

Japan's ageing population *Roujin Z* reviewed by Chris Corker

Saving the best till last? David Knox considers Miyazaki Hayao's latest film *The Wind Rises*

In this third issue of 2014, we are pleased to bring a broad range of reviews on a diverse selection of topics and genres to the fore. We begin with Chris Corker looking at *Granta: 127*, a collection of stories and images solely focussed on Japan covering a range of styles and perspectives.

We then move onto two animated films, one re-release of a 1991 classic, the other a brand new effort from a renowned director. Chris Corker's review of *Roujin Z* considers whether Hiroyuki Kitakubo's anime has aged gracefully as well as reflecting on the film as a social commentary, as relevant today as it was in the '90s. We also look at Miyazaki Hayao's latest offering, *The Wind Rises*, where David Knox considers this film that addresses the desire to create something beautiful and the realities of those creations being used in war.

The next review is of *Glorious Misadventures: Nikolai Rezanov and the Dream of a Russian America*, which chronicles Rezanov's attempts to establish and develop Russian settlements across the world. Sir Hugh Cortazzi highlights the relevance to Russo-Japanese relations of the unsuccessful and arguably disastrous efforts of Rezanov to establish trade relations with the Japanese.

We then review up and coming director Isogai Nagisa's *The Lust of Angels* which delves into the issues of harassment of schoolgirls on public transport. Finally, we look at the evolution of the traditional into the modern with Mary Murata's review of *Taiko Boom*, a book which examines the current social and international profile of *taiko* drumming.

William Cottrell

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Granta 127: Japan

By various authors,
edited by Igarashi Yuka

Granta Publications Ltd, 2014

272 pages

ISBN-10: 1905881770

Review by Chris Corker

Granta Literary Magazine, established in 1889 by students of Cambridge University and since then a front-runner in the promotion of all forms

of storytelling, has now released an edition focusing exclusively on Japan and its culture. Combining fiction and photo exhibitions, this volume offers something exciting and unfamiliar for those uninitiated in Japanese culture, and is likely to induce nostalgia in more seasoned Japanophiles. The accessible familiarity of many of these stories may border on trite for anyone already *au fait* with the culture, and those readers should not approach the collection expecting to have their preconceptions challenged. Those less familiar with Japanese culture, however, will gain some insight into Japanese society through an enjoyable, accessible medium.

In terms of theme, many of the stories understandably feature the Tōhoku Earthquake which has affected every Japanese person, regardless of their geographical location, highlighting a constant, underlying threat to life in an otherwise incredibly safe society. A secondary theme is one of loneliness and isolation, either self-imposed or forced. Many of the characters feel that they have few or no connections to society, that their future is a persistent weight on their shoulders. After the earthquake, many people lost their homes and belongings as entire neighbourhoods were swallowed by the tsunami, leaving them without a base or identity. Other themes include the treatment of the elderly in an increasingly ageing society; Japanese-Korean relations; being a foreigner in Japan; loveless/sexless marriages; and lagging gender equality (it is worth noting that many of the protagonists in this collection are female). In this review I will focus mainly on two of the stories – one by a Japanese author, one not – and write briefly on a few more that deal with these topics and others.

'A Clean Marriage' by Murata Sayaka is the first story in the collection and drops the reader right into the microcosm of Japanese married life. The style of writing is very dry and economical, representing the marriage, which from the start seems devoid of passion, the convenience of the couples' life together taking precedence. We are told immediately that their marriage is platonic. Recent surveys suggest that anything from a third to 40% of marriages in Japan are sexless, with work commitments, lack of personal space and no desire to have children being cited as reasons by couples. The increasing preponderance of the nuclear family has proved just as much a mixed blessing in Japan

as in the UK. The husband and wife in the story both seem very content with the arrangement – both of them in employment, dividing chores up evenly and seeing other people for sexual fulfillment – until the topic of children is discussed. Averse to sexual relations with each other, they decide to undergo a treatment using the 'Clean Breeder'. As their doctor explains:

'[I]t is a means to facilitate, in the purest sense of the word, reproduction. The aim of sex as a medical treatment is not to provide pleasure.'

