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Rethinking Accounting Professionalisation in China

A Study of the Development of the Chinese Public Accounting Profession since the “Reform and Opening-up”

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Rethinking Accounting Professionalisation in China

– A Study of the Development of the Chinese Public Accounting
Profession since the “Reform and Opening-up”

WENJUN WEN | DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION



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This thesis is a study of the development of the Chinese public accounting profession since China launched the “Reform and Opening-up” policy in 1978. The current, established theoretical representations of accounting professionalisation in China are predominantly underpinned by Gramsci’s (1971) hegemony perspective. Such a hegemony perspective has led to a one-sided understanding of accounting professionalisation in China. It is one-sided in the sense that accounting professionalisation in China is treated as a predictable end in itself – i.e. depending on the focused and studied actor (e.g. the Chinese state or the Big Four), this very actor is set to achieve and retain dominance over the process of accounting professionalisation in China. This thesis argues that such a one-sided understanding is overly simplistic because it presumes that other actors are fully aware of how power operates but consciously choose to go along with it.

The aim of this thesis is to nuance the hegemony representations of accounting professionalisation in China. Drawing on previously unaccessed archive materials and a series of interviews with representatives of the Chinese public accounting profession, this thesis examines the interactions between key domestic and international actors involved in and the impact of such interactions on the process of accounting professionalisation in China over time. This thesis demonstrates that, through interactions, actors collectively construct an evolving consensus on the institutional arrangements that are central to two key aspects of accounting professionalisation in China: the organisation of the professional domain and the practice of professionals within the professional domain. In contrast to the hegemony representations, neither the Chinese state nor the Big Four were found to be fully capable of dominating the process of accounting professionalisation in China. The process is more complicated than that recognised in prior studies, involving ongoing interactions between the Chinese state, the Big Four and other actors including, most significantly, the CICPA. The interactions between these actors are also relevant for the identity construction of individual practitioners. In doing so, this thesis provides more nuanced insights that help to deepen our understanding of accounting professionalisation in China.

Rethinking Accounting Professionalisation in China:

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Accounting Profession since the “Reform and Opening-up”

Wenjun Wen



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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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MADE IN SWEDEN 

To my family

Preface

The movement toward professionalisation is expanding in scope and becoming more sophisticated in character. Yet the effort to achieve the goals of professionalisation is fraught with difficulties and problems, and the process of professionalisation in a changing world turns out to be complicated and challenging to analytical study.

– Herbert Blumer

Table of Contents

- Acknowledgement** 11
- List of appended papers** 13
- 1. Introduction** 15
 - 1.1 Background to research 15
 - 1.2 Research motivation and aim 17
 - 1.3 Significance of research 24
 - 1.4 Thesis structure 25
- 2. The institutional context of the Chinese public accounting profession** 27
 - 2.1 Political system 27
 - 2.1.1 Reduced government involvement in business operations 28
 - 2.1.2 Single-party leadership 29
 - 2.2 Economic system 30
 - 2.2.1 Planned economy 30
 - 2.2.2 Market-oriented economy 30
 - 2.3 Regulatory system 32
 - 2.4 Cultural system 34
- 3. Theoretical framework: analysing accounting professionalisation in China** 37
 - 3.1 Accounting professionalisation: a context-contingent phenomenon 37
 - 3.1.1 Analysing accounting professionalisation: major schools of thought 39
 - 3.2 Research on accounting professionalisation in China 47
 - 3.2.1 Analysing accounting professionalisation in China 50
- 4. Methodological choices and considerations: exploring accounting professionalisation in China** 57
 - 4.1 Assumptions underlying this research 57

4.2 Methodological implications of social constructionism.....	59
4.3 Research design.....	61
4.3.1 Delving into realities: archival materials and semi-structured interviews.....	63
4.3.2 Meaning-making: organising and interpreting data.....	70
4.3.3 Reflections on methodological choices	74
4.3.4 Research ethics	77
5. Summaries of the appended papers	79
6. Concluding discussion	83
6.1 Accounting professionalisation in China	83
6.1.1 Initial destabilising changes: early reforms in the Chinese public accounting domain (1978-1992).....	86
6.1.2 Episodes of contention: growing challenges in the Chinese public accounting domain (1992-2007)	88
6.1.3 Towards occupational settlement: the embedding of the Chinese Communist Party (2007-present).....	92
6.2 Contributions and further insights.....	95
6.2.1 The double-hand of the Chinese state: maintaining the functional space for the development of the Chinese public accounting profession	96
6.2.2 The CICPA and the development of the Chinese public accounting profession	96
6.2.3 The Big Four and the development of the Chinese public accounting profession	97
6.2.4 The individual practitioners and the development of the Chinese public accounting profession	98
7. Implications and future research directions	101
7.1 Implications for accounting professionalisation in developing countries	101
7.2 Future research directions	107
References	111

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Wenjun Wen

Lund, October 25th 2021

List of appended papers

Paper I

Wen, W. J. (2021). Taking stock and moving forward: A systematic literature review on accounting professionalisation in China, 1980-2021. *Journal of Accounting in Emerging Economies*, e-publication ahead of print.

Paper II

Wen, W. J., Humphrey, C. and Sonnerfeldt, A. (2021). The strategic significance of the CICPA in the making of a Chinese home-grown public accounting profession. *Accounting and Business Research*, e-publication ahead of print.

Paper III

Wen, W. J. and Sonnerfeldt, A. (2021). The interplay between global accounting firms and national institutional contexts: The establishment of the Big Four in China from 1978 to 2007. *Accounting History*, forthcoming.

Paper IV

Wen, W. J. (2020). The institutionalisation of commercialism in the audit profession: How auditors constitute the commercial self in a large Chinese audit firm. *Journal of Accounting in Emerging Economies*, 10(2), 191-205.

1. Introduction

This thesis is a study of the development of the Chinese public accounting profession¹ since China launched the “Reform and Opening-up”² policy in 1978. It examines the interactions between key domestic and international actors involved in and the impact of such interactions on the process of accounting professionalisation in China over time. This thesis demonstrates that, through interactions, actors collectively construct an evolving consensus on the institutional arrangements that are central to two key aspects of accounting professionalisation in China: the organisation of the professional domain and the practice of professionals within the professional domain. In doing so, this thesis provides more nuanced insights into the process of accounting professionalisation in China than the one-sided “hegemony” (Gramsci, 1971) analysis that dominates the extant research.

1.1 Background to research

The Chinese public accounting profession is generally said to have first appeared in 1918 to meet the then demands of private business and increasing foreign investment (Xu, 1995; Hao, 1999; Xu and Xu, 2003). This early development³ of the Chinese public accounting profession was curtailed when

¹ This thesis uses the term “public accounting profession” to refer to the certified public accountants (CPAs) working in accounting firms to provide statutory audit services in China.

² Mao’s Cultural Revolution ended with his death in 1976. Deng Xiaoping was then reinstated after the purge, and became the *de facto* state leader. Deng ushered in an economic reform aiming to transform China into an economic power. “Reform and Opening-up” refers to the acceptance of foreign direct investment (FDI) in China and the increasing engagement between China and the outside world.

