

Mochinaga Tadahito and Animated Filmmaking in Early New China

Mochinaga Noriko; translated by Nick Stember

(Panel Chair) We're going to have five speakers today, so we will invite them to talk one by one first, then followed by Q & A from the audience. Today's first speaker is Mochinaga Noriko (1942-), the daughter of Mochinaga Tadahito (known in Chinese as Fang Ming) (1919-1999). Mochinaga Tadahito is a Japanese animator who grew up in wartime Tokyo. He lived in China for 8 years (1945-1953), becoming an important animator during the early period of socialist New China. His representative works include *The Dream to Be an Emperor* (1947), *Capturing the Turtle in a Jar* (1948), *Thank You, Kitty* (1950), *Kitty Goes Fishing* (1952), *Who Meowed?* (1979), among many others. Please, welcome Mochinaga Noriko.

(Mochinaga Noriko) First, I imagine everyone probably thinks it's very strange. Why did a Japanese man come to China to make animations? Well, it's all because when my father was only one year old, my grandfather came to work on the South Manchuria Railway Company (Mantetsu, 1906-1945). My grandmother was a school teacher. So when my father was only one year old, he was already living in Changchun. Up until first grade, my father spent his childhood going back and forth between Japan and Changchun. His life was all back and forth up until then. My family is originally from Saga Prefecture. I'm guessing you probably haven't heard of it, since it's way out in the Japanese countryside, with big fields as far as the eye can see. And so my father was going back and forth between Changchun and Saga. I won't be talking very much about my father's early childhood today, but I think it's important to point out that he was still just a kid when the war broke out. I personally believe that the war happened because Japan wanted to invade China. Around this time, my grandfather contracted acute pneumonia and ended up dying when he was still very young. There wasn't anything my grandmother could do, except work hard to support the family on her own. The reason I'm going into all of this is so that you all have some context for understanding the rest of my talk.

My father's primary school was what nowadays we would call an international school. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Russian children were all living together, so from a young age my father had a deep understanding of internationalization and the idea that people should be treated equally, no matter where they come from. When my father was a student, his favorite classes were science, music, and drawing, but especially drawing. Even then he was already extremely passionate about drawing, and was always making different things. I'll tell everyone a story about my father when he was young. Probably, when you hear the story you'll think it couldn't have really happened, but the rules at his school actually were this strict, it's true.

My father got the idea to take off his school uniform and put on his street clothes. That way he could sneak into a nearby movie theatre. He was caught by his teachers twice, and each time they said he was going to be expelled. So he was threatened with expulsion

twice. Actually, my father is the one who should be telling these stories. It's really too bad he already passed away more than two decades ago now. So I'm here today, in his place, telling his stories. But I hope everyone now knows that even when my father was young he was willing to risk getting expelled from school twice, just so that he could follow his passion.

In 1935, when my father was in the second year of high school, he was selected to represent the school on a field trip to Osaka. When he was in Osaka he tried to sneak out to go to a movie theatre, too. The two movies he wanted to see were Walt Disney's *Silly Symphony* (1929-1939) and *Water Babies* (1935). To his surprise, instead of trying to stop him, the teacher who was chaperoning my father actually encouraged him! He said something like, "Well, go on then." So he went and saw both movies, bold as can be, without a care in the world. And these two movies turned out to be a deciding factor in how my father spent the rest of his life.

At the time, what my father admired most about the animations he saw was the beautiful scene that had been created on the screen. That was when he decided he was going to study animation in art school. After applying all around, he was finally accepted to the Japanese Art School (Nippon Bijutsu Gakkō) in Tokyo. At the time, you couldn't major in animation yet, so his major was called "applied arts." It was designed to teach you some practical skills, and of course he had excellent teachers. Overall, my father did very well in school, and at his graduation he was asked to represent his class and give a speech. There are all sorts of stories about my father from this time in his life. But since we have limited time, I won't go any further than I already have.

