

INTRODUCTION

People usually pursue education as a means to an end—a higher social class. Bourdieu clarified the process of education-mediated class mobility and reproduction by demonstrating how people iteratively convert their capital into various forms of capital (Bourdieu 1973, 1986, 1996). What is less clear is what allows one group of people to succeed in converting and activating their capital for their status and making their success appear universal, while others face unexpected challenges and inconvertibility during the same conversion process. Scholars typically view capital conversion as an implicit process in which class advantage automatically facilitates seamless conversion, resulting in higher class status while leaving agency and struggle unexplored.

This study investigates institutionalized cultural capital and its convertibility into other forms of capital, propelling the actor to a higher class status. It examines how elite international students actively pursue graduate education abroad, how they use their obtained degree credentials, and how they encounter unexpected challenges along the credential pathway. Archival research and interviews with elite international students from South Korea (hereafter, Korea) are used to answer the questions. Korea is a representative "developmental state" (Amsden 1992), having not only rapidly expanded its higher education but also sending a large number of its students to the United States, the "magnet" for brains from all over the world (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008). When Korea first began to develop, higher education was only available to a small group of elite students who were either contest mobility winners or children of well-off families. They became primarily the first generations of elite Korean international students to attend American graduate schools. I conducted archival research to identify their institutional environments for studying abroad, as well as in-depth interviews to investigate their motivations, trajectories, and outcomes. The elites benefited from the American credential's symbolic and practical superiority in their returns, seamlessly converting cultural capital into profits, i.e., academic positions. However, there were two impediments. First, prior to its democratization in the late 1980s, the authoritarian Korean government strictly regulated its students' outgoing international mobility based on "academic achievement." As a result, study abroad opportunities were severely restricted to those with exceptional academic credentials and achievements. Second, even if the top student passed the academic test, the marriage barrier would prevent her from pursuing post-college education opportunities. The gender barrier resurfaced when she attempted to return to Korean academia as a professional with her graduate degree credential. The impediment demonstrates that, even with ascribed privileges, capital convertibility is not always guaranteed.

This research has significant implications. First, it clarifies Bourdieusian capital conversion models by demonstrating that capital convertibility and status acquisition are neither implicit nor automatic; rather, education-mediated capital conversion necessitates active efforts on the part of actors, including members of the elite class. Second, it advances our understanding of capital conversion patterns, implying that education-mediated social mobility is heavily conditioned by the state and educational system. Third, it demonstrates that we can better understand social reproduction mechanisms by examining divergent pathways in education-mediated capital conversion and linking these processes to their payoffs and limits in reality.

MOTIVATION

Scholars conceptualize education-mediated social mobility in a variety of ways, but I view it here as a conversion sequence of various forms of capital, such as economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital in various states (Bourdieu 1986). Class-based economic capital is frequently converted into other forms of capital, such as social capital for better opportunities and education-related cultural capital for status signaling and meritocratic qualification (Lamont and Lareau 1988). A successful sequence of capital conversions can often legitimately justify one's new, upper-class status.

Most empirical research on cultural capital has focused on determining how inherited cultural capital contributes to student academic achievement (Jaeger 2009, 2011) and how cultural capital is valued at a specific moment in specific settings, such as educational settings (Calarco 2011, 2014; Lamont and Lareau 1988), among the wide variety of research that examines its relationship with education and later with social mobility. They discover that parents' social privileges facilitate further academic achievement and status attainment (Lareau 2011; Lareau and Weininger 2003; McDonough 1997; Roksa and Potter 2011). Middle- and upper-class students typically inherit better educational environments from their parents and achieve higher levels of scholastic competence than their working-class peers. Furthermore, middle-class students with cultural capital employ a variety of strategies in order to navigate schools and other institutional settings with a stronger sense of belonging (Jack 2016; Khan 2011). In other words, wealthy parents legitimately "hoard" opportunities and "buy" meritocracy for their children, converting one type of capital into another (Buchmann, Condron, and Roscigno 2010; Mullen 2009; Reeves 2018). The scholars also find that "cultural mobility" for upper class status is available to students from various backgrounds (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Khan 2012; Walpole 2003). With its symbolic power, institutionalized cultural capital, such as a college diploma, contributes even more to the bearer's occupational and status attainment (Binder and Abel 2019; Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Bourdieu 1996; Brown 2001; Rivera 2012, 2016).

However, such explanations have two significant limitations. For starters, they have done little to examine the capital conversion process as a whole, as well as internal iterations within the process. Despite the previous findings about how cultural capital works in specific contexts, such as educational settings and labor market entry points, there is often a lack of a more macro

perspective that examines the entire process as a chain of iterative capital conversions. Bourdieu (1996), for example, demonstrates how elites transmit cultural capital to their children and how subsequent children's success in the educational system reproduces social inequality through state-sponsored meritocratic legitimacy. He does not, however, show the entire capital conversion process, which occasionally encounters unexpected seams, and instead moves on to detours, such as the next round of the conversion process to complete the final conversion. This iterative aspect makes the entire capital conversion process not a seamless axiom but rather a combination of diverse strategies.

