

# H igh Time for Japan to Promote Its Movies Abroad

By Yoshio KAKEO

## International Movie Evolution

There are two ways of internationally promoting movies, whether they are made in Japan or elsewhere. One is to export them. By exporting movies, it becomes possible to make the inherent culture of a producer country widely known to the rest of the world through the form of entertainment. The other is international co-production. There are many ways of international collaboration in movie production ranging from funding cooperation to personnel exchanges including movie directors, production staff and actors. In the last few years, international movie development has been rapidly progressing across the world in line with globalization.

US (Hollywood) movies have played a large role in the international development of movies. From the middle of the 1990s, exports of US movies exceeded revenues from the domestic market. Consequently, major Hollywood studios came to place a disproportionate emphasis on movies geared toward the international market rather than the US market. Namely, they chose easy-to-understand themes for movies, such as science fiction with dramas unfolding in outer space or taking place in the age of dinosaurs. But such movies proved to be out of line with the mission of making US culture widely known to foreign audiences. Conversely, it is safe to say US movies dominated the global market at the cost of distinctive American culture. This reality has resulted in the concentration of Oscar-winning movies among minor-scale films produced by independent studios in recent years.

To counter US prominence in the global movie market, the European movie industry increasingly began to undertake international film projects. The birth of the European common currency – the euro – spurred cultural interactions between European countries, creating an environment well fit not just for movie production in rivalry with US films but also for international co-production. By refraining from making movies depicting its own culture and instead producing movies that were of a global standard, the United States was able to dominate the world market, and the result was that it encouraged the movement for joint international movie production in other countries.

## Japanese Movies on World Stage

What then is the state of Japanese movies in terms of international development? Japan has exceptional content in the form of animation. Animation has spread worldwide, and is even more popular as TV content than as material for movies. Performances called *cos-play* (short for costume role-play) where *anime* fans dress up in the outfits of *anime* characters are popular in many countries. In recent years, more and more translations are being made of *manga* comic books on which *anime* stories are based.

*Anime* and *manga* have reached very sophisticated levels in terms

of storylines and artistic expressions as a result of stiff competition between several major publishers since the end of World War II. There is still a lot of potential in *anime* and, as a treasure trove for original movie content, in *manga*. Only a tiny part of the potential of these art forms has so far been exploited, and I am hopeful that they will make their overseas presence greater in the future.

As for Japanese dramatic movies, foreign viewers have been limited to movie analysts and buffs in developed countries, but this is not a case unique to Japan. With the exception of Hollywood movies, the number of fans who enjoy foreign movies is small in any country.

## Fighting Shy of Venturing Overseas

Until recently, Japanese movie companies have not been enthusiastic about marketing their films – including *anime* – overseas. With regard to dramatic movies in particular, Japanese companies would sell if a foreign buyer approached them, but they would not take the initiative in selling to overseas markets. One reason for this is that the Japanese domestic market is large. Helped in part by high admission fees for movie theaters, the Japanese film market is the second biggest in the world following the US one. The *table* shows that in 2002, Japanese movies fared badly compared to foreign movies, with their share of the domestic market at a record low of 27% in terms of both box-office and attendance figures. Later, however, Japanese movies made a sudden recovery while the share of Hollywood movies dropped in contrast. Even though Japan imposes no limits on the import of foreign films, Hollywood movies are struggling hard.

Major Japanese movie companies have thus found no need to venture into overseas markets. Even when movies are sold abroad, their prices have not been high enough to cover the costs of marketing. Consequently, movies shown overseas to play the role of informing audiences of Japanese culture were limited to those screened at film festivals. Many of these movies were made by independent productions, and directed by world-renowned directors. Such movies would often receive high acclaim at film festivals and other events, but with the exception of some ardent fans, most movies were not well received by the general public.

One reason given for the failure of Japanese movies to capture a large foreign audience is that they are not easy to understand. Like the movie industries in developed countries such as the United States and France, the Japanese movie industry has a history spanning more than a century. However, the dramatic techniques that have traditionally been used reflect the distinctive Japanese style of personal communication. It is a style where the speaker does not make a strong self-assertion and where the listener tries to grasp the speaker's feelings by thinking about what has not been said, namely, reading between the lines. With the exception of period action dramas which have a strong storyline, Japanese dramas are generally taken by the