When my father graduated, Japan wasn't the animation powerhouse it is today. At the time, you couldn't find a job making animations anywhere, so my father had to settle for looking for jobs in related fields. At first all he could find was work drawing billboards in art schools, or making posters for the Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre, and other things like that. Finally, after a long wait, in late 1939 the Art Film Company (Geijutsu Eigasha, or GES) put out a notice that my father saw, looking to hire animators. So he took his portfolio of all of the things he had drawn since graduating and went to apply. They hired him right away. They said my father was the kind of animator that comes along once in 100 years, a real prodigy. It was at the Art Film Company where my father met Seo Mitsuyo, the master of Japanese animation. Seo also thought my father was a great talent, and took a personal interest in his career. Later my father apprenticed under Seo, and together the two of them produced four animated films. But since it was still wartime, the films were mostly political propaganda. Even though that wasn't the reason my father got interested in making animation, he didn't have any other opportunities to make animation at the time. So he put everything he had into helping Seo make these four animated films.

By 1940, my father had been promoted to background artist and director, and was able to release his first film, the three-minute long *Quack Infantry Troop* (1940). And then something really important happened, in 1941. My father built Japan's very first four-layer multiplane camera — actually the first multi-layer camera in Japan. This was only four years after Disney, and was really the first complex animation camera set-up in

Japan. At the time, he used this set-up to shoot the Japanese animated film, *Ari-chan the Ant Boy* (1941). This is a very important film.

In 1943, my father and Seo made another film together, *Momotaro's Sea Eagles*, which was the first animated feature film in Japan. In 1944 he got another chance to make a feature film, again working with Seo. This film was called *Fuku-chan's Submarine*. When Professor Ono, who is here with us today, saw this film as a child, while his family was living overseas, it left a deep impression on him. He told me he hadn't thought that Japanese animation could reach this level. As everyone knows, because of the war, by 1945 in Japan everything was in short supply. Then there was the bombing of Tokyo, and our home burned down. Despite the difficult situation, my father and Seo knew they had a responsibility to continue with their work, and together were able to finish the film. Of course, the long hours he put into this film also marked the beginning of my father's health problems.

In 1945, Japan lost the war, and in China...I'm sorry, this is difficult for me to talk about. Because when we talk about 1945, and the war situation, everyone knows about the atrocities committed on Chinese soil by the Japanese military. As a Japanese person, I feel incredibly sorry that these things happened, so much so that my heart hurts just thinking about it. My father was the same way. At the time, nobody knew how long the war was going to last, and it just so happens that before the end of the war, my father went back to his second home (Manchuria) to recuperate.

Having just finished working on *Fuku-chan's Submarine*, my father thought that it was time for a change: Our home in Japan had been completely destroyed in the air-raids, after all, and the shortages of food and other supplies weren't helping my father's poor health. He still had some relatives on my grandmother's side who were living in Changchun, so my grandparents and great-grandparents all decided that the family would go to Changchun to convalesce.

It took us by complete surprise that not long after we went to Changchun, Japan was defeated, and we ended up getting caught up in the Chinese Civil War between the Nationalists and Communists. At the time, it wasn't just relations between China and Japan that were tense — there was whole other war that was going on between the two Chinese parties, in addition to Russian military situation, leaving all of northeastern China in a state of unrest. Father had come to Manchuria to rest, so he wasn't looking for work. But there was a studio called the Manchukuo Film Association (1937-1945) that hadn't disbanded yet, and the director of the studio invited my father to join them. Originally, my father hadn't planned on saying yes, but as soon as he caught that familiar scent of film in the studio, he couldn't control his creative impulse. And so that was how he ended up accepting their invitation.

After joining the Manchukuo Film Association, he headed up a small team that was responsible for making animations. At the time, there were a lot of Chinese people working in the studio, but because the Manchukuo Film Association was a Japanese company, they treated their Chinese employees very poorly. Not only did they not give

them stools to sit on, they didn't even give them desks to work on! Father was very unhappy of course and said they couldn't treat people unfairly like this. He demanded that all employees of the Manchukuo Film Association be provided a stool and a desk. That way everyone could fully dedicate themselves to their work.