Second, cultural capital research ignores the possibility of inconvertibility as well as differentiated cultural transmission pathways. According to research, both parents and children are very strategic in their actions (Calarco 2014). Upper-middle class parents, for example, actively seek out opportunities for their children (Reeves 2018). However, it is unclear how diverse pathways emerge alongside the successful transmission pathway, each with its own set of successes and failures, because scholars pay little attention to how children's entitlements unexpectedly constrain the conversion of one type of capital into another at specific conversion points and how they manage them. While previous research has focused on how cultural capital reproduces overall social hierarchy, we know little about how cultural capital is converted into other forms of capital in the overall capital conversion process and how unexpected inconvertibility leads to divergent pathways. I answer these questions with data from an archival and interview study of elite students from a developmental state that has sent a large number of its students to its sponsor country, the United States, since its inception.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Sample

Korean students studying in America began with 123 elites in 1948, when the official government was established after three years of American Military Government. With the relaxation of governmental mobility regulations during the 1980s, the number increased to 6,150 by 1980 and continued to rise at a rate of about 20% per year until it reached 23,360 in 1990. (Institute of International Education 2019). Prior to the 1980s, higher education in Korea was elitist in nature, with less than 10% of the population aged 18 to 21 enrolling (Korean Educational Development Institute 2003). Study abroad was more limited within this elite population, with its proportion never exceeding 3% within the higher education population (or less than 0.3% of the age 18–21 population). This elite group and their transnational trajectories can be used to study how capital conversion affects social mobility. This is because they not only show how educational credentials (both domestic and foreign) mediate social mobility, but they also show how different pathways can be taken when unexpected inconvertibility at conversion points occurs, even among the elite group. The developing authoritarian Korean government, as well as Korea's underdeveloped higher education system, add more nuance to the capital conversion process because rapid economic development and higher education expansion create more opportunities for capital conversion as the number of professor positions grows.

Prior to August of 1981, study abroad was limited to those with college diplomas (or at least two years of college education for natural science majors) and who passed the state-administered study abroad qualification examination. Even though the qualification started to relax, it still required the top 10% of high school academic achievement until 1988. As a result, until the late 1980s, study abroad was primarily limited to those with a bachelor's degree and a certain academic achievement until 1988. Therefore, I limit my research population to Korean international students who have enrolled in American graduate programs.

Data Collection

I collected archival data to delineate the overall study abroad environment from Korea's national archive, national library, and Seoul National University library. I identified 23,503 first generation Korean international students using archival data such as Korean government-collected students abroad registers from the 1960s to the 1980s and a full register of government-funded Korean international students from the 1970s to the 2010s. I took a random sample of 200 people from the identified group and contacted 93 of them whose post-education careers and contacts are traceable. The first round of interviews was conducted with 16 men and 4 women who responded to the interview invitation. I concluded each interview by asking interviewees to introduce me to Korean friends and colleagues who had experienced American graduate education before the 1990s, particularly females to balance the gender ratio, so that I could meet nine more people. While all 29 interviewees completed their American graduate education, four of them also completed their American undergraduate education, as indicated in parentheses in Table 1.

Table 1. Study Abroad Period by Gender

Period	Male	Female	Total
1950s	-	1 (1)	1 (1)
1960s	2 (2)	1	3 (2)
1970s	9	2	11
1980s	11 (1)	3	14 (1)
Total	22 (3)	7 (1)	29 (4)

I used interviews to understand informants' lives before studying abroad, their study abroad experiences, and their post-education career and life experiences. Because the interview was similar to an oral history approach, a pre-interview online questionnaire was used to collect basic information from respondents and prepare for semi-structured interview guides. Each interview lasted about 3 hours on average and took place between December 2021 and September 2022. Because of the widespread spread of COVID-19, ten Zoom interviews were conducted. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

I conducted ongoing data analysis of interview transcripts and archived material while reviewing fieldnotes on a regular basis to write analytic memos (Emerson and Fretz 2011). The memos were used to identify emerging themes in the data, discuss connections to previous research, and revise interview guides with new questions. I used MAXQDA to code interview transcripts, archival documents, and fieldnotes after developing a preliminary coding scheme based on themes in the memos.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Divergent Pathways: Capital Conversion Mechanism and the "Gender Hurdle"

