



REVIEW OF 'GOZE: WOMEN, MUSICAL PERFORMANCE, AND VISUAL DISABILITY IN TRADITIONAL JAPAN' BY GERALD GROEMER, 2016

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Gisa Jähnichen¹

Abstract

This short review essay is dedicated to the book 'Goze: Women, Musical Performance, and Visual Disability in Traditional Japan' by Gerald Groemer and published by Oxford University Press, New York. It comes as hardcover and in paperback. An e-book is also available. In the essay, the entire book is taken into view, especially the core ideas and consequences. Many thanks go to the journal *Asian Music* that has drawn my attention to Groemer's work on 'goze'.

Keywords

Goze, Japan, Female musicians, Disability, Music performances

Groemer's book, which came six years ago on the market, is a very brave try to overcome simplification in dealing with the subject 'goze'. Helpfully, the author gives a short introduction into his conventions (page 8) regarding the use of terms and his views on translations resulting in an interesting overview of geographical emergence of a modern Japan in all its contradictions.

In the following real introduction, he states discomfort with his explained motivation to deal with 'goze' as female musicians 'active from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries' (page 15). His language is straight forward, easy to understand, coming sharp out, and he is painfully to the point. For example, in the preface, he says about the essentials of being a goze in Japan and the necessity to see them as individuals who suffered a lot:

This struggle and its effects, not some timeless 'goze mind', enigmatic Japanese essence, or immovable "values", shaped much of the course of goze history. Despite living in a land of authoritarian political institutions, patriarchal social structures, Confucianist calls for social unity, and Buddhist talk of the "end of history", from the start of the Edo period goze began to actively pursue what I shall call their "emancipatory interests" (page 16).

His book, richly illustrated with maps and photographs, has at least six chapters and a seventh chapter named 'After the End', where the author draws a connection to present-day issues and

¹ Gisa Jähnichen is working as professor at Shanghai Conservatory of Music, member of professional international organisations and researcher in the field of ecomusicology and South East Asian performance practices.

persons involved in the discoveries being discussed in earlier chapters. All his chapters have additional names that summarize the core ideas. Reading the contents is already informing about the way how ideas are developed and derived. This convenient fact should not prevent from detailed reading as there are a lot more issues to discover and discuss. The author has notes at the end of each chapter, which seems a bit uncomfortable for a quick and exact reference. It would have been more helpful to organize at least a joint reference list for all chapters at the end of the book.

The author's emphasis on learning from those goze is the red thread in the entire book. Although he admits a multi-voicing approach to the goze's reflections on the human world, he tries to add up and fills the gaps that a single individual could not grasp through methodological arrangements and interweaving witness reports.

His first chapter deals mainly with the visual disability, the way of becoming disabled, the ideas of justifying one's lifestyle and views on early distinctions in goze institutions, their ritualized rules, and local habits. He let the goze do the talk and exhibit their personal views. Then he gently summarizes what they contributed to the historical facts about the last period of time.

The second chapter goes about the production of disability and sets out with a straight forward comment on the many tries of defining disability (page 15). The treatment of blind people might have been a bit different from other disabled persons due to the fact that the arts still could employ them and so this luxury of having entertaining performing arts could enrich the daily life of rural communities.

The third chapter traces the goze associations in what was once called Echigo and is today known as Niigata prefecture. Two of them are taken as examples. One was located in Takada, the other in Nagaoka. Both associations shared many features such as a hierarchical structure; worshipping of the goddess Benzaiten, a legend of origins and a code of behaviour, and a large repertory of songs. These associations supported goze in their daily life, their careers, and in their tours throughout the countryside. They mediated the relationship of goze to the rest of society and supplied a strong sense of legitimacy to the goze way of life, which delivers straight away the theme of the fourth chapter.

Again, in this chapter, the learning process is highlighted. The author shows a lot of respect towards what goze said, did, and how they behaved. To him, this is the cradle of wisdom.

However, the largest chapter is the fifth chapter that is fully dedicated to goze and their audiences. It is called 'Touring and Performing in Echigo' (page 120). The author dives deep into parts of the textual repertory and makes fine distinction from a historical viewpoint. He is clearing the persistent imagination of doing some artful begging at doorsteps. Thus, he is elevating the singing of richly equipped songs on available stages within village communities as far as it was allowed to do so. The author is always tried to give a social and historical framework to all steps that goze did and observations he could assemble. This seems to be a very helpful characteristic of this writing. Here is possibly the right place to add some space for improvements regarding the offered transcriptions, which do nothing to the understanding. At least, if using five-staff-notation (page 162), timelines could be in better proportion as a 16th should never take the same space as a quarter note. This could help understand construction principles and show the significance of tone shapes. It is also risky and not proven that all goze repertory is sung without any kind of meter.

The problem is finally how to remember the meter and the way of singing. These questions seem to be missed in this context which is mainly focussing on the sung text and less on

musical means to carry the text or change its meaning to serve with a better communication between the goze and their audiences.

In the sixth chapter, the author describes the stress for the goze business that came with the Meiji reforms. The reason for this painful decline might have been not the so-called ‘modernization’ of the society and the development of alternatives for travelling goze regarding the distribution of narratives on past and present events. It can be rather seen in the strong focus on exactly that communal function of enriching life of rural communities and filling the gap in the longing for historical connectedness through musical storytelling. The comparably low degree of respect towards musical skills perpetuated by state laws that banned dance and entertainment and religious views on the working processes in life contributed remarkably to the decline. The fight against all these smaller reasons and the revival of some practices that were soon labelled of being ‘traditions’ was often not successful, neither in the former powerful associations nor individually. The few survivors were all concentrated in the hands of new business people who exploited the traditional artists in a ruthless way.

After a detailed social-cultural analysis of the role that goze associations played in this regard, the author comes to the time after World War II, the Postwar Era (page 205), as he says.

Here he explains the ‘After the End’– efforts of a few single individuals in the context of recent Japan. Here, his focus is still unbroken with the transmitted stories and the song texts and less with the musical embedding and transformation.



Figure 1: Stylized book illustration of blind female singers with shamisen (public domain, Japan, photographed by Shinmichi Kurokawa in 2013).

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The entire book is furnished with an appendix that seems to be a last reminiscence of a kind of thesis writing. Literature referred to in the main text body is extensively mentioned and quoted including the so-called goze code. The author then uses the space to go through the different goze associations and their code interpretations. The appendix contains a number of rules and regulations, some of them in great detail, that were too bulky of being included in the endnotes of the chapters. A conclusive bibliography is also attached as far as the author could find out.

The book is a good addition to any individual or communal library, which deals with Japanology and East Asian local and historical differences.