

# **Japan's Circle of Power: Legitimacy and Integration of a National Elite**

Carmen Schmidt

## **Summary**

The concept of elites must be related to two important dimensions: democratic legitimacy and elite interpenetration as well as the distribution of power within these two dimensions. This paper develops a model for analyzing elites and shows how it can be used to understand the nature of Japan's leadership. Using a wide range of Who is Who publications, the incumbents of top positions within politics, bureaucracy, economy, pressure groups, and the mass media are investigated in accordance with the model presented in the theoretical part. The findings suggest that Japan's elite is not monopolistic. It neither consists of a single closed master caste, nor is it clearly dominated by one partial elite. It is not a pluralistic elite with fragmented centers of power and diverging interests drawn from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds. Instead, Japan is ruled by a circle of power, which is held together by exclusive patterns of recruitment, mutual interests, interdependence, elite consciousness, and personal ties.

## **1 A Model for Analyzing Elites**

The literature provides two basic frameworks for interpreting societal elites: the elitist approach, and the pluralist model of competing elites. According to the elitist approach, the elite of a society is characterized by an overlap between the different elite sectors, a high concentration of power, and a strong cohesion within the various elite groups. The pluralists conversely argue that an elite is comprised of various sets of groups with diverging interests, recruited through a variety of social backgrounds, and characterized by a limited concentration of power. However, as it was pointed out by many authors, the models lack arguments, there is a relative dearth of testable hypotheses, and, not least, they lack the solid ground of empirical variables. It is for this reason that an agreement between scholars about "who rules" has not yet been reached. Further, it has been argued that in the studies of elites, the higher the level of theoretical abstraction adopted, the greater the number of similarities, or at least of their functional equivalencies.<sup>1</sup> When the research is truly empirically grounded, the chances are greater to discover differences in national elite configurations caused by the diversity of the nations, social systems, structures, and levels of development.

---

<sup>1</sup> For this discussion, see Moyser/Wagstaffe 1987: 1-3; Dogan 2003: 6, 14; Schmidt 2004: 29-31.

One starting point in developing a model of elites which is clearly related to empirical variables, is the work of Giddens (1974: 4-7) who argued that there are essentially three aspects involved in the study of elites: recruitment, structure, and power. By combining the variables through differentiation between the latter aspects, he concludes that there are four types of elites: (1) the ruling class, (2) the governing class, (3) the power elite, and (4) leadership groups. Though the terminology does not seem to have caught on, it does indicate one way in which a model of elite studies can be developed.

One theoretically significant property concerning the conflict between elite rule and democracy needs to be added. The rule of a small elite runs counter to the democratic theory of majority rule as well as meaning inequality in the distribution of power when democracy in fact emphasizes the equality of individuals. This clash between the idea of elites and the idea of democracy is reduced if society's positions of power are in principle open to everyone, if there is competition for power, and if the holders of power are always accountable to the electorate. The democratic style of elite rule is therefore one of the crucial points in studying elites in contemporary societies.<sup>2</sup>

No satisfactory model for elite analysis is possible without taking the significance of the distribution of power into account. According to Giddens, power can be subdivided into: (a) effective power that can be diffused or centralized, which refers to the level of control from below, i.e. the limitation of the elite's power, and (b) issue strength, which refers to how far the power of the elite is limited within a restricted range of issues. While the former aspect is related to the vertical aspect of an elite's democratic legitimization, the latter deals with the horizontal dimension of the elite's integration.

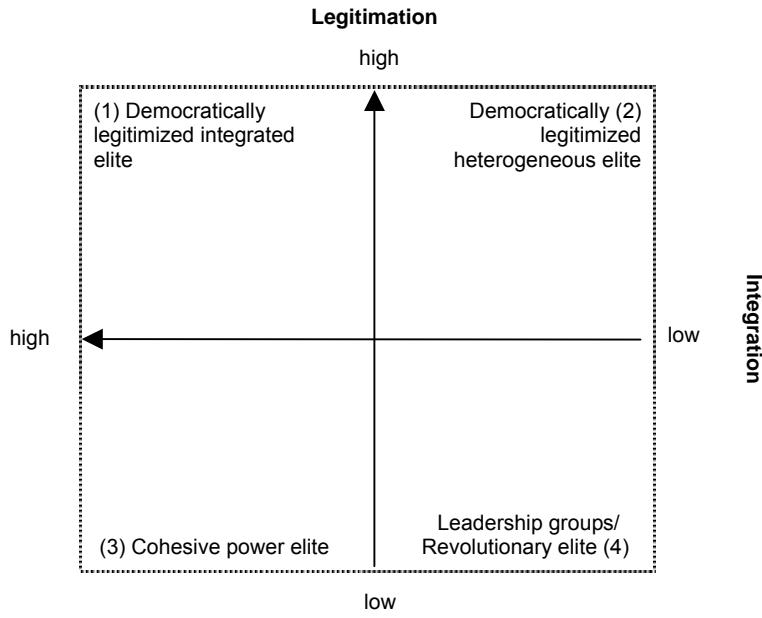
Generally spoken there are two dimensions involved in the study of elites: (1) democratic legitimacy and (2) what Giddens has called the elite's structure or integration. Within the vertical dimension "democratic legitimacy", elite studies should analyze the distance between the elite and the society to discover how far the process of recruitment is "open" to those drawn from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, or to which extent it is "closed" in favor of those drawn from a privileged class. The social background of the elites should therefore be studied as well as the channels through which such recruitment occurs. In addition, the question of how far the power of the elite is restricted from below should be addressed.

Within the horizontal dimension "integration" or cohesion, elite studies should be concerned with the elite groups' level of social, structural, and moral integration by investigating the socio-demographic similarities, the social networks and social contacts as well as the resemblance between career paths. Of significant importance is the horizontal elite interpenetration that signifies movements from one power

<sup>2</sup> On elites and democracy see Bottomore 1993: 8-9; Stammer 1951; Bachrach 1970; Joseph 1981.

summit to another and the elite's issue strength by means of interlocking directorships. The level of elite integration therefore provides information on an elite's uniformity, level of conflict and its consensus: the higher the level of elite integration, the lower the level of conflict within the group, and conversely, the higher the level of integration, the more likely we are to find consensus within the group. By combining the two dimensions, a classification of elite types in a given society can be done. The types that are clearly related to a set of empirical variables are:

**Fig. 1: Types of Elites in Democratic Societies**



Source: Compiled by author.

1. The democratically legitimized integrated elite with an open recruitment process, a high level of democratic control from below, a high level of social, moral and structural integration and issue strength, a low level of conflict and a high level of functionality.
2. The democratically legitimized heterogeneous elite drawn from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds with a high level of democratic control from below, but a limited issue strength, a low level of social, moral and structural integration and therefore a high level of conflict and a low level of functionality.
3. The cohesive power elite drawn from a privileged class with a low level of democratic control from below and issue-strength, a high level of social, moral and structural integration, a low level of conflict and a high level of functionality.