Owing to the Civil War between the Nationalists and Communists, the Manchukuo Film Association was eventually disbanded, and Father's department was placed under control of the Communist Party. In the beginning, they put someone named Shu Qun in charge. Because my father was the only one who knew how to do it, Shu Qun very politely invited him to help them make an animated film. It wasn't a "mandate;" rather, he hoped Father would decide of his own free will to continue working at the studio. Father was moved by the sincerity of his request, and in the end, he nodded and said he would stay behind to make animated films with the rest of the studio. After they had all decided to stay and make animated films, on account of the war situation, they decided that to protect their irreplaceable equipment and materials, they would divide the remaining staff into three teams and make a big move — they would travel from Changchun to Harbin, and from there on to Jiamusi, finally arriving in Xingshan, today a part of the city of Hegang. They went through a lot on that trip, and I think Duan Xiaoxuan, who is here with us today, can probably fill us in on some of the details, much better than I can. So I won't go into this part of my father's story too much, except for one story that took place after they had already arrived in Xingshan.

I think everyone already knows that back then there was a famous actress with the studio named Chen Boer. At the time, she asked my father: "Do you think you could use puppets to make an animated film?" It was a very bold suggestion, because my father worked in cel animation. He'd never made puppets before, and he didn't have any experience making puppet animation. But as I said before, father's personality was the sort that "goes where the tigers are instead of where the tiger's aren't." Whatever he wanted to do, he would wrack his brains until he finally figured out how to do it. So even though he didn't know how he was going to do it at the time, he agreed on the spot.

Chen Boer had a second suggestion, which was to use elements of Peking opera in the animated film. Because my father didn't know the first thing about Peking opera at the time, Chen Boer invited a Peking opera actor to give a live performance, and had my father come and study him. Father watched the actor's movements very carefully, and then made some sketches, trying his best to impress the movements into his memory. That's how China's first animated puppet film was made. It was called *The Dream to Be an Emperor* (1947). We're going to play a short clip from the film now.

"In dreams, he is already an Emperor. But the people of the land are fed up with him. To trick the eyes and ears of the entire nation, Chiang Kai-shek has covered up his evil crimes, and put on makeup, in preparation to put on a new performance of an old play. Bloodthirsty American imperialists will do anything get their way. Chiang Kai-shek wears a mask of hypocrisy, and the perfume of democracy. But it doesn't matter what trick the bandits come up with, they'll never be able to hoodwink..."

Since the war was still ongoing, supplies were short, so just finding the things to make the puppets was incredibly difficult. And because he had never made any before, he had to do many trials. Because of the limited circumstances, it really wasn't an easy film to finish. There is something else I have to mention: in addition to my father producing his first puppet animated film in 1947, I think everyone here also knows that the famous Czech animator Jiří Trnka also produced his first puppet animated film the same year. It's quite a coincidence.

It's still hard for me to talk about some of these things. There is something I forgot to mention just now, before I played the film clip. In 1948, after the Northeast Film Studio was established in 1946, they started working on their first cel animation, *Capturing the Turtle in a Jar* (1948). Whether you're talking about *Capturing the Turtle in a Jar* or *The Dream to Be an Emperor*, both films were produced in cooperation between my father and the Chinese. They overcame all kinds of difficulties to finish these films. For my father, this was a really precious experience, and until his very last days, he would often talk about his memories from this time and tell us stories about it.

New China was established in October, 1949, and in February, 1950, the director of the studio, Wu Yinxian, sent my father to meet Xia Yan. The two of them later went to Beijing together to attend the first meeting of the National Literary and Art Workers Congress. After New China was established, my father and Te Wei produced four films together: *Thank You, Kitty* (1950), *Little Iron Pillar* (1952), *Kitty Goes Fishing* (1952), and *Mushroom Picking* (1953). After producing these four films, my father was called back to Japan in 1953. Although he wanted to stay very much, he had no choice but to leave China. At the time, my little sister and I, plus my grandmother, all went back first, and then later my mother, and finally father.

My father really loved China, as much as he loved animation. Until he passed away, he always told us that. Father would often reminisce about the difficult time we all experienced together. He always felt that during his time in China he was at the peak of his creative powers, and naturally some of his best memories took place there. So I would like to thank his Chinese colleagues and friends for their camaraderie. Although you weren't able to stay by his side after he returned to Japan, in all of his work, from setting up a stop motion animation workshop, to working with American and Korean producers, he remained committed to the goal of internationalization. And in 1999, my father finally had to take his leave from the world. My father spent his entire life working to promote the internationalization of animation creation, and he always did what he wanted to do, no matter how hard. Thank you all!

Bio

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