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TITLE

**TO WHAT EXTENT DID THE INTERESTS OF JAPANESE
ZAIBATSU INFLUENCE JAPAN'S ACTIONS DURING THE
SECOND SINO-JAPANESE WAR AND LEAD TO
THE OUTBREAK OF THE PACIFIC WAR?**

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Topic: To what extent did the interests of Japanese zaibatsu influence Japan's actions during the Second Sino-Japanese War and lead to the outbreak of the Pacific War?

1

Identification and evaluation of sources:

2

Investigation:

3

Reflection

6

References:

8

Identification and evaluation of sources:

The research question to be asked in the investigation would be: *To what extent did the interests of Japanese zaibatsu influence Japan's actions during the Second Sino-Japanese War and lead to the outbreak of the Pacific War?* To flesh this out, two sources have been chosen: the essay by Masataka Matsuura, "Analysing the Relationship between Business and Politics in Pre-War Japan: Some Thoughts on the Zaikai" (2000)¹, and the thesis of Edwin Neil Smellow, "Zaibatsu: A Study of Japanese Combines Yesterday and Today" (1970)². The two sources provide essential yet distinct perspectives on how Japanese big business interacted with the nation's expansion during its war period.

Matsuura focuses his paper on the concept of zaikai, a group of high-ranking business and financial leaders, and its relationship with the pre-war politics³. Where Matsuura distinguishes zaikai and zaibatsu, the essay provides essential insight into the influence that economic elites had over Japanese decision-making in the 1930s and 1940s. This is pertinent to the research question, as it helps to understand whether the interests of giant business conglomerates played a decisive role in Japan's entry into China and subsequently clashed with those of the West. A strength of this source is that it is scholarly, as it is written by a historian who is also a specialist in Japanese political economy. It is supported by both detailed analysis and thorough research.

Furthermore, it is more nuanced in not directly and simplistically linking the sole cause of aggression in Japan to the interests of the zaibatsu, but rather situating them within the context of business-government networks. The source, however, is limited. Since it focuses more on the zaikai, it does not emphasize the direct participation of zaibatsu in war mobilization. It also reads as a secondary interpretation, building on previous work done on archives and economy, which lends it an authoritative aspect. Furthermore, it does not fully quantify the financial stakes of the zaibatsu in war-related industries, limiting its ability to draw definitive conclusions about the extent to which their economic interests directly encouraged military expansion.

¹ Smethurst, Richard J., and Masataka Matsuura. "Politics and the economy in pre-war Japan." Suntory and Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines, The London School of Economics, 2000, sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/js/JS381.pdf.

² Smellow, Edwin Neil. *Zaibatsu: A Study of Japanese Combines Yesterday and Today*. 1970. George Washington University, thesis. CORE, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/36708512.pdf>.

³ Kunimasa, Tsunehiro. "Japan's Economic Organizations: The Zaikai." JEF Journal, Japan Economic Foundation, www.jef.or.jp/journal/pdf/cov1_8505.pdf. Accessed 21 Aug. 2025.

The case study is "Zaibatsu: A Study of Japanese Combines Yesterday and Today" by Edwin Neil Smellow. The paper is more generalized, but its illustrations are detailed. The research documents the historical evolution of the four leading combines—Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, and Yasuda—to the period of the occupation reforms in the postwar era⁴. Specifically, Smellow's analysis of the 1930s and 1940s is relevant, wherein the author demonstrates how the zaibatsu became entangled in the Japanese military-political complex. Statistical figures (zaibatsu bank loans made to the military; the degree to which they dominated the war industry markets, etc.) are also given to substantiate their contribution to the war machine of Japan. This approach also has a strong point because it enables answering not only the research question in the form of an interpretation, but also in terms of economic data that can be measured.

Nevertheless, the thesis does not lack limitations. As it was written in 1970, it reflects the historiographical inclinations of the time. It extensively uses English-language materials, as the author was unable to read Japanese well. This limits the type of involvement with Japanese primary sources and raises questions about the completeness of the information. Additionally, being a thesis rather than a peer-reviewed monograph, it may not be as rigorous as other works that preceded it.