---

4. The leadership groups or revolutionary elite with a closed recruitment process to the top, a low level of democratic control from below, limited issue strength, a low level of social, moral and structural integration and a high level of conflict and a low level of functionality.

## 2 Competing Models on the Nature of Japan's Elite

In the studies on Japan's elite, the two "classical" interpretations mentioned above are identifiable as well: an elitist approach known as the "iron triangle" model, and the alternative of a pluralist polity that challenges the "iron triangle".

The elitist model is based on the concept of a tripartite power elite composed of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) leaders,<sup>3</sup> senior bureaucrats, and big business men. According to the elitists, the three groups comprising the elite triumvirate are united, both in purpose and action, and participate in most, if not all, important policy decisions. Other groups than those included in the triumvirate are regularly excluded from decision-making. Their relationship is further characterized by mutual dependence. For expertise in policy-making and policy-implementation, the political elite relies heavily on the government bureaucracy. In turn, the political elite exercises strong control over personnel's promotion within the bureaucracy and provides retired bureaucrats with career options as LDP diet members (*amakudari*). Big business and economic pressure groups, especially the Federation of Economic Organizations (*Keidanren*) that is now amalgamated with the Japan Federation of Employer's Associations (*Nikkeiren*) into the Japan Federation of Economic Organizations (*Nihon Keidanren*), wield considerable influence on politics as well by financing the ruling LDP. Big business thus has a share in policy-forming and political power. The argument runs further. Business and bureaucrats also depend on each other. Because retiring officials seek new jobs in private firms, they consequently influence regulatory and licensing practice in favor of their "clients" while still in office. All authors who support the "iron triangle" model agree on this mutual dependence set. However, there is less agreement on which of the three groups is regarded as the most or the more powerful.<sup>4</sup>

The pluralists challenge all these elite model propositions. Many observers have reported frequent and intense conflicts of opinion, not only between the three groups but also within the groups. One group of scholars refers to the perpetual factional strife within the LDP. The factions are seen to represent an important, and perhaps the most persistent, form of dissension within the LDP because they act as promoters of particular policies and can crystallize intra-party opposition into particular

---

<sup>3</sup> With a brief interruption between 1993 and 1996, the LDP has been the party in power since its formation in 1955 and is still the most powerful party in Japan.

<sup>4</sup> Prominent exponents of this thesis are Nagai 1960: 18-19; Ishida 1960: 33; Scalapino/Masumi 1962: 93; Fukui 1970; Tsurutani 1977: 70-115; Rothacher 1993; Kerbo/McKinstry 1995; Sugimoto 2003: 212-213.

policies and decisions. Others have stressed that the bureaucracy is neither united in purpose nor in action and point to the bitter conflict between the Ministry for Trade and Industry (MITI) and the Ministry of Finance (MoF) over government fiscal policy. Big business too is not regarded as a simple monolithic group when dealing with specific policy questions. The point is made that it too is divided in its interests and counsels and can only present a united front on the broadest issues.

In addition to all these divisions within each group, differences and conflicts within the three groups themselves are said to be prevalent and serious. After 1960 specifically, the three groups' opinions came into direct conflict in what was described as a diffusion of power in the upper levels of the policy-making structure. It is further argued that the opposition parties and non-elite groups actually contribute significantly to important policy issues. It is pointed out that the LDP usurped a series of the Japan Socialist Party's proposals regarding the environment policy for their new policy in order to cope with the JSPs' growth and the growing dissatisfaction within the society. In addition, the development of citizen movements is regarded as proof of the escalating grass-root democracy and democratic control over public policy-making at the local level. Thus, a second element of criticism of the elitist model is the assumption that even under single party dominance the opposition's opinions are taken into account and built into the party system.<sup>5</sup>

However, as is true for all studies based on one of the classical theoretical frameworks the outcome is determined by the approach that was adopted. It is for this reason that it is not possible to choose one position against the other with anything like total confidence.

### **3 Japan's Positional Elite: Sample**

In the following part, Japan's elite is investigated in accordance with the model presented above, which seems to be far more suitable to investigate the nature of elites than the elitist or pluralist approach. The positional method, which identifies elites as persons who occupy important positions, was used for sampling. Even though this method has its shortcomings, it is the one most widely used in determining national elite samples in complex industrial societies because it is the most reliable method and the easiest to apply in practice, since it neither presupposes expert guidance nor requires lengthy decisional studies (Hoffmann-Lange 1987: 29-30).

In accordance with this method, the members of Japan's elite were defined as the incumbents of powerful positions within the society. Since the most power resides at the very top and the top is most closely interlinked, only the incumbents of top positions within each sector were included. As shown in table 1, the sample included

---

<sup>5</sup> Exponents of a pluralistic interpretation are Inoguchi 1982 ("bureaucracy-led, mass inclusionary pluralism"); Murakami 1983 ("compartmentalized competition"); Satō/Matsuzaki 1985 ("canalized pluralism"); Muramatsu/Krauss 1987 ("patterned pluralism"). For a recent discussion, see e.g. Curtis 2002: 11-12.

243 positions in five important sectors (politics, bureaucracy, business, (economical) pressure groups and media), which were held by 231 individuals in January 2003.

There is much consensus among scholars that the political, administrative, and economic elites as well as the pressure groups are the most influential national players due to their power over the allocation of political, administrative and monetary resources. The media elite was included as they have the ability to channel information, influence the setting and framing of political and social agendas, and to legitimize or delegitimize certain political, economic, or social groups and ideas.

Given the fact that interviewing the incumbents of top positions within Japanese society isn't easily achieved, the data were derived from a wide range of Who is Who publications in Japanese.

**Table 1: Sample**

Sample	Positions	in %	Persons	in %
Politics	69	28.4	65	28.1
Bureaucracy	73	30.0	72	31.2
Economy	54	22.2	51	22.1
Pressure Groups	21	8.6	19	8.2
(Economical Pressure Groups)	(18)	(7.4)	(16)	(6.9)
Media	26	10.7	24	10.4
N =	243	100	231	100

Note: In each sector the following positions were included:

Politics: positions within the executive power (Prime Minister and cabinet), legislative power (heads of the Lower House committees (*iinchō*), the speaker of the Lower House (*gichō*)), political parties (the president and secretary general, three top officials of the LDP (*tōsan'yaku*), LDP faction leaders (*habatsu kaichō*)).

Bureaucracy: heads, aids and chiefs of secretariat within the ministries and offices on ministerial level (*jimu jikan*, *shingikan*, *kanbō chōkan*), heads of the external agencies and commissions (*chōkan* and *iinchō*), heads of the National Personnel Authority, the Chief of the Cabinet Legislative Bureau, the President of the Bank of Japan.

Economy: presidents (*shachō*) of the 50 most important corporations, including banks (according to firm size by capital); most important insurance companies with a capital higher than the lowest ranked corporation.

