

The German Year in Japan 2005–2006

By *Henrik Schmiegelow*

IN 1999/2000, the Japan Year in Germany impressed the German public with its superb display of Japanese art and culture. It was a wonderful gift of Japan to Germany. Working at the time in Berlin, I had the privilege of observing the most effective way this Japan year was organized. I was full of spontaneous – and still quite carefree – admiration. I did not have the slightest indication that only a year after the end of the Japan Year in Germany, I would be appointed to be the German Ambassador to Japan. Of course, I was thrilled about returning to Tokyo after having been absent for 30 years. What I did not in the least anticipate was that shortly after my arrival in Tokyo, some of my best Japanese friends would look at me with a certain expectation, the meaning of which I could not identify. Noticing my failure to understand, my friends offered a little help by asking the polite question whether Germany had ever organized a German year in other countries. Then, finally, it dawned on me that a particular kind of homework had fallen into my lap.

Returning the courtesy of the Japan year in Germany was indeed the first attempt ever to present a comprehensive picture of Germany in a foreign country over the length of a whole year. In the general spirit of austerity and budget cuts in our country, we could only hope for rather limited resources from public funds and some sponsoring money from the German business community. Based on these resources, we set out to envisage some 300 events from April 2005 to March 2006. Moreover, we tried to learn as much as possible from the way Japan organized its year in Germany.

Since March 2005, we have been completely overtaken, as it were, by “events.” Instead of the envisioned number, we have reached a total five times higher! Surprisingly, the large majority of events turned out not to be the ones initially planned in Germany but those which were added in the process as a result of ideas and suggestions by our Japanese friends. As a result, the Embassy’s role was much easi-

er than we had feared. Very often, we simply had to ask German museums, theaters, orchestras, universities and research institutes to follow up on the ideas of our Japanese friends. The blueprint of the Japan Year in Germany turned out to be a wonderful textbook on how to foster close cooperation between the private and the public sector in organizing major cultural events. All of this was taking place in the context of Japanese-German cultural relations which pundits had frequently described as doomed by globalization and other frightening processes, but which in fact turned out to be vibrant enough for the German Year in Japan to be guided by the “demand pull” of the Japanese public.

The German Year was organized around three “pillars”: culture, science and the economy. The cultural pillar alone counted roughly 1,000 events. Of these 200 were planned by the Goethe Institute. The 800 remaining events were the result of the long experience of Japanese private corporations with for-



Photos: German Embassy

German President Horst Koehler (left) and Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro (right) at the opening event of “The German Year 2005-2006”

own cultural events. Since our Japanese private business partners had to ensure the economic success of their projects, they had to go for the very best of German culture in the areas of music, painting, and the performing arts. Some German museums and orchestras needed a little prodding, some not at all. In the end, all were totally enthusiastic about the Japanese public. Judging from the packed audiences at the events I attended, the economic success for the sponsors was attained. Most of Germany's very best cultural institutions set off for Japan: concerts by the Berlin Philharmonic, the Berlin State and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestras, tours of the Bavarian and Stuttgart state operas, the Hamburg, Stuttgart and Berlin State Ballets, and the Wuppertal Dance Theatre, exhibitions of the Berlin Museum Island, the State Museums of Dresden, the contemporary painters Richter and Polke, the sculptors Barlach and Kollwitz and the great exhibition Tokyo-Berlin/Berlin-Tokyo. There was demand for classical as well as avant-garde art, high fashion and the new Berlin boutique experiments, Bavarian Eisbein and Hanseatic cuisine, the continuous flow of beer and the renaissance of Riesling.

The Japanese media played a decisive role in this achievement. *The Asahi Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, *Tokyo Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Fuji TV*, *Nippon TV*, *TBS*, *TV Asahi* and Toei Company organized events and managed PR. National and regional papers in Japan carried more than 1,300 articles about the German Year. So did glossy magazines like *Figaro Japon*, *Frau*, *High Fashion*, *Madame*, *Pen* and *Top Art*. The German organizers of the FIFA World Cup 2006 in 12 German cities used the German Year as a platform for the promotion of the games.

Leading German corporations were active in sponsoring major cultural events. They have understood that in Japan with its vast purchasing power "holistic branding", presenting German culture as an attractive trademark for the



Poster and the official mascot, Die Maus, for "The German Year 2005-2006"

benefit of their own products, wins over new groups of customers, especially among the younger generation.

The academic pillar turned out to be the greatest real surprise of the German Year. Previously, I had completely accepted the view that the glorious academic relationship between Germany and Japan was a thing of the past, fondly remembered by the age group over 60. What did happen, however, was a constant stream of suggestions from Japanese universities, think tanks or research institutes to organize workshops, seminars and lectures on topical issues of our time, from demographic change to nanotechnology, from privatization of postal services to United Nations reform. The World Year of Physics 2005 coincided with the 100th anniversary of Einstein's *annus mirabilis*, and we were asked to help stimulate the interest of young people in science by organizing an exposition on Einstein's famous journey to Japan in 1922. I am now very confident that the passing of the torch in Japanese-German scientific

relations to the next generation will be a spontaneous one. Again, the support by our Japanese partners in the scientific community turned out to be essential by providing the necessary impetus for several hundred events.

In the economic sphere, the German business community used the opportunity to present itself with numerous symposia, trade and technology fairs, and road shows at universities. Especially the latter were conducive in heightening the awareness for Germany and its businesses among our favorite target group, the young Japanese.

In conclusion, I am so glad to state that Germany may not have much experience in projecting favorable images by a "supply push" of German years abroad. But the friendly "demand pull" of the Japanese public for cultural, academic and economic exchange with Germany gives me great hope for the future of the friendship between our two countries.

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Henrik Schmiegelow is the German Ambassador to Japan.