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Japan Animation: from Commercialism to Art

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Abstract:

Guarding children from the too much influence of foreign culture, especially the influence of Western world, Chinese government has been encouraging the production of domestic animation.

In China, after 2000, it was decided that more than 60 percent of animations broadcasted on TV must be products of China. Although foreign animation is obliged to be under 40 percent, most of the TV stations except CCTV would not keep the rule. This is the reason why the government decided to take this measure. There is a fact in the background that Disney animations from US and Japan animations are quite popular among Chinese children. Especially, most of the elementary school pupils in the urban area seem to watch such Japan animations as “Detective Konan”, “Ultraman”, “Chibimarukochan (樱桃小丸子)”, “Captain Tsubasa” and so on. In China, Japanese animation and Manga are estimated very high. “Doraemon (机器猫)” used to be selected as the “most humorous reading piece” in the research executed by China Social Science Institute.

In Japan, the number of the animation pieces broadcasted on TV is about 2500. Including the sales of character goods, the gross sales are more than 1 trillion yens. It will be large enough to be called a “gigantic industry”. Export sales are 100 billion yens a year (half equal to the sales grade of all US movies a year, four times equal to the Japanese export steel sales to US). the share of Japanese animation in the world market is more than 60 percents, 80 percents of animation piece broadcasted on TV in Europe are Japanese product. Not only TV animation but also comics are popular. One can easily find bookshelves filled with “manga” in the bookstores in Asian or European countries. Japanese animation is highlighted as the world wide gigantic industry. Not only from the cultural point of view but also from economical phase connected with the movement of vast amount of money, the problems of globalization, regionalization and localization of animation are going to be focused on.

These kinds of animations in Japan, which compose the main stream of commercial animation, produce the particular sub-cultural field that is called “Otaku” culture. Akihabara, where a lot of foreign sightseers went to buy electrical appliance made in Japan, has recently been getting to be the center of “Otaku” culture. With animations, this “Otaku” culture also has spilled on the world. In Europe, as same as Japan, animation events (and even “costume play show” also) are held in various cities. Young people gathering there are called “Otaku” with the respect to the persons who are well up in the sub-culture.

In this paper, the presenter will not treat the actual conditions of Japanese animation as the gigantic industry with the worldwide market and vast investment, which even arouse the interference of politics in the various countries and areas. Relatively independent of the main stream commercial animation, there are some artistic and creative animations which have gradually been popular to the audiences. Their method and potentiality will be mainly introduced in the paper. In this boundary also we can find the conflict between the restriction of nationalism and the possibility of globalization, that never means “Amaricanization”.

The main objects of this examination are the animation pieces based on the works of MIYAZAWA Kenji, a famous Japanese poet and children story writer of the former 20th century. In these years, he has been regarded as one of the national writer of Japan, and also he has been getting gradually well-known in world wide scale. This paper will show how different are the concepts and methods of these pieces of “animazation” of literature, from the ones of commercial animations, and also will show the endeavor of animators to lessen the restriction of nationalism, localism and so on.

I “Gauche, a Cellist” (directed by TAKAHATA Isao, 1982)

The animation piece which is discussed first is “Gauche, a Cellist” directed by TAKAHATA Isao (高畑勲) in 1982. This feature length animation film is produced voluntarily by O-Production, which usually produces commercial animations.

The managing Director of O-Production is MURATA Kouichi (村田耕一). In this piece he also works as general art director. Famous Japanese animators such as SAITA Shunji (才田俊次, director of “MARCO”)、ANDOU Masashiro (安藤正浩, director of “Devilman”), TSUJI Shigeto (辻繁人, director of “Metropolis”) belong to this production.