Pressure Groups: chairmen of major business organizations (Nihon keidanren, Keizai dōyūkai, Nihon shōkō kaigisho), and in the case of Nihon keidanren, all top executives, the Chairman of the Japan Medical Association, the National Agricultural Co-operative Association, and the most important labor union, Rengō.

Media: presidents of Japan's core print media (*Yomiuri*, *Asahi*, *Mainichi*, *Nikkei*, *Sankei*) and their five affiliated media conglomerates, quality papers *Bungei shunju*, *Sekai*, *Chūō kōron*, the national public service television station NHK, private TV stations (WOWOW, Sky Perfect), major radio networks (Japan Radio Network, National Radio Network), major press agencies (Kyōdō Press, Jiji Press), major advertising companies (Dentsū, Hakuhōdo).

## 4 Democratic Legitimacy of Japan's Elite

### 4.1 Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment to elite positions in Japan can be described as a relatively closed process, especially with regard to gender and education. Women are largely underrepresented in higher positions despite the fact that 41 percent of the Japanese working population is female. Not surprisingly, only 3 percent of the Japanese elite is female, which shows the harsh reality of gender inequality in Japan. Nearly 80 percent of the elite attended one of the nation's elite universities compared to 5.5 percent of the population in 2002. The share of the nation's most prestigious Faculty of Law, that of Tokyo University (Tôdai), is extraordinarily high (see table 2). It is widely believed that the Japanese educational structure offers "equal" chances and is based on merit. Upon closer examination, however, the Japanese system appears closer to the class-bound elite universities of France or Great Britain.<sup>6</sup> Only persons from privileged backgrounds proceed to one of the nation's top universities, which is reflected in the elite's composition.

**Table 2: Patterns of Recruitment**

	Overall	Politics	Bureaucracy
Gender in %			
Male	97.0	89.2	100
Female	3.0	10.8	0
Educational background in %			
Others	3.0	7.7	0
Not known	0.4	0	0
University	96.5	92.3	100
Place of education in %			
Tôdai (Faculty of Law)	41.3 (28.3)	28.3 (20.0)	61.1 (52.8)
Kyôdai/Hitotsubashi	14.3	5.0	23.6
Waseda/Keiô	22.9	40.0	6.9
Others	21.5	26.7	8.3
Age in 2003 (on average)	(63.0)	(63.3)	(58.9)
54-	6.1	18.5	2.8
55-64	54.5	35.4	86.1
65+	39.4	46.2	11.1
Region in %			
Centre <sup>1</sup>	45.8	34.9	50.0
Tokyo-Yokohama	32.2	27.0	34.7
Nagoya	1.3	0	1.4
Osaka-Kyoto-Kobe	12.3	7.9	13.9
Periphery	54.2	65.1	50.0

<sup>6</sup> Studies of Tôkyô University students reveal that most of the students come from families which belong to the top earning 10-20 percent of the population. See Watanabe 1997: 63-66.

	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Politics</b>	<b>Bureaucracy</b>
Workplace in %			
Tokyo	91.3	100	100
Others	8.7	0	0
Past Occupation in %			
Business	39.0	29.2	1.4
Ministerial bureaucracy	35.1	21.5	91.7
Party	3.5	12.3	0
Media	10.8	6.2	1.4
Others	9.5	24.6	5.6
Not known	2.2	6.2	0
Career data (on entering the top position)			
Age	60.3	60.9	57,6
Years in sector	30.3	22,7	31,7
Years in institution	25.9 (28.5) <sup>2</sup>	18,2*	31,7
Years in position (in 2003)	2.7	2,0	1,1
Type of career in %			
Direct entry into sector	69.7	12.3	91.7
Career only within the same institution/organization	61.5	1.5	91.7
Career in different institutions/ organizations within the same sector	8.2	10.8	0
Sector change	27.7	81.5	8.3
Classical type <sup>3</sup>	22.5	76.9	0
Direct Cross over	5.2	4.6	8.3
Not known	2.6	6.2	0
	<b>Economy</b>	<b>Pressure Groups</b>	<b>Media</b>
Gender in %			
Male	100	100	100
Female	0	0	0
Educational background in %			
Others	0	10.5	0
Not known	0	0	4.2
University	100	89.5	95.8
Place of education in %			
Tôdai (Faculty of Law)	41.2 (21.6)	29.4 (11.8)	21.7 (0)
Kyôdai/Hitotsubashi	15.7	23.5	0
Waseda/Keiô	11.8	17.6	56.5
Others	31.4	29.4	21.7
Age in 2003 (on average)	(64.0)	(70.3)	(66.9)
54-	0	0	0
55-64	54.9	10.5	45.8
65+	45.1	89.5	54.2
Region in %			
Centre <sup>1</sup>	41.2	52.6	68.2

	Overall	Politics	Bureaucracy
Tokyo-Yokohama	27.5	21.1	59.1
Nagoya	0	5.3	4.5
Osaka-Kyoto-Kobe	13.7	26.3	4.5
Periphery	58.8	47.4	31.8
Workplace in %			
Tokyo	70.6	73.7	100
Others	29.3	26.3	0
Past Occupation in %			
Business	98.0	89.5	12.5
Ministerial bureaucracy	2.0	0	0
Party	0	0	0
Media	0	0	83.3
Others	0	10.5	0
Not known	0	0	4.2
Career data (on entering the top position)			
Age	60.1	67.1	61.3
Years in sector	35.6	Not known	34.4
Years in institution	32.9	4.9 (41.4) <sup>2</sup>	28.2
Years in position (in 2003)	3.9	3.2	5.6
Type of career in %		Federation	Occupation
Direct entry into sector	98.0	0	89.5
Career only within the same institution/organization	90.2	0	73.7
Career in different institutions/ organizations within the same sector	7.8	0	15.8
Sector change	2.0	89.5	5.3
Classical type <sup>3</sup>	0	15.8	5.3
Direct Cross over	2.0	73.7	0
Not known	0	10.5	4.2

Note: \* Entered the national parliament. <sup>1</sup> Centre: Tokyo-Yokohama: prefectures Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama and Chiba; Nagoya: prefecture Aichi; Osaka-Kyoto-Kobe: prefectures Kyoto, Osaka and Hyogo. <sup>2</sup> The chairpersons of the pressure groups were (with one exception) part-time officials and held regular jobs therefore we distinguished between a career in a federation and in an occupation. The overall sum is calculated on the basis of the occupational figure. The figure in parenthesis for the years at an institution is similarly calculated on the basis of the occupational figure. <sup>3</sup> Classical type: Long-term second career after sector change.

Source: Compiled by author.

The elites in all sectors (with the exception of the political elite) are usually recruited after graduation and promoted according to seniority, which is why they tend to be quite elderly when they reach a top position. Younger persons are scarce at the top. Overall the average age on entering the top position was 60.3 years and in 2003 only 6 percent of Japan's elite were younger than 54 and nearly 40 percent were older than 65 (see table 2).

