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# Social Capital and Institutional Constraints

A comparative analysis of China, Taiwan and the US

Joonmo Son



# Social Capital and Institutional Constraints

The sociological concept of social capital has grown in popularity in recent years and research programs in North America, Europe and East Asia have demonstrated how social capital has a significant impact on occupational mobility, community building, social movement and economic development.

This book uses new empirical data to test how social capital works in different societies with diverse political-economic and cultural institutions. Taking a comparative approach, this study focuses on data from three different societies, China, Taiwan and the US, in order to reveal the international commonalities and disparities in access to and activation of social capital in labor markets. In particular, this book tests whether political economic and cultural differences between capitalist and socialist economic systems and between Western and Confucian cultures create different types of individual social networks and usages. This comparison leads to Joonmo Son's fundamental argument that the institutional constraints of a society's political economy on the one hand, and culture on the other, profoundly impact on both the composition and utilization of social capital.

Based on rigorous statistical analysis, this book will be essential reading for students and scholars of economic sociology and comparative politics.

**Joonmo Son** is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore.

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# **Social Capital and Institutional Constraints**

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**Joonmo Son**

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# Contents

<i>Tables</i>	xii
<i>Figures</i>	xiv
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xviii
1 A comparative study of social capital	1
2 Accessed and activated social capital	11
3 Institutional constraints	21
4 Theoretical models and hypotheses	44
5 Data, methods, and measures	57
6 Accessed social capital among the three societies	86
7 Social capital and status attainment	103
8 Social capital and institutional constraints	135
Appendix A Identical module of position generators in the three societies	151
Appendix B Survey questions of a position generator (nurse)	152
Appendix C Types of community organizations in the three societies	154
<i>References</i>	155
<i>Index</i>	167

# Tables

5.1	Percentage of respondents knowing specific jobholders in the three societies	63
5.2	Comparison of extensity	64
5.3	Comparison of upper reachability	65
5.4	Comparison of range of prestige	66
5.5	Gender inequality in the United States	66
5.6	Gender inequality in Taiwan	67
5.7	Gender inequality in China	67
5.8	Racial inequality between whites and nonwhites	68
5.9	Race inequality between whites and African-Americans	69
5.10	Race inequality between whites and Latinos	69
5.11	Race inequality between African-Americans and Latinos	69
5.12	Factor analysis of accessed social capital when starting current/last position	70
5.13	Use of contacts in the three societies	72
5.14	Length of chain in the three societies	73
5.15	Proportion of direct contacts and family ties in the three societies	73
5.16	Closeness between job searcher and the first contact	74
5.17	Occupational classes of contacts	75
5.18	Routine job information in the three societies	76
5.19	Occupational classes in the United States, Taiwan, and China	77
5.20	Annual incomes in the United States, Taiwan, and China	78
5.21	Descriptive statistics of explanatory variables: demographic features	79
5.22	Descriptive statistics of explanatory variables: structural layers	82
5.23	Descriptive statistics of explanatory variables: socioeconomic status	84
6.1	Negative binomial regression of extensity	89
6.2	Tobit regression of upper reachability	92
6.3	Tobit regression of range of prestige scores	95
6.4	Robust standardized OLS regression of accessed social capital	96

6.5	Latent mean comparison of accessed social capital	99
7.1	Logit regression of presence of contact	105
7.2	Negative binomial regression of chain length	106
7.3	Multinomial logit regression of contact status	108
7.4	Logit regression of routine job information	109
7.5	Percentage of reduction in the three samples	111
7.6	Multinomial logit regression of occupational class	112
7.7	Robust OLS regression of annual income	114
7.8	China: Sensitivity analysis on subsamples before and after compulsory job assignment	117
7.9	Test of parameter invariance on accessed social capital (presenting test procedure)	121
7.10	Test of parameter invariance on accessed social capital (full results)	122
7.11	Test of parameter invariance on activated social capital (contact status)	124
7.12	Test of parameter invariance on activated social capital (presence of contact)	125
7.13	Test of parameter invariance on activated social capital (chain length)	126
7.14	Test of parameter invariance on activated social capital (routine job information)	129
7.15	Test of parameter invariance on status attainment (presenting test procedure)	130
7.16	Test of parameter invariance on status attainment (full results)	131
8.1	Standardized robust OLS regression of status attainment in the United States	143

