

Ludwig Riess *Allerlei aus Japan* (Miscellaneous Things from Japan) (1905)



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Ludwig Riess

Ludwig Riess was born in Deutsch Krone, North Germany (now Polish territory) in 1861 (Bunkyū 1). He studied history and geography at the University of Berlin, (home to eminent historians such as Gustav Droysen, Theodor Mommsen, and Heinrich von Treitschke) and worked as a scribe for Leopold von Ranke. In 1887 (Meiji 20), he was invited by the Japanese government to teach history at the College of Letters of Tokyo Imperial University (now the Faculty of Letters of the University of Tokyo). There he helped establish a more rigorous Western style of historiography and helped established the “Historical Society of Japan,” an academic society for historiography. During his tenure at the University of Tokyo, he taught historical methodology, history of civilization, ancient Germanic history, German and French history, in addition to his specialty of British constitutional history. It is said that Riess

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laid the foundation for the study of Western history in Japan. In the area of national history, he insisted on the need for research on foreign documents on Japan, especially the large number of Japan-related historical documents in the Dutch National Archives. During his tenure, Riess himself collected Japan-related documents in The Hague, London, and Rome when he returned home on furlough. Riess married a Japanese woman, Ōtsuka Fuku, with whom he had a son and three daughters. After retiring from the Tokyo Imperial University in 1902, he returned to Germany and worked as a lecturer at the University of Berlin (later as a professor outside the university) and as a lecturer at the Army War College, while at the same time publishing numerous works. *Allerlei aus Japan* (Miscellaneous Things from Japan) is a collection of various writings Riess published in German newspapers and magazines throughout his stay in Japan and thereafter. He died in Berlin in 1928 (Shōwa 3).

The newly born Meiji Japan was required to import Western learning in every field of study. To this end, many foreign teachers came to Japan as so-called “hired foreigners.” Ludwig Riess was one such foreign teacher.

He came to Japan at the age of 26 and showed a youthful interest in all things Japanese. From time to time, he contributed articles on various topics of interest to newspapers and magazines in his native Germany. After returning to his homeland following over 15 years of teaching in Japan, Riess continued to publish articles on Japan in Germany. He selected more than thirty of these articles and published them in 1905 under the title *Allerlei aus Japan* (Miscellaneous Things from Japan) exactly when the Russo-Japanese War triggered European interest in Japan, a small country in the Far East.

With regard to Japan-Germany relations at that time, the two countries had been in rivalry over their interests in mainland China since the Sino-Japanese War. Japanese newspapers vilified Germany, while German Emperor Wilhelm II came up with his “Yellow Peril Theory,” which warned of the perils of the yellow race (mainly with the Japanese people in mind). Riess, who had lived in Japan for a long time, and was happily married to a Japanese woman, must have found it hard to feel at ease when Germany and Japan were not only at odds politically, but also criticized and blamed each other in racial and cultural terms. In the preface to *Allerlei aus Japan*, Riess calls Japan “the country where I spent the most wonderful time of my life.” His daring to use such a phrase in Germany at the time of 1905 accentuates his enthusiasm for Japan and for the publication of this book.

When reading *Allerlei aus Japan*, we may notice that Riess’ writing is surprisingly calm and dispassionate. Perhaps, because of his background as a historian, Riess “lets the facts speak for themselves” regardless of the topic at hand. There is no effusive praise or, conversely, haughty and impassioned criticism in his writings on foreign countries. So, when reading *Allerlei aus Japan*, we may sometimes feel as if we are reading something like a report, a newspaper commentary, or, for that matter, a scholarly article.

When the so-called “Ōtsu Incident” occurred in 1891, in which the Russian Crown Prince Nicholas Alexandrovich was attacked by a Japanese policeman in the city of Ōtsu, Shiga Prefecture, Riess immediately wrote a report on the incident, which indeed has the feel of a correspondent’s report. “The impression this unexpected incident made on the Japanese public was extremely powerful,” he writes.

“Numerous schools, banks, theaters, and even the stock exchange were closed for one to three days to express sympathy for the injured Russian Crown Prince.” He does not call the Japanese policeman barbaric, nor praise the reaction of many Japanese after the event, but merely reports facts about the incident.