Here the modern ambiguity of gender roles is brought into focus, the biological imperative being replaced by the technological and clinical. It is the man in the story who adopts the archetypal female role, being selected as the focus of the procedure, succumbing later to morning sickness-esque nausea. In 'A Clean Marriage' the intersection of contemporary family life, convenience and scientific progress is put under the microscope, the removal of antiquated ideas and gender stereotypes facing off against the de-humanising element of this evolution, and the reader is left asking whether or not anything in life should truly be 'clean'.

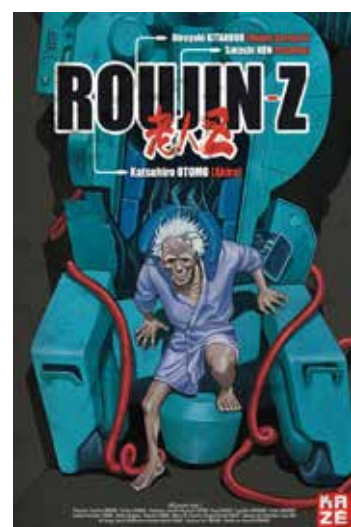
'Variations on a Theme by Mister Donut' by David Mitchell is a story that reproduces his now famed narrative technique. The split perspective – which Mitchell used in both *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* – is put to good effect here, not only offering a different viewpoint on the same tale, but with each voice revealing a clue that uncovers something new about the previous narrator. Mitchell taught English in Japan for 8 years, and his eye for detail adds authenticity to the story. Anyone familiar with Japan will recognise the range of characters that descend on Mr Donut – a foreigner teaching English and suffering an existential crisis; a phone obsessed teen channeling Japan's sexualised 'Hello Kitty' gender stereotype; a senile old man mumbling about the war; and the polite, earnest shop worker who freezes like a rabbit in the headlights the moment Japanese emerges from a foreign mouth, reflecting that her one English phrase, 'Is this a pen', never seems to come up in daily conversation. All these personalities clash in the diminutive setting of Mister Donut (a fast food café).

While each of these views offers its own social commentary – the old man bigoted, unable to forget the war, treated with disdain by the younger generation; the foreigner using Japan as a mere pit stop in his life journey, hunting for Japanese girls ('*Gaijin* groupies') by night; the young girl so consumed by technology and social media that she loses her sense of differentiation between reality and reality-TV – the main theme running through this story is one of loneliness. Each character, whether through his or her own self-imposed circumstances or ones forced upon them, is isolated from others in a society where, as the waves of people and progress crash down, it's easy for the head of one person to slip beneath the surface. The foreign English teacher's solution is simple enough: 'Befriend loneliness'. This advice is no use to the old man, whose own loneliness acts only as a painful reminder of his sweeter memories, his

own mortality tainting the present.

Further stories include Andres Felipe Solano's 'Pig Skin', in which a man is fascinated by a Korean he meets on a ferry and is drawn into a seedy plot that becomes the material for his own book. As well as depicting Korean-Japanese relations, this story also discusses Japan's decadent generations of previous authors, whose lifestyle was said to be a rejection of the nationalistic sentiment prevalent before and during the Second World War. 'Printable' by Tō Enjō is a metafictional story highlighting the plight of the translator, re-creating another's work but never creating anything of one's own. Finally, 'The Dogs' by Motoya Yukiko is a pleasant surrealistic story of a woman who withdraws from society to an isolated cabin in the snowy mountains. Here she meets a pack of small white dogs who she adopts as a substitute for human companionship. As her detachment from society deepens, the people around her lose their reality, becoming surreal.

