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JAPAN'S ELITE NETWORKS AT THE APEX OF POWER

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I. *Introduction*

Networks are of distinctive importance for the communication and the coordination of interests within each elite configuration. The concept "network" implies an image of individuals tied together with (visible and invisible) bonds and knitted into a mesh of connections (Scott 1990b: ix). The impact, which elites might exercise is magnified several times if each individual group is connected through network ties to influential leaders outside their sphere of influence. In other words, the more tightly woven the network relationships within the elite, the more easily consensus on conflicting issues can be sustained.

We can distinguish between institutionalized networks, networks created by interlocking directorates and informal networks such as academic cliques or family bonds that tie the elite together and serve to maintain their unity. The administrative system establishes institutionalized networks to provide the various interest groups with official channels of communication. When specific persons hold two or more positions in different sectors, so becoming multiple position holders and creating "interlocks" between sectors, we refer to a network of interlocking directorates. Informal networks, on the other hand, are established when individuals connect on the basis of personal ties. Such connections are often hidden, which make them far more difficult to study than formal networks or interlocking directorates, they nevertheless can serve as the main channels through which consensus on important policy decisions is achieved within the elites.

The following investigation of formal and informal networks within the Japanese elite is based on a sample of 231 individuals who held 243 positions in five important sectors (politics,

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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, the speaker of the Lower House), political parties (the president and secretary general, three top officials of the LDP, LDP faction leaders).

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

Economy: Presidents 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 dôyûkai, Nihon shôkô 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, Rengô.

Media: Presidents of Japan's core print media (Yomiuri, Asahi, Mainichi, Nikkei, Sankei) and their five affiliated media conglomerates, quality papers Bungei shunju, Sekai, Chûô kôron, 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 (Kyôdô Press, Jiji Press), major advertising companies (Dentsû, Hakuhôdo).

bureaucracy, business, (economical) pressure groups and media) in January 2003. 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 (see Table 1). 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.[1]

II. *Institutionalized Networks*

In Germany, institutionalized consultation networks play an important role in policy processes. These networks, established by law within the political and administrative system, ensure close relationships between the elites in all spheres and guarantee the participation of various interest groups within the policy process (Sauer/ Schnapp 1997: 247).

The most important official communication channels in Japan are the many government advisory committees in which politicians, the bureaucracy, and interest groups coordinate

[1] These were largely: *Seikai kancho jinji roku* (2003) (Handbook for politics and bureaucracy), *Yakuin shiki ho — jôjô kaisha 2003* (2002) (Annual report on the board members on the stock listed top companies), *Yakuin shiki hô — tentô* (*jasudakku*), *mijôjô kaisha 2003* (2002) (Annual report on the Jasdaq-listed companies and candidates for stock listing) and *Zenkoku dantai meibo* (2003) (Nominal list of interest groups in Japan).

TABLE 2. PARTICIPATION OF THE ELITES IN THE OFFICIAL ADVISORY COUNCILS IN 2002

Elites in:	N	%
Economy	6	11.8
Media	0	0
Interest groups	7	36.8

Source: Own estimation on the basis of *Shingikai sôran* (2002).

policy interests in a variety of ways. Article 8, Section I of the National Administration Organization Act legally authorized the creation of advisory bodies "… for the purpose of having them take charge of such appropriate business as the investigation of or deliberation on important matters, the examination of complaints, and so on through consultation with persons of learning and experience and others" (Schwartz 2001: 59). According to Muramatsu (1981: 125), these bodies mostly ensure political fairness, adjust societal interests, obtain specialists' views, and authorize administrative decisions. Although "persons of learning and experience" (*gakushiki keiken sha*) are quite numerous within the councils, big business plays the most prominent role within organized interests, while labor unions or citizens movements are represented on only a few of the nations advisory bodies. Between 1975 and 1996, big business occupied approximately one quarter of the official councils' seats (*shingikai*), while labor unions held only approximately 3.5 percent of the chairs. In 1998, roughly half of the seats in the private councils (*shiteki shimon kikan*) that had been established by ministries went to business, with only 2 percent to labor unions and 0.5 percent to consumer groups (Muramatsu, Itô and Tsujinaka 2001: 267).

Table 2 provides information on the elites' individual participation in the official advisory councils in 2002. Around 37% of the interest groups' officials and 12% of the investigated top managers served as councilors on the official bodies, while none of the presidents of Japan's mass media conglomerates participated in any of these bodies. The level of official contact between the political and administrative system, and top position incumbents on the boards of pressure groups and top companies can therefore be regarded as high. By way of contrast, the coordination of interests between the elite within the political and administrative system and the mass media can be regarded as very low. However, as Akhavan-Majid (1990: 1011) has pointed out, throughout the 1980s, during which much of Japan's media policy was formulated, the media conglomerates were represented on all relevant policy advisory committees and wielded visible influence on the policy outcomes. We could therefore conclude that the media only participates in advisory councils if their interests are at stake.

