



DIVERGING ACCOUNTS OF JAPANESE POLICYMAKING

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Introduction¹

Japan is a democracy,² and the Japanese Constitution prescribes a, for democratic countries, somewhat ordinary division of powers between the legislative (Diet), the executive (Cabinet), and the judiciary (Independent Court System). Article 41 states that, “The Diet shall be the highest organ of the state power, and shall be the sole law-making organ of the State” (Kenkyusha 1997:69), and Article 65 that, “Executive power shall be vested in the Cabinet” (Kenkyusha 1997:97). Article 73, moreover, pronounces that the Cabinet, in addition to other general administrative functions, shall:

(i) Administer the law faithfully; conduct affairs of state; (ii) Manage foreign affairs; (iii) Conclude treaties. However, it shall obtain prior or, depending on circumstances subsequent approval of the Diet; (iv) Administer the civil service, in accordance with standards established by law; (v) Prepare the budget, and present it to the cabinet orders in order to execute the provisions of this Constitution and of the law. However, it cannot include penal provisions in such cabinet orders unless authorized by such law; (vi) Decide on general amnesty, special amnesty, commutation of punishment, reprieve, and restoration of rights (Kenkyusha 1997:105).

In regard to the Judiciary, article 76 clarifies that, “The whole judicial power is vested in a Supreme Court and in such inferior courts as are established by law” (Kenkyusha 1997:113).

Scholarly accounts of Japanese policymaking unsurprisingly tend to be significantly richer than the formalized picture provided by the Constitution. The aim of this paper is to summarize ways in which Japanese policymaking has hitherto been approached analytically.

A variety of labels that have been attached to scholars who try to explain Japanese policymaking will first be introduced. In short, ‘apologists,’ ‘revisionists,’ ‘pluralists,’ ‘elitists,’ and those who describe Japanese policymaking as an ‘enigma’ will be differentiated between. The paper will then highlight different aspects of policymaking: The actors, their relationships, the informal mechanisms that they use to influence each other, and other characteristics of the Japanese policymaking process. The main focus throughout will be on foreign and security policies.

¹ I would like to thank Ms. Annika Shelly for proofreading this paper. However, needless to say, I take full responsibility for all errors that for some reason I did not correct.

² This may seem to be an odd remark, but it makes perfect sense once it is recalled that the country has often been criticized for not properly adhering to ideals so carefully the spelled out in its Constitution. In my opinion democracy in Japan is not of another kind than democracy in Western European states or in the U.S.A. Indeed, there are important differences, and some Japanese practices could rightly be criticized for setting aside the ideals too off-handedly, but this is not uniquely the case for Japan. I would therefore like to argue that *if* Japanese democracy in any sense is weaker than e.g. its Swedish counterpart, we had better see this as a matter of *degree* rather than one of *kind*. I am also of the opinion that if we want to criticize Japan’s democracy, we cannot just compare Japanese practice with ideals, but also with practice in other democracies. However, such a comparison is not the aim of this paper.

Schools of Japanese Policymaking

Analyses of Japanese policymaking seem to diverge most fundamentally on two dimensions: Whether it is defended or criticized (three variables), and regarding the number of actors deemed relevant to it (four variables). The total variance generates twelve ideal type analyses, as shown in Table 1 below.

Defense/Criticism of Japanese practices	Number of Actors			
	Non-enigma			Enigma
	<i>Pluralist</i> ³	<i>Elite-led pluralist</i>	<i>Elitist</i>	<i>Enigmatic</i>
<i>Apologist</i>	Curtis 1995			
<i>Non-normative</i>	Zhao 1995, Scalapino 1995, Calder 1997	Hughes 1999		
<i>Revisionist</i> ⁴	Abe <i>et al</i> 1994	Lehmann 1997	Johnson 1995	van Wolferen 1992

Table 1.⁵

In short, *revisionists* are characterized by their criticism of e.g. Japanese policymaking. In Japan, revisionists are often referred to as ‘Japan-bashers’ (Johnson 1995:101; cf. Lehmann 1997:130). On the contrary, as understood from the term, *apologists* tend to offer a defense of Japan, either by claiming that the country is not so different from other democratic and capitalist countries (Katzenstein 1996:28),⁶ or by justifying acknowledged differences with reference to cultural traits assumedly peculiar to Japan (van Wolferen 1992:18).⁷

The distinction between elitism and pluralism is certainly not unique for Japan; indeed, the battle between these two academic camps has permeated large parts of the social sciences during the last half-decade. *Elitism* is characterized by the normative claim that an elite should govern society, or the descriptive statement that this is in fact the case. Elitist scholars tend to character-

³ Zhao (1995:22) characterizes the following scholars as pluralist: Daniel Okimoto, Takashi Inoguchi, Muramatsu & Krauss, T.J. Pempel, and Quansheng Zhao.

⁴ The most well-known revisionists include: Karel van Wolferen, Glen Fukushima, James Fallows, Pat Choate, Marie Anichordoguy, Michael Crichton, Clyde Prestowitz, Chalmers Johnson (Johnson 1995:101).