The photographic art interspersed throughout the volume – some photos old and black and white, others modern and vividly colourful – is a pleasant diversion. Hamada Yuji, whose work 'Primal Mountain' also features on the cover of this edition, has attempted to create hyper-realistic mountains from pieces of tinfoil, superimposed on an authentic Japanese skyline. He writes that this is his response to the unreliable information that was released to the public after the earthquake. 'The information that was broadcast by the media, the information that we received, didn't match up to the reality that was before our eyes... I wanted to make something that showed 'real' and 'fake' becoming friendly with each other... It is not the maker of the images who establishes and delivers what is seen.' This contrast between what appears on the surface and the truth hidden below – the subsequent disillusionment and detachment – are familiar themes in many of these stories, adding an interesting and serious undercurrent to the quirky and rich cultural heritage that many already associate with Japan. An interesting read. §



Roujin Z

Directed by Kitakubo Hiroyuki and written by Ōtomo Katsuhiro

Re-release of a 1991 Anime

80 minutes, 2012

Review by Chris Corker

Roujin Z is not a new anime – it was originally released in 1991 – but it is one that has recently been re-released into the public domain, and also one of

those rare pieces of filmmaking whose social context is still just as relevant today as it was when it was made.

Focussing on the problem of Japan's ageing population (To quote the BBC: 'in 1990 [in Japan] there were almost six people of working age for each retiree, but by 2025 that number will have fallen almost to two.'), the film satirically reproduces the mech-orientated glory days of Japanese animation, placing this camp and overblown genre within a serious moral construct. And it does so to great effect, possibly more so for those who are familiar with older animation – newcomers may just find the whole thing baffling. Perhaps these, however, will find humour in the knowing nod to early sci-fi, with



its idealistic prophesy of the end of all our problems through the vessel of technology.

If anything could act as a guarantee of the quality the film has to offer, it would be the production staff. Ōtomo Katsuhiro, beside Miyazaki Hayao, is one of the few names in anime to be well-known outside of Japan and his seminal masterpiece, *Akira*, is still considered to be one of the most influential sci-fi and punk films of all time. The other notable name is Kon Satoshi who, until his recent and untimely death at the age of 46, produced some of the most thought-provoking – and certainly mature – anime ever. Works such as the psychological thrillers *Perfect Blue*, *Paranoia Agent* and *Paprika*, as well as other films such as *Tokyo Godfathers* and *Millennium Actress*, are a testament to an impressive body of work. I would argue, however, that his greatest project was born of a second collaboration with Otomo called *Memories*. Kon's segment, *Magnetic Rose*, perfectly entwines narrative elements such as love, loss and betrayal in the limited arena of deep space, and with only a forty minute runtime. I doubt any other film will ever take the genre of space opera – even if it is somewhat of a misnomer in this case – so seriously, or portray it more adeptly. And while Kon is only really responsible for art and design here, you can see the rudimentary origins of his character design and his attention to detail in play. Ōtomo-isms are also apparent throughout, most noticeably in the electronic wire tentacles that flail about madly, before connecting in synergy with buildings and computers, creating a network of throbbing mechanical veins.

The story takes place in a relatable and recognisable modern Japan, where the burgeoning population of elderly is becoming a problem for the state. The Ministry of Public Welfare steps in with a solution: the Z-001 bed, which can care for all of an elderly patient's needs

without putting more strain on a nursing force that is already stretched to breaking point. The Z-001 bed is an all-singing, all-dancing computer that seems too good to be true – and here's where the catch emerges: the power source is nuclear.

The basic concept already feels like one fit for anime aimed at young boys (*shōnen*); a bizarre reversal of the *Gundam* premise, where young children are forced into machines and used as tools of war. Here is where the satire begins. *Roujin*, in Japanese, simply means an elderly person. We associate the 'Z' however, more with shows that involve big shiny robots (as in *Mazinger Z*) or giant muscled heroes punching each other through mountains (*Dragon Ball Z*). What we don't expect, is a social commentary on an ageing society. These layers are where *Roujin Z's* strength lies. It isn't afraid to be derivative or to make nods to other works that have influenced it, such as in a scene where a hacker boasts he has just infiltrated the Tyrell Corporation, this being the manufacturer of Replicants in *Blade Runner*. It's an apt reference, given that the question really running throughout *Roujin Z* is whether or not a machine, devoid of compassion and other human emotions, can really give the same quality of care as a human.