III. *Interlocking Directorates*

Interlocking directorates have most commonly been studied to uncover structures of economical influence, as they indicate — even in a market economy — the degree to which interlocks exist between the leadership of competing firms.[2] This method was successfully applied in several national elite studies as well (e.g. Zapf 1965: 185f). In the same way that

[2] A compilation of major studies in this field can be found in Scott 1990a.

TABLE 3. INTERLOCKING DIRECTORATES

Other Position(s)	Politics		MB		Economy		Pressure Groups		Media	
in:	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Politics[1]	14	21.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
*National politics**	*0*	*0*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Party post	*14*	*21.5*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Local politics	*0*	*0*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bureaucracy[2]	-	-	2	2.8	-	-	-	-	-	-
Economy[3]	-	-	-	-	7	13.7	14 (9)	73.7 (47.4)	-	-
Pressure group[4]	-	-	-	-	8	15.7	-	-	-	-
Media[5]	-	-	-	-	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.

[1] Positions within the political sector; calculation based on *Seikai kanchô jinjiroku* 2003.

[2] Positions within the ministerial bureaucracy; calculation based on *Seikai kanchô jinjiroku* 2003.

[3] Positions on the board of a stock-listed company; calculation based on *Yakuin shiki hô — jôjô kaisha 2003*.

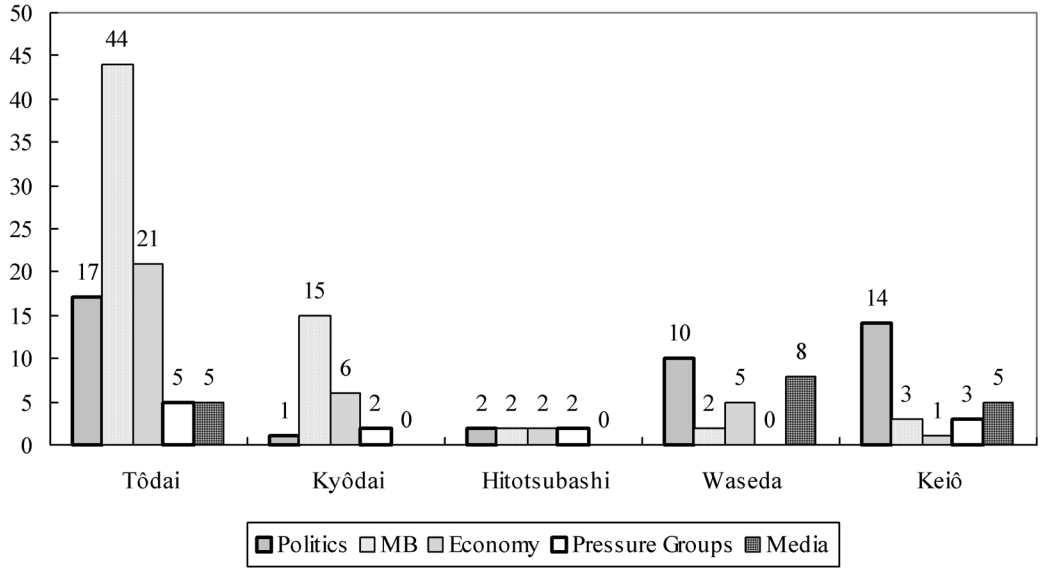
[4] Positions on the board of an important pressure group (*Nihon keidanren*, *Keizai dôyûkai*, *Nihon shôkô kaigi sho*, *Zenkoku ginkô kyôkai*, *Nihon shôkengyô kyôkai*, *Kansai keizai rengôkai*) and one of the investigated occupational associations; calculation based on *Yakuin shiki hô — jôjô kaisha 2003* and *Zenkoku dantai meibo* (2003).

[5] Member of the board in one of the investigated media corporations; calculation based on *Yakuin shiki hô — jôjô kaisha 2003 and Yakuin shiki hô — tentô* (*jasudakku*), *mijôjô kaisha 2003*.

such network structures provide information on interlocks between companies, they also reveal the interlocks between the sectorial elites through multiple position holders.

The analysis of the degree of interlocking directorates and the accumulation of positions (Table 3) shows a low degree of cross-sectorial interlock. 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 multiple position holders have not established extended cross-sectorial networks.

