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# Back at Munich's Ludwig Maximilian University: a few musings

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I first entered Munich's Ludwig Maximilian University (hereafter LMU) in 1985, foolishly thinking that I would study chemistry. Since that didn't work out so well, I changed my major to Japanology, little knowing what lay ahead for me. After getting my Master's degree in 1993 I moved to Japan in 2000, where I finished my doctoral dissertation on Tanizaki Junichiro and Thomas Mann, finally getting my degree in 2004. As the title of my thesis suggests I was already drifting towards comparative literature, a field where I could continue with my favorite subject: the study of graphic fiction. Over the years I stayed in contact with the Institute of Comparative Literature, and when I got approved for a year of research abroad the head of the Institute, Prof. Stockhammer, kindly agreed to be my supervisor. So, after 17 years in Japan I went back to my alma mater this time as a professor and not a student. And after working at various Japanese universities for 17 years, being back at a German university I strongly felt the differences between the two countries' educational systems, which are what I'm going to do a bit of musing about.

First of all, LMU is rather big, and while Kanagawa University, with its more than 18,000 students, is by no means small, an institution with more than 52,000 students is

in a different category. LMU is after all Germany's second largest university, with 18 faculties and more than 700 professors. LMU has, of course, quite a number of Japanese partner universities, and many Japanese who studied there became prominent figures in Japanese society, one example being Mori Ogai.

LMU is also quite a bit older than Kanagawa University, being originally founded in Ingolstadt in 1472, before relocating to Munich in 1826. Like almost all other German universities LMU is public, meaning that there are no student fees, a fact that will probably make Japanese students very envious. And what probably will make them even more



LMU main building at Geschwister-Scholl-Platz  
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envious is that there really aren't any entrance exams. Almost the only thing that you really need are your grades from high school. Apart from membership in the so-called Excellence Initiative, a government program that provides special funding for the best universities, there is also no real ranking of German universities. (LMU, by the way, is part of the Excellence Initiative.) It doesn't really matter where you study, only what and whether you get good grades or not. And while the university of course provides help for finding jobs there is no institutionalized job hunting as in Japan. Students can concentrate on their studies and not be distracted by job hunting; they are, on the other hand, responsible for finding their own career path. Of course, not everybody

graduates, but in Germany it is absolutely possible to get a good job without having graduated from university.

All these differences in the educational systems of Germany and Japan were once again made clear to me when I taught a seminar in comparative literature. As German students are expected to be responsible for their own futures once they enter university – with many moving out of their parents' home when they do so – they are, as a whole, more independent than Japanese students. This, by the way, is not meant as a critique of Japanese students: it is a simple statement of a fact that results from the aforementioned differences in the educational systems. A higher level of student independence translates into more interaction in class, which I found quite a refreshing change. Finally, I was reminded how much I had missed LMU's wonderful location in the center of Munich, right next to the city's largest park, the so called English Garden (Englischer Garten), which took traditional English landscape gardens as its model, and which opened to the public in 1789. Its most popular beer garden is situated at the so called Chinese tower, the perfect place to relax, sometimes even together with students, after a long day in the library or seminar.



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