Right in the middle of this troubled setting is Haruko, a student nurse caring for the elderly Mr Takazawa, who will later become our man in the machine. Takazawa yearns for the companionship of his wife, Haru, who we know has already passed away. His yearning is first misdirected towards Haruko ('ko' in Japanese can mean child, placing Haruko as a younger version of the wife that Takazawa has lost) and then the machine, which, through technological trickery imitates her voice. When Haruko realises that Takazawa is to be used as a test subject for the Z-001 she protests, asking the question: 'How can the machine give him the love he needs?'

This is a question that is later turned on its head, as the machine acts with Takazawa's desire's at heart, while the humans in charge of his care, who couldn't have been said to have treated him with dignity, try their best to capture him. It is Takazawa's desires – specifically to return to Kamakura and the *daibutsu* in Hase, where he spent happier times as a young man with his wife – that cause the machine to revolt, first being encouraged by outside hackers, before gaining sentience.

The escape is chaotic, and here the story takes on the

guise of a humour-filled chase sequence, reminiscent of films like *Herbie*. Adding to the humour of the chase are the central characters, featuring the archetypal roles of the brash, proper but naive official and his quiet, nefarious sidekick.



As the chase continues, the Z-001 becomes more and more emotionally involved with its patient, enveloped in the role of wife and protector. Wedged in here for good measure is a plot involving the use of the Z-001's chip by the military, but this is overshadowed by the more heart-felt narrative, the constant humour which prevents the story from becoming too heavy. This levity, however, never detracts from the depth of the story. If we were to dig beneath the surface we may even see Otomo's rampaging, ever-spreading, unstoppable technology as a clever manifestation of this ageing society, perhaps even of the effects on the planet of our entire population. The final scene brilliantly optimises this bizarre mix of the spiritual and technological, still treating it with a dash of humour.

While the animation may have aged, the social commentary of the film remains as relevant as it ever was, perhaps more so. It also helps that the film is, at its core, a light-hearted – at times almost slapstick – adventure that can be enjoyed by anyone familiar with anime, and probably even by those that are not. §

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The Wind Rises

Directed by
Miyazaki Hayao

Based on Hori Tatsuo's 1937
short story *The Wind Has
Risen*

126 Minutes, 2013 (DVD/
Bluray from Studio Canal)

Review by David Knox

The Wind Rises (*Kaze
Tachinu*) was never
intended to be a movie. It
was originally conceived
as a manga side-project

by its director and head of Studio Ghibli, Miyazaki Hayao. The manga was loosely based on the 1937 short story *The Wind Has Risen* by Hori Tatsuo, a fictionalized biography of Horikoshi Jirō. When approached to turn his manga into a full-length feature Miyazaki was reluctant given that he didn't believe the manga was appropriate for children, but was swayed by his staff's reasoning that even children should be allowed to grapple with challenging themes. I'm glad he changed his mind, though it's also bittersweet given that this is his last feature film before retirement.

Jirō Horikoshi was a designer of Japanese fighter planes during World War II and *The Wind Rises* follows him as he struggles to build his aircraft and grapples with life in pre-war Japan. There are elements of Jirō's life that have been embellished somewhat. For example, Jirō's wife did not have tuberculosis. Miyazaki's mother did, however, and his father was also director for the company that supplied rudders for the Mitsubishi A6M Zero, which was designed by Jirō Horikoshi, so when watching this part of the story one cannot help but feel that the film is somewhat autobiographical.



Does it need to be said that the film is achingly beautiful and stunningly animated? Probably not – it is Studio Ghibli after all and we've come to accept nothing but the best from them. But it's hard to fathom how the Studio keeps improving in a purely visual graphic sense. They were already at the top of their game with seemingly nowhere else to go with their last movie, *From Up on Poppy Hill*, but here they improve once more; the colour pallet is exceptional and every line is exquisitely drawn and wonderfully animated.

Sound design has also long been a strong suit for Studio Ghibli, and in *The Wind Rises* they have really raised the bar.

Many of the sound effects are rendered by human voice and this lends the machinery a distinctly living, breathing character. The scenes depicting the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 in particular exemplify this inspired artistic choice. The animation in conjunction with the vocalized sound effects gives the sense of a world that is alive, rippling, hissing and groaning as it cracks apart. It really felt as though *Namazu* – the earthquake causing catfish of Japanese mythology – was stirring.

