

# Madrigals, Mandarins, and Budgetary Politics

For a long time in the United Kingdom the Treasury was 'off limits' to scholars. Strange, because there was little doubt that this was the hard core of government, the central citadel of Whitehall where the Treasury men not only taxed the public, but defended the national purse 'like inverted Micawbers, waiting for something to turn down' (Winston Churchill). Since few acts of government have no financial repercussions, and since public finance is the purlieu of the Treasury, how could it escape the attention of political and other social scientists? There was no ban, but serious study of the Treasury seemed or was deemed impossible and best left to journalists. How could this be?

Review >

Japan

By Richard Boyd

The root of the problem was the cult, the culture, the mystique of the Treasury itself. These were mandarins among mandarins, an intellectual elite, the pick of the civil service, the cream of recruits, members of a chosen race, a race apart. A musical race at that! There was always a Treasury choir and even, at one time, a quartet of madrigal-singing Treasury knights (the UK's equivalent to Japan's administrative vice-ministers). In the Treasury, as Sampson famously observed, the literary, Oxbridge character of Whitehall had its quintessence. This was all a bit too much for the unchosen, the poor cousins of the mandarin, cloistered in their university departments, and so the Treasury remained substantially off limits until about 1970. At which time two American academics presented themselves, unabashed and unashamed, made appointments, prepared their questions, switched on their tape recorders, and asked their questions as the tapes rolled. The academics were Hugh Hecló and Aaron Wildavsky, their questions were answered in full, and the result was the classic 1974 study, *The Private Government of Public Money*.

The parallels with Japan and its Ministry of Finance (MOF) and, no less, between Maurice Wright and these distinguished Americans, are irresistible. The MOF is the centre of Japan's government (say what you will about the importance of the ministry formerly known as the Ministry of International Trade and Industry or (MITI), its initiatives, if and when they have financial repercussions, intrude the MOF's bailiwick and trigger its prerogatives), and its officials are no

less the crème de la crème, the pick of the bureaucratic crop, than their Treasury counterparts. The response of the poor cousins has not been so different either: Japanese scholarship has been at arm's length, to put it mildly. Budgeting is treated not so much as a substantial political process (with the exception of Campbell's pioneering study, *Contemporary Japanese Budgeting*, 1977) but rather in formal, constitutional, legal, and institutional terms. Journalists in Japan, as in England, are made of sterner stuff and are left to deal with the facts of the matter. Wright himself has co-authored a highly regarded study of the UK Treasury. His work on the MOF draws upon techniques and insights derived from that study, and consciously echoes a broad theoretical stance that refers back to Wildavsky. His 'tape recorder' was no less active than that of Hecló and Wildavsky – the book is fed on a rich diet of more than 150 interviews with senior officials and politicians.

There is another parallel at once intriguing and provocative. Hecló and Wildavsky were 'outsiders', removed at the outset from the inhibition and self-censorship that marked local observers. That distance facilitated enquiry, while expertise and experience derived elsewhere enabled research. This is troubling stuff for at least one group of professional students of Japan, for whom (to play on the colonial idiom) 'learning to dance like the natives' is a virtue not a vice, and is even an indispensable means to knowledge. The dance demands (Japanese) linguistic competence and a depth of cultural knowledge. We students of the dance see no disadvantage in this. Wright, perhaps, does, and he might be right – in this case at least. Certainly there has been no adequate account of budgeting in Japan in Japanese or English for decades. The pussyfooting around the MOF rivals that around the Treasury. Wright's interviews were conducted in English and he is unapologetic: 'most senior officials have acquired proficiency in the language from time abroad in academic study as part of their earlier formal training, and through career postings to Japanese embassies or international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank'. Was this a disadvantage? No. Not a bit of it. In fact, 'interviewing in English had the advantage that it was normally unconstrained by those social conventions and contexts cus-

tomarily observed in Japanese discourse'. Is this music to the ears of a Japan scholar? About as much as fingernails scraping on a blackboard are. As for the literature used, Wright knows and draws upon the major literatures in both languages. This is conventional enough: indeed, careers have been made out of synthesizing the best of published Japanese sources. This is emphatically not the case here. Wright depends little on Japanese literature, the limitations of which he understands. As for the results, Wright has written the only major text on the MOF and the Japanese budgetary process to have appeared in the last 25 years; it is a substantial, comprehensive, theoretically informed, analytically acute, and empirically rich, culturally sensitive, historico-institutional account of one of the key agencies in Japanese government and of one of the key processes in Japanese politics. Its importance is considerable. Not least for area studies. Read it. <

- Wright, Maurice, *Japan's Fiscal Crisis, The Ministry of Finance and the Politics of Public Spending, 1975-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2002), pp.631, ISBN 0-1992-5053-7.

## Bibliography

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