



Mitsuhsa Ishikawa

# Japanese Anime Evolving

Interviewer: Yoshihiro KATAOKA

**P**roduction I.G, Inc., an *anime* (animation) production company headed by President & CEO Mitsuhsa Ishikawa, has been aggressively pushing its way into overseas markets, setting up a US subsidiary in Los Angeles in 1997 and producing the animated part of Quentin Tarantino's world hit "*Kill Bill: Vol. 1.*" Ishikawa has shown a hard-nosed sense of strategy as well as bold moves in getting Japanese *anime* to evolve into a new dimension. He delves into his unique work philosophy in an interview with *Japan SPOTLIGHT*.

## Getting to Know One's Smallness

Production I.G has marked milestones in the history of Japanese *anime*, including the production of "*Innocence*," a Mamoru Oshii film that made history as the first-ever Japanese animated feature film to be nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2004. First of all, please let me ask you about your first encounter with *anime*.

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*Innocence*

**Ishikawa:** As I was a student, I had a part-time production management job at Tatsunoko Production Co., one of Japan's historic *anime* production houses. I then found myself drawn further and further into the production of *anime* in which animated images can get people moved very deeply. I recall staying overnight in the office those days, day in and day out.

After that, I spent about 10 months wandering in Africa and Asia. Wherever I went, from Kenya to Mikonos in Greece, I bumped into Japanese *anime*. I told myself that Japanese *anime* was something to be reckoned with. I learned from my own experience that *anime* knows no border.

As I was traveling around the world, I also had a keen sensation of being very small and powerless. To put it the other way around, I learned how important it is to go to someone for help. As I get other people involved, what it entails is an enormous power, one that can surprise people. As you go out into the world, your power can be multiplied by the number of people you are with. Needless to say, it happens that your power can be divided rather than multiplied. It makes it even more important that you keep up good communication with people.

After having a stint as an employee, I left Tatsunoko Production and set up my own studio at age 29. The lessons I learned while traveling around the world directly benefited me as I produced *anime* and managed the company.

## Using "Modesty" as Weapon

**As you were trying to raise funds for "*Innocence*," you went straight to Hollywood and signed up with DreamWorks SKG, the movie studio headed by director Steven Spielberg. "*IGPX*," which began broadcasting in Japan and the United States simultaneously in 2005, is produced jointly by Production I.G and Cartoon Network, the largest animation channel in the world. Do you have secret tactics as you negotiate deals with foreign partners?**

**Ishikawa:** I would rather keep "modesty" in my mind, the spirit that runs deep in Japanese culture. I will have to be tough when I

negotiate. But I also know that I cannot always win. I have to look at it from the other side's perspective. Unless I concede to some extent, I will never be able to get a contract signed and sealed. It means extra trouble for us to shoulder. At the end of the day, however, both sides will be happy that way. We start negotiations seeking to win or lose, black or white. In the end, however, we will end up in gray. So, gray is a color of modesty or humbleness. It is a beautiful color, you know.

Apparently reflecting their inferiority complex toward Caucasians, Japanese seem to change their way of looking as they mix with Western people. As for me, I don't like vertical relationships. So, I don't look up or down at people. I think that was a major factor behind Production I.G.'s success in building overseas connections.

It must be the influence of my mother who used to tell me, "Don't look up. Look down." She meant to say that I should keep my feet on the ground.

On the same grounds, I personally don't want to keep in step with the local *anime* industry's practice of farming out subcontract work to Asian countries with low labor costs. I want to build relationships based on friendship, not superior-subordinate relationships. So, as a friend of mine, the president of a Taiwan computer graphics company, asked me to introduce him to George Lucas for a partnership deal, I obliged, without thinking about my own business.

As you do overseas business, it's important to keep relationships active. At all times, you have to try to promote exchanges, and maintain the relationship. I am convinced that such exchanges resulted in Avi Arad, the famed producer of "Spider-Man," becoming the chairman of Production I.G.'s US arm last year. Now, Avi is working with DreamWorks on the Hollywood live-action adaptation of the original "Ghost in the Shell" comic book for which Production I.G arranged a license agreement.

## A Pyramid of Anime Works

**Japanese anime has evolved on its own, spreading to the rest of the world. What has made it happen?**

**Ishikawa:** First of all, there's an overwhelming amount of animated TV shows and feature films in Japan. No other country is as diverse in animation as Japan. There are all types of animated works available here, catering to children as well as grownups, even including violence and sex. Animation here is supported by the "manga culture" that is very high in quality and very wide-ranged in readership.

Of overflowing *anime* works, 90% may not necessarily be good ones. But you have to remember that it takes a pyramid of the 90% *anime* works to support a small number of extraordinary masterpieces on top. That's why extremely characteristic, moving works filled with grudges and passions emerge here.

In America, however, animation projects are subject to selection before being green-lit for production. As a result, those which get produced become all alike. I may say that Japan has soil from which even failures grow. It seems to me though that culture is something that feeds on the clutter and gives birth to edgy works.

The *anime* industry in Japan is like a pyramid. People at the bottom may have difficulties feeding themselves, but the ones at the top do make real money once in a while. Money rolls into the talented ones, and the talented ones flock to where money is in



Oblivion Island

place. I think that's what pop culture is all about.

It's not just for money. But you need money to produce *anime* on a continuous basis. After all, it is commercially made *anime* that is accepted by the world, helping to form culture.

It is one of those rare jobs in which you are paid to do it but, at the same time, you get people moved with emotion, isn't it? The more *anime* I produce, the more impressed I get. After producing *anime* for more than 20 years, I still remain fresh.

## Super-digital & Super-analog

**Production I.G is pursuing new methods of expression, including the production of "Oblivion Island," a 3D CG anime feature film which is still a rarity in Japan and which won the Digital Content Association of Japan chairman's award at last year's Digital Content Grand Prix event. What else do you have waiting in the wings?**

**Ishikawa:** I think "Innocence," which was taken to Cannes, made the fence between *anime* and live-action films a bit lower, paving the way for *anime* to develop onto the TV screen, games and live-action movies. Eventually it also led to the production of the "Ghost in the Shell" live-action film, and helped raise the entire Japanese *anime* world from a kind of off-Broadway status to a Broadway status.

Production I.G from now on will have a two-pronged strategy toward *anime*, super-digital and super-analog.

I have had a sense of crisis that Japanese *anime* is supported by excellent hand-drawn 2D *anime* creators, which in turn made it inevitable to lag behind in international competition for computer-generated 3D animation. So, we are now working on an entirely digital work by director Oshii. On the other hand, we will soon be able to complete a work on which we have spent the last seven years, drawing it by hand thoroughly from beginning to end.

We'll be on a two-horse chariot, keeping the reins on state-of-the-art and traditional *anime*. Keeping just one would not do the work. We have to create a new culture paying due respect to the old power, and use the old style while keeping the new culture in mind. The power of our creativity comes from a melting pot of the two.

I have a feeling that the two works of *anime* I mentioned will mark a watershed in Production I.G.'s history. It looks like 2011 will be a very important year for Production I.G to advance to the next step.

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Yoshihiro Kataoka is a former reporter/editor at Cultural News Section, Kyodo News.