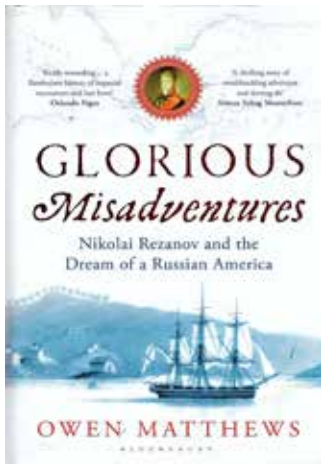


The film is punctuated with dream sequences in which Jiro converses with his hero and fellow aircraft designer Giovanni Caproni. Such set pieces should be familiar territory for those versed in Studio Ghibli's more whimsical side. These sequences have a wonderful flow to them; Caproni acts almost as a guide and mentor to Jiro, extolling on him the virtuous beauty of his designs and lamenting, as does Jirō, their 'inevitable' use for violence. It is hard here to be sympathetic, and the film in general is not without controversy. We are after all viewing a film about a man who designed a machine that was used to kill people during the most problematic era of Japan's history. At one point in the film Jirō contemplates that a weight problem with one of his designs could easily be rectified by removing the guns. That's just not an option, and he knows it, but he continues to design his aeroplane anyway. Jirō's thoughts on what his aeroplane is fundamentally going in to the world to do are only really explored in passing. At one point he remarks that "Japan is making an enemy of the world" and, in a frank observation, that "Japan will blow up". The film is challenging in this regard, which is what takes it to another level; here we have a man who knows what his creations will do and yet at the same time he is creating a design masterpiece, the A6M Zero.

Is *The Wind Rises* Miyazaki's best film? No, for me that honour lies with *Spirited Away*. Is *The Wind Rises* a great movie? Yes, entirely so. It is visually spectacular, beautifully written and, when required, wonderfully subtle. But most importantly, it feels deeply personal, as though this were a little piece of Miyazaki's heart on screen. It is no secret that Miyazaki has always been passionate about aircraft (Studio Ghibli is named after an Italian Ca.309 Ghibli, designed by Giovanni Caproni), and this film is clearly fuelled by the passions of its author.

Jiro is quoted as saying of his aircraft "All I wanted to do was make something beautiful". Miyazaki has certainly done so.

§



Glorious Misadventures: Nikolai Rezanov and the Dream of a Russian America

By Owen Matthews

Bloomsbury Publishing,
2013

369 pages, £9.98
(paperback)

ISBN-10: 1408822234

Review by Sir Hugh Cortazzi

This well researched and well written book traces the career of Nikolai Rezanov who sought to establish and develop Russian settlements in North America from Alaska to modern day California. It covers his early life in St Petersburg from his birth in 1763, his involvement with the Russian America company, his travels in the Pacific and ends with his death in Krasnoyarsk in Siberia in 1807.

Rezanov was ambitious but he had a difficult and quarrelsome character and was often his own worst enemy. He was accompanied by the naturalist Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff whose lengthy account was published in 1813. Captain Adam Johann von Krusenstern, who commanded the ship on which Rezanov travelled on his main voyages, but with whom he was often not on speaking terms, also published an account of his voyages with Rezanov in 1813.

Owen Matthews gives an interesting account of life in St Petersburg, in Siberia and in what was Russian America at the beginning of the nineteenth century, including Rezanov's stay in San Francisco in which he, then a widower, became betrothed to Conchita, the daughter of the Spanish governor. Rezanov died before he was able to marry her and her story has provided a romantic subject for American and other writers.

The main interest for anyone involved in the study of Japanese history and Japan's reopening to the west lies in the chapters devoted to the mission to Japan led by Rezanov in 1804/5.

After a tempestuous voyage from Kamchatka, during which the presents from the Czar to the Japanese Emperor were damaged by sea water and buffeting and Rezanov and Krusenstern quarrelled fiercely, the Russian ship, *Nadezhda*, arrived off the port of Nagasaki at the end of September 1804.

