

Anime, Becoming Part of the Global Lexicon

– 60% of the World's TV Cartoons Are Made in Japan –

By *Kurosawa Tsuneo*

SIXTY percent of the animated cartoon programs shown on television across the world are produced in Japan. Animated film has become a big success story for Japanese TV programs sold in the world market. The popular “Pokemon” TV series, for instance, has been aired in more than 60 countries.

Japanese-produced animated movies have also achieved international fame. On Sept. 11, Studio Ghibli, which produced Miyazaki Hayao's animated film “Howl's Moving Castle,” received the Osella outstanding technical contribution award at the Venice Film Festival. This is the third major international award for the famed animated movie director. His previous work, “Spirited Away,” won the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival and the Best Animated Feature Film at the Oscars. Japanese animated films have become so popular around the world that “anime,” the shortened Japanese word for animation, has become part of the world lexicon.

■ Anime TV programs galore

In the United States alone, the market for Japanese anime movies and TV series, along with a myriad of related products and character goods, is estimated at around \$4.3 billion, according to the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO). This, JETRO points out, is three times the size of the U.S. market for Japanese steel products. Most of the market sales come from anime characters and this shows how anime has penetrated the American pop culture.

In Japan, anime is an important attraction to get children to watch TV, and animation series dominate TV programs for children. From 6 to 7 o'clock in the evening, anime programs are always on the air. During a one-week period in early September, 15 anime series took up a total of 7.5 hours of air time from 7 to 8 o'clock at seven TV stations in the Tokyo area. The contents of those programs varied from detective stories to sports, comedy and science fiction.

There are some long-running TV anime series in Japan. The family comedy series “Sazae-san” has been on the air for 35 years, while “Doraemon,” the story about a cat-shaped robot that came from the future, has continued for 25 years.

■ Anime corner-cutters

The Japanese animation industry is already 87 years old and Japan may be considered one of the pioneers in the field as the first animated film in the world was produced just 10 years earlier. Since there was no television in those days, the medium of animation production was celluloid film. The first Japanese animation produced for television was “Astro Boy,” which debuted in 1963. This 30-minute weekly series was the work of Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989), the master “manga” comics artist adored by Japanese fans as the “god of manga.” It was Tezuka who, out of sheer necessity, developed what has been known as the “corner-cutting” process of anime production, a technique that has since given Japanese animation its very distinctive features.

In Tezuka's pioneering days, there were few animators around

Japan and there wasn't much money for anime production. Faced with such challenges, Tezuka decided to cut the number of animation drawings to a bare minimum. According to *Boku no Manga Jinsei*, (My Manga Life, a collection of Tezuka's speeches published in 1997), a 30-minute Disney TV cartoon program would require 17,000 drawings (the film itself is actually 24 minutes long). Tezuka managed to produce an anime of the same length with just 1,200 drawings. This is how Tezuka did it: For close-ups, use as many motionless facial expressions as possible. In a Tezuka anime, one drawing is sufficient for a two-second close-up sequence, whereas a Disney cartoon would require 24 drawings. For scenes with moving characters, shift the background little by little and the trick is done.

■ A distinction from Disney

As a result of such fiddling, a distinctive feature of anime is that it contains lots of motionless scenes. However, that was no problem for previous generations of Japanese children as they were familiar with *kamishibai*, traditional street entertainment in which the storyteller tells a story or fable and displays the characters on big color picture cards. *Kamishibai* was very popular with children before the age of television but faded away after the birth of TV. While a Disney cartoon is distinguished by the smoothness in the movement of its characters, a technique made possible by the huge number of drawings, a Japanese animation is characterized by numerous motionless scenes as well as stiff moving scenes. It was a fate that befell on anime produced under a minimalist drawing principle, and the fate has lasted to this day. It is sort of ironic that an animation production method born out of necessity is now beloved by children around the world – a situation that Tezuka had probably not anticipated even in his dreams.

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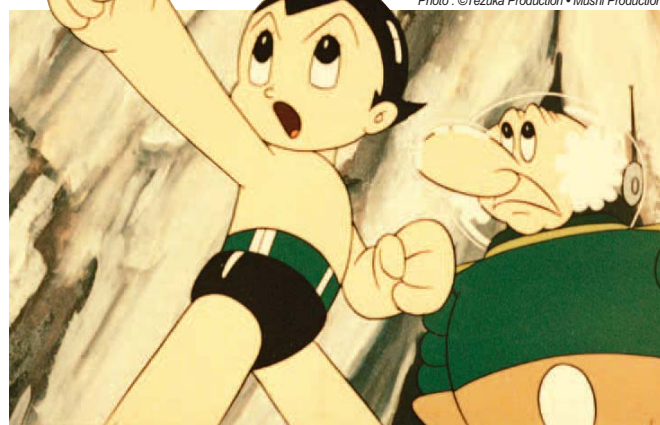


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“Astro Boy” was created by the god of manga

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