³ In the early 20th century, Chinese public accountants were allowed to establish accounting firms and perform a wide range of services (e.g. reviewing, investigating, and appraising accounting books; company registration and bankruptcy settlement; accounting consultancy and system design) (Xu, 1995). They developed a strong sense of professional community and became proactive in organising themselves into professional associations (e.g. the

the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949. Under a socialist regime, there was no role perceived for a public accounting profession. For this reason, the national system of recognising and supervising public accountants came to an end in 1951 (Yee, 2009). Accounting firms gradually disappeared as they lost their social and economic relevance *vis-à-vis* the rise of a socialist public ownership economy. The function of public accounting was replaced with a system of “specialist supervision and internal accounting control”⁴ (Xiao et al., 2000, p. 71).

With the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, China launched the “Reform and Opening-up” policy, bringing significant changes to the country’s economic as well as social structure. The “Reform and Opening-up” policy is essentially an indicator of the recognition of the forces of globalisation (Zheng, 2004). Participation in globalisation has helped China to improve its competitiveness in foreign trade and solve problems of lack of capital, technical equipment and management talent, gradually transforming China into one of the most important players in the world economy. In return, integration into the world economy has exposed China to increasing international influences to converge areas such as accounting with internationally acceptable practice in order to legitimate China’s participation in the global arena (Wu and Patel, 2015). Nonetheless, China’s embrace of globalisation appears to be on China’s own terms. As Zheng (2004) notes, the Chinese state or, more precisely, the Chinese Communist Party, has conceived of globalisation not as a wholesale process of “westernisation” but as a strategic tool with which to import and absorb useful western state products such as advanced technologies and skills to develop the country and achieve regime legitimacy. In accordance with political needs, the Chinese state has selectively accepted international influences on its accounting system by emphasising, for example, the discourse of “Chinese characteristics” (Ezzamel and Xiao, 2015), implying that the Chinese state has been able to exert more control *vis-à-vis* international influences over the development of the Chinese accounting system (Lu et al., 2009).

Institute of Chartered Accountants of Shanghai) (Xu and Xu, 2003). A number of foreign accounting firms also came to China and established their presence in Shanghai (Xu, 1995).

⁴ This system had three elements: (1) establishing internal accounting controls within companies or government departments; (2) overseeing the accounts of subordinate organisations by ministries and their local branches; and (3) providing “specialist supervision” by the Ministry of Finance, the taxation agencies, and the state banks and their local branches.

It is within the wider “Reform and Opening-up” context⁵ that accounting in China has been undergoing a rapid transformation, with the re-emergence of the public accounting occupation in 1980 marking the start of a new chapter in Chinese accounting history. The ensuing four decades not only saw the re-emergence of the Chinese public accounting occupation, but also the making of a profession, legitimised by a supporting legal and regulatory framework and its own national professional association – the Chinese Institute of Certified Public Accountants (CICPA). The CICPA is poised to become one of the world’s largest professional associations, with statistics at the end of 2019 showing that the CICPA had an individual membership⁶ of nearly 256,000 CPAs and a group membership of over 9,000 accounting firms (CICPA, 2019).

Given this background, investigation of the ways in which the Chinese public accounting profession is formed and transformed will serve as the subject matter of this thesis, offering valuable insights into the conceivably intertwining relationship between accounting and society at large. For the purpose of the present study, accounting professionalisation is defined as the process whereby aspirant actors interact with one another to achieve “occupational settlements” in the wider economic and social arena over time (cf. Paper I). The term “professionalism” is understood as the perception of the state of the professionalisation process at a particular point of time.

1.2 Research motivation and aim

The central motivation of this thesis has been a concern that the current, established theoretical representations of accounting professionalisation in China, underpinned predominantly by the “hegemony” (Gramsci, 1971) analysis, are not fully capable of delineating the empirical story of the development of the Chinese public accounting profession. More specifically, a systematic review of the literature suggests that, although there have been a wealth of studies introducing and examining accounting professionalisation in China, they tend to be explorative and descriptive in nature, seeking to outline

⁵ Chapter 2 will present a more detailed discussion of this context.

⁶ In comparison, at the end of 2019, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW) (formed in 1880) had a total individual membership of 154,531 (ICAEW, 2019); the American Institute of CPAs (AICPA) (formed in 1887) had a total individual membership of 431,000 (AICPA, 2019).

major events in Chinese professional accounting development rather than to explicate the dynamism underlying such development (cf. Paper I). Amongst the very few studies that did dedicate to explicate the subject matter, the core themes to have emerged have focused on tracing the hegemonic influences the Chinese state or the Anglo-American Big Four⁷ accounting firms have exerted on the development of the Chinese public accounting profession (cf. Paper I). These studies have drawn upon Gramsci's (1971) Marxist concept of hegemony⁸ to analyse how the two groups of actors have achieved and retained dominance over the trajectory of accounting professionalisation in China. For Gramsci, hegemony is the dominant political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent that is secured not by the use of coercive force but by the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class (Bates, 1975). It tends to infer the consent of the subordinate class from the absence of organised opposition to the hegemony. The power of a particular structural force, namely, ideology, is fundamental for the ruling class to keep the subordinate class submissive to the interests and strategic agendas of the ruling class. Gramsci perceives that ideology has a material existence in the activities of people, and provides them with rules of practical conduct and moral behaviour (Simon, 1982).

Within the Gramscian framework, for example, Yee (2008, 2009, 2012) examines how the political ideology of the Chinese state was "filtered down" and reflected in the development of the Chinese public accounting profession in the 1980s and 1990s. As Yee (2009, p. 77) puts it: "An effective way for the ideology of the state to be popularised and embedded into social discourse is for it to be incorporated into the educational system and socialisation practices. Such hegemonic strategy enables the state's ideology to spread and to become ingrained into the cultural values and social norms of the mass of the people in

⁷ During the period covered by this thesis, the set of the largest Anglo-American accounting firms has evolved from the "Big Eight" to the "Big Four".

⁸ The relevance of Gramsci's concept of hegemony in explicating accounting professionalisation in China has recently been questioned. According to Macve (2021), Gramsci's concept of hegemony was originally articulated to explain how European bourgeois capitalism had delayed the Communist revolution outside Russia mainly through the power of ideology to keep the working class identifying their own interests with the interests of the capitalist class. It is anomalous to apply Gramsci's analysis of the underlying forces at work within western "democratic" states to what remains, ideologically if not always in practice, an authoritarian Marxist-Leninist state. It is dubious to divide the Chinese public accounting profession based on class, as Chinese public accountants hardly feature any ruthless exploitation that seems to be central to Gramsci's Marxist class definitions, an exploitation that is much deeper than merely unequal access to economic rewards and to status and power (Macve, 2021; cf. Paper I).

the society”. Through effectively exercising its political and ideological leadership, the state has achieved hegemony within the accounting community and, as a consequence, succeeded in mobilising the Chinese public accountants in the implementation of its economic-related agenda. Here, Yee (2009) has conflated the state with a hegemonic class and treated the Chinese public accountants as a subordinate class. With reference to the Confucian principles of filial piety, Yee (2009) suggests that the Chinese state-accounting profession relationship is analogous to the father and son relationship encompassed within the Confucian notion of *wu lun*⁹. Yee (2012) theorises the CICPA as an arm of the state, with strategic imperatives or goals as being imposed upon the CICPA by a dominant state. The establishment of the state’s hegemony, according to Yee (2008, 2009, 2012), appears to have met no resistance or indeed a detectable desire for resistance to state intervention in the professionalisation process. Yee’s analysis does not provide specific insights into the role of international accounting firms and transnational organisations due to the state-centric focus.

