A Search for "Asian" Social Capital

Hiroo HARADA†

Introduction

Since Putnam's groundbreaking, controversial work (1993) on social capital, the subject has been studied on two fronts. The first involves recognizing and understanding its very existence and the relationships that constitute it. The second involves seeking and establishing indicators and measurements, and verifying the use and effectiveness thereof, for the purpose of tracking the extent of social capital.

As for the first, the very concept of social capital is difficult to recognize and understand from a physical and objective standpoint, so a variety of differences arise in the recognition of what kind of social dimension in which to understand and express it. Even relationships with family and relatives, which are the most personal kind of social relationships, are influenced not just by mere genetic information but also by things like one's relationship with the community (the local collective) and one's occupation or work. Furthermore, what kinds of experiences someone has over their lifetime is affected to a great extent by the circumstances of the times in which they live. In other words, even if a child follows in his parent's footsteps and holds the same job in the family business, he will end up having considerably different life experiences due to the circumstances of history. Because the concept of social capital is so ambiguous and vague, developing a definition that everyone can unfalteringly agree on is not easy to do. In that sense, we are far from reaching an established, common understanding[1]. Nevertheless, the novelty contained in the concept itself and the prospects for its effectiveness, etc., are attracting a lot of researchers and followers. Also, because it has been foreseen to be effective on the policy front, it is recognized as a promising analysis tool for policy strategists as well (eg., Miyagawa and Omori (2004)).

Partly for that reason, on the second front there have been a variety of attempts to try and determine how to envision and establish measurements and indicators for social relationships. In order to capture ambiguous, diverse social relations, it is necessary to start with relationships with family and relatives and list diverse fronts such as communities (local collective bodies); relationships with friends and acquaintances; work and workplace relationships, involvement

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† Dean, Graduate School of Economics ; Professor of Public Finance, Senshu University
[1] Lin (2001) and others have attempted to define and utilize "social capital" in line with the capital concept.

in politics; religion, faith, thought, and beliefs; and involvement in hobbies, recreation, culture, and the arts. In short, every imaginable dimension relating to the everyday life of people living in modern society is a potential target of this concept. However, an exhaustive definition like this ultimately ends up being, in concrete terms, tantamount to undefined. Some kinds of measurements or indicators are necessary. For example, Putnam (1993) developed an indicator for the maturity of civil society, as embodied in things like the degree of citizens' political participation. This measurement itself is not necessarily one-dimensional, but rather a result of synthesizing multiple measurements and making them into a composite, then deeming it an indicator of the "degree of civil society." Alternatively, there are some cases in which efforts have been made to at least seek a meaningful measurement from the standpoint of various communities and groups within the country or international comparison, even without going so far as to create a one-dimensional indicator, and then to reflect that on the policy front. Practical examples of that nature include Healy and Cote (2001), World Bank (2002), and the former Cabinet Office's Quality-of-Life Policy Bureau (2003).

Indicator of the "Degree of Civil Society"

When one tries to develop indicators of social capital, which is ambiguous and diverse to begin with, how to aggregate it becomes a focal point of discussion. Putnam (1993) tried to aggregate it from the standpoint of the degree of civil society as a measure expressing regional differences (between the North and the South) in all of Italy. This could also be referred to as the maturity of civic consciousness. It is a measurement that reflected the contrast between the North – where, having inherited the tradition handed down from the Renaissance days, the structure and awareness of citizen autonomy has steadily taken root – and the South, where, since the Norman conquest, feudal traditions and customs have penetrated even into cultural aspects.[2]

Either way, the measurement of the degree of civil society as envisioned in this way is actually a vector-shaped synthesis of multiple indicators and criteria. It appears exactly like the thick arrow in Fig. 1. This is an attempt to measure synthetically the degree of civil society of each country, community, and group on the political, economic, and cultural fronts. If we can develop a one-dimensional, single-line indicator such as this, it enables comparisons between each community and group, and it may even enable the tracking of changes over time.

However, even in this case, if we go into the issue of specifically what kinds of variables and measurements to use to understand and express politics, the economy, and culture, the reality is that there are limits to the possibilities of obtaining data, for example, so it is difficult to determine them beforehand. Nonetheless, a "degree of civil society" indicator derived in this way has the advantage of being succinct, in that it enables one to express phenomena in an

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[2] However, Ostrom (2000) observes several diverse cases and elicits the insight that social norms came about as a result of collective action taken by the group as a whole in order to avoid and forestall risk and danger. If we can verify that sort of group thinking, then path dependency, in which facts in certain historical periods almost permanently stipulate what follows, will become impossible.

extremely concentrated and symbolic way. And yet, even though this is a "degree of civil society" indicator that is accepted without problems as long as it is applied to countries, communities, and groups where the basic goals of society are broadly understood, in a case where the social consciousness and goals themselves that are shared among people vary widely, verifying the direction of the synthetic vectors that differ for each may be all one is able to do.


