

PRESS RELEASE

September 2026

ASIA POP

17 September 2026 – 23 May 2027

Hello Kitty, K-pop and bubble tea, manga, gaming and Squid Game: East Asian pop culture has long since become part of our everyday lives. It shapes the music charts and streaming platforms, fashion and beauty, food culture and digital communities. With ASIA POP, the NRW-Forum presents Germany's first major exhibition dedicated to this global phenomenon. At its heart are the pop cultures of China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan – and the ways in which their imagery, stories and products circulate around the world, connect fans and shape perceptions of East Asia.

Düsseldorf plays a particular role in this story. With its Little Tokyo district, Japan Day, the DoKomi anime and Japan convention and a large East Asian community, the city has been an important centre of cultural exchange for decades. The first Japanese and other East Asian companies began establishing themselves in Düsseldorf as early as the 1950s. Today, the restaurants, supermarkets, bookshops and stores around Immermannstrasse are as much a part of the city as the numerous fan communities that have formed around manga, anime, K-pop and gaming.

ASIA POP takes these developments as the starting point for an engaging yet critical exploration of a cultural phenomenon that reaches billions of people. Moving between art and commerce, tradition and the present, local communities and global industries, the exhibition examines how traditional symbols and forms of storytelling enter contemporary pop culture, how new aesthetics emerge – and how successfully governments and companies use culture as a form of international soft power.

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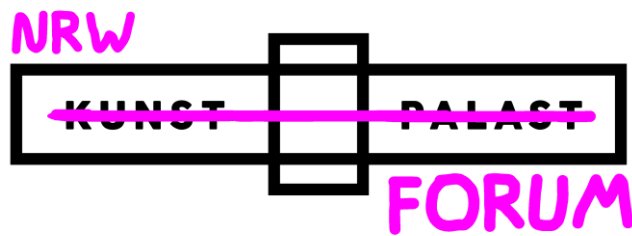
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“East Asian pop culture is everywhere today – in our playlists, on our screens, in our wardrobes and on our plates,” says Felix Krämer, Director General of Kunstpalast and NRW-Forum. “We are interested not only in why K-pop, anime and manga have become so successful around the world. We also want to explore the social questions, desires and contradictions that lie behind these phenomena. The exhibition can be fun – while at the same time encouraging us to look more closely.”

Pop culture across borders

For centuries, art, fashion and design from China, Japan and other parts of East Asia have influenced European artists and designers. What is new, however, is the speed and reach of today’s cultural exchange. Streaming services, social media and global platforms mean that music, television series, comics and trends can become available on different continents almost simultaneously.

Music offers a particularly striking example. Only a few decades ago, it seemed almost inconceivable that songs without English-language lyrics could top charts around the world. Today, South Korean K-pop groups fill the world’s largest stadiums, win international music awards and attract billions of views for their videos. Groups such as BTS have demonstrated that music can transcend language barriers.

Their success, however, is about far more than the songs themselves. K-pop operates as an entire ecosystem encompassing music, dance, fashion, social media, brand collaborations and an unusually close relationship between idols and their fans. Artists communicate regularly with their audiences via digital platforms, release exclusive content and create a sense of intimacy that goes far beyond the traditional relationship between star and fan.

This closeness has given rise to a fan culture with its own rituals, codes and objects. Fans form communities across the globe, learn choreographies, collect photocards and lightsticks, create fan art, travel to concerts and support their idols through elaborately coordinated campaigns. What might appear to be passive consumption becomes an active cultural practice.

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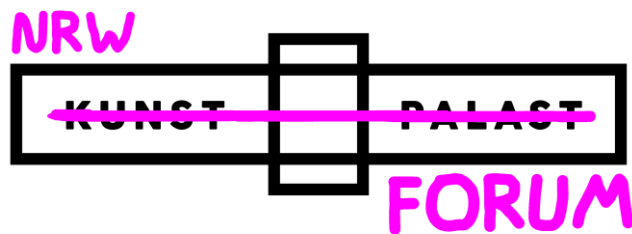
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Inside the exhibition, a karaoke bar invites visitors to perform their favourite songs live.