Rezanov's visit was based on an over-optimistic interpretation of the letter, known as 'the Nagasaki Permit,' given by the Japanese to Adam Laxman eleven years earlier. This provided permission for a single Russian ship to come to Japan and trade. On this flimsy basis and on the humanitarian pretext of returning five shipwrecked Japanese, Rezanov vainly hoped to persuade the Japanese to open up to trade with the West.

Rezanov had no real knowledge of how Japan was governed in the Edo period and even less understanding of Japanese bureaucracy. He could not begin to comprehend the way in which the minds of the officials whom he met worked. He could not speak any Japanese and mistranslations and misunderstandings proliferated.

Owen Matthews relates the frustrations caused by official obstruction and deliberate delaying tactics. The Russians were forced to remain on their ships for weeks and even when permitted to land were confined in what was little bigger than a cattle pen hidden behind screens. The excuse of the local officials for the delays was that they had to consult the Bakufu in Edo. Because of the slowness of land and sea communications at this time instructions from Edo could not reach Nagasaki for months.

Rezanov did not help his case. He openly pissed into the sea in front of Japanese officials and constantly behaved in an arrogant manner. He often lost his temper and his personal hygiene shocked the Japanese. Krusenstern and Langsdorff were frequently disgusted by his behaviour and there were times when it seemed that Rezanov was losing his reason.

The response from Edo, when it finally came through and was conveyed to Rezanov, was a humiliating rebuff. At the residence of the Nagasaki *bugyō* (governor) Rezanov was handed, in what was described by the Japanese as 'an extraordinary instance of favour,' a handsome scroll. This declared that 'Japan has no great wants and therefore has little occasions for foreign productions. Her few real wants... are richly supplied by the Dutch and the Chinese...' The Shogun regretted that he could not accept Czar Alexander's gifts or even his letter. 'The basic laws of Japan forbid us from making foreign acquaintances.'

Rezanov was not allowed to pay for the food and other supplies, which had been provided by the Nagasaki authorities, and was told that Russian ships would not be permitted to return shipwrecked Japanese sailors. The Czar's presents, which had been landed and rejected, had to be repacked and taken away.

On 5 April 1805 the Russian ship was towed out to sea and when out of cannon shot the ship's powder and the crew's swords and muskets, which had been impounded while the ship was in port, were returned to the Russians. The Japanese parting gift was 'a beautifully-wrapped packet of seed for the Empress of Russia so that she might have Japanese flowers in her northern gardens.' §



The Lust of Angels

Directed by Isogai Nagisa

UK Premiere at the
Raindance Film Festival

40 minutes, 2014

Review by Mike Sullivan

(Contains plot spoilers)

One of the reasons *The Lust of Angels* stands out from the

many other Japanese films being shown in London at the moment is that it was written and directed by a woman, Isogai Nagisa, and the short movie's main cast are all girls.

On top of the fact that seeing a Japanese film by a female director is something of a rarity, Nagisa herself is relatively unknown, and we have to thank Third Window Films for bringing her work to the UK. Over the summer Third Window Films started a Kickstarter fundraising project to release a limited edition DVD called *New Directors from Japan*, to include the work of three young talents who hadn't yet received any kind of distribution outside of Japan – or even within it. The appetite for such a project was such that they reached their goal within days which ensured that the DVD would be produced and go on sale in November 2014.

Nagisa's contribution to the DVD comprises *The Lust of Angels*, an earlier short film called *My Baby*, and an interview. Furthermore, *The Lust of Angels*, along with films by Takaya Kosuke and Watanabe Hirobumi – the two other directors on the disk – had its UK premiere at the Raindance Film Festival in London.

Speaking with Nagisa before the premiere she emphasized how grateful she was to Third Window Films for giving her this opportunity, while also being extremely nervous about how the UK audience would react. Regarding the film itself, she explained that the original inspiration for the story was based on something that happened to her friend at high school. A man flashed a group of schoolgirls and, contrary to his expectations, the whole group started making fun of him and one girl even attacked him. Nagisa used this for the basis of her story and expanded upon it.