As a result of the lifetime employment system, the overwhelming majority (61.5%) of the sample spent their entire working career within the same institution or organization and only 5.2 percent moved from a top position in one sector to that in another one.<sup>7</sup> Persons who fail to move to a top corporation or the ministerial bureaucracy after graduation therefore have no chance to do so thereafter, despite individual achievements in a middle- or small-scale corporation, or as a self-employed. Since the large corporations and the bureaucracy select their future managerial personnel from the nation's top universities, education is the most important selection criterion for a future elite position.

Similar to their counterparts in other sectors, the political elite graduated from one of the nation's prestigious universities, but in contrast to the other elites, most of Japan's politicians came to politics late, after other careers especially in economy (29.2%) and bureaucracy (21.5%). One more point stands out: 60 percent of the political elite can be classified as second- or third-generation diet members who inherited their political mandate from a father, a father-in-law or some other close relative. This figure is more than 20 percent higher than those for LDP diet members in 1999 when it was 38.7 percent (Schmidt 2001: Figure 6.4). However, belonging to a family of lawmakers is often the least: table 3 reveals, that nearly half of these persons had a former minister or Prime Minister as a close relative.<sup>8</sup> This elucidates the fact that politics has become a family trade monopolized by a second or third generation whose principal merit is being a descendant of a political dynasty.

**Table 3: Political Elite Descending from a Political Dynasty**

Second- or third-generation politician	N	in %
No	26	40.0
Yes	39	60.0
Former minister in family	14	21.5
Former Prime Minister in family	4	6.2
N =	18	27.7
N =	65	100

Source: Compiled by author.

The question of an open or closed elite selection process is conclusively answered by the facts presented above. Due to the Japanese system of lifetime employment, the nation's top universities function as the main channel through which recruitment to elite positions occurs. However, as Dahrendorf (1992: 273) once stated, it would not be all that bad for an elite to have the fact in common that all its members had passed through similar educational institutions since the demand for equal citizenship merely means that access to these institutions has to be open to all. This is

<sup>7</sup> Figure including the political elite. For details see table 2.

<sup>8</sup> Among them were eleven fathers, one mother, three adoptive fathers, one father-in-law, one grandfather, and one husband.

clearly not the case in Japan. In politics, inheritance plays the most important role of all in the path to the top, which limits advancement to an elite position to those belonging to powerful political clans.

#### **4.2 Democratic Power Legitimization**

In respect of the legitimization of democratic power, four points are distinctly important: the legitimization of the political elite through fair and free elections, a low level of influence on the political process by non-legitimated power groups, the inclusion of a wide range of groups in the policy decision-making process and public support for the leadership.

As in all democratic societies, the people by means of periodic elections select Japan's political elite. However, there are some limits to Japanese democracy, especially with regard to a continuing malapportionment problem, which means that the election districts are not proportionate to the population size. In the last upper house election in July 2004, electoral inequalities again widened, with one vote cast in the rural Tottori prefecture worth 5.16 votes in Tokyo (*Japan Times* 10.7.2004). The opposition parties are largely disadvantaged by the malapportionment in that they have fewer seats to compete for in urban areas where their strength most lies. The continuous inequality of the voting system is the main reason for the LDP's dominance of Japan's political system.

The non-legitimated elite groups exercise much influence on the political elite, who does not reign supreme within the policy process. Bureaucrats still conceive and draft most bills and exercise wide discretion in implementing them. Nevertheless, this should not be seen as bureaucratic supremacy, because LDP leaders have several ways of ensuring that bureaucrats remain responsive. The national Public Service Law (*Kokka kōmuin hō*) provides the government with a wide range of authority concerning control over personnel's promotion within the bureaucracy. In addition, the LDP provides retired bureaucrats with career options as party diet members.

Money is still the crucial ingredient for political success in Japan and a great portion of Japanese politicians' political activities is devoted to the raising of political funds. In 1994, the Political Funds Control Law (*Seiji shikin kisei hō*) was reformed and a system of governmental subsidies for political parties was introduced. Thereafter donations as a share of political parties' revenue decreased markedly. However, the LDP's actual revenue is widely thought to be four or five times the reported figures and the new law still offers politicians loopholes that allow them to hide some of their funds' donors. The reforms that occurred in politics' financial sector, while important, are therefore found to have failed to deal decisively with the problem of corporate financing of the LDP. This is highlighted by the fact that in recent times there have been various corruption scandals with high-ranking party officials being accused of having taken money in violation of the Political Funds Control Law. Big

business and the economic pressure groups thus still wield considerable influence on politics by (legally and illegally) financing the ruling LDP.

Mutual interests also closely tie Japan's mass media to the other influential groups. The media is a power group that can control public opinion. However, an important element of government influence on the press is the subtle control of the newsgathering process. In order to gather information, Japanese journalists need to be a member of one of the press clubs (*kisha kurabu*) that function as the primary conduits of official information. In addition to restrictions on free individual access to such clubs, which is limited to the journalists from major mass media conglomerates, the collective and exclusive nature of *kisha* club newsgathering in Japan is responsible for a striking uniformity in news coverage by the various media organizations.<sup>9</sup> The Japan mass media therefore does not function as the "third power" which restricts the power of the political elite. The Japanese bureaucratic and political elite as well as big business has come to rely on the press for a favorable explanation of their actions and policies; in return, the journalists receive exclusive information. The mutual dependence of the power groups and their ability to exercise reciprocal influence mean that in Japan there is no single power pyramid at the apex of power, instead we find a chain of high peaks.

To answer the question of the in- or exclusion of other groups than those mentioned in the political decision-making process, it is informative to look at the consultation process. In the many government advisory committees, in which policy interests are coordinated by the politicians, the bureaucracy and interest groups in a variety of ways, big business plays the most prominent role, while labor unions or citizens movements are represented on only a few of the nations advisory bodies. According to Muramatsu, Itô and Tsujinaka (2001: 267), big business occupied approximately one quarter of the official councils' seats (*shingikai*) between 1975 and 1996, while labor unions held only around 3.5 percent of the chairs. In 1998, roughly half of the seats in the private councils (*shiteki shimon kikan*) went to business, with only 2 percent to labor unions and 0.5 percent to consumer groups. It is therefore safe to assume that leftist interest groups such as labor unions or citizen movements are regularly excluded from the decision-making processes involving important policy issues.<sup>10</sup>

All of this may be the reason why public support of Japan's elite is very low. Using public opinion polls on the Japanese public's attitudes toward key institutions and political leadership, a noticeable loss of public faith in Japan's political leaders and institutions was found. According to a poll by the newspaper *Yomiuri shinbun* of December 1998, only 17.7 percent of the public expressed any confidence in their

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on this subject see Freeman 2000; Krauss 2000.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the advisory council also see Schwartz 2001.

political system (JPOLL/*Yomiuri shinbun* 24.12.1998).<sup>11</sup> In a December 1995 poll, only 29 percent said that democracy works well in Japan, and a plurality of those who had said it does not, blamed the politicians (37%), high-ranking government officials (16%) and the pressure groups (12%) (JPOLL/*Nikkei shinbun* 15.12.1995). Poll after poll taken over the past decade reveals a steadily increasing loss of confidence in Japanese leaders. In 1996, a poll showed that 32 percent of those polled trusted or somewhat trusted high-ranking government officials, but by 1998, this share had dropped to 16 percent (JPOLL/*Asahi shinbun* 8.12.1996 and 13.12.1998). In May 1998, 67 percent of the public polled expressed no or only a little trust in Japanese politicians (JPOLL/*Asahi shinbun* 17.5.1998). The mutual dependence and the cozy relationships between bureaucracy, politics, and business were specifically heavily criticized.