⁵ Dr. Kenji Suzuki has pointed out that on the ‘defense/criticism’ dimension a ‘Supporter’ category, including e.g. Ezra Vogel’s *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P. 1979), could be added, and that on the ‘number of actors’ dimension we should add ‘Institutionalism,’ and include names such as Takenaka Heizō. I completely agree with him. However, since the books examined so far fit into the table above, I will wait to make these corrections until a later version of the paper.

⁶ Kreft (1995:179-180) labels this group ‘liberals,’ because they claim that the U.S. trade deficit with Japan has largely domestic origins, and that U.S. trade practices should be liberalized.

⁷ In Japan, a relatively large number of people seem to believe that knowledge of cultural characteristics is a necessary prerequisite for understanding the politics of a country. Scholars who attempt to use Japan’s assumed cultural *uniqueness* as the independent variable in analyses of Japanese politics etc., are presumably related to the *nihonjinron* (the theory about the Japanese) school of thought (cf. Curtis 1995:34; Zhao 1995:9).

ize Japan as 'Japan, Inc.' (Watanabe 1989:5; Scalapino 1995:xi).⁸ *Pluralism*, on the contrary, either normatively prescribes that several societal groups should be able to affect national policymaking, or argues by way of empirical evidence that this is in fact the case. Adherents of this school also argue that the exercise of power by some actors over others varies with issues and that no single group or coalition controls outcomes across all issue areas (cf. Dahl 1957, 1958).

In reality, the distinction between normative and factual arguments is not always clear. Although elitist and pluralist scholars have largely diverging theories and perceptions, on one level they are in full agreement: They all share the belief that it is possible to know who governs, or who exercises power over whom, and to this extent they tend to disagree with e.g. Karel van Wolferen. To him, the question of Japanese policymaking and power is *enigmatic*; i.e. Japanese policymaking process is like 'a rudderless ship' (Scalapino 1997:xi). Van Wolferen believes that the image of government, or of any actor, as ultimately responsible for decision-making in Japan is fiction (van Wolferen 1992:6, 27, 35, 46, 54, 55, 63, 65, 386, 538, *et passim*).

Interestingly enough, regardless of their position in the table above, most scholars seem to agree largely as to what actors are involved in Japanese policymaking. They also describe relationships between those actors, and other characteristics of the policymaking process, in a similar manner, i.e. metaphorically as an 'iron triangle' (e.g. Drifte 1996:16) or a 'tripod' (e.g. Zhao 1995:11). In brief, this is the idea that Japanese bureaucrats, LDP-politicians (Liberal Democratic Party), and (organized) business cooperate intimately on several issues. Disagreements between scholars are rather a matter of focus and emphasis, and fundamentally they follow the divisions in Table 1 above.

According to one interpretation of elitism, the elite consists of all the actors in the tripod (Zhao 1995:22). Others have argued that bureaucrats make up the real elite: They take the lead over politicians, business people, and other societal groups (Johnson 1995; Zhao 1995:52).

Pluralists similarly tend to depart from the image of an iron-triangle, but they object to the idea that it is a unique feature of Japanese politics (Curtis 1995:23-24).⁹ They also stress its fragmented character: "In popular mind, [all Japanese policy-makers and power-holders] act as one," but, "In practice, they are divided or are even competitive with one another" (Emmott 1992:53; cf. Hughes 1999:162). In addition, pluralists tend to focus on domestic and external policymakers outside of the triangle, and on informal mechanisms that are used to affect the policymaking process (Zhao 1995).

⁸ Eugene Kaplan (1972:14) coined the expression of 'Japan, Inc.' (Kaplan, Eugene [1972] *Japan: The Government-Business Relationship. A Guide for the American Businessman*, Washington, D.C.)

During the last decade it has also been in vogue to picture Japan's policymaking regime in the spirit of Karel van Wolferen (1992 [1989]), i.e. as a network of overlapping hierarchies, lacking an absolute institution with ultimate jurisdiction over everything (Calder 1991:611; Vargö 1992:19; Drifte 1996:5, 28). However, nowhere is this thought as elaborate as in van Wolferen's own landmark volume: *The Enigma of Japanese Power*. This book is entirely dominated by the idea that no one is ultimately in charge in Japan: "There is, to be sure, a hierarchy or, rather, a complex of overlapping hierarchies. But it has no peak; it is a truncated pyramid" (van Wolferen 1992:7). Thus, even though van Wolferen acknowledges the existence of an iron triangle (e.g. van Wolferen 1992:143), he does not believe that power is ultimately in any of its corners, or to be found at all: "Japanese power, in short, is highly diffuse" (van Wolferen 1992:27; cf. *ibid.* pp. 35, 54, 55, 63, 65, 386, 538, *et passim*).

Although there might at first seem to be a contradiction between accounts that emphasize iron hard unity among policymakers and those that stress fragmentation, the two ideas can also be taken to be wholly complementary: To my knowledge, no one has ever argued that the iron triangle is made up of bureaucrats, politicians, and organized business *in any general sense*. Instead, there are allegedly multiple tripods, each consisting of the bureaucrats, politicians, and organized business that are involved-, or have interests, in the same, or similar, issues (or issue areas). It is nevertheless very likely that actors with conflicting interests within the same issue-area or across issues are in fact competing fiercely for money and arguing over agenda-setting. Furthermore, unlike van Wolferen, I believe that it is feasible to examine who exerts power over whom with regard to certain issues. However, such an examination necessitates both a sufficiently clear concept of power and careful empirical analysis, both of which van Wolferen's largely intuitive account lacks. I will further critique *The Enigma of Japanese Power* and discuss ways to analyze policy-making and power in the concluding section.