Investigation:

The outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and the subsequent Pacific War in 1941 were pivotal moments in contemporary history⁵. These wars were not only military conflicts but also deeply concerned with Japan's economic path and its aspirations. A key to these wars is the position played by zaibatsu, the conglomerates of Japan, eg, Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, and Yasuda. By the 1930s, these business empires had dominated Japan's industrial economy, controlling the banking sector, as well as mining, shipping, and other heavy industries.

The rationale for choosing this research question is the question that defined the historical debate: whether Japan was a militarist state or whether the economic ambitions of the corporate giants were the driving force behind their aggression. The overtly friendly ties between the

⁴ John, Peter. "Been There, Done That - The History of Corporate Ownership in Japan." Social Science Research Network, 2005, <https://scispace.com/pdf/been-there-done-that-the-history-of-corporate-ownership-in-56iar53kfn.pdf>.

⁵ The National WWII Museum. (n.d.). The Liberation of China and the Pacific. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/liberation-china-and-pacific>

zaibatsu and the state and military raise the question of whether the economic interests of the former, including gaining access to raw materials and expanding industrial markets, contributed to Japan's expansion into China and a logical confrontation with the Western powers. The massive spending on armaments and the development of industries of strategic importance had as a consequence the emergence of powerful business groups with interests tied to the survival of the trends in policy. This is why the research question is relevant to investigate, as it probes into the fields of business interests and war, providing insight into how economic power can influence foreign policy.

Masataka Matsuura provides the Relationship between Business and Politics in Pre-War Japan in the essay. Masataka Matsuura describes the interconnection between business elites (the *zaikai*) and the Japanese political decision-making process before World War II. Despite his efforts to make a distinction between *zaikai* and *zaibatsu*, Matsuura's discussion remains relevant to the research question, as he applies these economic factors within the framework of more powerful configurations that predetermined the outcome of the war.

These networks were a small entity whose power could not be equated with the *zaibatsu*. This is critical because it suggests that the interests of the *zaibatsu* were not the only force that caused war, but instead were exercised through larger businessman-politician blocs. To show a long-term relationship between the business leaders and the state officials, he points out how the policies indirectly influenced them and other economic leaders like Shibusawa Eiichi.

This effect can be observed in one aspect of Japan, specifically its involvement in the war in China. The government established measures that led to the allocation of funds towards industries of significant importance in building military potential, such as steel, coal, and shipping, in which *zaibatsu* firms dominated. What the *zaibatsu* could do at that moment was that they could not only count on guaranteed profits, but were also caught up in the necessity of continuing the war. Nevertheless, Matsuura also notes that they did not lean to only one side: they were the state-business coalition.

The climax of the source by Matsuura is that it is very nuanced. He does not make the *zaibatsu* the puppeteers of Japanese foreign policy, but instead locates it in the broader domain of political economy. This renders the essay valuable by providing an answer to the research question, as it is not oversimplified. However, its significant shortcomings are that Matsuura pays excessive attention to the *zaikai* and, as a result, pays insufficient attention to direct participation of the *zaibatsu* in the production process at the time of the war. He acknowledges there could be, but puts it in a broader perspective.

Matsuura, the Japanese scholar, too, can be said to be ideologically biased in the sense of emphasizing complexity rather than distributing blame. This is in part due to his context, in writing nearly 60 years after the war had concluded, when Japanese scholarship at least was inclined to reconfigure responsibility more collectively.

Edwin Neil, however, draws a closer association between the zaibatsu and the wars of Japan. Of interest to the study is how, by the 1930s, these conglomerates had ascended to control finance, trade, and industry, as noted by Mellow. Notably, he emphasizes that they were absorbed into the military-political complex in the course of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Mellow indicates that this is true, and Mellow presents quantitative evidence to support the view. For example, he records how in 1944, the four central zaibatsu banks lent generously to war industries, thereby directly funding Japan's military campaigns⁶. He has also presented tabular data on how production within major sectors of the economy, such as steel, shipping, and coal, was in the hands of zaibatsu groups like Matsui and Mitsubishi. This led to them being essential to the war effort, and their prospects became dependent on whether or not the war continued.

That the growth of such organizations was so significant to the nation as a whole is made very well by one of Smellow himself [[quote qualified] quadruple-Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, who, speaking of such old established and major financial concerns of the country, said that the economic structure of the country had been developed by them, and was stressing that modern Japan owed her prosperity to their efforts. This highlights the magnitude of recognition accorded to the zaibatsu by Japanese leaders as a key component of national policy.