“Fan culture is one of the phenomena I find most fascinating in the exhibition,” says curator Charlotte Ickler. “Fans appropriate pop culture and develop it further. They translate, collect, create and organise; they form their own communities across national and linguistic boundaries. At the same time, they operate within a highly professional commercial system that capitalises on precisely this emotional attachment. This tension between genuine enthusiasm, a sense of belonging and commercialisation runs through many areas of ASIA POP.”

The exhibition therefore also looks behind the flawless surfaces of the entertainment industry. In Cry Minami, artist Katja Stuke uses newspapers, magazines, books and DVDs to explore the tightly controlled roles imposed on Japanese idols. At the centre of the work is Minami Minegishi, a former member of the group AKB48.

In 2013, the press revealed that the singer was in a romantic relationship, despite an unwritten rule requiring idols to keep their private lives strictly out of the public eye. Minegishi subsequently shaved her head and appeared in a tearful video apologising for breaking the rules. Stuke raises the question of how personal this act really was – and to what extent it itself became part of a performance.

The world of K-pop is similarly characterised by intense expectations of performance and carefully controlled public images. Departures from accepted social norms are often met with harsh criticism. Here too, a fundamental contradiction within pop culture becomes apparent: while it can open up spaces for identification and self-expression, it can simultaneously reinforce normative ideas about beauty, success and behaviour.

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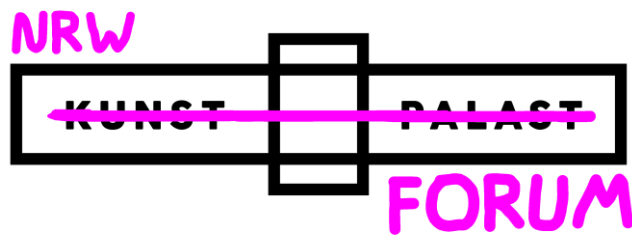
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From manga to global streaming success

The international rise of manga and anime is equally remarkable. Many people in Germany first encountered Japanese animation as early as the 1970s, often without necessarily realising it: series such as Heidi, Maya the Bee and Vicky the Viking were produced with the involvement of Japanese studios and animators.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Dragon Ball, Pokémon and Sailor Moon followed, shaping an entire generation. Today, Japanese manga are as commonplace in German bookshops as European or American comics. They have been joined by South Korean manhwa and Chinese-language manhua. In recent years, digital webtoons designed specifically for reading on smartphones have transformed the medium once again.

Here too, global success is driven by highly active fan communities. Events such as Japan Day and Düsseldorf's DoKomi attract hundreds of thousands of visitors. Cosplay, fan art and the intense engagement with individual characters and stories demonstrate that pop culture is not simply consumed. It is reimaged, transformed and made the basis of shared experiences.

At the same time, international streaming platforms are reshaping film and television. Korean productions such as Squid Game and Parasite reach audiences of millions, combining broad entertainment appeal with social and political themes such as inequality and the consequences of unfettered capitalism. Japanese anime and drama as well as Chinese-language series are now available to international audiences at any time.

East Asian cinema has, of course, enjoyed international recognition for many decades. In 1951, Japanese director Akira Kurosawa received the Golden Lion in Venice for Rashōmon. Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2003; Bong Joon-ho's Parasite won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2019 and subsequently became the first non-English-language film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. Hong

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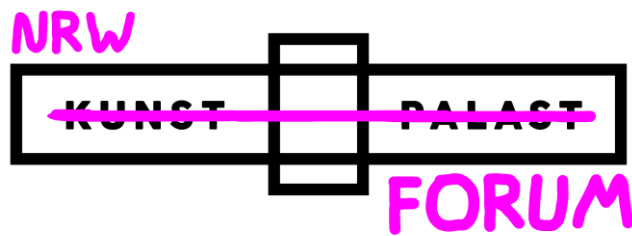
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Kong, meanwhile, left a lasting mark on international action cinema through stars such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan.