Below, I will first go over the main points usually made about the three major actors in the iron triangle. I will then go through some other actors that might be involved in Japanese foreign policymaking.¹⁰ Third, I will focus on the triangular relationships in which the tripod actors are entangled. In the section thereafter, I will discuss informal mechanisms and other characteristics of Japanese policymaking.

⁹ Gerald Curtis (1995:23-24) contends that the metaphor of an iron triangle was originally used with regard to U.S. politics: Vast cooperation and coordination between these three groups of actors is not genuinely a Japanese phenomenon, even though circumstances might be more accentuated there than elsewhere.

¹⁰ The distinction between actors in the iron triangle and other actors is *not* the same as that between formal and informal actors. Indeed, both formal and informal actors are found both within and outside of the tripod.

The Actors and Their Relationships

Bureaucrats

Japanese bureaucratic tradition has developed virtually undisturbed since the Meiji restoration in 1868. Unlike politics and big business, the bureaucracy was left almost untouched by the U.S. Occupation. In fact, considering that the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces (SCAP) even used it to administer the Occupation, the bureaucracy strengthened its position relative to politics and big business during this period.

Ministry staff is comparatively small (Nester 1990:141), but traditionally surprisingly homogeneous; between 80 and 90% of the top-level civil servants in central government used to receive their university diploma at the Law Department at Tokyo University (*Tōdai*) (van Wolferen 1992:60, 146-7). Although competition between ministries, bureaux and divisions is fierce, and the overall fragmentation is high, the common university background (*gakubatsu*, literally ‘school clique’) is taken to facilitate cooperation over borders when this is needed (Zhao 1995:124).

The use of *ringisei* (system for approval of a document by circulation) entails that Japanese bureaucratic organizations to a larger extent than elsewhere could be pictured as unitary actors. This system implies that policy plans and proposals are written by well-informed administrators at the very bottom of the bureaucratic hierarchy, and then circulated upwards to all the actors concerned, who formally approve of a document by affixing their seals to it. Sometimes as many as ten different levels of decision-making are involved in revising a policy before it is finalized, but as a result, internal consensus is often reached (Abe, Shindō & Kawato 1994:37; Zhao 1995:121-122; cf. van Wolferen 1992:443).

The major bureaucratic actors in Japanese foreign policy are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MITI), and the Ministry of Finance (MOF) (Calder 1997:8). MOFA together with the Defense Bureau take responsibility for security policymaking. However, at MITI, and to an even larger extent at MOF, foreign policy is subordinated to domestic imperatives (Calder 1997:11). This phenomenon is not in any sense unique for Japan, but, due to the extent of pork-barrel politics in the country, it is rather more emphasized there. The fact that they have largely diverging interests in foreign policymaking, entails that MOFA and MITI consider each others as ‘natural enemies’ (van Wolferen 1992:414).

Within MOFA, the North America- and Asia bureaux are generally believed to be the most influential with regard to foreign policymaking. Within MITI, only the Trade Bureau, which is

one of eight bureaux, is entirely concerned with international affairs (Calder 1997:9-10). In MOF, the Accounting or Budget Bureau is allegedly particularly influential. The norm of fiscal prudence restrains excessive foreign- and defense expenditures (Drifte 1996:19; Katzenstein 1996:105; Calder 1997:5).

LDP-Politicians

The LDP was established in 1955 as a coalition between the two present conservative parties (the Liberal Party and the Democratic Party) to serve as ‘a vote-collecting machine’ (*shūhyō mashīn*) for several conservative groups: organized business, government bureaucracy, and farmers (Nester 1990:145; van Wolferen 1992:39; Zhao 1995:43). The party stayed in office for 38 consecutive years until 1993. The decline of the LDP coincided with the end of the Cold War in 1989,¹¹ when the political opposition won the majority in the House of Councillors election. Four years later, a coalition government, without the participation of the LDP, took office. This event was precluded by a major reorganization of Japanese party politics: In a short period of time defectors from the LDP within and outside of the Diet formed three new conservative parties that rapidly gained in public support.¹² In little less than a year, all major Japanese parties except for the LDP and *Kyōsantō* (Japan Communist Party: JCP) formed a coalition government. However, the LDP reentered government in 1994, and has since ruled the country in coalition with, or with the support of, first *Shakai minshutō* (Social Democratic Party of Japan: SDPJ) and *Shintō Sakigake* (New Pioneer Party), and later *Jiyūtō* (Liberal Party: LP) and *Kōmeitō* (Clean Party). After the last election in June 2000 *Hoshutō* (New Conservative Party) also took place in the coalition government.

Even though Japanese political parties seem to be largely momentary phenomena, politicians are not. The fact that most changes were undertaken by the parties’ most upstanding members, i.e. their parliamentarians, further adds to the impression that Japanese political parties, and especially the LDP, are based more on friendship, loyalty and *realpolitik* rather than on ideological uniformity (cf. van Wolferen 1992:222). It also indicates that they are no mass movements.