TABLE

## Market share of domestic & foreign movies in Japan

Year	Japanese films			Hollywood films			Non-Hollywood foreign films		
	Films	Box-office sales	Attendance	Films	Box-office sales	Attendance	Films	Box-office sales	Attendance
	No. (%)	Mil. yen (%)	Mil. people (%)	No. (%)	Mil. yen (%)	Mil. people (%)	No. (%)	Mil. yen (%)	Mil. people (%)
2000	282 (43.8)	54,334 (31.80)	43.06 (31.80)	81 (12.6)	61,124 (35.8)	48.43 (35.77)	281 (43.6)	55,404 (32.4)	43.90 (32.42)
2001	281 (44.6)	78,144 (39.00)	63.76 (39.04)	65 (10.3)	76,514 (38.2)	62.41 (38.22)	284 (45.1)	45,496 (22.7)	37.11 (22.72)
2002	293 (45.8)	53,296 (27.10)	43.55 (27.08)	68 (10.6)	93,286 (47.4)	76.21 (47.40)	279 (43.6)	50,199 (25.5)	41.01 (25.50)
2003	287 (46.1)	67,125 (33.00)	53.61 (33.02)	93 (15.0)	85,006 (41.8)	67.90 (41.82)	242 (38.9)	51,128 (25.2)	40.84 (25.15)
2004	310 (47.8)	79,054 (37.50)	64.45 (37.89)	78 (12.0)	89,930 (42.6)	71.83 (42.23)	261 (40.2)	41,929 (19.9)	33.81 (19.87)
2005	356 (48.7)	81,780 (41.30)	66.46 (41.42)	81 (11.1)	73,090 (36.9)	58.94 (36.73)	294 (40.2)	43,290 (21.8)	35.05 (21.84)
2006	417 (50.8)	107,944 (53.20)	89.04 (54.20)	96 (11.7)	73,713 (36.3)	57.98 (35.29)	308 (37.5)	21,277 (10.5)	17.26 (10.50)
2007	407 (50.2)	94,645 (47.70)	77.78 (47.66)	78 (9.6)	82,129 (41.4)	67.59 (41.41)	325 (40.1)	21,668 (10.9)	17.82 (10.91)
2008	417 (51.9)	115,859 (59.50)	95.43 (59.46)	68 (8.4)	56,326 (28.9)	46.40 (28.91)	320 (39.7)	22,651 (11.6)	18.66 (11.62)

Source: Kinema Junpo Film Institute

masses in foreign countries as something difficult to understand.

As for international co-production, the Japanese movie industry has been as unenthusiastic in this area as it has been about exports. Two reasons can be given for this. One is that Japanese movie companies did not particularly feel the need to join forces with their overseas counterparts as film production was based on the premise that costs would be recovered through the domestic market. Another reason is that Japanese companies did not have experience in teaming up with foreign firms. As noted earlier, the Japanese movie industry has a long history, and it has established its own movie-making tradition.

Every step is meticulously taken in the process of film production in Japan, with each tiny part fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle, ranging from the business aspect that involves information disclosure on fund-raising and cost recovery to the production aspect that includes everything from filming arrangements to schedule adjustments for actors. The filming schedule is thoroughly thought out beforehand and carried out by experienced staff who can work on the same wavelength in perfect unison without words or gestures. In Japan, two filming schedules are prepared – for fine and rainy days. Details such as what an actor will be required to do on a certain afternoon two months ahead are written into the schedule. However, this kind of system does not work sufficiently in a joint international project as it would be impossible for international staff to follow such a precise schedule; when something unexpected happens, flexible responses cannot be taken.

### Internationalization Pressing New Evolution of Japanese Films

Since the beginning of the 21st century, South Korean dramas have become widely popular in a *Hanryu* (Korean-style) boom, adding fuel to the exchange of content among Asian countries. The Japanese and Chinese content industries were shocked to see South Korean television dramas and movies take Asia by storm. It was clear to them that efforts by the South Korean government to help the growth of its content industry and personnel had brought solid results. International exchange in Asia was also encouraged partly by the CEPA (Closer

Economic Partnership Agreement) signed between Hong Kong and China in 2004. The agreement paved the way for Hong Kong movies to advance into China, unfettered by the country's import quotas for foreign films. Any country can now enter the Chinese market by making movies jointly with Hong Kong, and the number of films produced through international co-production is on the rise.

The Chinese market is not very large at the moment, but is expected to become bigger in tandem with the growth of the Chinese economy, and movie industries in Chinese-speaking countries and regions such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia are looking to deepen ties with China. South Korea is also participating in an increasing number of projects with China in light of the small scale of its domestic market and little prospect of further growth in demand from the Japanese market.

The movie market in China is still very small in comparison with the Japanese market. In 2008, the Japanese movie industry had 194.8 billion yen in box-office revenues, while China's revenues were 4.3 billion yuan (roughly 64.5 billion yen at the exchange rate of 1 yuan to 150 yen). However, with the participation of movie industries in countries and regions such as South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia, the Chinese market is likely to become massive and exceed the Japanese market. Therefore, if the Japanese movie industry continues to stay sitting in its own market alone, the day will come when all it can offer is local content only.

There are signs of change in the domestic-oriented Japanese film industry. An example is the inauguration of the "J-Pitch" project, a support program for international co-production being promoted by an industry group, UNIJAPAN (Japan Association for International Promotion of the Moving Image), with the aid of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. In the project, plans for international co-production are solicited and the best plans selected for presentation at international movie festivals held in places such as Cannes, Berlin, Busan and Tokyo. With globalization increasingly taking place in the Asian movie market, measures are urgently needed to nurture personnel who can promote Japanese movies overseas. **JS**

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