O-Production was established in 1970 by four Japanese animators (SHIOYAMA Norio 塩山紀生, MURATA Kouichi 村田耕一, KOMATSUBARA Kazuo 小松原一男, YONEKAWA Koushin 米川功真), as a subcontract production company of drawing. Since then, O-Production have been concerning to many animation pieces, as the drawing and animation directors’ studio. Its main works are “Attack No.1”, “Tiger Mask”, “Heidi”, “Marco”, “Galaxy Railway 999”, “Getter Robot”, “Space Pirate Captain Harlock”, etc. Almost all of them are monumental pieces in the Japanese animation history. The fact that O-Production concerns deeply to the production of these works clearly indicates the ability of this company and animators who belong to it.

O-Production invited the animation director TAKAHATA Isao, to whom the company had made a close relationship through the production of the animation series of Japanese famous stories, to produce voluntarily the feature length animation film “Gauche, a Cellist”. This piece was received with a favorable review by audiences. Now more than 30 animators are working there, making animation pieces such as “Chibimarukochan (樱桃小丸子)”, “Metropolis”, and “Sen and Chihiro” which was produced by the famous animation production company “Studio GIBRI”, which belongs to TAKAHATA Isao and MIYAZAKI Hayao (宮崎駿).

It was already mentioned that O-production usually deals with commercial animations for movie theater or TV as directors’ studio of drawing and animation. We can easily find out in this particular “volunteer” work of the production company, with this background, some close relationship to commercial animation.

First: Adoption of the style of “ANIME” painting. TAKAHATA, the director of this piece, had been concerning the work of production of Japanese commercial animation since its begging. With MIYAZAKI Hayao, he has been one of the central members of “Studio GIBRI”. He can be said to be the pioneer of “ANIME”. Directed by TAKAHATA, it may be natural that this piece has the drawing style of one of “Studio GIBRI” works, and adopted the method of commercial animation.

With this problem, we can point out the introduction of some sub characters who never appear in the original story.

“Gauche, a Cellist” is supposed to be written in 1931 by MIYAZAWA Kenji. It was not published in the lifetime of the author.

Gauche, a cellist of an orchestra of movie theater in a small town is said to be a poor player. He is blamed by the conductor because of “out of tune”, or “no expression”. He rests no more than ten days for the concert of the 6th symphony. When he came back to his water mill hut, he practiced the cello part very hard. From that night on, a cat, a cuckoo, a raccoon dog, and a mother-son pair of field mouse visit him one after another. Through contacting these small animals, he unconsciously overcomes the defects of his play. In the concert he played a solo piece “Indian Tiger Hunting” for encore, and won reputation even by the conductor. He apologizes to the cuckoo whom he injured by accident.

In the original story, Gauche is described as a lonely personality who is boycotted even by other members of the orchestra. His private life in the suburban water mill hut inspires his image as a shabby middle age single man, while in this animation, a young female member of the orchestra who watches Gauche decently, appears as a sub character. With this alteration, the character of Gauche himself is changed into a young person. In the end of this animation, the audiences will even have an impression that Gauche and the girl may have sympathy with each other.

The male protagonist works with female sub character, whom the hero loves, or, at least has sympathy with: this is a combination generally adopted in the Japanese commercial animation. This kind of female character is called

“Madonna” after the nickname of the character of NATSUME Soseki’s famous novel “Bochan” “Madonna” is so important that how to actuate her character is the key point to get reputation to the “ANIME” piece by audiences. One of the reasons to add this female orchestra member may be the idea relating to the production of commercial animation which requires the character of “Madonna”.

Reflecting these backgrounds of animation product, despite that it is a volunteer work, we can find in “Gauche, a Cellist” the drawing style and methods used generally in commercial animation are also widely adopted. But it cannot be denied that this piece was released as volunteer projection. It had no general commercial root such as telecasting or distribution by major movie companies. This is the very reason why this piece kept a higher quality than other commercial works that must have many restrictions. The influence of production of this piece can be huge, because it proved possible that, ranking with commercial pieces, the volunteer work can prosper in the field of animation production.