Quite alike Japan, the LDP is composed both of formal and informal policymaking systems. Formally, there is a President (*tōsōsai*), a Secretary-General (*kanjichō*), a Chairman of the Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC) (*seimuchōsakaichō*), and a Chairman of the Executive Council

¹¹ This hypothesized relationship between the end of the Cold War and the end of the ‘55-*taisei*’ in Japanese domestic politics is not recognized by Sone. In his opinion it would be easy to imagine how the end of the Cold War could have brought disadvantage to the Communist party or the Socialist Party, but more difficult to see why the LDP, the only party protecting liberalism during the Cold War, would be damaged (Sone 1994:20). However, in retrospect it is clear that, even though the LDP has lost a few seats in the Diet, in total liberal and conservative parties have grown steadily since the end of the Cold War, while the JSP has almost been extinguished.

¹² *Nihon Shintō* (New Japan Party), *Sakigake* (Pioneer Party), and *Shinseitō* (New Political Party).

(*sōmukaichō*). Apart from its Chairman, the formal organization of the PARC includes Vice-Chairmen, a Policy Deliberation Commission (*seisaku shingikai, seichō shingikai*) consisting of about 15-20 members, 17 divisions (*bukai*), about 100 less formal investigative commissions (*chōsakai*) and special committees (*tokubetsu iinkai*). The membership in these bodies is partly assigned and partly voluntary (Nester 1990:162; cf. Zhao 1995:48, 73). Within PARC there is a Foreign Policy Division (*gaikō bucai*), whose members deliberate on foreign policy issues together with prominent bureaucrats.

Within the LDP there are four types of informal actors that are able to exert substantial influence over party policy: First, there are the factions (*habatsu*). This phenomenon is most conspicuous with regard to the LDP, where factions perform an institutionalized role in the party machinery and are “a source of never-ending friction” (van Wolferen 1992:183). In fact, factions are like parties within the party, and they too are held together by ties of political convenience, money, and personal relations, rather than by ideology and common policy positions. Usually there are about five different factions, each with a membership of between 30 and 80 law-makers (Nester 1990:159; Abe *et al* 1994:125-126; Zhao 1995:74) and each led by a potential or current party president. So far, prime ministers have always taken the relative strength of these groups into consideration when forming their governments. Second, there are the *zoku* (tribe) politicians who, due to his or her former career or to Cabinet appointments, have developed a special knowledge of, and/or interest in, a specific issue-area, e.g. a foreign policy (Zhao 1995:48). Since such politicians become experts within their field, they can negotiate on a more equal footing with bureaucrats, and affect party policy. Third, there are a number of LDP organizations formed on an *ad hoc* basis, and with regard to foreign policy there is often open polarization often between such groups (Zhao 1995:67, 71). Fourth, short of a strong party, each member of the Diet, and prospective members, has his or her own organization. These are called *kōenkai*, and they are based geographically in the constituency of each parliamentarian. In order to be reelected, politicians need to interact socially with their electorate; attend weddings, funerals, help local businesses, etc. (Abe *et al* 1994:179). This system is criticized for being the “major cause of the high cost of politics in Japan, and, in turn, a cause of political corruption and popular political alienation” (Abe *et al* 1994:172). They are also an important reason why most politicians engage in construction, farming, foresting, and fishing and other areas that touch the daily lives of ordinary people. This is simply because an engagement solely in foreign and defense affairs does not pay off equally well (Calder 1991:613; Drifte 1996:18).

Organized Business Actors

Zaikai, or organized business, make up the third component of the iron triangle. Nester writes that, “*Zaikai* interests sculpt the national agenda through four national corporate organizations whose political and policy efforts complement each other” (Nester 1990:180). They include: The Federation of Economic Organizations (*Keidanren*), the Chamber of Commerce (*Shōkō Kaigishō*), the Council for Economic Development (*Keizai Dōyūkai*: CED), and the Japan Federation of Employees Association (*Nikkeiren*). At the moment *Keidanren* and *Nikkeiren* are attempting to carry out a merger of their organizations.

On the level below *zaikai* there is also substantial organization, e.g. several *gyōkai* (*gurupu* or *keiretsu* i.e. industrial groups) each with their *shachōkai*, i.e. directors’ conference (van Wolferen 1992:61; Zhao 1995:89).

The Japanese non-governmental sector¹³ is richly organized and plays a substantive informal role in foreign policy (Calder 1997:2). Calder even asserts that it conducts its own foreign policy, “and does so in a fashion distinct from that of the Japanese state” (Calder 1997:17). *Zaikai* often uses lobbying a means to conduct foreign policy. The Japanese non-governmental lobbying apparatus is known for its size and for its efficiency: “In 1985 there were 182 Japanese lobby groups in Washington,” and “The ranks of these Japanese lobby groups are filled with more than a hundred former senior American officials” (Nester 1990:194).

Other Actors

Outside of the iron triangle many domestic and foreign actors are fully capable of affecting national policy. I will first treat the former, then the latter.

