'Demon Slayer' destroyed box-office records despite the pandemic, but why?

It was the box-office weekend that rocked the world.

"Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie — Mugen Train" opened in Japan on Friday, Oct. 16. By the following Monday, it had pulled in around ¥4.6 billion (almost ¥$44 million), the best opening in Japanese box-office history. As the dust settled, industry watchers worldwide were asking themselves two questions: How did a film make that much money in the middle of a pandemic? And, what the heck is "Demon Slayer"?

The popularity of the latter helps explain the former. The film is based on the manga "Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba," which is set in Japan's Taisho Era (1912-26) and revolves around a young man's quest to restore the humanity of his sister, who has been turned into a demon that craves human flesh. As the title suggests, he also does some demon slaying along the way.

The manga ran in the pages of Shonen Jump from 2016 to 2020 and followed many of the beats of that magazine's most famous properties — think "Dragon Ball," "Bleach" and "One Piece" — while introducing its own original elements.

Moderately successful in its first two years in serialization, "Demon Slayer" really caught fire last year thanks to a televised anime adaptation by studio Ufotable. Popular in its own right, the anime also drove sales of the original manga to the point where sales charts were dominated by multiple volumes of the series for weeks. There was even a "Demon Slayer"-inspired wave of thefts — a wave by Japanese standards, at least — forcing multiple manga retailers to stock the series behind their sales counters instead of on the shelves.

"I think a big part of its appeal is that it's very emotional," says Alfred Toh of anime tourism website Mipon. "It's very easy to understand, too."

The popularity of "Demon Slayer" meant that the film, also animated by Ufotable, was virtually assured to make some serious yen. Oh, except for that whole pandemic thing.

In one way, the COVID-19 pandemic may have actually prepped "Demon Slayer" to slay at the box office, says Aya Umezu of film analytics firm GEM Standard.

"As the pandemic prompted people to refrain from various consumer behaviors, the amount of time spent using video streaming services rose. (The series) was offered on nearly every streaming platform," says Umezu. "Streaming services kept fans 'warm,' building eagerness for the movie."

Excited as "Demon Slayer" fans were to see the film, though, what about the risk of going to the theater? The main reason English-language media jumped on the "Demon Slayer" story was astonishment in the West, where COVID-19 cases are again spiking, that a film would break box-office records. Here in Japan, though, cases have hovered around 500 a day since early September, and movie theaters have been in operation — with extra safeguards such as thermal scanners — since June. Until recently, screenings have been held at 50% capacity, but theaters can now fill every seat as long as they don't sell food. These measures appear to be enough for most cinemagoers, says Umezu.

"Based on a consumer survey conducted on Oct. 10, a full 80% of people who went to a cinema answered that they felt 'very safe' or 'somewhat safe' during their visit," Umezu says.

Toh, who saw the film opening day, is a member of that 80%.

"Aside from the masks, everything felt normal," he says. "I didn't feel like there was any danger at all. It was a bummer I couldn't eat popcorn, but it was understandable."