

Foreword

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FOREWORD

Peter Ackermann and Evelyn Schulz

This volume of essays was not planned the way it has turned out.

When we first were asked to gather a selection of papers for publication in this year's volume of the *Asiatische Studien*, we spoke to a number of prospective contributors in a mood reflecting a certain degree of worry. What we were worried about was the fact that many people who here in Europe had studied books and articles on Japan showed a tendency to appear very "informed" about Japan, to speak of Japan in terms of "knowing" Japan and of "understanding" Japanese developments and phenomena. We are well aware that Japanologists have in recent years increasingly been called upon specifically to provide information of the kind that should help planned projects in the sciences, in business or also in tourism to be carried out more effectively.

To us, who speak Japanese and spend a considerable amount of time in Japan, dynamic Japanese reality always appears to be very different from the static images of Japan held by probably the vast majority of persons discussing the country from outside. In particular, the speed and the manifold facets of change in Japan make our endeavour to "catch" Japanese reality through description and research a frustrating task, the results of which always appear to us to fall terribly short of the "real thing".

With these worries in mind Peter Ackermann composed a call for papers made up of the following text:

"The 1997 volume of the (Swiss) *Asiatische Studien* (Asian Studies) wishes to focus on culture as a process of continuous movement and change. The idea is to try to take two Japanese terms seriously that are used in discussions of social realities in Japan as perceived by the Japanese themselves. These terms are: *tayōsei* and *ryūdōsei*, implying, respectively, "diversity, variety, manifoldness", and "liquidity, fluidity, something that keeps moving".

Like many of my colleagues in Japanese Studies, I am often called upon to deliver lectures and write articles on "Japan", "Japanese style management", "Japanese education", "the Japanese personality", "the

Japanese language”, “Politeness in Japanese”, “Japanese Music” and the like. I feel it necessary to make the point that tasks of this kind appear extremely problematic to anyone familiar with concrete situations in Japanese reality.

Also, it has become fashionable to have researchers from various individual disciplines within the overall field of Japanese Studies to join forces, the aim being sometimes quite explicitly “to explain Japan”, to “help us to understand Japan better”. However, we may ask ourselves: can we, if we are honest, really tell what “Japan” is? Can ever so many studies from many different disciplines really help us understand “Japan” better?

If we ignore the professional Japanese Japan-explainers, and also the somewhat unnatural situations where Japanese try to tell non-Japanese about Japan, we will soon observe that people in Japan, just like people elsewhere in the world, are perfectly aware that the context they are living in is a continuous process, not a rigid state. The daily problems and anxieties of people in Japan, just like elsewhere, arise from being constantly challenged by this process and having to adapt to it. Moreover, this adaptation is always the result of a large number of conscious and unconscious choices being made, and therefore always consist of as many differing positions as there are individuals.

Of course it is legitimate for us to ask whether the choices made and the positions taken can be characterized in an overall sense as “specifically Japanese”. However, I think this question should not be of central concern in the intended collection of contributions. Finding out what is “specifically Japanese” would demand an extensive comparative study and, more importantly, could all too easily suggest a static culture characterized by one specific pattern of acting. Rather, it is the intention of this volume to stress different and diverging positions, the relationship between positions, and the process and pattern of change that is brought about by a multitude of positions existing side by side.

One aspect I consider to be of particular interest is the relationship between concrete states and attitudes as they exist at one point in time, and states and attitudes that exist at other points in time. We should not forget that even the most traditional and “static” structures and values are always “modern” structures and values, i.e. they are a (conscious or unconscious) reaction in the present to some earlier state considered worth retaining, or restoring. At the same time, every existing, “modern” value and structure

contains the seed of development within it, be it that it is (consciously or unconsciously) retained, changed or discarded. In this sense there is no such thing as “Japanese”, but rather, there is constant coping with change and diversity by people in Japan and/or people speaking the Japanese language.

To sum up, the 1997 volume of *Asiatische Studien* should contain a collection of contributions that bring to awareness the existence of *tayōsei* and *ryūdōsei* in any aspect of life and society that is in some way related to Japan.

As there are not only questions of content involved in such an approach, but also questions of method, discussions that draw on material from other cultures (e.g. China, or a country in Southeast Asia) would be welcome too, provided they also touch upon – and stress – some theoretical aspect of the general topic of the planned volume.

It is probably an illusion to expect ever to be able to “grasp” a culture, but the further away a culture is from us, the more we seem prone to believe in this illusion. (The many reasons for this fact are obvious: less immediate contact, less feedback, salient differences in comparison with our own culture, which absorb our interest to too high a degree, a much smaller number of experts, who would hardly appear to be seriously doing their job if they related just to tiny facets of some micro-reality somewhere in Japan, etc.)

However, at this time, where people not only wish to read about Japan, but also to prepare themselves for interaction with Japanese (hopefully using the Japanese language), it is urgent to be highly sensitive to the fact that culture is an ongoing process, consisting of an innumerable number of actions and reactions. The ability to cope with this process is becoming vital as we begin to realize that abstract understanding of “Japanese management/education/politics” and so on are not enough. Maybe a few interesting contributions might spring from the knowledge that there is a fundamental difference between “Japan” and, say, the living and breeding patterns of the bullfinch.”

The response to this call for papers was overwhelming. We never expected so many and such a large variety of papers to be submitted. As it was our aim to stress *tayōsei* and *ryūdōsei*, we decided to accept the majority of papers, provided they made an explicit effort to come to terms with the

problem posed in the call for papers. It goes without saying, however, that none of the papers have solved the posed problem in an ideal way, rather, they have dealt with the problem within the limits of their possibilities.

It would have been desirable to invest more time and energy in editorial work and present this collection of papers in a slightly more clear-cut way. However, we are forced to beg the reader to understand the predicament we faced in that a large number of very different papers had to be accommodated in a periodical whose publication must not be delayed too long. The result is therefore something of a kaleidoscope, which we hope will at least heighten the awareness of certain problems and show that change, diversity and fluidity are aspects that can and must be approached from many angles. To our mind, such a kaleidoscope goes a long way to deepen the very impression of the *tayōsei* and *ryūdōsei* of Japanese reality, and this is our ultimate aim.

The editing and the layout of this volume had to be undertaken by a very small, non-professional team and under difficult technical circumstances. We would like to express our most sincere gratitude to Christoph Langemann, Verena Werner and Peter Buchmann for their invaluable help and the enormous amount of energy and time invested to prepare these papers for publication.

Zürich and Erlangen, August 1997