

# Erwin von Bälz (Baelz) *Das Leben eines deutschen Arztes im erwachenden Japan* (*Awakening Japan: The Diary of a German Doctor*) (1876–1905)



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Erwin von Bälz (Baelz)

Erwin von Baelz (Bälz) was born in 1849 (Kaei 2) in Bietigheim, southern Germany. He studied medicine at the Universities of Tübingen and Leipzig. After serving as an apprentice medical officer during the Franco-Prussian War, he became an assistant, and then a lecturer, in pathology and internal medicine at the University of Leipzig. He came to Japan at the invitation of the Japanese government in 1876 (Meiji 9), became a teacher at Tokyo Medical School (the later University of Tokyo Faculty of Medicine), and stayed in Japan for the next 30 years. During the period, he not only introduced modern Western medicine to Japan, but also devoted himself to the development of cures for diseases unique to Japan, including research on tsutsugamushi disease and beriberi. He also introduced the benefits of Japanese hot springs to the world. In addition, he conducted anthropological research on the

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physical characteristics of the Japanese, and the famous Mongolian spots are said to be Baelz's 'discovery.' He is known, in the field of psychiatry, for his research on *kitsune-tsuki*, or fox-possession, as well as for his creation of "Baelz water", a topical skin medicine. As for his family life, Baelz married a Japanese woman, Arai Mutsu (later Hanako), with whom he had a son and a daughter. After retiring from the University of Tokyo in 1902, he worked as a court physician for the Ministry of the Imperial Household for 3 years before returning to Germany with his wife in 1905. He died in Stuttgart in 1913 (Taishō 2). The diary that Baelz kept while in Japan was edited by his eldest son Toku and published in Germany in 1931 (Shōwa 6). The book *Awakening Japan: The Diary of a German Doctor* contains not only the text of *The Diary*, but also draft speeches, memoirs, letters, and other writings.

Japanese medicine during the Meiji period was greatly influenced by German medicine. Many German physicians came to Japan to teach Western medicine in Japan. Among them, Erwin Baelz (who stayed in Japan for 30 years), deserves special mention. Some go so far as to call him "the father of modern medicine in Japan." Besides this medical contribution, Baelz left us today with a valuable testimony about Meiji Japan in the book *Awakening Japan: The Diary of a German Doctor* (hereinafter *The Diary*), which was edited by his eldest son, Toku Baelz.

Baelz came to Japan in 1876, not long after the turmoil of the Meiji Restoration. During the 30 years before his return to Germany, he wrote in his diary a variety of his thoughts and feelings about the turbulent times of the Satsuma Rebellion, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Russo-Japanese War. He wrote with the sober eyes of a foreigner, and yet often, too, with excitement and animation as if he himself were Japanese. *The Diary* is an invaluable source of Meiji's historical facets, and as a theory of Japan that includes brief but incisive comments on various events. For example, on February 9, 1889, when the citizens of Tokyo were in a state of excitement over the promulgation of the Constitution, Baelz writes, "Tokyo is in a state of indescribable excitement over the preparations for the promulgation of the constitution on the 11th. [...] The great joke is that no one has the least idea of what the constitution will contain!" The reality of Japan during the Meiji period was thus aptly captured by the pen of a foreigner named Baelz.

Baelz was in an advantageous position to describe an unknown aspect of Meiji Japan. As a court physician for the Ministry of the Imperial Household, he was often present at important meetings attended by Meiji dignitaries, and through diagnosing and treating them he became acquainted with such dignitaries as Iwakura Tomomi, Inoue Kaoru, Yamagata Aritomo, and Ōkuma Shigenobu. A commentator on the English translation of *The Diary* said that the list of Japanese politicians of Baelz's acquaintance reads like a Who's Who of Japanese politicians in the Meiji era.

Indeed, *The Diary* is not only a record of various events, but also a Who's Who that shows the real personalities of Meiji politicians. For example, his description of Iwakura Tomomi's plea to keep him alive until Itō Hirobumi comes back to Japan with a draft constitution, when he realizes that he does not have long to live, is a true testament to the spirit of a Meiji politician. On the other hand, the description of Ito Hirobumi's audacity in showing with a gesture that the Crown Prince was like a

puppet is a valuable testimony obtained only because *The Diary* was not expected to be made public.