Domestic Actors

Numerous actors outside of the iron triangle can also influence policymaking: Opposition parties, news media, organized farmers (e.g. National Federation of Agricultural Co-operatives), researchers at universities and think-tanks, gangster syndicates (*yakuza*), police, prosecutors, and public opinion (van Wolferen 1992:55; Scalapino 1995:x; Zhao 1995:ch.5, 11, 88, 100, 102; Calder 1997:15-16, 23). There are moreover between 200 and 280 *shingikai* (advisory councils) that consist of members both from within the triangle and from outside of it, and that advice government

¹³ The term ‘private sector’ has been deemed misleading (Johnson 1995:107), because the boundaries of public and private are less clear-cut in Japan than in many other countries (Calder 1997:17).

on policy issues. However, for the most part, and with the exception of *hōsei shingikai* that deals with juridical issues, advisory councils largely fail to play the independent role that they could.

Foreign Actors

It has been stated time and again that Japanese foreign policy tends to be articulated in reaction to foreign, especially U.S., pressure (*gaiatsu*) (Calder 1988; Yasutomo 1995:33-58; Lehmann 1997:135): “The U.S. government is a major lobby in Japan” (Katzenstein 1996:38). In the early 1990s, however, lots of scholars argued that Japan had started to act more independently of the U.S. (Chiba 1996:xix), e.g. in its UN (Iwanaga 1997) and Middle East policies (Yasutomo 1995:7). Yet, with the new Guidelines in 1997, and the possible Japanese participation in the Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) project, the tide seems to have turned. Regardless of tides, it seems appropriate to assume that the scope of U.S. influence over Japanese policy, i.e. to the extent that it exists, differs with issues and with other situational circumstances. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between foreign and domestic pressures, indeed domestic groups are able to use *gaiatsu* for their own benefit (Katzenstein 1996:38; cf. Yamamoto 1989:164).

Foreign pressure is not just undertaken by other states. Foreign opinion can also be a viable source of pressure, and in Japan arguably a more viable one than domestic public opinion (Katzenstein 1996:38; Lehmann 1997:134).

Relationships within the Iron Triangle

LDP-Politicians vs. Bureaucrats

Although the bureaucracy is constitutionally subordinate to the Diet, and the LDP’s policymaking role is arguably growing (Nester 1990:167; Scalapino 1995:x), there is plenty of evidence suggesting that top-level bureaucrats still play a crucial role in the drafting, deliberation, and implementation of long-term Japanese policy. The political turbulence in the 1990s described above allegedly further benefited the relative strength of this group (Sone 1994:22; Yasutomo 1995:141; Wan 1995:105). Although a strong bureaucracy may not be a feature entirely unique for Japan (Curtis 1995:136, 148), here Cabinet ministers seldom stay in office long enough to be able to take the lead other than nominally; their terms are short and uncertain, and bureaucrats often refer to them as “minister what’s-his-name” (Abe *et al* 1994:31). The reason for frequent Cabinet changes is that party leaders need to keep the balance between factions, and let all LDP lawmakers who have won at least six re-elections to the House of Representatives, and served as a parliamentary vice-minister become ministers at least once in their career (Nester 1990:165). With

the possible exception of Nakasone's term as Prime Minister, Prime Minister's Office's (*kantei*) influence over foreign policy has been limited (Calder 1997:12-13). In comparison, high-level bureaucrats work independently of election results and party intrigues. The conference of the administrative vice-ministers (*jimujikan*) is described as a miniature cabinet: "this is where *real* decisions are made" (Iwanaga 1995:200, emphasis added). The relationship between the two groups has been characterized as, "Politicians reign, but bureaucrats rule" (Hague *et al* 1992:347). In contrast to most other countries, in Japan bureaucrats are said to create general outlines, while politicians struggle with details (Curtis 1995:160-161). Although Japanese bureaucrats have several chances to affect policy, they cannot completely ignore political leadership. If, however, bureaucrats are responsive to politicians, they are likely to be successful (Curtis 1995:111, 150-157).

Although it does not pay off in terms of votes and financial support for politicians to be engaged in foreign and security policies, and although foreign policy is under the jurisdiction of MOFA, Curtis surprisingly claims that, "Especially concerning foreign policy, politicians, and not bureaucrats, in most cases reached the definite decisions themselves" (Curtis 1995:151; my translation from Japanese). In particular, when a major controversial issue arises, the role of MOFA becomes peripheral to the benefit of the LDP. MOFA bureaucrats thus make decisions on routine and non-controversial foreign policy issues, while broad guidelines and more important issues are decided primarily by LDP's top leaders and the PARC (Scalapino 1995:x; Zhao 1995:76-77). There is an argument, however, that these bodies are in turn likely be influenced by MITI, MOF, or other bureaucratic actors.¹⁴

Bureaucrats vs. Business

The relationship between bureaucrats and organized business in Japan has been characterized by close cooperation. The government has arguably been capable of influencing business actors quite efficiently through administrative guidance¹⁵ (*gyōsei shidō*) and other incentives, e.g. directed aid, and at times even informal or indirect threats of sanctions (Inoguchi 1991:107, 116; Abe *et al* 1994:35-36):

Essentially administrative guidance involves the use of influence, advice and persuasion to cause firms or individuals to behave in particular ways that the government believes are desirable. The persuasion...is exerted and the advice given by public officials who may have the power to provide – or withhold – loans, grants, subsidies, licenses, tax concessions, government contracts, permission to import, foreign exchange, approval of cartel arrangements, and other desirable (or undesirable) outcomes, both now and over the indefinite future. But it is inaccurate to think of administrative guidance exclusively in terms of manipulation of carrot and stick. (Gardner Ackley and Hiromitsu Ishi (1976) "Fiscal, Monetary, and Related Policies," *Asia's New Giant – How the Japanese Economy Works*, Hugh Patrick and Henry Rosovsky, eds., The Brookings Institution, 236-7. Quoted in Tsuru 1993:96).