A full 73 percent of the public polled by NHK in 1995 stated that politicians depend too much on bureaucrats to make policy decisions (JPOLL/NHK 24.6.1995, JPOLL). *Yomiuri shinbun* polled the citizenry in 1994 on the question "Do you think *amakudari* (the appointment of former government officials to a responsible position in a private company) is unacceptable, can't be helped or is entirely acceptable?". Only 5 percent said "entirely acceptable", 53 percent answered "unacceptable" and 35 percent answered "it can't be helped" (JPOLL/*Yomiuri shinbun* 21.5.1994). In another poll, the pollees were asked to choose several characteristics from a list that best described their impression of bureaucrats. Among 20 positive and negative answers, "their relationships with political circles and businesses are too cozy" (38%) was ranked first (JPOLL/*Yomiuri shinbun* 21.5.1994). The confidence gap appears to have resulted from a combination of political scandals, the failure of political reform, and the reduced chance for political change. Today the confidence gap is merely expressed in an increasing number of non-voters and unaffiliated voters as well as in a steadily declining voter turnout rate, but in the long run, it could threaten the stability and legitimacy of Japan's political system and leadership. Based on these findings we can conclude that the level of the elite's power legitimization is very low. The control from below through elections as well as public support is very weak and the non-elected elites exercise a wide range of influence on the political process and decision-making, while oppositional groups are regularly excluded from the policy-making process.

---

<sup>11</sup> Poll provided by the Japan Public Opinion Library (JPOLL), Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (University of Connecticut). Neither the original collectors of the data nor the Roper Center bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

## 5 Integration and Cohesion of the Elite

### 5.1 Socio-Demographic Integration and Social Networks

The socio-demographic and social integration of Japan's elite can be classified as very high. Almost all members of the elite belong to the post-war generation that was born between the late 1930s and early 1950s. They experienced the nation's recovery from postwar devastation and impoverishment to the rapid economic growth as young men in the 1950s and early 1960s, and thus share the same life experiences.<sup>12</sup> Due to population concentration there, many of them come from Tokyo. Almost all elite members work and live in the capital where all governmental institutions as well as the headquarters of nearly all large companies, associations, and media companies are located. The overwhelming majority of Japan's elite graduated from one of the few elite universities, especially from Tokyo University (table 2). This exclusive educational experience creates common values and morality and an old boy network of elite college graduates (*gakubatsu*), which, together with family ties and other forms of personal relationships, enhances elite unity and cooperation. The bonds created during their university days normally last a lifetime and continue to influence decision-making, business, and politics. An average graduate, once he has begun employment, will be expected to confine his professional as well as personal life to his work group with its hierarchical forms of social relationships and will have little chance to form personal relationships outside his workplace. The years spent at university therefore offer a rare chance for creating mutually advantageous relationships with peers (Cutts 1997: 19). Such networks are not only formed by studying at the same faculty, as memberships of various clubs, which provide students with opportunities to network across faculties, are regarded as more important.

The analysis of the university background of Japan's elite clearly shows that only graduates of Tokyo University are represented in all sectors in considerable numbers. In the political sector 17 persons (20.0%) graduated from Tôdai, in the bureaucratic sector 44 persons (52.8) are Tôdai graduates, for the economic elite the figure stands at 21 (21.6%) and for the leadership of the pressure groups and the media at 5 persons in each sector (11.8% and 21.7%). We can therefore conclude that the Tôdai connection (Kerbo/McKinstry 1995: 140) is the most important academic network tying the elites together.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 2 demonstrates this network as based on year of graduation and graduates by sector. The numbers symbolize the individuals who graduated from Tôdai while the lines illustrate the potential relationships that can connect them. Given the fact that students in Japan study four years, persons who graduated in intervals of 3 years had

<sup>12</sup> For the political generations within Japanese society see Sugimoto 2003: 72-80.

<sup>13</sup> For this discussion also see Watanabe/Schmidt 2004: 63.

at least one year in which to get to know one another and are therefore connected with such a line. The outcome is a map of the structure of the Tôdai *gakubatsu*. Only one graduate (1938) is not connected with such a potential line, while all the others are linked to potential relationships. We find a gap between the graduates of the political sector, who graduated after 1976, and the other elites. We expect this gap to be filled when the elites of the other sectors move into an elite position. This emphasizes the fact that a network is steadily maintained with the passage of time and can thus be classified as self-perpetuating.

Diet clique members (*zokugiin*), who are quite numerous among the political elite, maintain another network. More than 50 percent of the political elite, who were LDP members can be classified as *zokugiin*, compared to only approximately 30 percent of the LDP diet members.<sup>14</sup>

The term *zokugiin* refers to politicians who have considerable expertise in and practical experience of a particular area of government policy and enough seniority in the ruling LDP to have enduring influence on the ministry responsible for that policy area. The *zokugiin* align with bureaucrats and interest groups in trying to find areas of compromise between interest groups and government. Thus, one can conclude that they play an important role in the communication and coordination of interests within the elite groups.

We further surmise that "old boys" networks of former bureaucrats within the political elite are also of distinct importance for the coordination of interests. They usually stay in close contact with "their" former ministry and through their former occupation have a wide range of contacts (Schaede 1995: 293).

