

ASIAN CORNER

A life in pictures



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

As a boy, I was always discouraged from reading comic books. The teachers at my school in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) argued that my language skills would not improve with the kind of English that they used and my parents would be appalled when they caught me with them.

But despite the disapproval I faced, India did actually have a comic culture. Indeed, many Hindu mythological tales were narrated through such pictorial forms, and it was advantageous in a country with low literacy levels.

This was long time ago, before I had been introduced to Japanese comics. In 2000, I spent six months in Japan researching modern cinema and it was there that I first felt the enormous appeal of manga and anime. In Tokyo, I saw the phenomenal lure of animation through the work of Hayao Miyazaki's 2001 classic "Spirited Away". Produced by his Studio Ghibli, it told the story of a sullen 10-year-old girl trapped in alternate reality inhabited by spirits and monsters. It won the Oscar for the Best Animated Feature at the 75th Academy Awards and the Golden Bear at the 2002 Berlin Film

Festival. It went on to become one of Japan's biggest earners, taking \$272m in worldwide sales.

Often compared to Walt Disney, Robert Zemeckis and British animator Nick Park, Miyazaki was already a well-known manga artist before he made his first animated feature, 1979's "Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro". His 1997 film "Princess Mononoke" had a strong feminist undercurrent, and his movies often see young girls as protagonists in themes about humanity's relationship with nature and technology. It was such stories that helped transport animated cinema into the girls' rooms for the first time.

Miyazaki arguably made a bigger contribution to his country: drawing world attention to its film industry. His movies opposed the view that Japanese cinema had died along with its former giants, directors such as Kenji Mizoguchi, Yasujiro Ozu and Akira Kurosawa.

Unsurprisingly, Japanese anime now accounts for 60 per cent of the country's total film production. Such is their growing international appeal that most Japanese anime features are now distributed by US production houses, like Miramax and Columbia. In 1999, Miramax released "Princess Mononoke", dubbed using the voices of Claire Danes,

Gillian Anderson and Minnie Driver, while a digitally-restored version of Katsuhiro Otomo's 1988 critically-acclaimed "Akira" opened theatrically. Miyazaki's more recent hits, "Howl's Moving Castle" from 2004 and 2008's "Ponyo", also found big markets outside Japan and earned well.

While Japanese anime blends many forms and styles, there are some features that appear to remain standard, namely large, heart-shaped faces, gigantic round eyes and statuesque bodies. It was the grand master of Japanese animation, Tezuka – said to have been an ardent Disney admirer – who first introduced this style. His first popular character was Astro Boy, a space-age Pinocchio robot visualised by a scientist whose son was killed in a road accident. Astro began as a comic book series in 1951 before being adapted into a TV show in 1963.

Western animators may be constantly trying to create characters that look as real as possible (Steven Spielberg's latest feature, "The Adventures of Tintin: The Secret of the Unicorn", is a prime example), but Japanese artists are still doggedly sticking to its well-established traditional cartoon look. In the end, it's the comic fan's call which version works better.