Fig. 1   Single-line Indicator of Degree of Civil Society
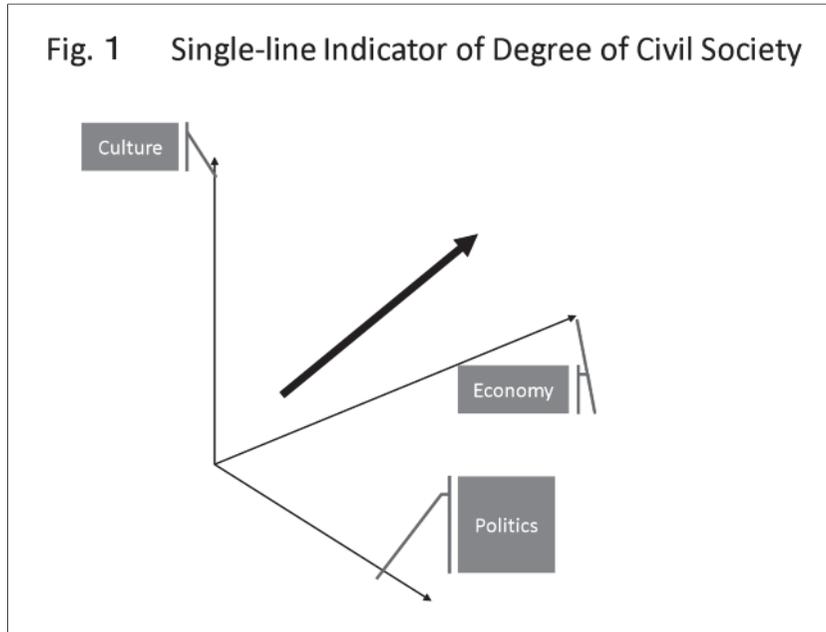
An "Asian" Indicator of Social Capital

In short, the single-line indicator of "degree of civil society" above is a clear standard for a one-dimensional, numerical expression, but that is largely because it pares down the inherent ambiguity and diversity of social relationships. In fact, in cases where different values are shared in each country, community, and group, wouldn't those differences themselves become important things to be aware of? When one considers that we are trying to recognize and understand the social relationships of each country, community, and group as social capital to begin with, then how one accurately understands and expresses the ambiguity and diversity thereof naturally becomes an important issue.

Simply put, even within a single country, community, or group, there is a high probability that in a different era (eg., Middle Ages/modern era, or pre-war/post-war), people would adopt mindsets and behaviors that are practically akin to entirely different people. For Japanese in the present time (the beginning of the 21st century), the central theme of Japanese politics in 1945, which was to "uphold the national polity," is a mindset that is generally even more alien than the political theme of the last days of Shogunate rule and the Meiji Restoration (late 19th century), which was "Revere the Emperor and expel the foreigners." Meanwhile, even under

the same era and circumstances (eg., globalization or a controlled economy), if the country, community, or group differs, it is possible that people's patterns of behavior will differ. For example, it is often pointed out that although they are both capitalist economies, the American model and the European model have different mechanisms and operations.

The fact that different social relationships exist is thought to be behind these kinds of differences. Considering what our interests are, that is obviously something we have to extract. And that means seeking and developing indicators that incorporate the ambiguous and multifaceted nature of social relationships. Specifically, let's imagine a composite indicator like that in Fig. 2. In the case of this indicator, its shape is recognized and expressed as a problem from the dimensions of politics, the economy, and culture. For example, in the years around 1935 in Japan, public interest focused on politics (military affairs), but in the years around 1965, there was great interest in the economy. So even in the same country, community, or group, when the times and circumstances are different, one can recognize different social relationships, and as "indicators of the degree of civil society," these must be expressed with different shapes – namely, with the "composite" indicator of the degree of civil society in Fig. 2. If we amplify that further and focus on East Asia, the area that is the focus of our research project, we can say that this, precisely, is the act of developing and seeking an Asian indicator of social capital.

Fig. 2   Composite Indicator of Degree of Civil Society
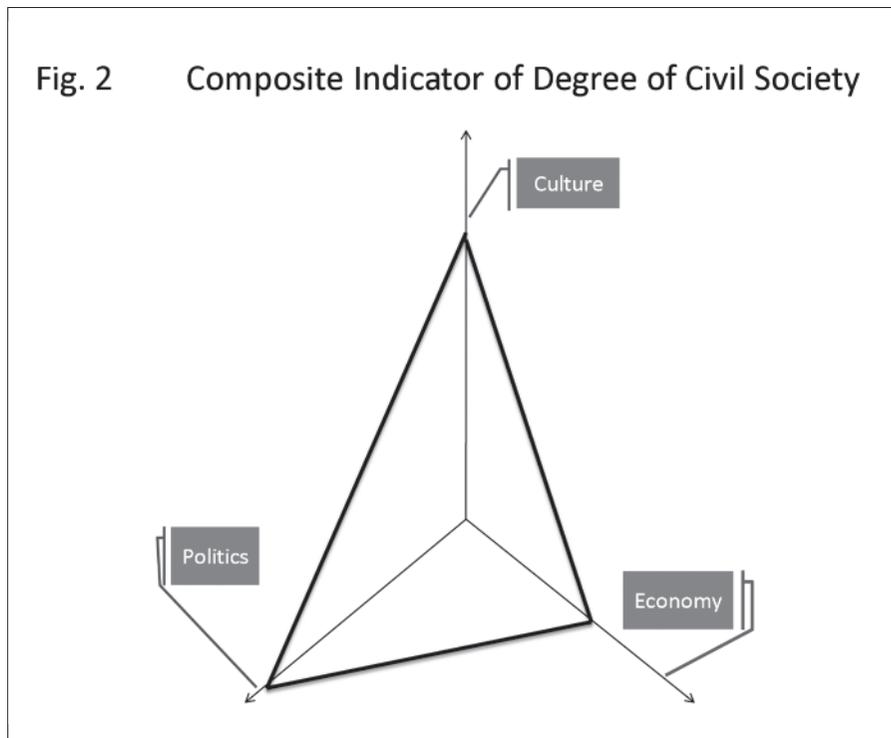
Two Preceding Attempts

