The Transfer of Technology between Germany and Japan from 1890 to 1945

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1 INTRODUCTION

These two quotations clearly show how strongly German scholars’ views of Japan changed within only a few years. For Hans Fleschner (the source of the second quotation), participant at the 1929 World

Asia, the cradle of mankind, is covered with the debris of weak, disgraced people, who can no longer make use of the possibilities of the encouragement that the present technical progress offers to them.¹

Friedrich Freiherr von Wieser, 1910

. . . Japan is in every respect a modern country and has proven that in general and special questions of technology it can keep up with all other countries . . .²

Hans Fleschner, 1930

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Engineering Congress in Japan, the country already belonged to the group of progressive, industrialized countries. Only twenty years earlier, the economist Friedrich von Wieser obviously did not even acknowledge Japan as a country. In his view, all Asia consisted of peoples who did not take part in the modernization process, so were doomed to lose out. These countries were not only losers in the fields of technology or economics, but also as political or cultural powers. The quotation from von Wieser shows that even though Japan had won two wars (against China in 1894/95 and Russia in 1904–5), so gaining the respect of some Western powers, he would not recognize it as a modernized – or even a modernizing – country.

For some scholars in Germany like von Wieser, Japan was obviously still the ‘Far East’ – ‘far’ not only geographically but also mentally. It is surprising that this view persisted despite the development of close technical and economic ties between the two countries during the Meiji era (1868–1912). It shows that many German intellectuals were unaware of development taking place in Japan.

On the other hand, it is clear that Japan’s politicians and intellectuals in the early Meiji era also did not perceive Germany as an ‘industrialized country’. This is in sharp contrast to their view of the USA, Britain and France. That was why compared to other industrialized countries few German technical advisers and engineers were employed by Japanese industry.

However, the situation rapidly changed around 1890. At that time Japan started to recognize Germany as an industrial nation, one indicator being the growing interest of Japanese science students in German sciences. The First World War, however, altered these incipient mutual positive perceptions. In the interwar period, Japan became again very ‘far’ for Germany, which was busy handling its own difficult economic problems. But the great interest shown by Japan in German technology led to some kind of partnership between the two countries.

Starting from the 1930s, the technological development of Japan produced particular needs. The Japanese side sought only very specific German technology. Especially during the wartime period, the Japanese were interested almost exclusively in Germany’s arms technologies. At the same time, an arrogant attitude towards Japan prevented the German side from perceiving the scale of Japan’s technological development. Many Germans saw Japan still as an ‘apprentice’, learning from Germany. The idea that Japan might have technology to offer German industry was almost unthinkable. This gap in mutual perceptions resulted in many misunderstandings on the German side, and strained the relationship between Germany and Japan, which officially was based on the ideology of ‘Völkerfreundschaft’, but in reality was rather deformed by distrust on the German side.

This chapter examines changes in the mutual recognition in the field of technology. This field, represented by engineers and the transfer of technology, is rarely taken up in papers on German-Japanese relations.