Unlike Matsuura, Smellow makes a direct connection between zaibatsu interests and Japanese aggression. Their mutual interests in markets and raw material sources, he argues, coincided nicely with the military vision of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Typical policies implemented to ensure that zaibatsu subsidiaries were geared towards Japanese expansion included the establishment of the so-called national policy bodies in the 1930s. The zaibatsu were not the passive recipients of this effect of imperialism on Sanwell, but active participants with significant influence that promoted expansionism.

The advantage of Smellow is that the study is highly structured and economical. His tables and statistics serve as evidence of the zaibatsu's involvement in Japan's war machine. Nonetheless, there are flaws in his work. It should also be noted that he did not read Japanese and relied heavily on English-speaking literature, which can limit the depth of his analysis. Moreover,

⁶ Glick, Reuven, and Michael M. Hutchison. "Banking and Currency Crises: How Common Are Twins?" National Bureau of Economic Research, 2000, www.nber.org/system/files/chapters/c10274/c10274.pdf.

writing in 1970, that view represents a postwar Western understanding that tended to blame Japanese aggression on corporate and militarist elites. This is compared to the more balanced Japanese worldview of Matsuura.

The combination of the two forms a suitable source for the research question. Matsuura highlights the unmanageable nature of the business-politics relations, indicating that the power of the zaibatsu was not the only factor in the entire network of the zaikai. Mello, by contrast, emphasizes the structural success of the zaibatsu in the war-related industry and asserts that their interests were inherently linked to Japan's expansionist policy. Both underline the significance of policies that tied business and war. Matsuura cites economic mobilization policies, which channeled resources into heavy industry, and Smellow outlines the process by which banks and subsidiaries belonging to the zaibatsu provided money and equipment to the military. In ideological terms, the sources represent the contexts: Matsuura was writing in 2000 and in Japan, thus the less accusatory tone; Smellow wrote in 1970 in the United States, so with the present understanding of Japanese history, the objective was to show the zaibatsu as being primary contributors to the tragic path of Japan to the war.

Reflection

Throughout this research, I became familiar with several methodological considerations commonly employed by historians. Both primary and secondary sources can be utilized by historians with the aid of the comparative approach, which enables them to identify patterns, confirm them, and highlight contradictions and inconsistencies. The procedures performed in this paper entailed critiques and analysis of the secondary academic essay by Matsuura and the historical thesis by Smellow, and positioning them in their historiographical context. This comparative methodology provided me with the opportunity to appreciate how various historians construct the role of the zaibatsu in Japan's wars, considering their ideological standpoint, nationality, and access to materials.

The major impediment I experienced was the lack of availability of primary data at the time. Most wartime zaibatsu records were destroyed or unavailable; thus, much of the evidence available to historians has been gathered through postwar research or pieced together from economic statistics. His limited ability to read Japanese also limited the sources he could use in his analysis, as he stated himself. On the same note, whereas Matsuura offers much-needed insight, the fact that he does not refer to the zaibatsu but rather the zaikai limits the scope of his

arguments. It is symptomatic of larger problems with reconstructing the economic and political relations of this period: evidence is frequently limited, and interpretations are inextricably linked to the focus.

Another factor to consider is the objectivity of sources. Kenichi Ohno reveals the postwar Western bias that tended to pin the blame on the zaibatsu as the promoters of Japanese militarism⁷. His morally tinged description of the zaibatsu as the main pavement of aggression can therefore be subject to moral judgment. Matsuura (2000), writing in Japan in 2000, is more circumspect and suggests that the zaibatsu should be considered within the context of a broader network of elites, acknowledging the multiplicity of factors and the absence of simple blame. Becoming more aware of these biases would prove essential to my analysis, as it would enable me to recognize that, in addition to being informed by evidence, historical interpretation is influenced by the historian's purpose and the context in which it is presented.

⁷ Kenichi Ohno. *The History of Japanese Economic Development: Origins of Private Dynamism and Policy Competence*. Routledge, 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324691322_The_History_of_Japanese_Economic_Development_Origins_of_Private_Dynamism_and_Policy_Competence.

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