Our research project does not purport to attach too much importance to the differences between the West and Asia or between Asia and Japan. For example, the spirit of rationalism that is behind the logic and system of the market economy has a common applicability and versatility in any location or era. More specifically, in stable human and social relationships, mutual trust and a spirit and mechanisms of reciprocity are essential and unavoidable. In that sense, we must be circumspect about playing up the differences between Asia and the West too lightly and excessively. However, it is also true that the introduction, permeation, and entrenchment of a democratic political system began in the West and spread to Asia. With regard to performance on the economic front, as well, it is an obvious fact that since the mid-20th century (or in the exceptional case of Japan, since the late 19th century), Asia passed through the take-off and catch-up stages and grew and developed to the point that it now plays a part in leading the global economy. There are research findings (eg., Aoki, Kim, and Okuno (1996)) that depict the secrets and mechanisms of that sort of rapid growth on the economic front, but here we want to focus more along the lines of Bell (2000) and others on an attempt to extract unique elements (something along the lines of genes) between Asia and the West that differ and do not mix despite mutually influencing each other.

The dimensions in which these kinds of differences between Asia and the West often appear are, according to the diagrams in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, politics and culture. Because the economy, as described above, consists of basically profit-seeking behavior, both Asia and the West are on pretty much the same playing field, relatively. Meanwhile, the differences in politics and culture derive in large part from people's awareness of problems, more than from systems or organizations (eg., see Inoguchi (2004)). Empirical surveys based on this awareness have already been carried out in recent years by two research groups. The first was the Asia Barometer survey, a research project headed up by Takashi Inoguchi, president of the University of Niigata Prefecture. The findings of that study include, for example, Inoguchi, Basanez, Tanaka, and Dadabaev, eds. (2005), Inoguchi, Tanaka, Sonoda, and Dadabaev, eds. (2007), Inoguchi and Carlson, eds. (2008), Blondel and Inoguchi (2008), Inoguchi, ed. (2009), and Inoguchi and Blondel (2010). The second survey is an accumulation of "civic awareness" survey analyses of modern Japan headed up by Yutaka Tsujinaka of the University of Tsukuba. This survey bore fruit in the form of, for example, Tsujinaka, Pekkanen, and Yamamoto (2009), Tsujinaka and Mori, eds. (2010), and Tsujinaka and Ito, eds. (2010). The first study, that by the Inoguchi group, was a cross-national study focused on Asia and based on an indicator called the Asia Barometer. The second study, that by the Tsujinaka group, is focused primarily on figuring out the structure of political decision-making at the local government level in the present Japan.

Judging from the progress of our research, both these means and subjects cover too broad a range, and we might tend to feel that they are more than we can handle. However, the intentions of both research projects do not differ much from our research project, so we plan to follow them as much as possible.

In Closing

In light of the broad overview above, creating a social capital indicator is unavoidable for our research project, so following the preliminary survey (four countries) in the second year, we plan to work on a full-fledged survey in the third year. But when we do so, it is necessary to incorporate the distinctive elements into our research project. From the standpoint of sustainability, we have to set up and seek a "social capital" indicator.

In sum, by taking these objectives into consideration, a social capital indicator could move beyond being merely a subject of intellectual curiosity and quite possibly become an analysis and proposal tool that is effective in policy and practical terms. When that happens, I would like for us to set our sights on this indicator becoming a tool that provides basic information for the purpose of substantiating an "East Asian community."[3] I understand that, of course, to be not the short-term policy achievement desire of giving substantive meaning to the idea launched in the autumn of 2009 by Democratic Party of Japan prime minister Yukio Hatoyama, but rather a prerequisite for deepening fundamental understanding for working on mid-term or structural challenges.

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3 An "East Asian community" is not original to Democratic Party of Japan former prime minister Yukio Hatoyama but has of course been considered and proposed for some time on the part of scholars and researchers. For example, see Shindo and Hirakawa (2006).

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