

From Japanology to Japanese Studies and Beyond: Trends in German Scholarship

Anna Maria Thränhardt

*Visiting Professor, International Research Center for Japanese Studies
(Visiting Professor, Catholic University of Louvain)*

The Road to University for German Students: Access for the "Chosen Few" only

Germany has a school-system which is not comprehensive but divides pupils at an early age (normally at the age of 10 years) into different types of schools which lead to very different levels of educational attainment. The first "Hauptschule" gives its students a general education, which ends at the age of 16 years and enables them to enter a training as a craftsman. The second track, the "Realschule", also lasts until the age of 16 years, but on a higher educational level. Attendance of further schooling ("Berufsschule") on a part-time-level accompanying the vocational training in a public system is compulsory until students have attained the age of 18 ("Berufsschule"). Only the third track, the "Gymnasium" (corresponding to the old "kyuu-koutou-gakkoo in pre-war Japan) leads its students to a demanding final examination ("Abitur"), which in principle enables them to enter any university without further passing an entrance-examination. According to official statistics the graduation-rates from "Hauptschule", "Realschule" and "Gymnasium" are 32%, 38% and 30% respectively¹.

So, as we see, the German system is rather elitist, dividing the children at the age of ten into separate schooling tracks according to their expected intellectual capabilities. At this age it is often more the attitude of the parents than the intellectual qualities of the offspring which is decisive for selecting the type of school where the children are sent and therefore the system lacks in openness of access to advanced educational opportunities for children of lower social strata. Part of this is compensated by the fact

¹ Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft Köln (ed.), *Zahlen zur wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: 2000*, Köln 2000, table 125.

that in cases of outstanding intellectual achievement, it is possible to change from one of the less demanding school-types to the "Gymnasium" at an later age or even after having finished one of those schools with excellent results. But in reality this is impossible to achieve without extra tutoring from the side of the "Gymnasium", because of the differences in requirements in the different school-types and the ensuing disadvantages of the graduates from "Real- or Hauptschule". As the commitment of the "Gymnasiums" towards such thinking in terms of equal educational chances for the offspring of all stratas of society is developed differently, the rate of pupils who are successful in such a "late-switching" varies considerably. Educational policy being the responsibility of the state ("Bundesland"), the chance to achieve this—for obvious reasons—is statistically better in states with progressive majorities.

This graded system of school-education from a comparatively early age, on the other hand, has the advantage of offering intellectual training with high standards for the "chosen few" who are sent to the "Gymnasium" and are able to graduate after 9 years. In this context, it must be added, that—in contrast to the Japanese system—the process of selection is not restricted to the period of entering high-school or final graduating examinations. The whole period of schooling is highly competitive and selective (i.e. pupils can fail in any grade, and have to repeat the year, if their scores are too low. In case of repeated failure they are forced to leave the school and are sent back to one of the lower type schools).

The German University-System

After graduating from high-school by passing the "Abitur", students can enter any university without further entrance examination. Temporal restrictions ("numerus clausus") are in effect in a few disciplines where the number of students is too high in relationship to laboratory-capacities, e.g. in medicine, veterinary medicine or psychology. But in Japanese Studies there of course exist no such restrictions.

Most German universities are public (state universities) and generally it can be said that there does not exist a hierarchy of different levels of quality among them. Furthermore there are no fees for the students to pay. For students whose parents cannot afford to pay for their living expenses, there is even the possibility to get public funding for the time of university train-

ing, mainly on a loan basis.

A second big difference from the Japanese or American system lies in the way university is organized: except for language training, the courses can be freely chosen according to the student's own interests. This has to do with the fact that students in philological or social science departments are rather free in combining majors and minors. For a Master's degree they need to have a major, e.g. Japanese studies, and two minors, e.g. Chinese Studies and political science, economics, literature, philosophy, comparative religion or comparative linguistics. It is recommended that the minors be chosen in such a way as to complement the major, in factual as well as methodological respect. So for students interested in literary aspects of Japan, the first choice would be to combine Japanology, German literature and Sinology. For students concentrating on sociological aspects of modern Japan, Japanese studies could be combined with political science, economics or politics of East Asia.

German university-education is oriented very much on teaching scientific methods and gives a good scientific training from the very first day of studies, while neglecting the aspect of teaching facts. The idea behind it is to teach the student how to do research or where to find information, rather than teaching her/him facts. As the "Gymnasium" has lasted for nine years with rather strict schedule oriented towards general education, this is completed before students enter university and there is no need at the university level to study general subjects. University training is meant to give specialized courses only.

Traditionally, there is no B.A.-degree in Germany, but presently some universities are starting to offer such degree on the basis of a more structured curriculum with a credit point system along American or British lines, in order to adjust to internationally transferable university curricula. But the normal way up to now is to study for about 6 years and finish with a M.A. degree. Unnecessary to say, this leads to German students finishing academic training and entering the job-market at an advanced age. On the other hand, it should be pointed out, that university students applying for exchange programs in foreign countries already have a specified scientific training even without having "graduated" from university, because there is no such graduation-degree as a B.A. For exchange programs with Japan this fundamental difference in the structure of university training some-

times causes misunderstandings in the sense that advanced students in the German system are not recognized as students working on a graduate level with scientific aims.

From Japanology to Japanese Studies

In all of Germany there exist some 40 chairs of Japanology or Japanese Studies. While the term Japanology ("Japanologie") was used at the time of establishment of such chairs in the fifties and sixties, "Japanese studies" is mostly used for more recent establishment of departments. The change of name represents a change of contents as well: the classical subject of "Japanology" focused mainly on cultural, literary and philological aspects of Japan before the Meiji-Restoration, while Japanese Studies are concerned with present-day Japan. The methods employed here are sociological, political or economical. In short, Japanese Studies are organized as regional studies, employing the scientific methods of the relevant disciplines. It was mainly in the seventies and eighties, that chairs with this orientation were founded. The rise of this new trend was emphasized by the establishment of a new scientific association, the German Association for Social Science Research on Japan (Vereinigung fuer sozialwissenschaftliche Japanforschung), in 1988, which since then has organized yearly conferences on important topics related to recent developments in Japan. Examples of this are the following:

- Eurocentrism in Research on Japan
- Social Policy in Japan
- Individualization in Japanese Society
- Small Government in Japan—Model or Anti-model?
- The Yen—Economic, Political and Social Dimensions of a Currency
- Reforming Japan
- Japan in Comparison—Perspectives on Comparing Japan

The website of this association can be visited for further information under the following address:

www.jdzb.de/vsjf.htm