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## A Global Moment for Political Machinery: Reconceptualising the Cabinet System from the Great War to the Great Depression in Japan and France (1914-1932)

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### Introduction

Japan's modern cabinet system was understood as structurally weak by scholars after the defeat of 1945. However, the reality of this system, starting from the collaboration between the ministers, remains understudied, just like its interpretations by contemporary actors accompanying and following the First World War. There have not been enough attempts to find in global connections the origins of shifts in its understanding and practice within Japan. Likewise, the cabinet system of France's Third Republic has been criticised for its instability. Despite similarities in their alleged dysfunctions, both systems have never been analysed together and compared. How did the Great War and the global turmoil of its aftermath impact the Japanese and French cabinet systems' conceptions and practices? The present work answers this question by analysing primary historical sources from the start of the conflict to the first effects of the Great Depression (1914-1932). Through a comparison of the two institutions, and while acknowledging their interconnections, it reconsiders the cabinets' weaknesses and identifies solutions imagined by their elites. By sketching the shared tendencies in institutional changes following the Great War expressed in both cases, it further demonstrates how the conflict initiated a 'Global Moment' for constitutional thought and the adaptation of political frameworks. The first part of this dissertation analyses the ambiguities of French and Japanese modern cabinets via a systemic approach, by explaining the establishment of these systems within their legal traditions (chapter 1), and doctrinal confusions born from textual ambiguities (chapter 2). Focusing on practices from the Great War to the Great Depression, the second part compares persistent malfunctions (chapter 3) of both cabinet systems and the strategies to compensate for them (chapter 4). The reconceptualisation of these institutions is discussed in the last part, separated into three chronological stages: revelations contemporary to the Great War (chapter 5), the renewal of concepts and interpretations in its immediate aftermath (chapter 6), and reforms that were conducted from 1925 to 1932 (chapter 7).

### Part I. Theorising Ambiguous Frameworks

#### Chapter 1. Tormented geneses for ambiguous constitutions (1789 – 1914)

Although France first introduced written constitutions after the 1789 Revolution, a parliamentary regime only emerged in the early 19th-century constitutional monarchies. A proto-cabinet also appeared at that time, but did not survive the repeated regime changes until 1870. Japan integrated the 'globalisation of constitutions' in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. While still relying on ancient institutions, the creation of its modern cabinet system in 1885 through written law was more abrupt than in France. While the Meiji Constitution was promulgated with its main authors hoping for it to last for decades, with expected gradual evolutions, the French Constitutional Acts of 1875 were seen as a temporary conciliation between Republicans and Monarchists, most likely to undergo drastic changes in the upcoming years. But important similarities also existed. A perspective drawn between both Constitutions showed that these texts, while aiming to organise the country's political regime, omitted the cabinet system itself and its leader by only defining 'Ministers'. This was in both cases due to a compromise difficult to reach, and hopes from various political forces to see the system evolve towards different regimes. The ministers, stuck between the head of State and the Parliament, remained barely mentioned to avoid another clash within the political world. A Prime Minister appeared in both countries but was conceptualised as fundamentally different from the British precedent. While both political regimes experienced gradual evolutions regarding the position of their ministers, the interpretation of their prerogatives and status remained largely dictated by ambiguous definitions in the written law.

## **Chapter 2. Doctrinal confusions: an institution hard to define (1870s-1932)**

Constitutional law appeared as a science at a similar time in Japan and France, as it followed the promulgations of the Meiji and Third Republic Constitutions. Both countries experienced divisions between diverse doctrinal positions. In Japan, the ‘traditionalists’ opposed the ‘liberals’ in their understanding of the Emperor. In France, the schism was a methodological one, dividing scholars between naturalist and positivist preferences. But in both cases, a tension existed between those defending the particularism of their domestic constitutionalism and those comparing its features with other models to elaborate universal rules. Doctrines in France and Japan discussed similar issues of executive power, crystallised in the cabinet institution. Its position and the ministers’ interrelationship, its interaction with other political organs through the mechanisms of ministerial responsibility, and the range of the Prime Minister’s prerogatives were equally questioned in both countries. Japanese and French scholars paid much attention to written law, and schisms appeared when some of them extended their understanding of the constitutional system behind strict positivist limits by including customs or universal developments in their conceptions. These common features testify to the ambiguity of both political regimes, as theorists aimed at clarifying these features. However, discussions occurring in Japan went to a deeper level than in France. They addressed fundamental elements of the cabinet system because of the position of the Japanese Emperor in the political system. The historical background in France since the Revolution furnished enough constitutional precedents to compensate for juridical gaps in the 1875 Constitutional Acts, while Japanese scholars still had to define many constitutional concepts and mechanisms.