¹⁴ I acknowledge Dr. Kenji Suzuki for clarifying this point to me.

¹⁵ Scalapino (1995:x) suggests that nowadays we had better speak of 'administrative suggestion.'

Bureaucratic influence over business is allegedly also derived from a common value base and from bureaucracy's advantage in knowledge (Tsuru 1993:96). There are nevertheless scholars who assert that the idea of an extensive co-operation between bureaucracy and business is far too exaggerated. Paul Kennedy (1994:197), for example, questions the efficacy of pressing the Japanese government as a means to change the behavior of Japanese companies, as the U.S. government repeatedly has done.

The main incentive for bureaucrats to cooperate with business is the *amakudari* (descent from heaven) system, which regularly lets retired bureaucrats find employment in companies and other non-governmental organizations (van Wolferen 1992:59, 166; Zhao 1995:52). In recent years, Japan has further been shaken by several corruption scandals where not only politicians, but also top-level bureaucrats, have been found to receive large amounts of corporate money.

Links between bureaucracy and business are also present within foreign policy. Business is clearly dependent on e.g. MITI for support and guidance on trade-related issues, but government is also dependent on business: Japan's trading houses, banks, and manufacturing corporations gather political information of interest to the government, and it relies on their intelligence capabilities. Moreover, rather than setting up military missions abroad, the government often entrusts trading companies with, for example, negotiations over international arms deals (Katzenstein 1996:36, 37; cf. Nester 1990:198).

Business vs. Politicians

If politicians approve of legislation (proposed by bureaucrats) that favor business, companies will invariably make financial contributions to election campaigns etc. Organizations such as *Keidanren* used to make large contributions on behalf of the whole business community. Now that such contributions have been voluntarily refrained from since the early 1990s, individual companies and trade associations seem to have shouldered the task. According to Abe *et al* (1994:49), the economic resources of organized business make it the most powerful actor.

With regard to foreign policy, there seem to be no direct links between business and politics. I would suggest that to the extent that there is a connection, this is mediated by the bureaucracy.

Culture and Informal Mechanisms in Japanese Foreign Policy

It is a distinguishing feature of apologists to try to justify what other scholars criticize about Japan with reference to its alleged cultural uniqueness (examples will be given below). However, a majority of those who do research about Japanese politics actually refer to terms and practices which

are claimed to be part of the Japanese culture, and whether they are apologists or not, they seem to hope that such variables are explanatory.

Above, I have already mentioned culturally related term such as *ringisei*, *habastu* and *zoku*. I will continue along the same vein with a look at a few features of Japanese political culture that also appear in most accounts of Japanese political issues. I will then present the more specific informal mechanisms of Japanese policymaking that are brought up in Quansheng Zhao's careful study: *Japanese Policymaking: The Politics behind Politics: Informal Mechanisms and the Making of China Policy* (1995). I will also try to relate Zhao's terms to broader cultural concepts.

Japanese Political Culture

In analyzing Japanese politics and international relations, scholars often turn their attention to: *Honne*, *tatema*, *haragei*, *wa*, *giri*, etc.

Honne, Tatema, and Haragei

The terms *honne* (real intention) and *tatema* (open statement) are mutually exclusive. *Honne* is the information that is left in the background, and that is only accessible to those in whose personal interest it is to keep it within their own group. Informal, if nonetheless institutionalized, bargaining belongs in this category. *Honne* sometimes reveals itself to the outside world by the eruption of a *hōgen* (irresponsible utterance) or a *shitsugen* (slip of the tongue). The results of bargaining, together with official documents, mostly represent *tatema*. *Tatema* is thus what is openly shown. Closely related to *honne* and *tatema* are *ura* (inside) and *omote* (outside) (Johnson 1995:159-161; Zhao 1995:155; cf. van Wolferen 1992:309; Scalapino 1995:x-xi; Zhao 1995:6, 137; Lehmann 1997:152, footnote 2).

To convey *honne*, the Japanese use a means of communication called *haragei* or *ishin-denshin* (mind-to-mind communication) (Johnson 1995:160; Zhao 1995:138). Although *haragei* implies saying one thing but meaning another, Zhao claims that those who understand Japanese culture will also understand the difference (Zhao 1995:138).

Groupism, Wa and Giri

In line with the distinctions above, Japanese are often claimed to have an exceptionally strong sense of inside and outside; they have a feeling of community with the inside and one of alienation from the outside. Groupism is continually re-affirmed and re-constituted by the common aspiration for harmony (*wa*): "A goal of the policymaking process in Japan is to seek points of

compromise, so that all involved parties can protect their interests in the internal bargaining. At the same time, the possibility of open conflict will be reduced to a minimum, and political harmony will more likely be maintained” (Zhao 1990:154; cf. Inoguchi 1992:78; Vargö 1992:19; Calder 1997:1). This is the process that underlies *ringisei* discussed above.