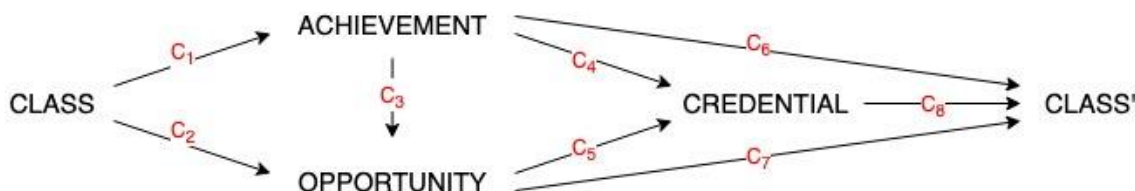


Figure 1. Education-Mediated Capital Conversion Mechanism

During the early stages of both the nation and the higher education system, different pathways for transforming one capital into a different form become more apparent (Figure 1). During the first three decades, higher education was not as developed as it could have been. This led to a mix of typical class inheritance stories [Privilege Pathway: modern—C1-C3-C7; traditional—C2-C7] and a lot of self-made stories [Achievement Pathway: C6]. As the overall higher education system evolves, various pathways to a higher class status became available, ranging from the Credential Pathway [C1/C2-(C3)-C4/C5-C8] to the Achievement Pathway to the Privilege Pathway.

In such a setting, studying abroad was a qualitatively distinct and elitist option. Elite domestic universities were frequently closed due to student protests against military dictatorships, and the number of Ph.D.-granting institutions was limited due to a lack of adequate graduate education environments. As a result, the United States was sought after as a location for "true higher" education. In addition, official development assistance programs, such as the Minnesota Project (Kim 2019), were provided to retrain current faculty and educate potential faculty in order to meet the expansion of higher education, often without granting degrees. In such cases, rather than the degree credential, it was the American education itself that signaled superiority.

Male Elites: Variegated Seamless Pathways

Both class origin and self-achievement enabled joining the upper class. First, the socioeconomic background provided access to higher levels of education [C1]. The wealthy parents not only provided their children with educational support to advance to the next level, but they also exempted their children from earning bread (Weber 1978), especially at higher levels of education.¹ Furthermore, as secondary education expanded, more opportunities for self-achievers to enter higher education became available. Because education was perceived as the most equitable mechanism for upward mobility, families selectively supported their sons, usually the first or smartest, to join the education race, regardless of the family's class, in order to raise up the entire family. And the son's success led to new opportunities for social recognition [C3]. Because the credentialing process was still ongoing in Korea as part of the overall development of the education system, self-achievers' paths were hybrids of the credentialing [C4/C5-C8] and self-achievement [C6] pathways. As a result, despite the various internal processes, various pathways—credential-, achievement-, and privilege-based—gathered male elites at the higher education level.

Because the college credential premium was high, most male elites chose to transfer their credentials to elite jobs and careers [C8], but a few elite students chose to fly across the Pacific to study at American universities in order to obtain a high-quality education and an American credential to become professors when they returned. Because comparable credentials were lacking in Korean society, their capital conversion, particularly C8 (sometimes C6 or C7 for those without degrees), worked well most of the time.

Female Elites: Convertibility in Error

Detoured to Get Married

When female elites attempted to convert their academic credentials, unequal gender norms frequently blocked their pathways at several conversion points, in contrast to the diverse and seamless pathways of male elites [C8]. They were elites because their family backgrounds enabled them to pursue higher education via various pathways and capital convertibility, which were particularly rare for women during the early stages of economic development. As shown in Table 2, higher education frequently

¹ As the Korean economy was in transition from agriculture to manufacturing, the physical input of human labor was critical for the family's lives.

signaled upper-class status during this time period, particularly for women. Even the most affluent females faced limited post-college opportunities because the societal expectation for female education was to produce "wise mothers and good wives." In contrast to their male counterparts, marriage was the most common way for their institutionalized cultural capital to be activated and capitalized, completing the capital convertibility cycle [C7].

Table 2. Class Composition by Gender

Class	Male	Female	Total
Upper-	10 (1)	6 (1)	17 (2)
Middle- and Working-	12 (2)	1	13 (2)
Total	22 (3)	7 (1)	29 (4)

Faced with inconvertibility at the C8 passage in the first round, a few elite women chose to enter the second round of the credential pathway [C4/C5-C8] to get into (American) graduate school. This drive propelled them to the second round's achievement or opportunity stage. However, they discovered that their capital conversion toward the second round-credential stage is dysfunctional, which was not the case in their elitist first round in Korea. The barrier affects both high achievers [C4] and privileged groups with opportunities [C5] because it is cultural. Unlike ordinary fathers, liberal fathers generously supported their beloved daughters' domestic higher education in the first round; however, they began to block their daughters' pursuit of graduate education abroad because they believed "overeducation" would eliminate their daughters' marriage prospects.