II “Nokto de la Galaktika Fervojo” (directed by SUGII Gisaburo, 1985)

The second piece to be discussed here is “Nokto de la Galaktika Fervojo (this Esperanto title means ‘Night of the Milky Way Railroad’)”. The original story is one of the masterpieces of MIYAZAWA Kenji. MASUMURA Hiroshi (ますむらひろし) made a comic strip based on MIYAZAWA’s story. Getting idea from the comic strip, this piece is made as an feature length animation in 1985, by SUGII Gisaburo (杉井ギサブロー) as the director. Famous drama writer, BETSUYAKU Minoru (別役実) wrote the scenario, and music direction was done by HOSONO Haruomi (細野晴臣), a former member of Yellow Magic Orchestra.

The story begins with the scene in the classroom where the protagonist Giovanni goes. The teacher is telling about galaxy while Giovanni listens to it in an absent-minded way. His father went fishing and there is no information about him so far. His mother is sick in bed now. He is so busy for the part time job that he can’t play even with his classmates.

It was a night of Star Festival. Asking for the milk which should have been delivered to his mother, he went into town, where he happened to meet his classmates. He was jeered by the classmates and escaped to the Hill of Weather Ring Post.

Seeing the sky with sad sentiment, he suddenly found himself in a train. He had got on the train at Galaxy Station. He travels the Milky Way with his intimate friend Campanella. Giovanni keeps a mysterious ticket in his pocket. While traveling from Northern Cross to Southern Cross, he meets and leaves many persons. Through these experiences, he decided to persuade the Real Happiness. But around the Coal Sack in the sky, Campanella suddenly vanished away from him.

After he found himself on the hill, he went to the milk shop to get the milk. Walking along the street, he found that Campanella was missing in the river because he has dropped in the river in order to rescue his friend’s life. Giovanni had no words to say. Campanella’s father told him about his father’s returning home. Giovanni began to run to his home.

“Nokto de la Galaktika Fervojo” is made as a commercial animation. It is expected to be distributed to the nation-wide movie theaters. Actually, this animation was presented in the theaters to get prosperity. Even with this background, the style of drawings and setting of characters are quite different from the methods generally adopted in typical commercial animation pieces.

The beginning of the original story is as following:

“Well, then, everybody, while its been called a river or a leftover spill of milk, can you tell me if this pale white thing is in fact a river?” The teacher pointed to the whitish Milky Way zone stretching from top to bottom of the star map that hung over the blackboard.

Campanella raised his hand. Four or five other students raised theirs. Giovanni started to raise his hand too, but quickly pulled it back. He felt sure that he’d read once in a magazine that the Milky Way was made up of stars, but recently he’d been in a continual daze, even in the classroom, and had neither free time to read books, nor books to read. He’d begun to feel that he didn’t understand anything for certain.

The animation begins in this way. (Projection of the video clip)

The original story begins with teacher’s words. It indicates that Giovanni is hearing teacher’s words in half dreaming. It would be difficult to transfer this whole situation into a scene of animation film. In the animation, the school is seen first from high above in the sky. The point of view gradually comes down with swinging, moves

through the isle of the school building, and finally reaches the classroom. At this very final point, the teacher's voice is heard by the audience. As a literature, the original story has some difficulties for visualization. This is an example of solution for this kind of difficulty. The original story has a lot of features which are proper to literature. The director of this animation skillfully avoids these difficulties. Visualization is successfully achieved. As result, this way of production gives the film its particular mood.

The characters, which are of course human beings in the original story, are changed into cats' form in the animation. This change emphasizes the fantastic element in the original story. Girls who appear in the animation as sub characters are expressed still in the form of human being. The style of drawing of girls seems to be traditional, stereotyped. On the one hand, it shows us some solutions of difficulties lying between literature and animation. On the other hand, participation of talented artists such as BETUYAKU as scenario writer or HOSONO as music director can be regarded as an effort to overcome restriction of commercial animation, which is called generally as "JAPAN ANIME"

III "Restaurant with Many Orders" (script and directed by OKAMOTO Tadashige, supervised by KAWAMOTO Kihachiro, 1991)

Finally, we are going to discuss about the animation piece "Restaurant with Many Orders". The original story of MIYAZAWA is famous for its allegorical mood. Scenario writing and direction was done by OKAMOTO Tadashige (岡本忠成). He died while he was preparing for the film. His good friend KAWAMOTO Kihachiro (川本喜八郎) succeeded his plan and complete the film. While keeping the frame of original story, OKAMOTO and KAWAMOTO boldly changed the plot. They express to the maximum the fantastic world of original story by cell animation with delicate pictorial contrast. The music by HIROSE Ryohei (広瀬量平) helps to intensify this effects.