In contrast to Yee’s focus on the state, Gillis (2011, 2014a) employs a similar Gramscian framework to illuminate the role of the Big Four in the development of the Chinese public accounting profession since the early 1980s. Gillis (2011, 2014a) argues that the Chinese public accounting profession could be divided into two classes shortly after its inception. The first class consisted of those public accountants who organised into indigenous accounting firms. The other class consisted of the Big Four that entered China at the same time. Over time, the indigenous and Big Four classes of public accountants would become conscious of their class differences. According to Gramsci, hegemony results because of the consent of the lower class to the perceived superior ideology of the ruling class. In China, one of the claims to ideological superiority of the Big Four is their purported expertise in the application of international accounting and auditing standards, as Gillis (2011, p. 242) explains: “Local firms did not present a viable alternative ideology, and consequently effectively consented to the domination of the western ideology advanced by the Big Four. Consent came in part because local firms viewed adopting western ideologies as a way to compete against the Big Four. Instead, the ideologies simply reinforced the hegemony of the Big Four because they validated the beliefs of many users in the superiority of the Big Four”. The ideological superiority of the Big Four has enabled them to establish a

⁹ The Confucian notion of *wu lun* or “five relationships” encompasses the principle of all social connections and behaviour, including relationships between father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, ruler and subject, and finally, friend and friend (Yee, 2009).

dominant role in the development of the Chinese public accounting profession wherein the traditional controlling power of the Chinese state was said to have retreated (Gillis, 2011, 2014a).

Taken together, this hegemony perspective has attributed dominance on the basis of the focused and studied actors, giving rise to a one-sided understanding of accounting professionalisation in China. It is one-sided in the sense that accounting professionalisation in China, underpinned by the theoretical *fiat* of hegemony, is treated as a predictable end in itself – i.e. depending on the actor in question (e.g. the Chinese state or the Big Four), this very actor is set to achieve and retain dominance over the professionalisation process. This thesis argues that such a one-sided understanding is overly simplistic because it presumes that other actors are fully aware of how power operates but consciously choose to go along with it (Burawoy, 2012). Indeed, under a global context, accounting professionalisation has become increasingly transnational in nature, characterised by the cross-border production and enforcement of professional standards and regulation as well as a globalised market for the production, recruitment, and professional development of the accounting labour force (Samsonova-Taddei and Humphrey, 2014). The local process of accounting professionalisation has been subject to coexisting but also contesting influences and sources of authority and legitimacy originating from the national and transnational levels (Poullaos and Ramirez, 2020). Through a reliance on the hegemony perspective, the extant accounting literature on China has not delineated many important interactions between actors at the national as well as transnational levels, not to mention what comes out of these interactions regarding the notions of professionalism and possible implications for global professional accounting development (cf. Paper I). To further uncover the empirical story of the development of the Chinese public accounting profession, it is necessary to rethink accounting professionalisation in China by placing the interactions between domestic and international actors at the centre of analytical attention. Here, the term “interaction” specifically denotes the varied ways in which actors engage with and react to one another.

Given the above discussion, the aim of this thesis is to nuance the established hegemony representations of accounting professionalisation in China. Realising this aim would involve empirically investigate the interactions between key domestic and international actors involved in and the impact of such interactions on the professionalisation process. Therefore, this thesis set out to ask the following research question:

How have the interactions between key domestic and international actors shaped the process of accounting professionalisation in China over time?

In searching for the answer to this research question, this thesis draws upon the theoretical insights of Burrage et al. (1990) to analyse the development of the Chinese public accounting profession since China launched the “Reform and Opening-up” policy in 1978. According to Burrage et al. (1990), analysis of professionalisation needs to clearly identify the groups and organisations whose actions can shape the form and the success or failure of professionalisation. Professionalisation is the outcome of the ongoing interactions between the actors involved. These actors have their own interests and priorities, and utilise diverse resources and strategies in the professionalisation process. In this vein, Burrage et al. (1990) avoid the structural reductionism that views professions as the product of macro-processes, and redirect the centrality of studying professionalisation towards the sustained analysis of the interactions between the actors involved. To capture such interactions, this thesis has divided accounting professionalisation in China according to the common units of analysis emerging from the now extensive global literature on accounting professionalisation. More specifically, this thesis focuses on the activities of and events participated in by the national professional accounting association, global accounting firms, and individual practitioners working in the organisational setting of global accounting firms¹⁰. In line with these chosen units of analysis, the following sub-research questions will be explored:

1. What is known about accounting professionalisation in China in the extant accounting literature? (Paper I)
2. How has the national professional accounting association (CICPA) participated in the organisation of the Chinese public accounting profession? (Paper II)
3. How have global accounting firms (the Big Four) participated in the configuration of the rules, norms, and values underpinning the Chinese public accounting profession? (Paper III)
4. How have individual practitioners participated in the construction of professional identity in the Chinese public accounting profession? (Paper IV)

Below are brief summaries of the appended papers that address these sub-research questions. In addition, Figure 1 provides an overview of the appended papers.

¹⁰ Chapter 3 will present a more extensive discussion of these units of analysis.

Paper I. This paper conducts a systematic literature review of the extant literature on the Chinese public accounting profession to develop critical insights into how the research field has been developing. It serves as the stepping stone to the following three empirical papers. The paper identifies the key actors involved in the professionalisation process and categorises the different levels of analysis emerging from the extant literature. It shows that, due to the lack of a common theoretical vernacular and an agreed-upon focus, the extant literature presents a fragmented and contradictory picture. It then outlines future research directions and opportunities to move the research field into the next stages of development.

Paper II. This paper turns the focus towards the strategic significance of the CICPA in developing the Chinese public accounting profession. It particularly examines the role and strategies of the CICPA with regard to the organisational aspect of professional accounting development in China. Drawing on previously unaccessed archive materials and a series of interviews with senior representatives of the Chinese public accounting profession, the paper reveals a more nuanced empirical story of professional accounting development in China, in which the CICPA has been able to exercise a greater degree of agency than is currently represented in the extant accounting literature.

Paper III. This paper revisits previously published histories and analysis of the Big Four's expansion in China, and provides a more insightful understanding of this expansion. Based on an extensive analysis of archive materials and interviews, the paper shows that the Big Four's expansion in China has been deeply intertwined with the country's socio-political and economic transition under the "Reform and Opening-up" policy. The paper reveals important conjunctural moments in history that provided the Big Four with important windows of opportunity to actively shape local institutional change to their own interests.

Paper IV. This paper explores the agency of individual practitioners and examines their active construction of professional identity in the organisational setting of accounting firms. Drawing upon a series of interviews with individual practitioners, the paper shows that, within the "clan-like" structure of the audit engagement team, three recurring prevalent discourses (i.e. the client relationship, adding value, and career) were powerful scripts in constructing individual subjectivity wherein the "professionalism" ideal was re-enacted to rationalise the incorporation of more commercialistic elements.