## 5.2 Horizontal Elite Interpenetration

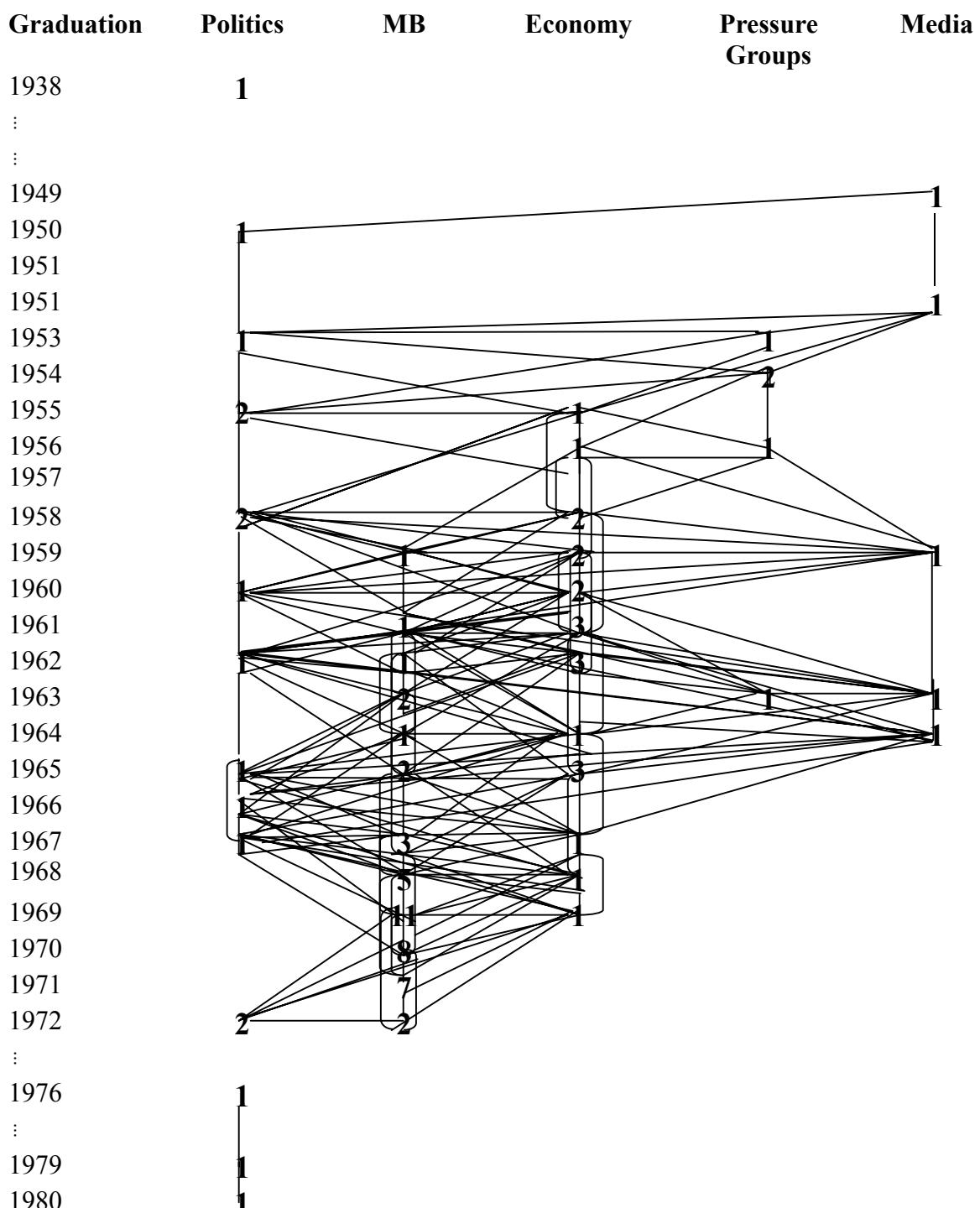
In contrast to this high degree of socio-demographic and social integration, the elites are subdivided into firmly structured units in respect of their careers. Usually they are recruited while young and are promoted step-by-step within the given organization or company until they finally reach a top position. No significant external recruitment or crossover from a leading position in one sector to that in another sector occurs (table 2), which is mainly an outcome of the Japanese lifetime employment model. Any experience they have achieved comes mainly from a lifelong career in the same company or organization.

---

<sup>14</sup> Calculation based on the list of *zokugiin* published by *Shukan asahi* in 2002.



**Fig. 2: Network of Tôdai Graduates among the Sector Elites**



Note: MB = Ministerial bureaucracy.

Source: Compiled by author.



Their socialization takes place in only one sector and in many cases in the same institution or organization, which makes them blind to the needs of other sectors and creates a strong loyalty towards their own sector or institution's interests. It is noteworthy that retired bureaucrats (with one exception) are not found within the corporate elite. While numerous former bureaucrats are found on the largest private corporations' boards, they do not hold top positions at the very apex of power. This matches the findings of Colignon and Usui (2003: 166), who between 1982 and 1998 found a stable number of only two percent former bureaucrats as listed private companies' board directors. It should further be noted that the economic pressure group officials usually hold an honorary position within the given organization. As a rule, they serve as chairperson of the board of a major company (*kachō*) and their careers therefore resemble the top managers' career pattern.

**Table 4: Interlocking Directorates**

Other Position(s)	Politics		MB		Economy		Pressure Groups		Media	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
in:										
Politics <sup>1</sup>	14	21.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
National politics*	0	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Party post	14	21.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Local politics	0	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bureaucracy <sup>2</sup>	-	-	2	2.8	-	-	-	-	-	-
Economy <sup>3</sup>	-	-	-	-	7	13.7	14 (9)	73.7 (47.4)	-	-
Pressure group <sup>4</sup>	-	-	-	-	8	15.7	-	-	-	-
Media <sup>5</sup>	-	-	-	-	1	2.0	-	-	7	29.2
In different sectors:	-	-	-	-	4	7.8	2 (2)	10.5 (10.5)	2	8.3
Economy + pressure group	-	-	-	-	4	7.8	0	0	0	0
Economy + media	-	-	-	-	0	0	2	10.5	2	8.3
N innersectorial posts =	14	21.5	2	2.8	7	13.7	0	0	7	29.2
N intersectorial posts =	0	0	0	0	13	25.5	16 (11)	84.2 (57.9)	2	8.3
N posts overall =	14	21.5	2	2.8	20	39.2	16 (11)	84.2 (57.9)	9	37.5
N no other posts =	51	78.5	70	97.2	31	60.8	3 (8)	15.8 (42.1)	15	62.5
N =	65	100	72	100	51	100	19	100 (100)	24	100

Note: \* Without seat in national parliament. Figure in (): other positions of the pressure group chairpersons without occupational position. MB = ministerial bureaucracy.

<sup>1</sup> Positions within the political sector; calculation based on *Seikai kanchō jinjiroku*.

<sup>2</sup> Positions within the ministerial bureaucracy; calculation based on *Seikai kanchō jinjiroku*.

<sup>3</sup> Positions on the board of a listed company; calculation based on *Yakuin shiki hō – jōjō kaisha 2003*.

<sup>4</sup> Positions on the board of an important pressure group (Nihon keidanren, Keizai dōyūkai, Nihon shōkō kaigi sho, Zenkoku ginkō kyōkai, Nihon shōkengyō kyōkai, Kansai keizai rengōkai) and one of the investigated occupational associations; calculation based on *Yakuin shiki hō – jōjō kaisha 2003* and *Zenkoku dantai meibo*.

<sup>5</sup> Member of the board in one of the investigated media corporations; calculation based on *Yakuin shiki hō – jōjō kaisha 2003* and *Yakuin shiki hō – tentō (jasudakku), mijōjō kaisha 2003*.

Source: Compiled by author.