Not surprisingly, his reports on historical events read like newspaper articles, but his method of “letting the facts speak for themselves” is used across the board, even when describing “Yamato-damashii” (Japanese spirit/Yamato-Geist) and “Bushidō” (the way of the warrior/der Weg des Kriegers). For example, on “Yamato-damashii,” Riess writes: “Already three hundred years ago, the Dutch had this experience. [...] When a foreigner disputes with any one of the Japanese merchants, his fellow Japanese merchants quite spontaneously stand up in unison to boycott the foreigner. Once the ‘Yamato-damashii’ is aroused, the Japanese can no longer escape their implicit sense of duty.” Whether “Yamato-damashii” or “Bushidō,” from the perspective of someone raised in the European cultural sphere, and such concepts being uniquely Japanese, one would expect a more critical analytical approach. Riess, however, describes these concepts quite calmly, as if he were writing about a political event. It is more like reporting than discussion.

Much of Riess’ writings are like this. Riess, like any historian, wanted to show the real face of Japan, a country hardly known to most Europeans, as faithfully as possible. For the same reason, Riess likes to take up the Japanese system, which may appear mysterious to Europeans, and gives a detailed explanation of it.

Take, for example, the “Genrō” (elder statesmen) system. At the time of the Russo-Japanese War, the Tokyo telegraph frequently sent articles to Germany about the decision of the “Japan’s elder political advisors,” but the German translation of the word “Genrō” as “ältere politische Berater” must have made German readers suspicious of the state of politics in Japan. Riess’ writing style is at its best when explaining such things. With concrete examples, he attempts to inform German readers about the details of the foreign system by referring to German historical institutions which are similar to the “Genrō” system.

It is not a surprise that *Allerlei aus Japan*, which aims to inform Europeans about the realities of contemporary Japan, mainly discusses current affairs. However, the book is not merely a commentary on Japanese politics, but also explains in detail the traditional culture of Japan and the Japanese lifestyle and customs of the Meiji period, brilliantly describing Meiji Japan from a foreigner’s perspective. The excitement of Japanese children in Meiji Japan celebrating the Momo no Sekku (Peach Festival) and Tango no Sekku (Boys’ Festival); the hustle and bustle of adults welcoming the New Year; and the Bon festivals (to celebrate dead ancestors’ homecoming), are vividly described in this simple narrative.

In addition, Riess also casually introduces Japanese Edo literature. He translated *Cash-strapped in the New Year’s Eve* from the book *Saikaku Shokoku Banashi* (the miscellaneous stories of Ihara Saikaku, a writer of popular fiction) into German as *Koban-Münze gefunden* (Koban coin found), as if he had heard the story from someone else, without naming Saikaku or anyone else. The story is included in *Allerlei aus Japan*. One of the interesting aspects of this book is that we modern Japanese find Riess focusing his attention on unexpected aspects. Further, through

his eyes, German readers will be able to experience Japanese culture from various angles and perspectives.

Needless to say, *Allerlei aus Japan* also includes Riess' own personal experiences. Foreigners who have lived in Japan often write about their experiences with fire, and Riess is no exception. In addition, he compares various nation's attitudes toward fire: "In London, the fire scene is often inundated with piles of onlookers causing a huge commotion. In Chicago, rumors spread quickly about the millions of dollars in fire damage. [...] In Tokyo, when a fire breaks out, people respond in a courteous and respectful manner, with neighbors doing their best to help put out the fire." It would be an exaggeration to call this "comparative cultural analysis." However, as a "thesis on Japan," Riess here uses a comparative methodology to explain "Japan," referring to various national characteristics. This deviation gives us a glimpse of another Riess, who is different from someone basing his research on close observation of Japan and its objective reporting.

Riess introduced Japan in positive terms based on his deep understanding of the country. Yet he was not devoid of a critical perspective on the country. One chapter in *Allerlei aus Japan*, entitled "A Flaw in Japan's Cultural Development," stands out from the other chapters, which focus on introduction and analysis. Riess' criticisms do not address the distortion of Japanese culture due to modernization, but he does criticize the lack of respect for individuality in traditional Japanese culture from a European perspective. That Riess, who was so focused on reporting, refers to "flaws" in Japanese culture points to the multifaceted nature of this book.

In the preface to *Allerlei aus Japan*, Riess likens himself to a person who, in his spare time, never tires of gazing at the clutter of mineral specimens arranged in a case. *Allerlei aus Japan* (Miscellaneous Things from Japan) is a collection of occasional writings, not a unified or systematic "thesis on Japan." This explains his choice of the word "*Allerlei*" (Miscellaneous) in the title of this book. It is also why we may find unexpected gems among the cluttered 'mineral' samples. This diversity is the book's most distinguishing feature, often absent in similar books that are meant to be "theses on Japan."

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