FIG. 1. DISTRIBUTION OF GRADUATES OF ELITE UNIVERSITIES ACCORDING TO SECTOR (in Persons)



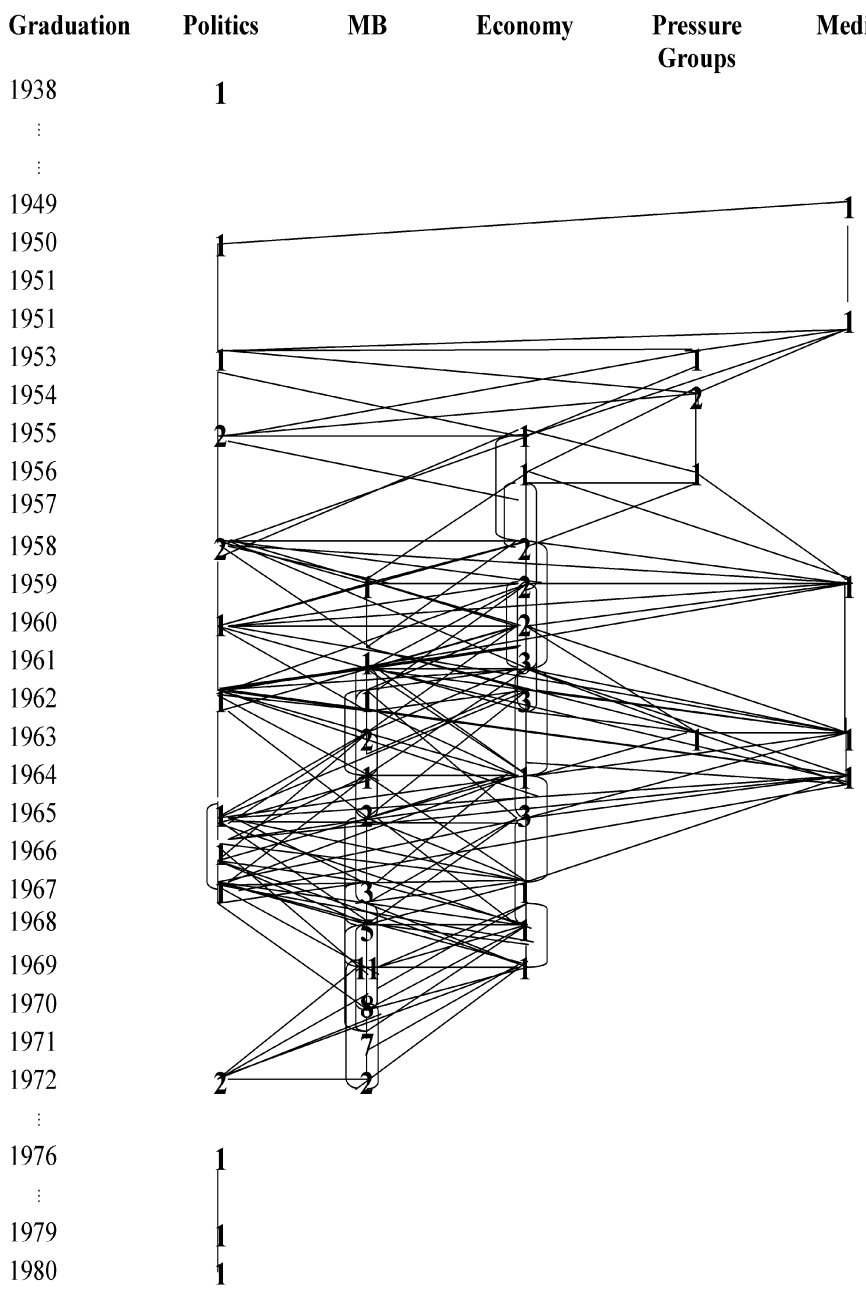
IV. *Informal Networks*

1. Academic Cliques

The overwhelming majority (78.5%) of Japan's elite who attended university graduated from one of the few elite universities, especially from Tokyo University (*Tôdai*). This exclusive educational experience creates common values and morality as well as a network of elite college graduates (*gakubatsu*), which enhances elite unity and cooperation. The bonds created at university normally last a lifetime and continue to influence decision-making, business, and politics. An average graduate, once he has begun working, 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 of forming 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 (Figure 1). 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/Mc Kinstry 1995: 140) is the most important academic network tying the elites together.