# Figures

1.1	Institutional constraints and types of social networks	5
1.2	Moderation of the effect of social capital by institutional constraints	8
5.1	Structural layers of social networks	80
6.1	Structural layers of social relations and accessed social capital	86
6.2	Distribution of extensity in the three societies	88
6.3	Distribution of upper reachability in the three societies	91
6.4	Distribution of range of prestige scores in the three societies	94
6.5	Confirmatory factor analysis of accessed social capital	98
7.1	Accessed and activated social capital and status attainment	103
7.2	SEM multigroup path analysis	119

# Preface

I first became interested in the relationship between social capital and institutional constraints when I worked as a second-year reporter at YTN, a twenty-four-hour news channel in South Korea in 1996. It was September 18, another seemingly normal day. At dawn I made the rounds of several major police stations in Seoul to check if there were any significant events to report on air. Nothing unusual occurred until I got a call from a senior reporter who told me to go quickly to the Ministry of Defense in Yong-san. When I arrived at the pressroom of the ministry, I could feel that something had gone seriously wrong. I received another call informing me that a car with a camera crew had been sent to pick me up at the ministry. Its destination was An-in-jin Ri – the name was unfamiliar to me then – in Gang-neung city, a small northeastern fishing village about seventy kilometers from the borderline between North and South Korea. As we rode in the car I at last became fully aware that North Korean armed spies had come onshore from a submarine – a submarine that had malfunctioned so they were forced to land.

As soon as the dozens of reporters from newspapers and broadcasting companies arrived at the spot in the afternoon, we were led by a group of South Korean soldiers to a nearby mountain called Cheong-hak. There was no explanation of why we had to hurriedly climb the mountain. Halfway up the mountain the soldiers at the head stopped suddenly; on the hillside a yellow photo line had been placed around a vacant area. At first I could not tell what was inside the line because a thick forest darkened the area. I became aware of a bad smell and some of reporters began vomiting. I realized that the corpses of eleven North Korean soldiers lay in a row on the ground covered with fallen leaves. They had all been shot in the head. Later it was revealed that they were crew members of the submarine who were supposedly untrained for survival as armed spies. However, it was not clear if they had committed suicide voluntarily or had been killed by the armed spies, their own colleagues. One thing was clear – there was no sign of a fight between the crew members and the armed spies. It thus appeared that their rules of engagement prescribed that the crew members should be terminated first if they were pursued by enemies.

A mop-up operation in search of the North Korean armed spies went on for forty-nine days until early November, requiring over a million man-days in

the region, and leaving seventeen South Korean soldiers and civilians dead and over thirty wounded. In the days following the incident thirteen of the remaining armed spies were killed in action. Only one remained missing and was assumed to have crossed the border successfully. Thus they either died or fled. However, there was an outlier. One spy, Kwang-soo Lee, managed to separate from his colleagues and surrendered on the first day. I recall his recorded message to his colleagues resounding throughout the mountainous areas in eastern Gang-neung through megaphones mounted on numerous military trucks: “Comrades, surrender. They will not kill you. I am treated well.” In late October, at a nationally televised press conference held in Seoul, I was able to ask him the question that had haunted me: had the crew members at the Cheong-hak Mountain killed themselves, or had they been killed? He stared at me for a while, then slowly lowered his head. Mr Lee is now in his late forties and gives special lectures to South Korean soldiers on security threats from the North.

In my over seven years as a reporter I experienced not a few impressive social and political incidents. Nonetheless, the tragic scene of the dead North Koreans who were indoctrinated to be killed or commit suicide in certain situations was the most persistent one in my memory. Given that it is likely that the crew members were killed by their comrades – or at least that the armed spies did not prevent them from shooting themselves – it appeared that their social relations were shattered by institutional directives. From a sociological viewpoint these men had been oversocialized to give up their lives, even though the term, oversocialization, has been criticized as a simplified concept that stresses too heavily the power of social structure. Yet not all the North Koreans who landed on An-in-jin Ri succumbed to the power of structural indoctrination. One deviated from it and tried, though unsuccessfully, to persuade his comrades to desert the unconditionally robotic behavioral pattern.

In 2002 I made the transition from reporter to doctoral student in sociology in the United States. While taking a course on social capital from Professor Nan Lin in my first semester at Duke, I made up my mind to conduct research on how institutional constraints moderate the effect of social capital crossnationally. Of course, I had North and South Korea in mind. However, gathering data from the North was – and is – impossible. I therefore decided to compare China, Taiwan, and the United States because Professor Lin planned to administer surveys composed of the same social capital module in these three countries. The two most important comparative axes I adopted were political economy and culture; political economy divides the three countries into a capitalist (the United States and Taiwan) vs. socialist (China) dichotomy, while the collective Confucian culture joins the two East Asian countries against the United States with its individualistic culture. The main focus was placed on China. I found that compared to Taiwan and the United States, the effect of social capital in China was smaller, presumably affected by the dual constraints of socialism and Confucianism; nevertheless, its effect remained significant on status attainment outcome, indicating the resilience

of individual social capital. Therefore the study found that individual choice in forming and utilizing social capital still takes its portion in explicating labor market outcomes even under rigid institutional constraints, as Mr Lee's choice went against inhumane directives even though he could only save his life alone. Helped greatly by the mentorship of Professor Lin, I defended my dissertation on this topic in 2008. This monograph is a thorough revision of the dissertation, undertaken over the past three years since my arrival at the National University of Singapore.

