The second day of the international conference ‘The Superpower of Japanese Soft-power’ started in high spirits as the first guest was Mr. Suzuki Toshio – producer and co-founder of Studio Ghibli. Third- and fourth-year students of the Japanese Studies Department at Sofia University had the great opportunity of conversing with Mr. Suzuki in Japanese about their love towards the art of animation and his work at the Studio. Moderator as well as participant in the session was Albena Todorova.

The discussion opened with questions about Mr. Suzuki’s current projects and his responsibilities as a producer. He shared that Studio Ghibli has been working on a new film for the past three years and that it would most probably take three more to complete. He was also thrilled to learn that Studio Ghibli is so popular and beloved in Bulgaria as at the beginning of the enterprise no one expected that they would become so well-known all around the world.

The curious students did not miss their chance to ask Mr. Suzuki how he got into the film industry as he has graduated with a degree in literature from Keio University. He replied that not many universities in Japan have these types of majors and that literature and films are closely intertwined. Mr. Suzuki also showed a vinyl record of the Bulgarian ‘Bodra smyana’ choir whose music we can hear in the movie ‘Only Yesterday’ (1991). He shared that the vinyl record is quite dear to him and was an inspiration during the creation process behind the film.

In the spirit of International Women’s Day the students steered the discussion towards the strong female characters in Ghibli’s animated feature films and if there were any role models and inspirations behind them. Mr. Suzuki was assertive – Japan is a country where women are strong and he doubts that there is a country in the world where that is not so. Even in Ancient Japan the rulers of the country were women and now they are the pillars of today’s society. He amplified his statement with Studio Ghibli’s statistics according to which over 60% of the Studio’s staff are women as well as about 80% of everyone involved in a new project. He also kindly shared that all women in his life have been a guiding light throughout his career path.

Afterwards the conversation went back to the Bulgarian folklore music included in ‘Only Yesterday’ and the song ‘Dilmano-Dilbero’ that we can hear in the film. Mr. Suzuki talked about the daunting challenges the team had to go through in order to obtain the copyright permission not only for this music but for all the other pieces that appear. The strong friendship bond between Bulgaria and Japan was also discussed as well as Mr. Suzuki and director Miyazaki Hayao’s love for European countries and their culture, mythology and art.

The third- and fourth-years were eager to know more about some of Studio Ghibli’s most famous and highest grossing films such as ‘Spirited Away’ (2001) and ‘Princess Mononoke’ (1997) and how Bulgarians could present their cultural heritage in a similarly compelling way. Mr. Suzuki’s response was to focus on keeping our traditions alive and what makes our country unique, to cherish our cultural treasures and look after them with care in order for the world to see them.

Discussion proceeded with how Ghibli movies and characters are perceived in different countries. Mr. Suzuki gave an example with the ‘Spirited Away’ character No Face who made some laugh and others cry. He added that he had experienced true cultural shock seeing the variety of reactions of the public around the world. Yamanaka Sadao and Kurosawa Akira were some favourite directors who Mr. Suzuki mentioned as well as talking about the all-time question whether computer animation would entirely take over hand-drawn animation.

Lastly, the students asked Mr. Suzuki for advice – about studying Japanese and towards young people in general. A heartwarming and inspiring response was given – ‘Everything that is in front of you do diligently and with care, step by step.’ With a gleam in their eyes everyone agreed that every journey begins with a single step. A commemorative photo with the image on screen of Mr. Suzuki closed the first session at which end words were needless. Everyone’s hearts were brimming with quiet gratitude, inspiration and elation.

The second session of the second day of the conference was titled ‘The Importance of Art Today’ and was opened by the moderator Nadya Obretenova from the Bulgarian National Television with introductory remarks by assist. professor Stella Zhivkova from the Japanese Studies Department at Sofia University.

The first lector and presenter was Mr. Sato Kazutaka from the International Otaku Expo Association (IOEA) who talked about Japanese soft power and women’s role in it. He made a short historical review mentioning authors such as Sei Shonagon and Murasaki Shikibu to Higuchi Ichiyo. He also talked about how women have influenced creation and popularization of manga and anime. Now the percentage of women who create, publish or are interested in manga or anime is even slightly higher than men. Mr. Sato got questions about Japan considering new copyright rules for cosplay.

Next was professor emeritus Hamashita Masahiro from Kobe College, who has visited Bulgaria in the past, discussed the connection between words and images, the necessity of context to understand any piece of art, and rethinking aesthetics in the digital era. A question for prof. Hamashita was about the secrets behind the success of Japanese animation and whether that was due to the century-long aesthetic traditions of the country.

Professor Araki Hiroshi from the International Research Center for Japanese Studies Nichibunken, who has also visited Bulgaria on numerous occasions, talked about Japanese classical literature and its expressions in modern culture as well as how modern culture has increased the interest in Japanese classical literature all around the world. He gave a couple examples from different countries, including Bulgaria. Third-year students asked prof. Araki for advice on translating Japanese classical literature in order to gain perspective for their future endeavours on translation under the guidance of prof. Gergana Petkova.

Last but not least in the session participated professor Anri Kulev, famous Bulgarian animator and film director, New Bulgarian University, and maestro Yordan Kamdzhalov, musician and conductor. Prof. Kulev discussed traditions in Bulgarian animation as well as a short historical overview and talked World Festival of Animated Film in Varna and Hiroshima, and our ties with Japanese animators. In a short interview with the students who were present he suggested the possibility of a collaboration between Japanese animators and Bulgarian Japanese language students. Prof. Kulev gave his perspective on inspiration and how to work with the lack of such, routine and discipline, and diversification in the process of creation. Maestro Kamdzhalov ended the last session on a high note with an emotional and thought-provoking speech about the necessity to understand the bigger picture during times of trial, the need to escape the world of deception and controversy and learn from history so that we do not repeat it.

The last day of the international conference was closed with concluding remarks from prof. Gergana Petkova, Head of Japanese Studies Department at Sofia University, about the courage ‘to come out of the static and embrace dynamic’, to join forces and challenge one another in order to continue our mission toward society and the future. We are here and now – multidimensional and multifaceted, and our role is to keep inspiring, guiding and leading others through education, culture and art even when that proves to be the hardest.