FIG. 2. NETWORK OF *TÔDAI* GRADUATES AMONG THE SECTOR ELITES



Note: MB= Ministerial bureaucracy

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 for four years, persons who graduated in intervals of 3 years had 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 political sector graduates 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 such a network is steadily maintained with the passage of time and can thus be regarded as self-perpetuating.

2. Diet Cliques

Diet clique members (*zokugiin*), who are quite numerous among the political elite, maintain another personal network. 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 Liberal Democratic Party (LDP),[3] 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. An important part of this process is the Policy Research Affairs Council (PARC), which is where the various interest groups and civil servants negotiate and exchange opinions with the leaders of the LDP. According to the party bylaws, all legislation must be examined by and have received the approval of the PARC before it can be submitted to the Diet. Usually policy matters are referred to one of the divisions (*bukai*) of the PARC, which are organized parallel to the ministries and Diet standing committees. Within these divisions there are LDP Diet members who represent certain interests related to the respective policy field and who work to develop and protect their clientele groups' best interests. The *zokugiin* are therefore an important element in the linkage between politics, pressure groups, and the ministries and can be regarded as the spearhead of pressure group politics within the LDP (Kitagawa/ Kainuma 1993: 132-35; Hrebenar/ Nakamura 2000: 138f, Curtis 1988: 113ff).

Zoku are not formal organizations, and there are no generally accepted rules for determining when a Diet member becomes a *zokugiin*. According to the newspaper Shukan Asahi's 2002 list of *zokugiin*, 76 persons acted in 11 fields of interest. Almost all of them (93.4%) were members of the Lower House and only one *zokugiin* did not belong to the ruling LDP. Based on this figure, more than 50 percent of the political elite who were LDP members at that time can be classified as *zokugiin*, compared to only approximately 30 percent of the LDP Diet members (see Table 4). Thus one can conclude that they play an important role in the communication and coordination of interests within the elite groups.

[3] 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.

TABLE 4. EMPIRICAL DATA ON *ZOKUGIIN*

Origin	N	%	
Lower House	71	93.4	
Upper House	5	6.6	
N=	76	100.0	
Party affiliation	N	%	
LDP	75	98.7	
New Conservative Party (*Hoshu shintô*)[2]	1	1.3	
N=	76	100.0	
Share	N	*zokugiin*	%
Lower House	480	71	14.8
LDP members of the Lower House	239	70[1]	29.3
Sample: political elite	65	21	32.3
Sample: LDP members	38	20[1]	52.6

Note: Persons listed as *zokugiin* in one ore more fields. Number of seats as of 9/ 9/ 2002. Source: *Asahi gendai yôgo chiezô 2003*: 364. [1]Calculation based on LDP members only. [2]After the Lower House election in autumn 2003, the party joined the LDP.

3. "Old Boys'" Networks

Former bureaucrats' old boys' networks are also of distinct importance for the coordination of interests within the national elite. The term "old boy" refers to a former government official who after retirement from civil service (*amakudari*),[4] is re-employed in politics, the private or quasi-private sector and begins a second career in which he draws heavily on the expertise and personal relationships he accumulated in his former profession as a bureaucrat (Schaede 1995: 293). They usually stay in close contact with "their" former ministry and through their former occupation have a wide range of contacts.

For the maintenance of the "old boys'" networks three points are distinctly important: First, there are ministerial clubs such as MITI's "Tuesday Club" where retired bureaucrats meet to strengthen ties and to exchange ideas as well as to keep in close contact after retirement. Second, the smooth flow of information is guaranteed by regular "vintage meetings", where each bureaucrat's "class" in a certain ministry gather for lunch, typically once a month. Due to the progressive retirement process, some colleagues have already retired and started a second career while others are still in office. The third mechanism for maintaining such a network is the "old boys' meeting", which the ministry itself arranges. During this meeting, an incumbent bureaucrat briefs his retired seniors on policy-issues that are currently relevant within the ministry. This briefing keeps the former bureaucrats informed on internal matters (Schaede 1995: 297-98).

Among the investigated sample, retired bureaucrats are especially found among the political elite. Nearly one quarter (21.5%) of top position incumbents within the political elite are former civil servants. It is noteworthy that retired bureaucrats (with one exception) are not found within the corporate elite. While numerous former bureaucrats are found in various positions within private corporations, they do not hold positions at the very apex of power. This matches the findings of Colignon and Usui (2003: 166) who, between 1982 and 1998,

[4] The term "amakudari" literally means "descend from heaven".