Japanese groupism is not just characterized by *wa*, but also by *giri* (a feeling of obligation), which is one of the ways in which *wa* is actually reached. Since *giri* unsurprisingly is directed towards superiors, groupism is simply another word for complicated hierarchies or leader-follower relationships (Zhao 1995:114, 115).

Other Informal Mechanisms

As a means to analyze Japanese China-policy, Zhao focuses on three informal mechanisms of Japanese politics: *tsukiai*, *kuromaku*, and *nemawashi*. He also attempts to link each of these concepts to a political theory, and thereby showing that informal politics is not an inherently Japanese feature. He also, however, stresses that Japan’s informal mechanisms do have their own characteristics (Zhao 1995:202). I believe that this conclusion is correct, but as argued below, I question the relevance of the concrete linkages. I will also argue that the examined phenomena are inter-related, and moreover related to the other cultural themes discussed above.

Tsukiai

On the first level we find *tsukiai*, which is first defined as, “after-hours entertaining and socializing among managers and workers in companies and manufacturing enterprises” (Zhao 1995:20) *Tsukiai* is a means to create a sense of community among colleagues or of entertaining customers. Next, the meaning of *tsukiai* is compressed into meaning ‘social links’ (Zhao 1995:44), and connected to political pluralism. This is probably Zhao’s reason for claiming that *tsukiai* is a feature of a societal-, social systemic-, or social environmental level, and of linking it to network theory (Zhao 1995:4, 5, 20 179, 185 *et passim*).

I fully understand the role of *tsukiai* as a mechanism of Japanese foreign policymaking, and I do see the connection to the concepts discussed above, namely, that *tsukiai* facilitates groupism and creates a sense of *giri* (cf. Zhao 1995:47, 180). However, the connection between *tsukiai*, network theory and political pluralism, the placement of *tsukiai* on a system level, and the empirical analysis of Japanese China-policy that follows, all seem a little forced: First, *tsukiai* means socializing rather than networking, and to the extent that this mechanism helps entail political pluralism, it probably shares this trait with all informal mechanisms. Second, socializing occurs on an

individual level rather than on a societal one. To be sure, Zhao writes that, “The driving force behind the LDP’s supportive policies toward farmers was the special connections (*tsukiai*) between the two groups, which generated a strong sense of mutual obligation – a foundation for obtaining votes” (Zhao 1995:46). However, and third, if *tsukiai* is supposed to function as a mechanism of policymaking, which could easily be examined empirically, it seems unwise to take it to denote just any connection, and especially one that is situated on a level far above of that inherent in the term.

Kuromaku

Zhao places *kuromaku* (or *kagemusha*) on the second level. *Kuromaku* is defined as “informal political actors and organizations that do not necessarily have formal (or official) status, but who often use behind-the-scenes channels to get things done” (Zhao 1995:65). He contends that this phenomenon exists on an institutional level, and that it is thereby connected to organizational theory.

I again acknowledge the relevance of the term for analyses of Japanese policymaking, and I also see several interesting connections to the terms discussed under the heading of political culture above: Indeed, in the sense that it is used about an actor that is covertly powerful, *kuromaku* represents *honne* in itself, but it is also used to convey *honne* (Zhao 1995:180; Johnson 1995:109-110): “[In Japan] authority appears mostly at the *omote* level, power at the *ura*” (Johnson 1995:161). Historically, there were always former emperors or the like behind the nominal one, and behind the Imperial system there was for centuries a Shogunate both with a nominal *shōgun* and former *shōguns* or other real decision-makers who actually ruled the country. Today’s most significant *kuromaku* are high-level bureaucrats (*keōkyū kanryō*) (Johnson 1995:161) and veteran politicians, e.g. former prime ministers, who can depend on a large personal network (*jinmyaku*) (van Wolferen 1992:145). However, as shown by Zhao, any of the informal actors within and outside of the iron triangle can be a *kuromaku*.

The drawback of this account, just like the one above, lies in the forced theoretical connection (Zhao 1995:65). Indeed, reference to Max Weber’s three types of legitimate authority (rational, traditional, and charismatic) and the claim that in Japan the traditional one prevails, are interesting (Zhao 1995:66). But, frankly, what is the relationship between *kuromaku* and organizational theory? To the extent that organizations can play the role of *kuromaku*, there is obviously one connection, but it is far from clear-cut. The problem is that although *kuromaku* can be used to signify organizations, this is not its original meaning: *Kuromaku* was first used about *individuals* working behind-the-scenes. Moreover, many political actors are organizations. Even if organizational the-

ory could be used to understand their political role in general, it is unclear why Zhao chooses this theoretical strain to elucidate the phenomenon of *kuromaku*.

Nemawashi

Nemawashi, i.e. behind-the-scenes pre-decision consensus-building activities, is placed on the lowest, individual, level, and linked to the concept of political culture (Zhao 1995:4, 5, 113, 120, 148, 179, 185).