### **Part II. Struggling Powers**

## **Chapter 3. Persistent malfunctions and their effects (1914-1932)**

In the practice of the French and Japanese cabinet systems, confusion arose because of approximate definitions of terms like ministerial solidarity, cabinet unity, collective responsibility, or head of government. The subsequent discussions added to the pressure on the cabinet, sometimes weakening it to the point of resignation, and often paralysing the political debate. Some meaningful differences were noted: France had a consistent issue with collective responsibility over time that Japan did not have, while Japanese substitute Prime Ministers and the procedure around their nomination and prerogatives sparked off more trouble than their French counterparts. These considerations confirm that the deep forces bringing instability to the cabinet system were different in these two cases: France mostly suffered from its partisan patchwork, while Japan faced the consequences of an unclear regime nature. While ambiguous texts regarding the collegiality of the organ led ministers to often act independently, a strong input on ‘inner-cabinet harmony’ in Japan and ‘ministerial solidarity’ in France did the opposite: it forced a consensus that was hard to obtain. Although this consensus was often worked around, opposition forces or rogue ministers used this malfunction against the cabinet. Prime Ministers lacked legitimacy and freedom of action due to their nomination and interim procedures, as well as their competition with other sources of power. They also lacked systemic control and coercive methods, preventing them from actively uniting the cabinet in France or reshuffling it when needed in Japan.

## **Chapter 4. Practical strategies to oppose systemic constraints (1914-1932)**

Prime Ministers used legal tools and practical strategies to compensate for the dysfunctions in their cabinet systems. A few exceptions aside, they were free to choose the ministers and implemented strategies like nominating friends they could trust or forming all-star cabinets. An equilibrium was nonetheless needed to obtain enough political support, which appeared as a greater obstacle in France because of the divided party system. Some Prime Ministers further managed to control their cabinets by securing alliances with key ministers, requiring reports and justification for their colleagues’ actions, and orienting the decisions. Prime Ministers implementing inter-ministerial communications had greater chances to successfully unify

their team. They could resolve early-stage tensions or create coherent policies. With a wide range of content discussed and important decisions taken, cabinet meetings, centred around the Prime Minister, were a privileged time to efficiently lead the team. They were much more consistent in Japan than in France, especially during the party politics period. This suggests an evolution towards a more unified cabinet team from 1924 and an emphasis put on oral communications in the Japanese case, whereas cabinet unity in France largely depended on the Prime Minister's personality from 1914 to 1932. Prime Ministers also sought legitimacy from their Head of State. This custom was more integrated in France because the President of the Republic often participated in cabinet meetings and weighed in on the decisions. Successive Japanese Prime Ministers solicited the Emperor to force ministers to stay in office until 1928, and turned to the *Genrō* for advice and appeasement between ministers.

### **Part III. Adaptations from the Great War: A shared path**

#### **Chapter 5. 1914-1918: An eye-opening War**

France immediately engaged in a total war that was conducted on its territory, and was forced to rapidly adapt its political framework. Attempts were made to unify the cabinet and certify the Prime Minister's superiority through systemic and customary evolutions. Meanwhile, as Japan saw the conflict as an opportunity for territorial expansion, it adjusted some of its administration between civilian and military power, but no major changes were made to the cabinet system. Both countries kept track of foreign powers' institutional evolutions during the war and shared a specific interest in the United Kingdom's reforms. Lloyd George's War Cabinet, sometimes hailed as a model of resilience and stability, was much studied in reports to the central government and made public by the press. The Japanese academia was also prolific in this task, and doctrinal disputes shifted from an old Germany/Britain to a particularism/universalism dichotomy. The French political sphere was very proactive in proposing plans for long-term reforms. Deputies recognised the Third Republic's default as salient during the war and suggested systemic or customary renovations to augment the executive authority, also after the war. In Japan, a few isolated plans for future administrative reforms were made to improve the cabinet's efficiency, but these were anchored in the Taishō Democracy process and did not represent an immediate reaction to the conflict. France was therefore in more haste to adapt its system, due to the difficulty of its situation during the war, while Japanese discussions were more general and conceptual.