To put it another way, regardless of their elite educational level, the C8 path is intentionally blocked for this generation of elite females in order to stimulate the C7 path. This "reversed credential pathway" [~C5-C7] is a modernized version of the traditional privilege pathway [C2-C7] in which the academic credential serves as a mediator to foster "good marriage" opportunities rather than being directly convertible into new class status, C8, like male peers. This flipped C5 passage encourages female college students to engage in homo- or hypergamy by C7. The parents, particularly the fathers, were supportive of their daughters' domestic college education as a signal of personal competence and family background for the smooth operation of this marriage circuit, but they were skeptical of graduate education, which could not be capitalized in the marriage market.² The second round of the credential path with (American) graduate education is beneath mention in this female-only path.

Despite the marriage wall, a few Korean elite females matriculated in American graduate schools. However, even after enrolling in graduate education, female elites discover that their (post-)graduate pathways are not on an equal footing with their male counterparts, indicating yet another unexpected stumbling block and dysfunction of the C8 passage. While their male colleagues were able to obtain and convert their American academic credentials into professor jobs at their alma maters and subsequent new upper-class status, the same was not always true for females with US doctorates.

Blocked from Converting Degree

For the first generation of female elites, marrying an elite man who pursued the same American graduate education (or sometimes temporarily detaching from family as a single) was a viable solution to overcome the marriage barrier. However, another gender barrier arose as they began their graduate studies. Even if both couples began graduate studies abroad, the husband's career path was culturally expected to be prioritized in order to keep the family stable. This frequently prevented females from even beginning the C8 conversion process. In reality, despite their husbands' and families' promises³, many of the female elites were discouraged from completing their degrees during their graduate education for the same reason. As a result, even with graduate degrees, many of those female "survivors" of the "marriage sieve" were unable to ignite their C8 convertibility.

Dysfunctional Convertibility of Degree

Even if the highly educated female has no familial or cultural issues, whether she is single or has a perfect supportive family environment to convert her credential, she may struggle to convert her institutionalized cultural capital into professional jobs. This goes back to how male elites with American Ph.D.s obtained jobs through personal networks and referrals. The male Korean elites relied heavily on their social networks, which they had built up during their meritocratic contest mobility process in Korea, to find academic jobs. Their newly obtained American graduate degrees and publication records also helped to justify their hiring. However, with unequal gender composition, a network-based job search was difficult for female elites in Korean academia. Although some had advantageous opportunities at their alma mater as the first doctoral degree holder as a graduate, the majority of the female elites did not have such opportunities and had to start as lecturers, which required several years of repeated applications before they were appointed as tenured professors.⁴ The dysfunction of the C8 passage for female elites is frequently obscured by success stories of male elites who successfully convert their degrees into academic positions.

² This rationale primarily explains the paradox of a low labor force participation rate among educated Korean females.

³ Although the exact ratio of the two cases is difficult to determine (1: a wife foregoing or delaying her graduate education to prioritize her husband; 2: a husband foregoing or delaying his graduate education to prioritize his wife), the first scenario is more common. And this narrative comes up repeatedly in interviews, particularly when I request introductions to female interviewees in order to balance the gender.

⁴ This disparity in reliance on social capital in job search could be attributed to different interpretations of meritocracy in their domestic competitive mobility process.

"Men's Circle": Differentiated Academic Circuit Process

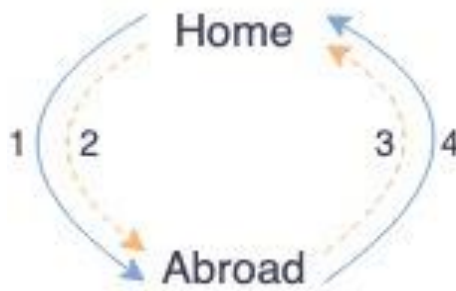


Figure 2 "Men's Circle"

To summarize, various factors influenced the capital conversion mechanism for the first generation of elite international students. There were several education-mediated pathways that paved the way for male elites. The ostensibly identical pathways, however, were not seamless for their female colleagues: the C8 convertibility was not only detoured but also blocked and dysfunctional in several ways as a result of their gender. As a result, the "men's circle" in Figure 2 summarizes the distinct trajectories of men and women. The elite males arrive relatively seamlessly at the credential stage in their second round of credential pathways (sometimes a self-achievement pathway) (blue arrow 1), and they usually succeed in returning to Korea with their credential and completing their academic circuit by converting their newly obtained academic credential into jobs in Korean academia (blue arrow 4). On the contrary, elite females have a difficult time making it to foreign educational institutions (yellow dotted arrow 2), and the "survivors" are sieved once more when they return to Korean academia (yellow dotted arrow 4). The academic circuit of the first period becomes the "men's circle" as a result of these diverging paths.

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