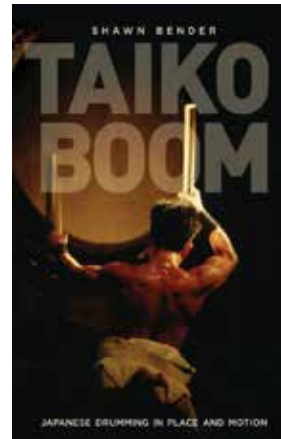
The film itself covers the twisted mixed desires of a group of four schoolgirls within a world of male gropers and out of control schoolboys. On the infamous Hanagawa train line all girls are aware that there are many gropers, and so most girls take long detours rather than risk riding on the train. One day Saori is on the train and reading a little red book when a middle aged man starts to grope her from behind, unbeknownst to him another schoolgirl, Yuriko, nearby has noticed.

She attacks the groper, slashing him with a razor blade; however both the groper and Saori run off when the train stops. Later at school the teacher introduces a new student, Saori is shocked to see Yuriko. The two girls become friends,

and along with two other girls make the decision to hunt gropers.

However, their hunt exposes deep divides among the girls which are mainly personified by Saori's desire to be touched and Yuriko's hatred of it. The wide gap between them leads to their ideals of justice becoming twisted, and puts them all in danger.

The movie has a real 1970s feel to it, while the plot creates real tension by addressing an all-too-familiar problem in Japan. At 28, Isogai Nagisa is still a young director and we can hope to see more from her in the future. [S](#)



Taiko Boom: Japanese Drumming in Place and Motion

By Shawn Bender

University of California Press,
2012

280 Pages, £19.95

ISBN: 0520272412

Review by Mary Murata

The sound of the *taiko* drum is the sound of Japan. The 'DON' of the huge drum booming across the temple grounds; the high pitched *shime*-drum as it drums out the audience from a sumo tournament; the cheerful beats of the festival drums accompanying *bon-odori*. Few traditional Japanese events would be the same without *taiko* in the background.

Often described as the 'ancient' art of Japanese drumming, *taiko* has undergone a revolution since the 1950s. *Taiko* has moved out of the shadows, away from being the accompanying instrument in the background to centre stage. The player has become a performer, skilled in not only playing the beats but also executing exciting visual physical movements. The development of the *taiko* ensemble owes as much to western influences as it does to traditional Japanese music. The first *taiko* group – Osuwa Daiko – was formed by jazz drummer Oguchi Daihachi who had the vision to create a drum kit using traditionally-made drums. The group Ōedo Sukeroku evolved out of adding flash dance movements to traditional festival pieces. Ondekoza (later Kodō – arguably the most famous and best *taiko* group) was established by disillusioned young urbanites setting up a commune to live closer to 'nature'. Although studying traditional music and dance, they were equally influenced by western musicality.

In his book *Taiko Boom*, Shawn Bender charts the journey of *taiko* out of the temples and festivals and on to the international stage. But not only that, he uses *taiko* as a prism through which many aspects of Japanese society can be viewed. Asano Taiko is the world's leading *taiko* drum manufacturer – established in 1609 the current owner is

the 16th generation engaged in the manufacture of *taiko* prized across the globe. So why would the head office have a framed certificate from the tax office for 'outstanding tax preparation'? The Asano family, in common with most *taiko*-makers, are *burakumin*, a group traditionally associated with 'polluting' occupations such as leather work and handling dead skins (used for drum skins). Although illegal, discrimination against *burakumin* persists to this day. Bender takes us to Liberty – the Museum of Human Rights – in Osaka and introduces *taiko* groups which use *taiko* as way of "revealing and overcoming all forms of discrimination".

In other chapters, Bender discusses the role of women, nationalism and aesthetics of race in *taiko* as well as the rise

of modern 'traditions'. *Taiko* is currently experiencing a huge increase in popularity (the titular boom) all round the world; *taiko* groups (Japanese and non-Japanese) regularly tour the UK, and appear on the programme at the Edinburgh festival, Glastonbury, WOMAD and the Royal Variety Performance. Despite this, very little information is available in English. Although written in a slightly academic tone (the book started life as a doctoral dissertation) it is engaging, entertaining and accessible to anyone with an interest in Japan or *taiko*. This fascinating book in effect doubles the amount of literature available in English on *taiko* so is a very welcome addition. §



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