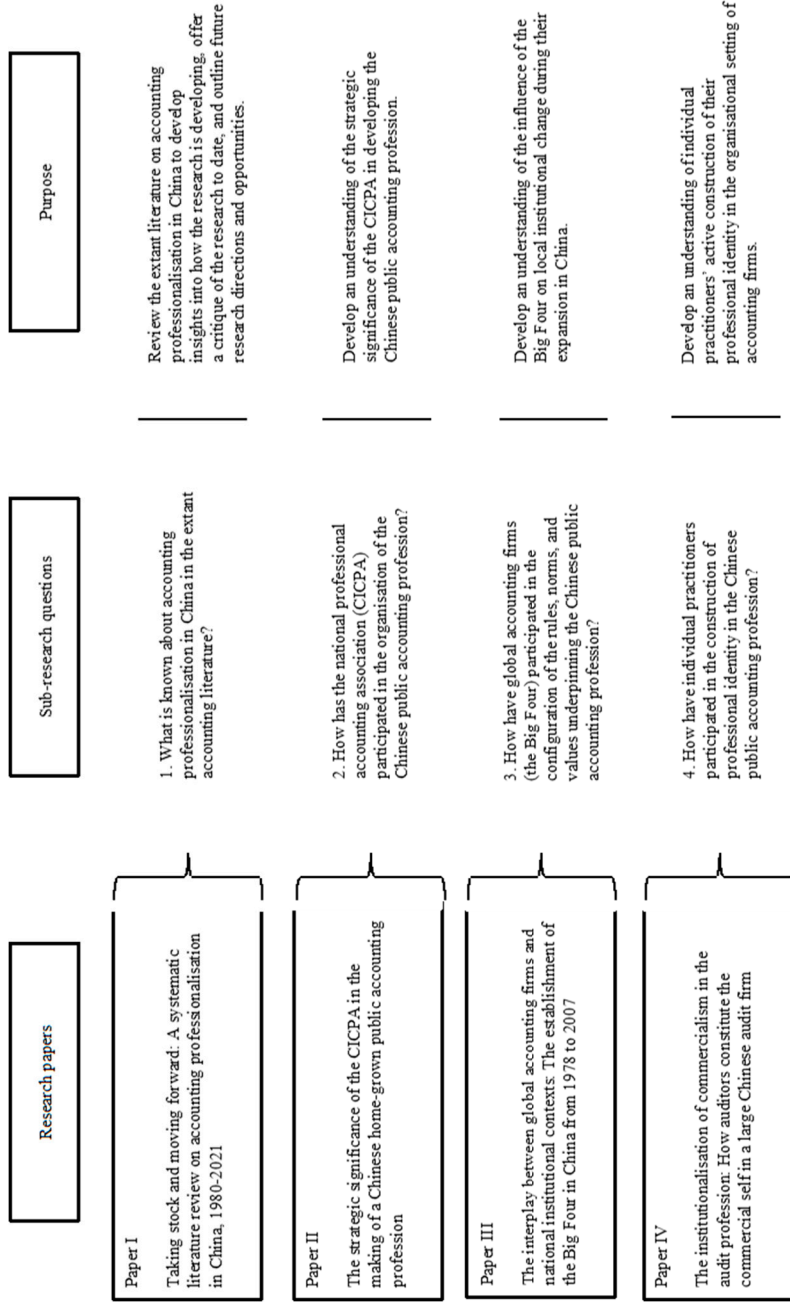


Figure 1. Overview of the appended papers.

1.3 Significance of research

This thesis is distinctive in that it diverges from the current, established hegemony analysis of accounting professionalisation in China. First, this thesis has directed scholarly attention to the importance of focusing specifically on the interactions between actors in the professionalisation process. This focus is shaped partly by the empirical world of nowadays frequent and intense interactions, and partly by the theoretically informed expectation that increasingly complex transnational accounting regulation will result in novel, problematic, or impactful interactions (see e.g. Poullaos, 2009; Poullaos and Ramirez, 2020). By drawing upon the theoretical insights of Burrage et al. (1990), this thesis has advanced an interaction perspective to analyse accounting professionalisation in China. The advantage of this perspective is that it provides sufficient abstraction without concluding any fixed endpoint of the professionalisation process. Second, as interactions are fluid and a snapshot has little analytical value, this thesis has adopted a longitudinal approach. The value of a longitudinal approach is that it “permits the observation, description and/or classification of ... phenomena in such a way that process can be identified and empirically documented” (Miller and Friesen, 1982, pp. 1013-1014). Furthermore, a longitudinal approach also enables “developmental explanation” based on a time series of events (Mason, 1996). Taken together, this thesis contributes to more nuanced theoretical representations of accounting professionalisation in China. One of the core messages concerns how the organisation and practice of Chinese public accountants are continually evolving. Through examining the interactions between key domestic and international actors, this thesis suggests that such evolution is a multi-participatory and consensus-seeking form of change wherein single actor is not fully capable of playing a dominant role. This line of thought highlights the importance of contemplating the impact of interactions on actors’ capacity for agency in the professional domain. A deeper understanding of such impact can help actors shape future interactions, creating beneficial impact.

Besides its theoretical contributions to the extant accounting literature on China, this thesis will also inform those involved with the development of the public accounting professions in other developing countries¹¹. Over the past four decades, China has made great achievements in strengthening the capacity

¹¹ The classification of developing countries is based on the United Nations’ 2021 World Economic Situation and Prospects; see https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP2021_ANNEX.pdf.

of indigenous accounting firms to rival the dominance of the Big Four, not just in China but globally. If China's economic success story continues¹², it clearly has greater potential to further change the nature and structure of the hitherto mainly Anglo-American dominated global profession (Macve, 2020). Rethinking accounting professionalisation in China through an interaction perspective will help to generate a deeper understanding of the role and capacity of the actors involved over time. Although the scale and institutional context of China makes it a unique market among developing countries, insights from such a study can further illuminate the viable strategies still available for professional accounting development in developing countries in the globalised era, when developing countries, as a group, are "being ever more tightly constrained in their national development strategies by proliferating regulations formulated and enforced by international organisations" (Wade, 2003, p. 621). In light of the Chinese case, we should perhaps be more sceptical of the current transnational arena of accounting regulation, which is said to have greatly limited the ability of developing countries to protect their fledging professions against the foray of foreign established powerhouses in the form of the Big Four (Hopper et al., 2017). A more development-friendly environment arguably requires changes in the current mandate and priorities of transnational professional and regulatory organisations. The question is how to legitimise an expanded "policy space" (Wade, 2007a) for developing countries and dilute requirements to subscribe to "international best practice". The balance needs to be shifted away from the unmediated drive to homogenise around Anglo-American models of accounting professionalisation towards granting developing countries more reasonable scope to choose appropriate levels of national protection that are conducive to the development of a profession responsive to local socio-political and economic demands in the long term.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis is composed of four papers and this introductory part (called *kappa* in Swedish language). This kappa provides an overview of the research aim and research question, the theoretical basis underpinning the research, and the

¹² China has recently become the world's second largest economy measured by gross domestic product (GDP) and the largest economy measured by purchasing-power-parity (PPP) (IMF, 2019).

methodological approach adopted to conduct the research. It also discusses the findings and elaborates on the contributions in relation to the previous research. Specifically, this kappa consists of the following seven chapters:

Chapter 1 introduces the specific area of research interest. It particularly justifies the need to conduct research on accounting professionalisation in China, linking it to the research aim and research question. The chapter also presents brief summaries of the four appended papers, illustrating how they connect to the research aim of this thesis.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the institutional context of the Chinese public accounting profession, outlining important developments within China's rapidly evolving political, economic, regulatory, and cultural systems.

Chapter 3 explains the theoretical basis of this thesis. It illuminates the contingent nature of accounting professionalisation and discusses the major schools of thought applied to interpret and explain the professionalisation process. The chapter also reviews the extant literature on accounting professionalisation in China and articulates an interaction perspective for analysing the Chinese case.

