

Eija Niskanen
From Toei Doga
via TV animation to Studio Ghibli



Toei Doga (later Toei Animation), established in post-war Japan to produce full-movement animation films, often called 'Asia's Disney', produced also highly acclaimed animation professionals, whose careers spanned through, participated in, and influenced the historical shifts in Japanese animation industry. Yasuo Otsuka, master character design animator schooled newcomers Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata at Toei Doga, and later participated in their post-Toei works.

When Toei Doga in late 1960s started producing television animation, with Osamu Tezuka's *Astro Boy*'s success as a model, animators, who had joined the studio with an admiration for *Hakujaden (The Tale of the White Serpent, 1958)* started looking for other opportunities for the use of the skills with animation. Yasuo Otsuka was hired for the newly established A Production studio, running under Tokyo Movie Shinsha production house, to animate *Lupin III*. The preproduction took two years, during which A Pro, with need of a cash flow, starting producing *Moomin*, based on Finnish author Tove Jansson's novels, for Fuji TV. Otsuka did character design for the series. *Moomin* turned out to be a hit with its fast pace, artistic level, and sweet fantasy world, and caught the attention of Miyazaki and Takahata, who joined in creating the numerous TV animations based on classic children's literature from around the world. The program slot, in the beginning called 'Calpis Theater' named after its main sponsor, Calpis soft drink manufacturer, was renamed 'World Masterpiece Theater/Sekai meisaku gekijo', and introduced classic animations such as *Heidi Girl of the Alps* (with Miyazaki and Takahata in charge of direction and main animation), *Marco*, *Anne of Green Gables* and so on. Like the beginning part of *Moomin* from October 1969 to March 1970, animated by Otsuka, the shows featured relatively smooth movement considering television budgets, and movable events and characters. When *Moomin*, partly due to copyright infringements was turned from A Pro to Osamu's Mushi Pro studio, the animation quality on the level of cell count per second went down. Mushi Pro, of course, is famous for introducing 'limited animation technique' as a cornerstone technical and aesthetic mode for Japanese television anime with *Astro Boy* (1963).

Due to their experience with both with long feature animation at Toei Doga (Takahata's *Horus Little Norse Prince, 1968*), and with animation highly acclaimed animated classics for World Masterpiece Theater slot, Takahata and Miyazaki, along with Otsuka as character designer entered in producing their first theatrical films: *Panda Go Panda!* (1972), and its sequel *Panda Go Panda!: Rainy Day Circus* (1973), under the production house of the same Tokyo Movie Shinsha responsible for the World Masterpiece Theater. *Panda Go Panda!*'s Panda Papa character, who comes to live with a small girl as a surrogate father, can be seen as a pre-model for *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988). Miyazaki also made *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro* (TMS, 1979), with the animator Otsuka, who had also worked with its television version. Otsuka had worked with Miyazaki also on *Future Boy Conan* TV animation (1978).

Otsuka's involvement with Miyazaki and Takahata continued to the first years of Studio Ghibli (established 1985). The involvement of these three in combined Otsuka's skillful and lively 'bad by characters' with the experience of Miyazaki as an animator for the key scenes, which involved speed and the use of more cells than the slower scenes. Thus the phasing

of speed became a base aesthetic for anything Miyazaki and Takahata participated in. It can be claimed that Toei Doga's original aim to be the 'Disney of Asia' was kept alive through such Toei-educated animation professionals as Yasuo Otsuka, Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, and it flourished at Studio Ghibli.

Biography

Eija Niskanen is PhD candidate at University of Helsinki, where she also teaches film and animation history. She holds an MA from UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. She has been studying Japanese film and animation history at Nihon University and recently at Meiji University as an exchange scholar. She is also one of the founding members of Helsinki International Film Festival, and currently works as Programming director for Helsinki Cine Asia Asian film festival. She coordinates Finnish film and animation events to Japan, and has done industrial research on coproduction possibilities between Finland and Japan for Finanimation and ETLA – Finnish Economic Research Institute).