TABLE 5. "OLD BOYS" WITHIN THE POLITICAL ELITE ACCORDING TO MINISTRY OF ORIGIN

Originating ministry/ agency	N	%
Ministry of Finance (MoF)	4	28.6
Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI)	4	28.6
Ministry of Home Affairs	3	21.4
Ministry of Labor	1	7.1
Ministry of Education	1	7.1
Bank of Japan	1	7.1
N=	14	100

found a stable number of only two percent former bureaucrats as listed private companies' board directors.

Table 5 shows the number of "old boys" within the political elite by ministry. Former officials of the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI)[5] were most numerous. Both ministries are considered very prestigious and important and their role can hardly be overestimated. The Ministry of Finance, through its budgeting and tax policies, exerts a strong influence on the nation's economy. Together with the Bank of Japan, it manages the monetary control, which is one of the most important tools for regulating the economy. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry not only controls foreign trade through basic legislation, but also through its regulation of licensing and patent agreements, its supervision of economic, and trade agreements, its protection of domestic markets as well as its promotion of exports. (Kim 1988: 2, Johnson 1982, Okimoto 1989). Japanese companies largely depend on the policies formulated by both ministries and try to influence their outcome, which is why "old boys" from those ministries function as the main linking agents between the economic and governmental interests.

4. Marriage Ties

Many Japanese authors have stressed the importance of marital alliances (*keibatsu*) that align business families with politicians and bureaucrats through strategic "placement" of daughters. Jin (2002), for example, presented a map of the most important personal connections between Nagatachô, Kasumigaseki and Marunouchi, the locations of the Diet, the ministries and the major companies. Satô (1981) provided a detailed list of more than 4000 family members of what is called a "new establishment", including former post-war prime ministers, company presidents, and, through close relatives, the emperor himself.

Only eight persons (3.5%) of the entire sample were represented in the super-*keibatsu* that Satô listed, most of them belonging to the political elite (Table 6).[6] Since we lack better empirical data, we cannot confirm the importance of marriage ties at the apex of power in Japan, but at least within the political elite they seem to be of significant importance. A secondary analysis of Jin's data shows that twelve of twenty-seven post-war prime ministers

[5] In the administrative reorganization of January 2001 the Ministry's name was changed to Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI).

[6] Since the average age of the elite members in 2003 was 60.3 years, we can surmise that the majority was already married in 1980 and should therefore be listed in Satô's work.

TABLE 6. MEMBERS OF POWERFUL FAMILY CLANS WITHIN THE ELITES

Elites in	N	Members of the "new establishment"	%
Politics	65	6	9.2
Bureaucracy	72	0	0
Economy	51	0	0
Pressure groups	19	0	0
Mass media	24	2	8.3
N=	231	8	3.5

were directly related through marriage ties with their brothers, sisters, or their own children. Moreover, this family group includes more than a dozens major industrialists, high-ranking bureaucrats, the emperor and the empress as well as nineteen acting members of parliament.

V. *Conclusion*

As the investigation illustrates, Japanese elites share close ties with one another, ties that can be used for communication and the coordination of interests. The detailed analysis of networking sources within leading elite groups suggests several significant findings: First, as we have seen from the investigation of institutionalized networks, participation in advisory bodies do not account for the majority of networking sources among Japanese elites. There are organizational links, however. Yet, in numerical terms there is no large scale interlocking. Second, the interlocking is not built upon multiple positions in various hierarchies. The analysis suggests that the accumulation of positions is mainly limited to the given sector or neighboring sectors. Third, the key factors facilitating networking ties in Japan are informal networks such as school ties, Diet-clique networks, and "old boys'" networks. The relationships between the elites can therefore be considered in terms of a network connecting the elites, with the link predominantly formed by personal relationships

Within the Japanese leadership groups, the position of the political elite is central. While there is no evidence that the political elite plays a decisive role in the coordination of the interests of the society as a whole, it is central to the communication and interest coordination network within the elite due to this elite's past careers as bureaucrats, and the importance of the *zokugiin* who coordinate the elite groups' mutual interests. However, this should not be regarded as political supremacy. As the analysis clearified, other social networks such as academic bonds are also used for inter-sectorial communication and the coordination of interests. These invisible social bonds created during the years spent at university, tie the elites together into a network of connections, forming a grid that resembles a fish net, and serve as a cornerstone of elite unity and cooperation.

The strength of these informal bonds between the elites surely influence the policy strategies pursued by various elite groups. What is often interpreted a result of the Japanese "consensus culture", is rather an outcome of the coordination of interests through informal contacts. Because these contacts are predominantly based on hidden structures, much of this process happens behind "closed doors". To date these suggestions must be regarded as

speculative, but it is quite evident that elite networks based predominantly on personal ties lead to policy decisions that are not transparent to the public.

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