Chapter 4 describes the methodology adopted in this thesis. It makes explicit the underlying research assumptions as well as the related research design, including the general methods applied for data collection and analysis and the specific methods used in each of the empirical papers. It then ends with reflections on methodological choices and a note on research ethics.

Chapter 5 summarises the four appended papers. The summary includes the specific aims, findings, and contributions of each of the papers, providing background for the ensuing discussion of the findings and contributions of this thesis.

Chapter 6 returns to the research aim and research question of this thesis. It illustrates how the interactions between actors have shaped the trajectory of Chinese professional accounting development over time. It also discusses the contributions in relation to the previous research.

Chapter 7 sheds light upon the potential implications of the findings of this thesis, particularly with respect to accounting professionalisation in developing countries in the globalised era. It also identifies future research directions based on the contributions made in this thesis.

2. The institutional context of the Chinese public accounting profession

The purpose of this chapter is to set the scene for this thesis. As mentioned earlier, accounting professionalisation in China has been intertwined with the broader institutional context in which it is embedded. Detailed reflection on the wide-ranging social transformation in China over the period covered in this thesis will help to provide the contextual information needed to better understand the subject matter.

2.1 Political system

The Chinese Communist Party, formed in 1921, established the People's Republic of China in 1949. Since the formation of the new China, the ideological principles of Mao Zedong, the paramount leader of the Chinese Communist Party, have gradually come to dominate the country. The Marxist notion of class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie was elevated as the nodal point and focus of the Chinese Communist Party and the government (Ezzamel et al., 2007; Xu et al., 2013). Domestically, class struggle constituted an essential part of the then prevailing political discourse and was vividly manifested in several mass political campaigns, including the *Anti-Rightists* movement in 1957 and the *Cultural Revolution* between 1966 and 1976. With the end of the *Cultural Revolution*, Deng Xiaoping took over political power in 1978 and initiated major socio-political and economic reforms to overcome the problems that emerged during the Maoist era. To break away from Mao's rigid ideological principles, Deng urged the Chinese Communist Party as well as wider Chinese society to "emancipate the mind, seek truth from facts" (解放思想, 实事求是 or *jiě fàng sī xiǎng, shí shì qiú shì*). Deng stated that, in the past, people's minds had been confined by

ideological taboos, the framework of stigmatised Marxism, and limited in that no one was allowed to go beyond these “forbidden zones”, effectively stifling Chinese society’s capacity to question and innovate (Xu et al., 2013). Following the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in December 1978, Mao’s class struggle primacy was replaced with Deng’s economic development primacy. Deng emphasised that political reform was a necessary condition for economic development (Cheng, 1989). Traditionally, the Chinese Communist Party used to dominate every aspect of the country. Beginning in the early 1980s, such problems as the amalgamated Chinese Communist Party, government, and business sector, i.e. the Party taking the place of the government and the government taking the place of the business sector, were gradually addressed to enhance efficiency and to establish a clear system of accountability (Cheng, 1989).

2.1.1 Reduced government involvement in business operations

In October 1984, the Chinese Communist Party issued the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on Economic System Reform*, formally highlighting the need for the “separation of government and enterprise” (政企分开 or *zhèng qǐ fēn kāi*). The Decision explained several major deficiencies associated with the existing institutional arrangement where the government was considered omnipotent, having the power of public administration, the ownership of enterprises and the right to operate enterprises:

There is no separation of responsibilities between government and enterprises. The government has over-regulated enterprises, neglecting the role of commodity production, the law of value, and the market ... this has caused a situation in which enterprises lack the autonomy ... this severely suppressed the enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity of enterprises and the broad masses of employees, making the socialist economy, which should have been full of vitality, largely lose its vitality (Chinese Communist Party, 1984, p. 2).

Since the issuance of the Decision, the Chinese government has been striving to reduce its involvement in and separate its function from business operations (Wu and Patel, 2015). A series of administrative laws and regulations have thus far been promulgated to build an open and responsive style of administration. For example, the *Administrative Procedure Law* was issued in 1989 to encourage the transparency and fairness of decision making by government agencies. In recognition of the widespread public outrage of the

public regarding power abuse, the *Administrative License Law* was issued in 2004. Such progress suggests that the Chinese government is aware of the severity of issues caused by bureaucracy and is willingness to address those issues (Wu and Patel, 2015).

2.1.2 Single-party leadership

In parallel to the progress of the “separation of government and enterprise”, the further “separation of party and government” (党政分开 or *dǎng zhèng fēn kāi*) was undertaken. Deng believed that power at that time was too concentrated in the Party. The Party’s branches at all levels “have managed too many things that shouldn’t be, and cannot be, and are not well managed”. Consequently, in October 1987, the Chinese Communist Party issued the *Overall Vision of Political System Reform*, pointing out that the key to the political reform was to separate the function of the Party and the government. According to the *Overall Vision*, the Party’s role was envisaged as one of exercising leadership in politics, that is, the leadership in political principle and political direction, whereas the government’s role was as one of directly implementing public administration. In order to fundamentally address overlapping functions, one distinctive feature of the *Overall Vision* was to gradually remove Party branches from within government agencies. The “separation of party and government”, however, was abruptly halted in 1989 because of the political struggle within the Party surrounding the Tiananmen Square event. The Party then reversed its position by strengthening the “Party-building work”¹³ (党建工作 or *dǎng jiàn gōng zuò*) in society, consolidating the political core and the leading position of the Party’ organisations. China has ever since remained a Party-state characterised by the embedding of Party and government leadership. This arrangement helps the Party control the government at all levels of the national hierarchy (Zheng and Gore, 2019). More recently, the Party has strengthened “Party-building work” in the Chinese public accounting profession. This is notably manifested in the installation of Party branches in Chinese accounting firms. The implications of “Party-building work” for the development of the Chinese public accounting profession are still unfolding and merit further empirical research.

¹³ “Party-building work” in China refers to expanding the Communist Party’s organisational coverage at the grassroots level, including studying the Party’s theories, conducting activities in accordance with the Party doctrines, and making rules along the Party lines (cf. Paper II).

2.2 Economic system

The economic system is closely related to politics in China because of its socialist nature and unique political system. Big strides have thus far been made to reform the economic system, marked by China's visible transition from a planned to market-oriented economy.

2.2.1 Planned economy

Starting in 1953, guided by class struggle primacy, the government started to carry out the socialist transformation of capitalist industry and commerce, rebuilding private ownership of the means of production into state or collective ownership in the hope of eliminating exploitation and class differences (Xu, 1995). In 1955, the transformation was completed, with state-owned enterprises dominating the national economy. Central planning was adopted as a mechanism to balance the demand for and supply of resources and became a hallmark of China's economic system under Mao.

Under the planned economy, enterprises were simply considered production units for implementing national economic plans with very little autonomy (Wu and Patel, 2015). They obtained funds, mainly from state appropriations, and were directly managed either by the central government through various ministries or by local governments. Production budgets were allocated to enterprises in accordance with national economic plans. Profits made by enterprises were remitted to the state, forming an essential part of national revenue. Instead of financial rewards based on work performance, employees were primarily motivated by moral or political incentives with titles such as "excellent manager" or "model worker" (Wu and Patel, 2015).