The career paths of the members of the political elite members differ markedly from their counterparts in other sectors. Typically, they started a second career after a first one in business or bureaucracy. However, on average they spent 18 years in national politics and 22.7 years in the political sector until they reached their top position. They can therefore be classified as professional politicians (table 2).

In comparison, the research suggests that the elites in all sectors are quite elderly and have served in the same organization or company for a long time, which suggests that they are career elites with their own forms and traditions of promotion.

The analysis of the degree of interlocking directorates and accumulation of positions (table 4) shows a low degree of cross-sectorial power. Only a few persons hold cross-sectorial positions, while the accumulation of positions was mainly limited to the given sector or neighboring sectors. Even though we find some top managers serving on the board of a major company, or as officials of an economical pressure group, the same individuals usually do not hold influential positions in multiple sectors. As far as the degree of interlocking directorships is concerned, there is substantial evidence that the elite's effective power is diffused and limited to the given sector and not centralized in the hands of a small elite.

To sum up: through their career paths the elite groups are isolated and subdivided into firmly structured units with their own rules of promotion. There is no free interchange between the entire elite and their issue strength is limited to their own sector. Their education, a shared consciousness, mutual interest, and personal networks tie them together and serve to maintain their unity.

## 6 Conclusion: Japan's Circle of Power

The aims of this paper were to clarify an empirically grounded concept of elites, to show how this can be used to understand the formation of national elites, and to apply this concept to Japan. Elite configurations reflect in large parts social, structural, cultural and political structures of a given society. Given this diversity of national elite configurations it is far more promising to use an empirically grounded concept to reveal the diversity of national situations. Even though some aspects of the "iron triangle" model and the pluralist view of the character of Japanese elite proved to be right, against the background of the presented findings none of the models entirely describe the nature of Japan's leadership.

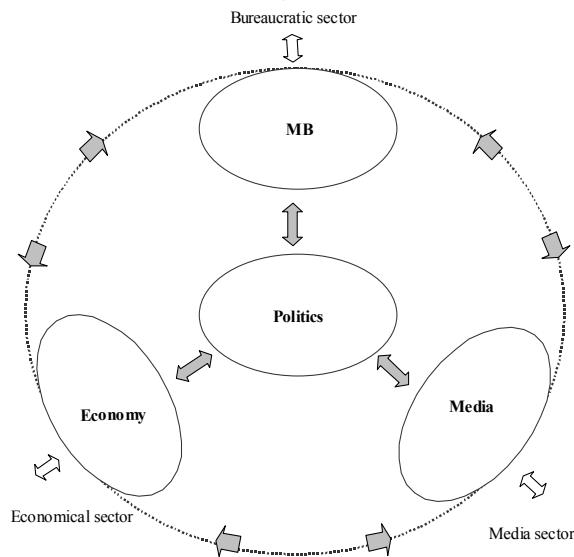
The study has revealed an inequality in the competition for an elite position caused by education, the importance of gender and – in case of the political elite – of family. Although not all Tôdai graduates and heirs to a political family automatically succeed in reaching the summits of society and state, the mentioned variables are indispensable prerequisites for an elite position within the Japanese society. A closed path to the top is not unique to Japan. Almost all elite studies find evidence that elites have a narrow social base of recruitment and are characterized by self-

reproduction. Recruitment to a top position on merit – even in advanced industrialized societies – is almost always found to be a "myth" (Hartmann 2002).

The investigation of vertical power distribution shows evidence that no group clearly dominates within the establishment. The relationship between the groups is characterized by mutual dependence, as pointed out in the elitist model, which is the main reason why none of the groups dominates the political process. There is no single high pyramid dominated by one of the partial elites. All groups are on the same level of power, linked by mutual interests. The media can be seen as the fourth estate, which is an influential block closely linked to the three centers of power. Its patterns of recruitment resemble those of elites in other spheres. It enjoys close links with the other elites through exclusive reporter clubs and its function lies in explaining the government and big business' actions and policies.

The career paths of Japan's elites reveal a high degree of sectorial variation. The elites in all sectors (with the exception of the political elite) are usually recruited young and are promoted through seniority within the given organization or company until they finally reach a top position. No significant movement from one power position to another takes place. This is reinforced by the fact that they do not hold interlocking directorates. Therefore, osmosis between the elite groups is relatively weak. The elites have sector-specific interests rather than being united in purpose and action as the elitist model predicts. In this sense, the findings lean towards the pluralist interpretation of elite configuration. However, due to shared patterns of elite recruitment, and therefore a shared elite consciousness as well as numerous communication networks, the outcome is not a fragmented elite with a high level of conflict as the pluralists predict. The high level of structural and social integration favors elite compromise on all relevant subjects. A variety of personal networks is also used to ease conflicts deriving from diverging interests.

The findings suggest that the Japanese elite is not monopolistic. It does not consist of a single, closed master caste, nor is it clearly dominated by one partial elite. It is not a pluralistic elite with fragmented centers of power and diverging interests, drawn from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds. Instead, Japan is ruled by a circle of power, which is held together by exclusive patterns of recruitment, mutual interests, interdependence, elite consciousness, and personal ties with all of the elite groups on the same level of power.

**Fig. 3: Japan's Circle of Power**

Note: MB = Ministerial bureaucracy.

Within this circle, the position of the political elite is central. There is no evidence that the political elite plays a decisive role in the coordination of the interests of the society as a whole. However, it is central to the communication and interest coordination network *within* the elite due to this elite's past careers as businesspersons, and bureaucrats, and the importance of the *zokugoin* who coordinate the elite groups' mutual interests. In this sense, they function as linking agents in Japan's circle of power. Their recruitment patterns also place them in the middle of the circle of power. The elites in the other spheres are, as far promotion and career are concerned, firmly rooted in their respective sectors. However, the selection of the political elite is mainly based on inheritance. They form a clearly separate kind of class or cast within the society's social structure and are therefore the furthest removed from the general population.

Every elite configuration largely depends on the social mobility, the societal cleavage structure, and the political system of a given society. The consistent inequalities within the Japanese society and the one-party dominated system are the main reasons for the limited access to elite positions. A low level of conflict and a high degree of stability therefore characterizes the circle of power. This constellation is unlikely to change within the immediate future.

