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The Peculiarities of Japanese History A Foreign Historian's Perspective

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Abstract

Japan's relationship to the outside world and its historical development are determined by the geographical position at the periphery of East Asia and the insular character of the country. The *basso ostinato* of Japan's history seems to be a dichotomy between „Inside“ (uchi 内) and „Outside“ (soto 外). The lecture will take the work of the historian and cultural critic TSUDA Sōkichi (津田左右吉 1873-1961) as a point of departure for exploring the peculiarities of Japanese history in two directions. First, I discuss Japan's relations to its Asian neighbours and to the West, characterized by periods of “openings” and “closings”. Second, I analyse Japanese strategies of cultural self-defence and the views on Japan from outside. Both are elements that influenced the historical development in various periods of time.

Based on considerations in my recent book (*Geschichte Japans*. München: C. H. Beck 2022) I finally discuss under which conditions we see political change and cultural innovation in Japan. My thesis is that there is an interdependent relationship between the change from “openings” to “closures” (and back) on the one side and historical turning points on the other.

Wolfgang Schwentker is a Professor Emeritus at Osaka University where he taught comparative intellectual history from 2002 until 2019. He is author of: *Max Weber in Japan. Eine Untersuchung zur Wirkungsgeschichte, 1905-1995* (Mohr/ Siebeck 1998; jap. transl.: 『マックス・ウェーバーの日本—受容史の研究 1905-1995』みすず書房 2013); *Die Samurai* (Beck 4. Aufl. 2019); *Geschichte Japans* (Beck 2022). He has co-edited 『マックス・ヴェーバーとその同時代人群像』ミネルヴァ書房 1994, *The Power of Memory in Modern Japan* (Global Oriental 2008), and *Geschichtsdenken im modernen Japan. Eine kommentierte Quellensammlung* (Iudicium 2015).