background, Felix Siau subtly and indirectly promotes the idea of a transnational Islamic Caliphate, as campaigned by the banned Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), which Felix was part of. Juxtaposing the One Piece flag and the HTI flag (both in black color), he states that the black flag symbolises togetherness and liberation, representing the fight against injustice and oppression. At the end of the video, he says (in English): 'The black banner is a will, the justice will prevail. Simple statement: the government fail, we sail'. In some ways, what he says echoes radical ideas of Left internationalism (against capitalism, nationalism, and colonialism); yet his solution is a transnational Islamic Caliphate. Luffy's revolutionary version feeds into his radical version of Islamism, and a relatively secular popular icon has been given a new meaning in his Islamist activism.

It was not the first time Felix Siau had referenced elements of Japanese pop culture in his preaching. He has compared the struggles of Luffy and the Prophet Muhammad, as well as discussed, the similarity between Samurai's and Islamic values. Based on my long-term online and offline observations of Felix Siau's preaching, this paper focuses on the Islamist reimagining of Japanese visual media. Such blending of politics, popular culture and religious identity reflects an evolving form of Islamic piety in Indonesia – attractive but radical, entertaining yet conservative, personal if political.

Hew Wai Weng is a research and teaching fellow at the Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World, University of Edinburgh. He has published on Chinese Muslim identities, Hui migration, popular culture, social media, and urban middle-class Muslim aspirations in Malaysia and Indonesia. He is the author of *Chinese Ways of Being Muslim: Negotiating Ethnicity and Religiosity in Indonesia* (2018).

Dr. Sabrina Zahren

'Embedding Anime in the Saudi Entertainment DNA': The role of anime and manga in Saudi pop culture and cultural policy

The success of Saudi artists and cultural workers on a regional and international scale is an important aspect of Saudi soft power. The expansion of cultural infrastructure and substantial investment in influencers, designers, producers, musicians, and artists is intended to realize the potential of the country's young population and establish a new cultural elite (Foley 2019). During my research on Saudi influencers between 2017 and 2023, I found that Japanese manga and anime characters and their mannerisms as well as the aesthetic of this art form, play an important role in Saudi digital pop culture. Stories and characters from *One Piece*,

Dragon Ball and *Captain Tsubasa* are particularly popular among Saudi millennials (born between 1980 and 1995). In the 1980s, this generation came into contact with imported and dubbed anime series on their afternoon TV programs (Kaneko 2025). Thanks to digital media, Generation Z is now also consuming more and more content from the anime spectrum. Furthermore, this art form is part of national cultural policy and the subject of transregional Saudi-Japanese collaboration in the cultural sector. This is evident in the hosting of the *Saudi Anime Expo* in 2019 and 2022, the *Anime Town* project in Riyadh in 2022, and construction projects such as the *Dragon Ball* theme park in *Quiddiya City*. Although these events and projects are organized by the *General Entertainment Authority*, and primarily exhibit and celebrate Japanese pop culture, Saudi Prime Minister Mohammad bin Salman, a fan and connoisseur of manga and anime, aims to support Saudi productions and producers (Lomas 2024). Furthermore, the national goal is to promote Saudi culture globally through Saudi-produced manga and anime that showcase local cultural attributes (Lomas 2024). One milestone was the Saudi-Japanese co-production ‘The Journey’, which premiered in Tokyo in 2021. Since there is little substantial research on Arabic and/or Saudi manga and anime culture, I aim to present different actors, institutions, personalities and productions within the workshop and evaluate how a potential research project could be mapped out. I will particularly focus on the transregional collaborations between Saudi and Japanese artists and publishers, as well as their processing of local materials. The goal is to adopt a critical media perspective while also recognizing manga and anime as a part of Saudi cultural policy. Additionally, I will explore through content analysis, how Saudi influencers receive and reproduce the inherent ethical, moral and philosophical questions of the art form and how these narratives circulate within the Arabic-speaking digital sphere.

Dr. Sabrina Zahren is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at LMU Munich. She works at the intersection of Arabic studies and critical media studies. She is member of the *Arab Mass Media and Transregional Netcultures* research group and also works as a student coordinator and student counsellor. Her research focuses on digital platforms, digital industries, influencer culture, and digital cultural production (e.g. gaming, manga, and anime) in Saudi Arabia and other countries on the Arab Peninsula.