## References

Abe, Hitoshi/Muneyuki, Shindō/Sadafumi, Kawato (1994), *The Government and Politics of Japan*, Tōkyō: University of Tōkyō Press, Original: *Gaisetsu gendai Nihon no seiji*, translated by James W. White, Tōkyō: University of Tōkyō Press, 1990

*Asahi gendai yōgo chiezo 2003* [Asahi Dictionary of Contemporary Terms 2003] (2002), Tōkyō: Asahi shinbun sha

Bachrach, Peter (1970), *Die Theorie demokratischer Eliteherrschaft: Eine kritische Analyse*, Frankfurt a. M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1967

Bottomore, Tom (1993), *Elites and Society*, London: Routledge, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1964

Colignon, Richard A./Chikako Usui (2003), *Amakudari: The Hidden Fabric of Japan's Economy*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press

Curtis, Gerald L. (2002), "Politicians and Bureaucrats: What's Wrong and What's to Be Done", in: Gerald L. Curtis (ed.), *Polymaking in Japan: Defining the Role of Politicians*, Tōkyō and New York: Japan Center for International Exchange, pp. 1-17

Cutts, Robert L. (1997), *An Empire of Schools: Japan's Universities and the Molding of a National Power Elite*, Armonk und London: M. E. Sharpe

Dahrendorf, Ralf (1992) [1967], *Society and Democracy in Germany*, Aldershot, Hants: Gregg Revivals

Dogan, Mattei (2003), "Introduction: Diversity of Elite Configurations and Clusters of Power", in: Mattei Dogan (ed.), *Elite Configurations at the Apex of Power*, Leiden and Boston: Brill: 1-15

Freeman, Laurie Anne (2000), *Closing the Shop: Information Cartels and Japan's Mass Media*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press

Fukui, Haruhiro (1970), *Party in Power: The Japanese Liberal-Democrats and Policy-Making*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press

Giddens, Anthony (1974), "Elites in the British Class Structure", in: Philip Stanworth and Anthony Giddens (eds.), *Elites and Power in British Society*, London: Cambridge University Press: pp. 1-21

Hartmann, Michael (2002), *Der Mythos von den Leistungseliten: Spitzenkarrieren und soziale Herkunft in Wirtschaft, Politik, Justiz und Wissenschaft*, Frankfurt a. M. and New York: Campus

Hoffmann-Lange, Ursula (1987), "Surveying National Elites in the Federal Republic of Germany", in: George Moyser and Margaret Wagstaffe (eds.), *Research Methods for Elite Studies*, London and Boston: Allen & Unwin: pp. 27-47

Hrebunar, Ronald J. (2000), "The Money Base of Japanese Politics", in: Ronald J. Hrebunar (ed.), *Japan's New Party System*, Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press: pp. 59-83

Inoguchi Takashi (1982), *Gendai Nihon no seiji keizai* [Modern Political Economy in Japan], Tōkyō: Tōyō keizai shinpō sha

Ishida, Takeshi (1960), "Wagakuni ni okeru atsuryoku dantai hassei no rekishiteki jōken to sono tokushitsu" [The Historical Conditions and Characteristics of The Origins of Pressure Group Politics], in: Nihon seiji gakkai (ed.), *Nihon no atsuryoku dantai* [Pressure Groups in Japan], Tōkyō: Iwanami shoten: 30-45

*Japan Times* (10.7.2004), "The Whys and Wheres of House of Councilors Elections", by Reiji Yoshida: p. 3

Joseph, Lawrence B. (1981), "Democratic Revisionism Revisited", in: *American Journal of Political Science* 25: pp. 160-187

Kerbo, Harold R./John A. McKinstry (1995), *Who Rules Japan? The Inner Circles of Economic and Political Power*, Westport, Connecticut und London: Praeger

Krauss, Ellis S. (2000), *Broadcasting Politics in Japan. NHK and Television News*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press

Moyser, George/Margaret Wagstaffe (1987), "Studying Elites: Theoretical and Methodological Issues", in: George Moyser and Margaret Wagstaffe (eds.), *Research Methods for Elite Studies*, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin: pp. 1-24

Murakami, Yasusuke (1983), *Shin chūkan taishū no jidai* [The Age of the New Middle Mass], Tōkyō: Chūō kōron sha

Muramatsu, Michio/Itō, Mitsutoshi/Tsujinaka, Yutaka (2001), *Nihon no Seiji* [Politics in Japan], Tōkyō: Yūhikaku, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1993

Muramatsu, Michio/Ellis S. Krauss (1987), "The Conservative Policy Line and the Development of Patterened Pluralism", in: Kozo Yamamura and Yasukichi Yasuba (eds.), *The Political Economy of Japan, Vol 1: The Domestic Transformation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press: pp. 516-554

Nagai, Yōnosuke (1960): "Atsuryoku seiji no Nihonteki kōzō" [The Japanese Patterns of Pressure Group Politics], in: Nihon seiji gakkai (ed.), *Nihon no atsuryoku dantai* [Pressure Groups in Japan], Tōkyō: Iwanami shoten: pp. 9-29

---

Ramseyer, J. Mark/Frances McCall Rosenbluth (1997), *Japan's Political Marketplace*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1993

Rothacher, Albrecht (1993), *The Japanese Power Elite*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan

Satō, Seizaburō/Matsuzaki, Tetsuhisa (1986), *Jimintō seiken* [LDP Power], Tōkyō: Chūō kōron sha

Scalapino, Robert A./Jun'nosuke Masumi (1962), *Parties and Politics in Contemporary Japan*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press

Schaede, Ulrike (1995), "The 'Old Boy' Network and Government-Business Relationships in Japan", in: *Journal of Japanese Studies* 21: pp. 293-317

Schmidt, Carmen (2001), *Sozialstruktur und politisches System in Japan: Gesellschaftliche Konfliktlinien, politische Repräsentation und die Formierung der Wählerschaft*, Marburg: Tectum

Schmidt, Carmen (2004), "Theoretische und praktische Aspekte der Eliteforschung", in: *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies* 36/1: pp. 29-43

Schwartz, Frank J. (2001), *Advice and Consent: The Politics of Consultation in Japan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1998

Seikai kanchōjinji roku [Handbook for Politics and Bureaucracy] (2003), Tōkyō: Tōyō keizai shinpō sha

Shukan Asahi (1.3.2002), "Zokugii 100 nin risuto" [The 100 Diet Clique Members]: pp. 24-25

Stammer, Otto (1951), "Das Eliteproblem in der Demokratie", in: *Schmollers Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft* 71: pp. 513-540

Sugimoto, Yoshio (2003), *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1997

Thayer, Nathaniel B. (1969), *How the Conservatives Rule Japan*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press

Tsurutani, Taketsugu (1977), *Political Change in Japan: Response to Postindustrial Challenge*, New York: Longman

Watanabe, Masao (1997), "Class Differences and Educational Opportunities in Japan", in: *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies* 29: pp. 49-71

Watanabe, Masao/Carmen Schmidt (2004), "Die wirtschaftliche Elite Japans: Rekrutierungsmuster und Netzwerkbeziehungen", in: *Japan aktuell* 1: pp. 56-66

Yakuin shiki hō – jōjō kaisha 2003 [Annual Report on the Board Members on the Stock-listed Top Companies] (2002), Tōkyō: Tōyō keizai shinpō sha

Yakuin shiki hō – tentō (jasudakku), mijōjō kaisha 2003 [Annual Report on the Jasdaq-listed Companies and Candidates for Stock-listing] (2002), Tōkyō: Tōyō keizai shinpō sha

Zenkoku dantai meibo [Nominal List of Interest Groups in Japan] (2003), Tōkyō: Nikkan kōgyō shinbun sha