The original story of "Restaurant with Many Orders" is a part of a children's story book that has the same title as this story. This book was published by the author himself in December, 1924 when MIYAZAWA was still in life. This is one of the most popular pieces in MIYAZAWA's children's story to readers of any age and sex.

Two young gentlemen from city lose their way in the deep forest. They are so hungry. Suddenly there appears a restaurant of Western style with shop sign "The Wildcat House" in front of them. Inside the restaurant, there is a long isle and they find many doors on which is written strange "orders" from the owner of the restaurant. Finally they find out that the "orders" are asked to them, and they are preparing to be cooked for themselves and be eaten by the owner; Wildcat. They narrowly escape to be eaten with the help of a hunter and dogs. They bought wild birds as souvenir and returned to city, but the broken looks of their faces could by no means be retrieved.

The women as the incarnation of Wildcat, who appears before the young gentlemen in the deepest place of the Wildcat House, are this animation's proper characters. There are no such women in the original story. By introducing these characters, the fantastic mood of the original story is much more intensified. As the result, this animation has become impressive enough to be appreciated by adults. The style of drawing formed by using cells which are painted by hand is also very sophisticated. These features of this animation piece have almost no concern to the style of "ANIME character" which is generally adopted to Japanese commercial animations.

OKAMOTO Tadashige, who put the idea of this animation graduated Faculty of Law of Osaka University, worked in a company for two years. After that, he studied to produce animation in Faculty of Art of Nihon University. He worked as animator in the NOM Production company of MOCHINAGA Tadahto (持長只仁), and established Echo Company in 1964. His special field was doll animation which is relatively short. He himself produced and directed films. He knew very well how to use properly the form of plane, solid, and half-solid. Quite different materials and techniques such as wood, skin, cloth, wool, paper, clay, plastic, metals, cedar board etc. are adopted to each one of his animation pieces. In his works, music occupies a much more important position than simple BGM. For example: "Home, My Home"(1970), "Song Series" (including three pieces, 1968—1970), "Everyone's Songs by NHK" (including six pieces, 1975—1986), and "Namu Ichibyou Sokusai" (1973) are full of recitatives and songs, "Chikara-bashi" (1976) is accompanied with Shamisen music, and "Okon Joruri" is a Japanese traditional song story with "Joruri" sung by an old woman and a fox named Okon which occupies the key position. Since 1972, OKAMOTO began to collaborate with KAWAMOTO Kihachiro, gave "Puppet Anime Show" which consists of animation pieces of the two persons and puppet show. This event continued for 6 years to contribute to the recognition of puppet animation to society. "Restaurant with Many Orders", left unfinished after

his sudden death in 1990, was completed by his sworn friend KAWAMOTO. OKAMOTO's works are full of pathos and sympathy, while they sometimes show keen critical minds. The evaluation of his works has been getting higher and higher even after his death.

IV From Kenji to Basho: Possibility of Collaboration between Literature and Animation

KAWAMOTO Kihachiro, who succeeded OKAMOTO's idea to complete "Restaurant with Many Orders", is also one of the leaders of Japanese animators. Born in 1925, from an early age KAWAMOTO was captivated by the art of doll and puppet making. After seeing the works of maestro Czech animator Jiri Trnka, he first became interested in stop motion puppet animation and during the 50s began working alongside Japan's first stop motion animator, the legendary MOCHINAGA Tadahto.