2.2.2 Market-oriented economy

China's market-oriented economy was developed through a series of economic reforms. The Chinese leadership adopted a pragmatic and incremental approach to restructuring the national economy. As a result, the economic reforms proceeded in different stages, gradually transforming the economy from being centrally planned to market oriented (see Table 1). Important changes in the national economy have included, for example, development of foreign-invested firms, development of the private sector, state-owned-enterprises (SOE) reforms, and formation of the capital market.

Table 1. Distinct economic periods in post-1949 China.

Characterisation of economy and polity	Periods
Centrally planned economy	1949-1978
Planned commodity economy	1978-1992
Socialist market economy	1992-present

Source: adapted from Zhang et al. (2014)

Development of foreign-invested firms

Following the “Reform and Opening-up policy”, China has attracted an increasing number of foreign investors. The average amount of foreign direct investment in China between 1979 and 2019 was USD 86.76 billion annually, with a minimum of USD 80,000 in 1979 and a maximum of USD 290.93 billion in 2013 (World Bank, 2019). Multinational corporations have established their Chinese presence in various forms, including Sino-foreign equity, and contractual joint ventures, and wholly foreign owned firms (Wu and Patel, 2015). They have played an important role in transforming corporate governance and accounting in China. For example, they acted as role models by demonstrating to Chinese domestic enterprises how western management practices work. China’s initial demand for international accounting harmonisation was also driven by foreign-invested firms (Hao, 1999; Ezzamel and Xiao, 2015).

Development of the private sector

In 1981, the establishment of sole traders was encouraged. Prices for most industrial goods and products have gradually been liberalised since 1982. Private enterprises further boomed after the government established policy incentives to protect the property of entrepreneurs. Private ownership secured the constitutional protection for the first time in 1988 (Wu and Patel, 2015). By the end of 2018, the private sector in China was contributing more than 60% of the country’s GDP (Zhang, 2019).

SOE reforms

Since 1983, SOEs have been required to pay taxes instead of remitting profits to the government. Subsequently the government introduced a corporatisation scheme in 1991, under which SOEs were converted into shareholding companies (Wu and Patel, 2015). Beginning in the mid-1990s, guided by the principle of “grasp the large, and let go of the small” (抓大放小 or *zhuā dà fàng xiǎo*), small- and medium-sized SOEs were merged, closed, or privatised, while the state retained control over large and key SOEs. Except for those large

and key SOEs, operations of SOEs were no longer subject to national economic plans, and they competed in freer markets (Wu and Patel, 2015).

Formation of the capital market

The Shanghai Stock Exchange and Shenzhen Stock Exchange were established in the early 1990s. Since the inception of these two exchanges, the domestic capital market has achieved remarkable growth. By 2020, the Shanghai Stock Exchange and Shenzhen Stock Exchange have emerged as the 4th- and 7th-largest exchanges in the world with market capitalisations of USD 4.67 trillion and USD 3.28 trillion, respectively (Statista, 2020).

2.3 Regulatory system

China has adopted a rigid statutory law system in which laws tend to be very detailed and cover most aspects of daily life (Wu and Patel, 2015). Over the past four decades, China has made tremendous efforts to reform its legal system following the economic reforms. A series of major laws¹⁴ governing economic activities has been enacted. For the purpose of this thesis, the following discussion focuses on major regulations and laws that govern the Chinese public accounting profession.

Several regulations deeply affecting the initial formation of the public accounting profession were promulgated by the state between 1980 and 1986. For example, in September 1980, the National People's Congress, which is the highest legislative body in China, enacted the *Income Tax Law for Sino-foreign Joint Ventures*. In the same year, on 14 December, the Ministry of Finance (MOF) issued the *Detailed Principles for Implementation of Income Tax Law for Sino-foreign Joint Ventures*, stipulating for the first time that an auditor's report required for a tax return must be signed by a Chinese CPA (Hao, 1999). On 23 December, the Ministry of Finance promulgated the *Provisional Regulations Concerning the Establishment of Accounting Consultancies*, marking the first step in the re-establishment of the public accounting profession. On 1 January 1981, the first Chinese accounting firm – Shanghai CPA – to emerge as part of the revival of the Chinese public accounting

¹⁴ These laws mainly include, for example, the *Accounting Law* (enacted in 1985), the *Bankruptcy Law* (enacted in 1986), the *Company Law* (enacted in 1993), the *CPA Law* (enacted in 1993), the *Auditing Law* (enacted in 1994), and the *Securities Law* (enacted in 1998).

profession was established in affiliation with Shanghai Finance Bureau. More accounting firms were established in succession in other provinces of China. In July 1986, the State Council issued the *Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Certified Public Accountants*, laying the key legislative foundation for establishing the CICPA.

In October 1993, the National People’s Congress further enacted the *Law of the Certified Public Accountants*. It consolidated legal backing for the CICPA, set out clear rules for CICPA’s administration and organisational structure, and prescribed CPA qualification procedures and service scope. In particular, it required CPAs and accounting firms to perform professional services in an independent and fair manner and made CPAs liable to clients and other parties who may suffer a loss due to audit failures. The new law has expanded the role of the CICPA and escorted the Chinese public accounting profession away from state control and towards becoming a “communal organisation” (Hao, 1999, p. 293). In February 2006, China achieved substantial convergence of its accounting and auditing standards with the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) and International Standards on Auditing (ISA). Figure 2 depicts the current public accounting regulatory framework in China, outlining the regulatory relationship among the Chinese government, accounting regulators, professional accounting association, and accounting practitioners.

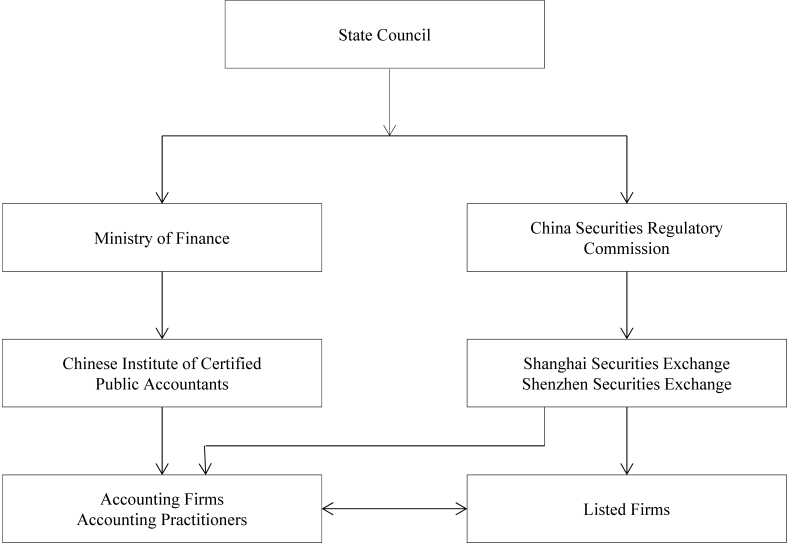


Figure 2. Public accounting regulatory framework in China.
 Source: adapted from Wu and Patel (2015).

2.4 Cultural system

China has a strong heritage of the Confucian philosophy that occupies a centre stage in the Chinese social behaviours. The fundamental assumptions of Confucianism are that people exist in relationships with others, and that relationships are structured hierarchically, with people accepting a hierarchical order in which everybody has a rightful place that needs no further justification (Bond and Hwang, 1986). Familial, social, and political stability and harmony are the ultimate aims of Confucianism. Such stability and harmony are sustained by each individual honouring the requirements of their role relationships with others (Bond and Hwang, 1986). As such, *guanxi* is one of the most salient cultural constructs in China, developing from Confucian doctrines regarding ties of kinship and close personal relationships. It emphasises the favour-exchange or reciprocity among different actors in the society. Traditional Chinese culture, characterised by relationship harmony, has been said to be less compatible with the key tenets such as independence and autonomy that underlie the Anglo-American accounting professions (Chow et al., 1995).