#### **Chapter 6. 1919-1924: Innovative conceptions for a New World**

The Great War's aftermath offered a context favourable to deep introspection to all belligerents. Both Japan and France were marked by a shift in international relations. Longing to please the former Entente and maintain Japan's new first-rank status, part of the Japanese elite distanced itself from the German model and recognised the United Kingdom as an example of efficiency. France was destabilised by new customs some saw as imposed by Lloyd George, which, for instance, had the Prime Minister decreasingly implicated in domestic affairs and unable to oversee the cabinet. Reconceptualising domestic institutions, and the cabinet system in particular, became essential to maintain their influence on the international scene. In addition, both countries also lived through economic troubles due to the war, and composed their reforming projects acknowledging these material limitations. Japanese commentators praised the United Kingdom's resilient institutional adaptations before calling for similar reforms as Lloyd George's War Cabinet's novelties to improve the Japanese cabinet's cohesion and efficiency. An anglophile part of the French elites also praised innovations brought by the United Kingdom and proposed renovations with similar goals to their Japanese counterparts: unifying the cabinet through interdepartmental coordination and reinforcing the Prime Minister's status. This last objective was more of a priority in France, and projects were more detailed than in Japan. Besides systemic restructuring, the key concept of ministerial solidarity was questioned and reevaluated in practice in the aftermath of the Great War.

## **Chapter 7. 1925-1932: Systemic reforms and deceptions**

Between late 1924 and 1932, the Japanese cabinet system saw its bases reinforced by systemic reforms and the stabilisation of the Prime Minister's superiority over his colleagues. Practical mechanisms such as collective ministerial responsibility were also normalised. French Statesmen attempted many more reforms, showing the broader range of issues perceived to affect the French cabinet system, but these evolutions were not sustained after the cabinet in power resigned. A growing imbalance worsened within the French cabinet: the Minister of Finance gained importance because of economic problems and sometimes exercised authority over the ministers instead of the Prime Minister. Similar battles for authority were not observed in Japan. The establishment of a Cabinet Secretariat in Japan (1924) and of an Under-secretary to the Prime Minister for interdepartmental coordination in France (1925) suggests that postwar reconsiderations had matured enough to lead to concrete measures during this period. British precedents motivated and inspired these reforms. Many specific issues nonetheless remained unaddressed. By the early 1930s, the Japanese cabinet was still marked by an overall defect of legitimacy over other political organs. Its French counterpart was still unstable and suffered from a cruel impermanence of systemic reforms. These seemingly unsolvable weaknesses irritated public opinion. Intellectuals fearing for their democratic ideals made new demands from 1928 to renovate the cabinet systems. The British model proved impotent and abandoned fundamental features such as ministerial solidarity from 1931, encouraging the attacks of anti-Westminster thinkers on the recent domestic evolutions inspired by British precedents. These led to new demands for constitutional revision in France, whereas Japan was hit by the collapse of party politics and military coups, signalling the start of a new era.

## **Conclusion**

This study's results showed that despite their discrepancies, the Third Republic and Meiji systems shared a fundamental paradox: they were defined by ambiguous written laws despite strong positivist traditions. As a result, the cabinet became a central institution while still being defined by blurry concepts and mechanisms. This was translated into practice by a similar lack of unity, questionable leadership, and a malfunctioning of ministerial responsibility. While solutions existed for Prime Ministers to lead their teams in both countries, these were customary rather than systemic, and attached to the actors' personalities. The Japanese cabinet was, in fact, more of a reality than its French counterpart, as it durably appeared more stable, coherent and consistent. This dissertation further demonstrated that the Great War was a Global Moment for the reconceptualisation of the Japanese and French cabinet systems. Both cases were nonetheless connected through the experience of the First World War and its global aftermath. An important part of their elites shared a fascination for the United Kingdom's wartime evolutions, which influenced the practice and the reforms of their domestic systems during and after the war. This suggests an essential yet underrated stage of the importation of the British political model into different regions of the World, and opens the discussion for a global history of its influence beyond the Dominions and the post-1945 Commonwealth. The Japanese cabinet system showed greater capacity to renew its executive power's main institution from the Great War to the Great Depression. Yet reforms were limited and appeared disappointing in both cases, as consistent malfunctions were still observed until 1932. This implies that while the war changed the mentalities, it did not lead to a complete and systemic solution to all issues. In addition, customs and small-scale administrative reforms, rather than in-depth renovations, were judged insufficient because of these countries' positivist traditions. Primary sources hinted at broader interconnections with other regions of the world, like Italy, which laid the ground for future work on the global conception and definition of cabinet systems during the interwar period.