Art between pop, consumer culture and identity

Alongside objects from everyday life and popular culture, ASIA POP presents artistic positions that engage with the mechanisms underpinning these visual worlds. Rather than simply depicting popular culture, the artists examine how images circulate, the notions of identity they produce and the points at which personal memory, social expectations and commercial staging intersect.

Emil Adam's ACID RANCH 2.0 is an interactive sculpture three metres high, made up of a multitude of classic toys, elements from computer games, kitsch objects and consumer goods. It reflects the visual overload and constant stimulation of a society shaped by advertising and social media.

In his drawings and collages, Hiroki Tsukuda brings together natural and artificial elements to create new hybrid visual worlds. His work Transforming observation explores how nature and the universe are altered by industrial intervention and technological development – and how new structures and relationships emerge in the process.

“What particularly interests me about these works is the way something that initially appears familiar, perhaps even playful, can suddenly raise questions about identity, belonging or social roles,” says exhibition curator Nana Tazuke-Steiniger. “That second look is precisely what we hope to encourage through the exhibition.”

Press any button to start

Global gaming culture, too, would be almost unimaginable without East Asia. From the 1980s and 1990s onwards, Japanese companies such as Nintendo and Sony established consoles that found their way into living rooms across the world. Characters and fictional worlds from Super Mario, Pokémon and Final Fantasy are now among the most recognisable images in pop culture.

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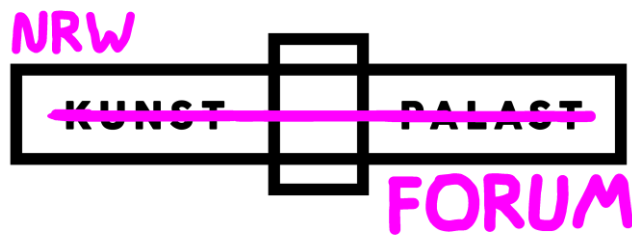
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At the same time, a particularly strong e-sports culture developed in South Korea and China. Professional gamers now compete in international tournaments, while streamers reach audiences of millions through digital platforms. Gaming has become a social space in its own right, where communities form, shared aesthetic codes emerge and the boundaries between games, entertainment and media production become increasingly fluid.

The exhibition also shows that the images of East Asia conveyed through games, films and television series are often shaped by clichés. Historical settings, traditional clothing, temples, martial arts and supposedly “typically Asian” landscapes become instantly recognisable elements within a global visual vocabulary. ASIA POP therefore also asks who produces such images, what expectations they serve and how perceptions of the self and the other influence one another.

From Hello Kitty to a nation of mascots

Few areas illustrate the connection between cuteness and commerce as clearly as East Asia’s mascot culture. In Japan, mascots are used not only by companies, but also by cities, government authorities and public institutions. They are intended to create identification, make complex institutions appear more approachable – and, of course, to sell products.

For ASIA POP, the NRW-Forum has created its own mascot, Maru. In doing so, Maru joins a tradition that has produced characters with worldwide appeal. The best-known example is Hello Kitty, who has captivated several generations of fans since the 1970s. Other characters can become global collectors’ phenomena almost overnight – only to be replaced just as rapidly by the next trend.

This interplay of scarcity, collecting and belonging plays a central role in today’s pop-culture market. Characters are released in ever-changing editions, brand collaborations generate coveted limited products, and social media can propel individual figures from niche objects to global sensations at remarkable speed.