I am indebted to many persons for their help with this book. I thank Professors Nan Lin, Edward Tiryakian, John Wilson, Linda George, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Angie O'Rand. Without their critical advice I could not have developed this comparative research on social capital. Dr Qiushi Feng, my long-time friend from Duke years and now also a departmental colleague at the NUS, contributed insights and instrumental assistance on Chinese socialist institutional constraints found in [Chapter 3](#). In regard to Taiwanese institutional constraints, Professors Nan Lin and Chih-joy Jay Chen at the Academia Sinica read the manuscript and gave helpful comments.

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Department of Sociology at the NUS allowed me to have a sabbatical semester without which I could not have finished the manuscript. In particular, I am thankful for the collegial support of Professors Chua Beng Huat, Paulin Straughan, Vineeta Sinha, Jean Yeung, Ho Kong Chong, Lian Kwen Fee, and Tan Ern Ser at the NUS Sociology. My student Fadzli Baharom did an excellent job in helping the literature review of the institutional constraints in the labor markets of the three focal countries. Cyndy Brown, my copyeditor, went the extra mile to improve the quality of the manuscript. Hannah Mack and Ed Needle at Routledge patiently provided editorial support.

I give special thanks to the late Mr Tae-Joon Park, the president of the POSCO TJ Park Foundation, from which I was awarded a research grant for this monograph. He passed on when the manuscript was about to be completed.

I am truly grateful for the sacrificial love and support of my wife, Mi-Kyeong Kam, through the years when I was a reporter, a doctoral student, and a professional sociologist in Korea, the United States, and Singapore. This book is dedicated to her. My two adorable children, Hahae and Hajin, could not play with their father as much as they wished because this project and others occupied his time. I am sorry about this and want to spend more time with them to show how much I love them. My parents in Seoul, Yeong-Gu Son and Sam-Nam Kim, consistently prayed for me and my family, allowing me to break out of my own personal "constraints" and reach significant goals that were almost unimaginable in the past.

Lastly, I want to make clear that the goal of all my work, including this book, is to try to fulfill God's justice in the social world, particularly for those who are under the shackles of inhumane institutional constraints.

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32).

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# 1 A comparative study of social capital

The essential building blocks of the social world are relations among human beings. Like it or not, a significant part of one's social life is composed of ties with others who are either immediately or indirectly related. Figuratively speaking, humans are not isolated islands floating around an infinite ocean (Flap 2002); rather, people usually form specific relations with others in structurally arranged and, to some significant extent, confined areas of social life. This means that there are structural forces that prearrange the general settings of social relationships even before actors appear on the scene and choose their social contacts out of the seemingly countless people around them. In other words, the choices of social relations are far from a random selection.

For example, it is not likely that a five-year-old boy in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates could befriend another five-year-old boy in Seattle, Washington in the United States. If this geographic barrier sounds too obvious, it may be that a temporary Mexican migrant construction worker in the United States cannot make regular contact with a local white-collar manager in the IT industry, even when geographic distance is removed. Further, it is well known that even in a single society, racial/ethnic groups, if any, have a strong tendency to maintain predominantly homogeneous in-group ties; as a result, interracial or interethnic ties are significantly fewer. In addition, ethnic differentiation even within a race can hardly be ignored, as in the tragic "ethnic cleansing" of Tutsi by Hutu in Rwanda in the mid-1990s, even though the deadly antagonism between these two ethnic groups was much affected by the Rwandan postcolonial legacy. Even when visible cues of collective differentiation do not exist in racially and ethnically homogeneous societies, dialects may instead work as verbal signals of regional origin, and minute linguistic differences among regions may form invisible but effectively exclusive structural boundaries among social groups, as we see from the long-standing conflict between the Young-nam and Ho-nam regions in South Korea. Religion should not be omitted from the list of possible structural barriers of social relations, as the history and current affairs of Europe, Africa, and Asia have shown; it is perceived to be the core pillar in the clash of civilizations in the post-Cold War era (Huntington 1996). Of course, the