

BRINGING JAPANESE CINEMA TO THE WORLD

Known internationally for works such as Godzilla, Toho has been working overtime to bring Japanese anime and other cinema to the rest of the world. Here are some of the reasons behind the surging popularity and positive ratings Japanese films are earning among movie audiences overseas.

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“JAPANESE anime and other movies have been getting high ratings from foreign countries lately,” says Koji Ueda, general manager of the international business department at Toho Co., Ltd., Japan’s largest movie company. “Among all these works,” Ueda adds, “the copyright licenses for anime get bought up by companies worldwide the moment they’re offered outside of Japan.” The main reason behind the prosperity of anime is likely due to the two main types of movie audiences out there.

After streaming services—such as Netflix in the U.S.—gained prominence, audiences have

shifted to mainly going to movie theaters to see major popular Hollywood titles. Award-winning movies from movie festivals such as Cannes and Berlin rarely bring in strong box-office earnings worldwide, which reveals a

clear division between films that professional movie critics rate highly and movies that people simply watch for pleasure.

“That has resulted in two distinct groups—global viewers who watch films for relaxation,



Toho's promotional booth at the Cannes Film Market, which is held in conjunction with the Cannes Film Festival

and local viewers who seek art and cultural quality,” Ueda explains. “Anime seems to be the middle ground that satisfies the needs of both types of viewers.”

Another factor is that China now ranks second in movie box-office sales after the U.S., which shows another type of audience. Animation is often more suited to expressing inner worlds or fantastical concepts with no basis in reality, and because it is easy to understand viewers can follow the story, no matter their country of origin.

The quality of Japanese animation has gotten so high that even adults enjoy watching it. Animation was once seen as something only for children, which featured the main character as a hero. However, Japanese anime features school life, families, adult relationships and human drama like live-action films, and has covered many real-life genres, to the point that it conquered that stereotypical image.

Japanese anime began to gain momentum when it became wildly popular among a core group of fans, many of them men in their twenties and thirties in North America and Europe. After winning over this group, interest in the genre expanded, leading to several major hits. Titles such as blockbuster *Kimi no Na Wa* (*Your Name*) and works from Studio Ghibli such as *My Neighbor*

Totoro and *Princess Mononoke* gained great popularity among a wide demographic worldwide straight away.



Kimi no Na Wa was a blockbuster in both Japan and China

If you take a look at recent popular international works, there is a definite trend toward globalization. The original stories and intellectual properties, such as characters or logos, tend to be multicultural and ethnically diverse, and many feature the Middle East, South America, Asia and Africa. It is clear that numerous movie producers in Hollywood and elsewhere are seeking fresh new themes for films they hope will become worldwide hits.

The epic *Godzilla* series, which has even made it into the Guinness World Records for its longevity, also gained global fame thanks to several high-profile

Hollywood movie adaptations. “I’d like to make other influential Japanese intellectual properties,” Ueda says with great passion. Foreign fans of Japanese movies rate the unique aspects of Japanese culture highly, and believe that those singular elements are the strength behind Japanese works.

While many Japanese movies and anime productions use Japanese approaches and perspectives, they also incorporate deep universal themes and portray complex emotions, allowing non-Japanese viewers to relate the action to their own lives and enjoy the experience. Japan is third in movie box-office sales worldwide, and Japanese creators of cinema such as Toho will use their own ideas to continue making appealing anime and other works that thrill the world. □



Poster of the major hit *Godzilla*