In 1958, he co-founded Shiba Productions to make commercial animation for television, but it was not until 1963, when he traveled to Prague to study puppet animation under Jiri Trnka for a year, that his puppets truly began to take on a life of their own. Trnka encouraged KAWAMOTO to draw on his own country's rich cultural heritage in his work, and so KAWAMOTO returned from Czechoslovakia to make a series of highly individual, independently-produced artistic short works, beginning with *Breaking of Branches is Forbidden* (花折り Hana-Ori) in 1968.

Heavily influence by the traditional aesthetics of Noh, Bunraku doll theater and Kabuki, since the 70s his haunting puppet animations such as *The Demon* (鬼 Oni, 1972), *Dojoji Temple* (道成寺 Dojoji, 1976) and *House of Flame* (火宅 Katakaku, 1979) have won numerous prizes internationally. He has also produced cut out (kirigami) animations such as *The Trip* (旅 Tabi, 1973) and *A Poet's Life* (詩人の生涯 Shijin no Shogai, 1974). In 1990 he returned to Trnka's studios in Prague to make *Briar Rose*, or *The Sleeping Beauty*.

In Japan, he is best known for designing the puppets used in the long-running TV series based on the Chinese literary classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国志 Sangokushi, 1982—1984), and later for *The Story of Heike* (平家物語 Heikemonogatari, 1993—1994).

In 2003, he was responsible for overseeing the *Winter Days* (冬の日 Fuyunohi) project, in which 35 of the world's top animators each worked on a two-minute segment inspired by the *renku* couplets of celebrated haiku poet MATSUO Basho. Famous Russian animator Yuri Norstein collaborated with KAWAMOTO in this project.

Born to Jewish parents in a Moscow suburb, Yuri Norstein painted as a hobby and trained as a carpenter before studying animation. He directed his first film in 1968 and made a series of short films notable for their attention to atmosphere and fine detail, using a multiplane camera to create the illusion of three-dimensional depth. His 1979 film, 'Tale of Tales' was acclaimed by a panel of international animation experts as the best animated film of all time. Since then, he has worked on an adaptation of Gogol's 'The Overcoat', which has been beset by production and funding problems. A small part of the piece that was released as pilot film even surprised the audiences by its high quality of beauty. Its perfection is hotly awaited now.

In this "renku" animation "the Winter Days", KAWAMOTO and Norstein scarcely adopted those routine methods used in commercial films. Each animators that participated in the project find a way to develop a creative work of animation.

"The Winter Days" is far distant from commercial animation which spreads in world-wide scale not only in the process of production but also in the process of consumption. Choosing Basho's literature work, a very "Japanesque" material as object, animators from all over the world expressed the world of Basho in animation by way of each person. As Basho's "renku" is a kind of Japanese poem, it necessarily holds the restriction of language. Specific representation by visualization shows possibility to overcome this restriction. Vast uncultivated field is revealed through making this animation, such as how to imagine rich visions from these simple phrases, how to connect the distance of images between two phrases, or how to express them by visual images.

On the one hand there is a "globalization" of commercial animation presuming worldwide market principle. On the other hand animators who hope to collaborate with friends of all over the world have been increasing and had already given some rich products. Even if their market is still relatively small and their trials are actually still rudimentary, we can expect that its future will be pretty hopeful.

Conclusion

As has been mentioned, getting rid of the frame of “JAPAN ANIME” in system of commercialism, Japanese animation tends to become a kind of total visual art. The Book of the Dead (死者の書 *Shisha no Sho*), KAWAMOTO’s second feature length stop motion puppet animation, after *Rennyō and His Mother* (蓮如とその母 *Rennyō To Sono Haha*) in 1981, recently completed. It had its world premiere as a part of a Special Retrospective Tribute at the 40th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (July 1-9, 2005, Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic) to get reputation. We can find some possibility of internationalization of animation product that is fairly different from globalization, which is nothing but another name of Americanization, such as the spread of Disney animations. The future of these kinds of artistic animation will be promising, if it can keep distance from both Americanization and narrow-minded economical nationalism.