Baelz, who witnessed many deaths as a physician, often writes, with great grief and admiration, of the Japanese attitude toward death. In addition to the case of Iwakura Tomomi mentioned earlier, the stories of how Soejima Taneomi “bore his distress stoically” when he was informed of his son’s imminent death, and of the brave attitude of Tokyo Governor Matsuda’s wife, who “has been able to retain an appearance of dignified composure” in the midst of immense pain after being told that her husband has cancer, are described with sympathy and admiration. Baelz, who also wrote the book *Death and the Japanese*, was particularly interested in Japanese attitudes toward death. In this sense, *The Diary* is unique as a “thesis on Japan,” because it describes, with concrete examples, the cultural behavior of the Japanese under the extreme circumstances of death.

*The Diary* has a variety of contents, providing a view of Japanese behavior under various circumstances. On seeing strangers helping one another at the scene of a fire and working quickly to restore the damaged area after the fire was extinguished, Baelz exclaims: “They are a wonderful people, these Japanese!” He was also amazed at the orderly behavior of many people enjoying boating on the Sumida River, describing them as “a people with whom good behavior has become second nature.” However, he also expressed his dissatisfaction with some behaviors, such as the university authorities’ treatment of foreign teachers. When the University of Tokyo was inaugurated shortly after his arrival in Japan, Baelz lamented the fact that no acknowledgment was made to the German teacher at the ceremony. In his diary more than 20 years later he was equally indignant because the Minister of Education had given few words of acknowledgement to foreign teachers at a farewell banquet.

A diary being a diary, it is not surprising to find a mix of positive and negative evaluations of the Japanese. Baelz writes harshly of the way the Japanese treat foreign teachers as if they were convenient machines, but also warmly regards the simple and honest attitude of the ordinary people.

The particularity and variety of its descriptions and anecdotes, and the raw, intimate form of expression, demonstrate that often a single concrete ‘living’ example is more persuasive than a theory of ten million words. In *The Diary*, a foreigner, whose own experiences inevitably led to a series of frictions with other cultures, expresses his non-uniform evaluations of Japanese culture in a direct manner, even in his ambivalent attitude. If cross-cultural understanding is achieved, never by drawing a straight line, but rather by walking a zigzag course, then *The Diary* is not only a “thesis on Japan,” but also an example of how a person who comes into contact with a different culture may learn to “understand” it.

Baelz himself, after 30 years of contact with Japanese culture, was keenly aware that it is not possible to understand another culture overnight. Therefore, he always cautioned Japanese intellectuals who, in their haste to import things European, neglected to understand or explore the roots of European culture, and instead became preoccupied with importing foreign culture. He often made a record in his diary of his speeches at universities and other institutions, one of which warns against the

attitude of Japanese people who simply import the fruits of Western science without understanding its origin and essence:

From all the lands of the West there have come to you teachers eager to implant this spirit in the Land of the Rising Sun and to enable you of Japan to make it your own. Often enough, however, their mission has been misunderstood. They have been looked upon merely as purveyors of scientific fruit, whereas they really were, or wanted to be, the gardeners of science.

Baelz felt his position enabled him to teach Japanese people how to import Western culture, and he was wary of Japanese perceptions of cross-cultural understanding. He writes, “One who wishes to understand a foreign nation must try to immerse himself in its modes of thought and expression, for only when he has done this will he be able to explain its views and customs.” Having arrived alone in Japan, a foreign country in the Far East, and feeling perhaps isolated in his experiences there, he was sometimes struck by feelings of dislike for Japan. He was committed to trying to understand Japan, in all its complexity, and so became wary of the ease with which the Japanese imported the fruits of Western culture without experiencing any culture shock.

Because it was written over a period of 30 years, with occasional interruptions, *The Diary* does not have a consistent theme or tone, and it can be read in a variety of ways. In terms of volume, more than half of the book, which begins in 1876 and ends in 1905, covers the period from 1904 to 1905. This was the period from the eve of the Russo-Japanese War to the end of it. Thus this portion of *The Diary* is a valuable source of contemporary recount of Japanese history at the time of the war.

While engaged in education as a university faculty member, Baelz, who, as a physician, examined various people and associated with many Meiji dignitaries, left valuable records of Meiji history. At the same time, he was a keen observer, admirer, and critic of a variety of matters, ranging from the feelings and behavior of the Japanese people to the attitudes of intellectuals and to the state of ordinary people. Therefore, *The Diary* contains a wealth of content and can be read in a variety of ways.

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