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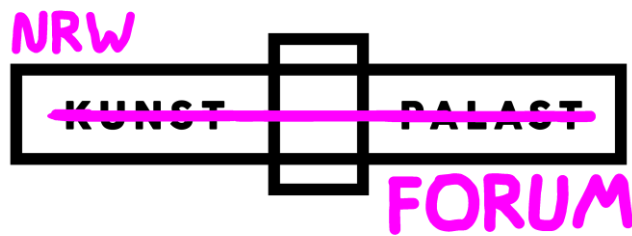
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A taste of East Asia

Pop culture is not only something we see and hear – it can also be tasted. Ramen and sushi, Korean barbecue, hotpot, kimchi, matcha, onigiri and bubble tea have long since become part of everyday life in Germany. In Düsseldorf, this development is particularly tangible. Alongside established Japanese restaurants, a growing number of Korean, Chinese and Taiwanese shops and restaurants can now be found in and around Little Tokyo.

The international success of these foods also tells a story of migration, trade and political relations. Germany's first Chinese restaurant opened in Berlin as early as 1923. Japanese and Korean cuisine spread more widely through Germany, particularly after the Second World War. Today, their influence extends far beyond specialist restaurants: instant noodles, soy sauce, kimchi and sushi can be found in virtually every larger supermarket.

Food itself also becomes a vehicle for cultural ideas. Certain dishes evolve into lifestyle products, spread via social media or gain popularity through films and television series. Cultural exchange, marketing and the search for perceived authenticity are closely intertwined here too.

Kimono, K-Beauty and global aesthetics

East Asian forms and motifs have influenced Western fashion for centuries. Cherry blossom, silk fabrics and the cuts of traditional garments such as the kimono, hanbok and Tang jackets have repeatedly been adopted and reinterpreted.

In the 20th century, Japanese designers such as Hanae Mori and Rei Kawakubo developed distinctive formal languages of their own, deliberately challenging stereotypical Western representations of "Asians" and provoking the fashion establishment. Today, aesthetic influences circulate in every direction. Luxury labels and fast-fashion brands collaborate with anime and manga franchises, while characters such as Hello Kitty and Pokémon appear equally at home on T-shirts, handbags and catwalks.

K-Beauty has likewise become a global economic force. Korean cosmetics brands set trends that can spread around the world via social media in a

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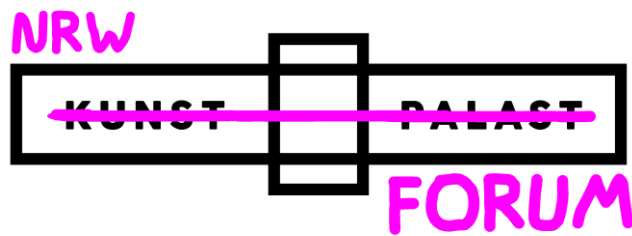
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matter of days. At the same time, the industry raises questions about beauty standards and perceptions of the body. Practices including extreme dieting, cosmetic surgery and discriminatory attempts to imitate East Asian facial features are increasingly subject to criticism.

Pop culture as soft power

The global success of music, film, fashion and food has long had political and economic significance. Governments actively support cultural production as a means of strengthening their country's international image. The best-known example is the so-called Korean Wave, or Hallyu: the global success of South Korean music, films, television series, games, fashion and cosmetics has fundamentally transformed perceptions of the country while generating considerable economic benefits.

Yet ASIA POP does not tell a straightforward success story. The exhibition also examines commercialisation, pressure to perform, cultural attribution and stereotypical ideas. It presents pop culture as a complex network in which cultural traditions and global markets, individual enthusiasm and government strategies, creative appropriation and commercial interests continuously overlap.

The exhibition therefore concludes with a deliberately open question: *What does pop culture mean to you?* Members of different Düsseldorf communities are given their own voice within the exhibition, revealing how varied personal relationships with music, fashion, film, food and comics can be.

In this sense, ASIA POP ultimately also becomes an exhibition about Düsseldorf itself: a city in which global cultural exchange has been part of everyday life for decades – and one in which it is particularly easy to observe how seemingly local phenomena become global pop culture.

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