Moreover, a series of foreign humiliations from the late 19th century Opium Wars to the 1937-1945 Japanese occupation at times reduced China into a semi-colony and semi-feudal society, largely shaping the psyche of a nation that detached itself from the world after the founding of the new China in 1949. Lagging behind the west again made China vulnerable again to the modern world, and made the “Reform and Opening-up” launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 a clear imperative. Nationalism has been mobilised by the Party-state to restore China’s sovereignty, prosperity, and power. In reality, mixed emotions have arisen as the need to depend on the west to develop the economy had to overcome an inherited psychological resistance. As such, almost all the reforms in China have been labelled “reform with Chinese characteristics” (Aufrecht and Li, 1995). Here, the maintenance of “Chinese characteristics” largely performs a discursive role, mediating different interests and views of the political, technical, and other actors in the relevant networks (Ezzamel and Xiao, 2015). China’s methods for dealing with the outside world can be summarised in an old Chinese saying: “Chinese learning as the substance, and western learning for practical use” (中学为体, 西学为用 or *zhōng xué wèi tǐ, xī xué wèi yòng*). This approach does not emphasise a direct resistance to globalisation but a selective importation of western products such as advanced technologies and skills, enabling Chinese nationalism to be reconciled and compatible with globalism. For the purpose of the present study, such a

mixture of China's own means and western products has led to both convergences and divergences between Chinese and western professional accounting development.

3. Theoretical framework: analysing accounting professionalisation in China

The purpose of this chapter is to lay the theoretical basis of this thesis. This chapter starts by reflecting upon how the phenomenon of accounting professionalisation has been approached differently amidst the diversity of occupational experiences and cultural variations across societies. This chapter then reviews in detail prior studies of accounting professionalisation in China and, by drawing upon the theoretical insights of Burrage et al. (1990), articulates an interaction perspective with which to analyse the Chinese case.

3.1 Accounting professionalisation: a context-contingent phenomenon

The study of accounting associations and their accompanying professionalisation process has been approached using different paradigms, with writings of accounting associations and their members dating back as far as the 1890s in the United Kingdom where the first modern professional accountants emerged (Parker, 1981). Although these early studies provide detailed accounts of the development of various accounting associations, they are “official histories” commissioned by accounting associations involved (see e.g. Brown, 1905; Garrett, 1961; Collard, 1980) and written by others sympathetic to professional accountants’ endeavours (see e.g. Stacey, 1954). Such official histories, often underpinned by a Darwinian assumption that accounting is progressive, are engaged to commemorate important milestones in the passage of time. In general, studies of this type tend to be uncritical and atheoretical in nature, mainly serving to justify the status of practitioners

(Macdonald, 1984; Carnegie and Napier, 1996) and their contributions and necessity to society (Loft, 1986; Sikka and Willmott, 1997).

Given the increasing awareness that accounting essentially reflects and is influenced by the broader environment in which it is embedded, an alternative paradigm of accounting has gained momentum. This new agenda calls for the study of accounting phenomena within wider social, political, and economic contexts (Burchell et al., 1980; Hopwood, 1983, 1994). From this perspective, accounting professionalisation is perceived as a social-historical product, the meaning of which has to be interpreted within the particular context in which it is embedded (Ramirez, 2001). Scholarly works that are informed by this perspective overcome the limitations associated with the earlier historical narratives and offer new insights into how the development of an accounting profession is shaped by its broader environment. This has been visibly demonstrated, since the mid-1980s, by the proliferation of English-language scholarly works pertaining to accounting professionalisation. These studies employ a heterogeneous range of theoretical perspectives to explain the phenomenon and the many struggles experienced by the accounting occupation in the process of acquiring professional status. Analysis of accounting professionalisation produced since have, in contrast to the traditional “official histories”, tended to be sceptical of claims of altruistic service and functional contribution that emanated from the accounting profession itself (Poullaos, 2009; Poullaos and Ramirez, 2020).

Initially, heightened scholarly attention was paid to examining accounting professionalisation in what can be loosely defined as the Anglo-American world, with the particular experience of the UK being the epicentre of such inquiry. This country has a long history of professional organisation characteristic of strong emphasis on self-regulation and autonomy with a limited role for the state as a regulatory body (Poullaos and Ramirez, 2020). Studies in this area are later expanded to the US, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (see Table 2).

Over the past two decades, the production of research on accounting professionalisation in non-Anglo-American countries has also gained momentum. These include, first, continental European countries such as Belgium, France, Greece, Sweden, and the Czech Republic. These have been followed by studies in African countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Nigeria, in Asia-Pacific countries such as Brunei, China, and Japan, in Latin American and Caribbean countries such as Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, and in Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia. As well as filling a gap in historical accounts of the development of the profession in these non-Anglophone countries, these studies serve to highlight the perils of making

generalisations based on Anglo-American experiences (Poullaos and Uche, 2012; Poullaos and Ramirez, 2020).

Taken together, this extensive range of studies demonstrates that “accounting professionalisation processes are not univocal but that they amalgamate elements that may vary, sometimes greatly, from one country to another and from one historical period to another” (Poullaos and Ramirez, 2020, p. 280). In consequence, they follow manifold paths and can have different outcomes (Yee and West, 2010). The trajectories of accounting professionalisation are fundamentally contingent upon the prevalent social, economic, and political conditions.

Table 2. Works on accounting professionalisation in different regions.

Regions	Exemplary works
Anglo-American countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The UK: Macdonald (1984, 1985); Willmott (1986); Robson and Cooper (1990); Walker (1991, 1995, 2004); Robson et al. (1994); Lee (1995); Walker and Shackleton (1995); Sikka and Willmott (1995) • The US: Miranti (1990); Holtzman (2004); Doron (2013) • Australia: Chua and Poullaos (1993, 1998); Poullaos (1993, 1994); Carnegie and Edwards (2001); Carnegie et al. (2003); Evans and Poullaos (2012) • Canada: Richardson (1989a, 1989b, 2010) • New Zealand: Perera and Rahman (1997); Perera et al. (2001)
Continental European countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belgium: De Beelde (2002) • France: Ramirez (2001) • Greece: Ballas (1998); Caramanis (2002, 2005) • Sweden: Öhman and Wallerstedt (2012) • The Czech Republic: Seal et al. (1996)
African countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethiopia: Mihret et al. (2012) • Kenya: Sian (2006, 2010, 2011) • Nigeria: Uche (2002, 2010)
Asia-Pacific countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brunei: Yapa (1999) • China: Hao (1999); Yapa and Hao (2007); Yee (2008, 2009, 2012, 2020); Gillis (2011, 2014a); Macve (2020, 2021); Zhu et al. (2021) • Japan: Sakagami et al. (1999) • Sri Lanka: Yapa (2006)
Latin American and Caribbean countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brazil: Bicudo de Castro and Mihret (2020) • Jamaica: Bakre (2005, 2010) • Trinidad and Tobago: Anisette (2000, 2003, 2010)
Middle Eastern countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Egypt: Ghattas et al. (2020) • Iran: Mihret et al. (2020) • Saudi Arabia: Mihret et al. (2017)

3.1.1 Analysing accounting professionalisation: major schools of thought

In investigating the process of accounting professionalisation, a number of major schools of thought, though firmly rooted in the Anglo-American world, have been advanced to explain the circumstances under which occupational

groups become professions. As shown below, these perspectives are usually underpinned by the sociology of professions literature¹⁵ (Birkett and Evans, 2005), including, for example, trait, functionalist, and critical approaches. The work of Willmott (1986), examining the professional organisation of the British accounting profession as part of the broad movement of “studying accounting in its social context”, is a notable marker of the introduction of the sociological insights to the study of accounting professionalisation.