I definitely see the relevance for studying Japanese foreign policy of this distinctive Japanese negotiating style. I also recognize the connection to most of the Japanese terms discussed above: Indeed, *nemawashi* represents one way to reach *wa* or mutual understanding (Zhao 1995:180), and it can be performed by *kuromaku* by means of *tsukiai*. Kyōgoku's¹⁶ definition of it, moreover, resembles that of *haragei*: “a form of implicit communication in which one person can read the other person's mind, although nothing explicit has been said about the matter or problem that has come up” (Zhao 1995:113). Indeed, when *nemawashi* or face-saving procedures like this are omitted from the bargaining process, or have been too quick, Japanese speak of ‘the dictatorship of the majority’ (van Wolferen 1992:442).

The problem of Zhao's account, again, is the forced linkage between *nemawashi* and the concept of political culture, and the placement of the mechanism on the individual level. In short, are not all informal mechanisms equally a matter of political culture, or not so? And, if *tsukiai* and *kuromaku* were forced on supra-individual levels, why cannot the same be done with *nemawashi*? I recognize that *nemawashi* originally implied individual negotiation, but I am also sure that it would be possible to argue that the term should be applied to negotiations between organizations or societies.

Concluding Remarks: Implications for Future Research

By way of conclusion, I would like to discuss essentially two themes: First, the connection between policymaking and power that is inherent in almost all of the accounts discussed above, but most notably in van Wolferen's and Zhao's books. This discussion is followed by one about cultural variables: In what way could culture be used as an independent variable without running the risk of tautology?

¹⁶ Kyōgoku, Jun-Ichi (1987) *The Political Dynamics of Japan*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 69-71.

Policymaking and Power

Before answering the above questions, I would like to draw attention to the most common way to understand power in political science and elsewhere in accordance to Japanese policymaking, i.e. an attributive view of power. Calder's (1997:6) focus on money and number of personnel in government institutions in examining the relative weight of Japan's foreign policy institutions, and Nester's (1990:180-182, 193-194) exposition of quantitative measures to exhibit the relative weight of actors in Japan's corporate world, both indicate this understanding of power. I have questioned the utility of such an approach before (e.g. Hagström 2000), and will now turn to the linkage between of policymaking and power.

Van Wolferen's (1992:xi, 27) explicit ambition – to face the subject of power squarely – is no less than extraordinary, and his criticism of social scientists' failure to make use of the concept of power is wholly justified. It is therefore discouraging to scrutinize his own analysis: First, it lacks an explicit definition of the concept of power. This entails that van Wolferen's innumerable references to power lack explicit *meaning*. Second, although van Wolferen (1992:456) states that the purpose of his book is to study how power is exercised in Japan, he then goes on to contend that, "Power in Japan is so diffuse that it eludes confrontation" (van Wolferen 1992:68; cf. *ibid.* p. 27, 44). Frankly, how can what one believes to be eluding confrontation be made the very topic of a book? Does not van Wolferen contribute to the mystification of power by not clearly stating what he means by the term? Third, despite of the fact that he has warmed up to the elusiveness of power in Japan, van Wolferen then goes on to delineate a wholly intuitive picture of power in Japanese society. I do admit that some of his insights and speculations were of interest, but a careful empirical analysis that makes its point of departure in an explicit understanding of the concept of power would be preferable.

One book that does include an explicit understanding of power that permeates the whole account, actually hardly without mentioning the term at all, is Zhao's *Japanese Policymaking: The Politics behind Politics: Informal Mechanisms and the Making of China Policy* (1995). Zhao early refers to Polsby's pluralist definition of power (Zhao 1995:7), and although power is not really the issue here, with Zhao's consistent focus on decisions (Zhao 1995:11), it could very well have been. Zhao departs from formal decision-making and although he opens the door to informal mechanisms, I get the impression that he is only interested in more or less *publicized* informal behavior (Zhao 1995:23). He therefore fails to take into account the criticism that has been directed against pluralist power theories. For example, he does not focus non-decision-making (Bachrach & Baratz 1962, 1963) and the power over agenda setting and action that is based in normative,

cultural, linguistic, or otherwise elusive informal mechanisms (Lukes 1974). Unlike Zhao, I believe that it is an empirical question whether Japan is a pluralist society or not. To be able to make fair judgement, however, it is first necessary to recognize that the very foundation of our decisions-making capabilities, norms, culture, language etc., may be monopolized by one group in society, i.e.,

...is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to...[shape peoples'] perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial. (Lukes 1974:24).

Policymaking and Culture

Cultural explanations, i.e. where culture in a broad sense is used as an independent variable, are not in favor with the scientific community. The claim that a state of being is an explanation of a state of doing, is tautological (van Wolferen 1992:22, 23; Katzenstein 1996:2). By bringing allegedly specific cultural characteristics up for discussion, however, most authors in one way or another imply that such features have explanatory value. Van Wolferen, and to a much lesser extent Katzenstein, are no exceptions to this. Again, I do believe that cultural, normative, and linguistic variables to a large degree determine our lives, and to the extent that such variables are reproduced in a way that our interests are infringed upon, power is exerted over us. Since it is not satisfying to use culture, or structure, or invisibles in *any* broad sense, as explanatory variables, I would instead suggest that we try to point to the very specific mechanisms by which things happen, e.g. by which power is exercised (Zhao 1995:4-5; Katzenstein 1996:2). To study policymaking or power is thus to pinpoint the responsibility of different actors: If not the relative responsibility to lead their lives completely at will, then the responsibility to reproduce cultural or other structural patterns.

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