Trait approach

The sociological study of the professions in its early stages focuses on characteristics that represent the core traits of the *ideal-type* profession (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933; Greenwood, 1957). This approach rests on the assumptions that (1) professions possess a checklist of particular attributes to be applied in differentiating them from non-professions; and (2) professions hold altruistic motives and serve the public for the good of society (West, 1996).

Attempts made to define the profession by referring to a checklist of attributes culminate in the work of Millerson (1964). By reviewing previous publications concerning the traits needed to achieve public recognition of professional status, Millerson (1964) summarises the most essential traits of a profession: (1) skill based on theoretical knowledge; (2) provision of training and education; (3) testing of competence of new entrants; (4) adherence to a code of ethics; (5) altruistic service; and (6) professionally organised and self-regulated (see Figure 3).

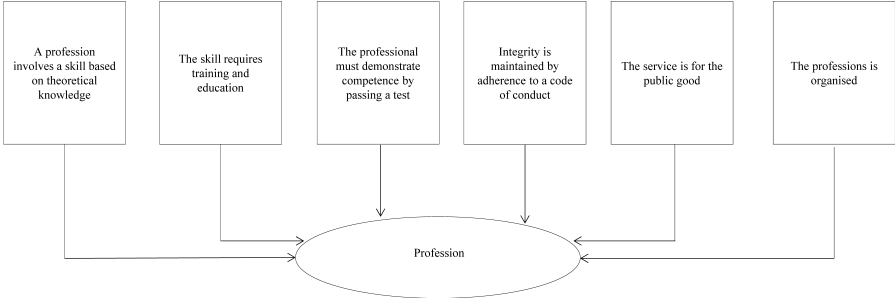


Figure 3. Summary of attributes for achieving public recognition of professional status.
 Source: adapted from Millerson (1964, p. 4).

¹⁵ For general reviews of sociological approaches to the understanding of professions, see e.g. Suddaby and Muzio (2015), Ackroyd (2016) and Saks (2016).

The core tenet of the trait approach is that profession is a definitive status that is reached by fulfilling a series of predefined criteria. Researchers envision professionalisation as something natural and desirable and tend to identify a common pathway to professional status. For example, in his well-known article “The professionalization of everyone”, Willensky (1964) suggests that the degree of professionalisation is to be measured based on the criteria of technical competence and service ideal. By examining the dates of first events in the development of various professions, Willensky (1964) notes a common path or a set of steps through which occupations are able to ascend to professional status. The process of professionalisation is accordingly posited as linear and determined by a sequence of events.

Critique of trait approach

Despite its initial popularity, the trait approach suffers from a number of weaknesses. While researchers are preoccupied with elaborating on the checklist of attributes by which professions can be distinguished from non-professions, one key problem with this is that there was (and still is) only limited agreement as to what the attributes of professions are or why they are important. The task of formulating the list of attributes becomes somewhat arbitrary, with researchers falling into the trap of introducing their own biases into the analysis. This led Dingwall (1976, p. 332) to conclude that the logical outcome of the trait approach is that “a profession is nothing more or less than what some sociologists say it is”. Also, a checklist of attributes alone is insufficient for a theory, which requires proposals about causality to be made. Too often it is simply assumed that these attributes must be the cause of professional status, but how and why is unanalysed (Ackroyd, 2016).

Functionalist approach

The first recognisably theoretical account of professions is the functionalist approach. The functionalist approach suggests that professions exist because they are functional in a way that meets the needs of the wider social system. Key source of ideas here are Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons. Society is understood as a complex system whose various parts work together to produce stability and solidarity (Ackroyd, 2016). The functionalist approach extends the unilateral perspective of the trait approach by acknowledging that professional status delivers benefits to those holding that status. Implicit in the approach is the assumption that professional status is a mutually beneficial social contract under which professionals undertake to make available and responsibly apply their esoteric knowledge and skills in exchange for socioeconomic privileges such as self-regulation, protection from competition

by the unqualified, exalted social status, and remuneration (West, 1996). It emphasises the importance of moral consensus among the members of society in maintaining the integration and smooth operation of society. Under this approach, failure to professionalise may be the result of a failure on the part of the occupation to adequately perform the functions assigned to it or to otherwise achieve or demonstrate the existence of professional attributes, whether because of the inadequacies of the professional association or otherwise.

Critique of functionalist approach

Like the trait approach, the functionalist approach is also seriously flawed. It came under repeated criticisms and was disowned by sociologists in the early 1970s (Macdonald, 1995). The key problem is that, as opposed to being empirically demonstrated, the distinctive attributes of professions such as possession of esoteric knowledge, independence, altruism, and self-regulation are normally assumed and largely unquestioned (Willmott, 1986). As a consequence, functionalist contributors tend to “take professional ideologies on trust without systematically examining their validity”, therefore “legitimizing professional privileges in advance of careful appraisals of the function and behaviour of professions in society” (Saks, 1983, p. 3).

The problematic nature of the trait and functionalist approaches has also been reviewed in the accounting literature. For example, Robson and Cooper (1990) provide an analysis of the professional basis of accountancy in the UK. They highlight the deficiency in employing both the trait and functionalist approaches to examine the development of the accounting profession. The lack of a theoretical basis is identified as one factor that leads to the “disarray” and “confused nature” of explanations underpinned by the trait approach (Robson and Cooper, 1990, p. 368). While the functionalist approach attempts to provide a theoretical basis for the trait identified, it tends to degenerate into a crude determinism under which the accounting profession merely serves “a well-defined, uncontested and unproblematic set of needs, both within the firm and within society” (Robson and Cooper, 1990, p. 371). Changes in the accounting profession may also arise from conflicts over social developments. Consequently, the functionalist approach is translated into an elaborate justification for the status quo of the accounting profession, running a serious risk of becoming tautological. Another major deficiency in using the trait and functionalist approaches is their lack of historical basis. Both approaches fail to adequately explain the dynamics of the process by which the accounting occupation becomes professionalised, the differentiation within the profession, and the challenges to professional status (Robson and Cooper, 1990). They

offer an understanding of the nature of the accounting profession only in terms of current practices; variations between societies and over time are simply ignored.

Critical approach

Commencing from the early 1970s, contradictions between conventional trait and functionalist analysis and the observed behaviours of professional groups, such as those evident in the case of accounting, prompted a rethinking of the approaches by which professions should be studied (West, 1996). Research efforts were encouraged to abandon the pursuit of a “general theory”, and professions were to be studied “as individual empirical cases rather than specimens of some more general, fixed concept” (Freidson, 1983, p. 34). However, consideration emerged of the possibility that professional groups are primarily motivated by self-interest rather than the claimed public-interest agenda: “the professional body is regarded as a basic organisational instrument for defining and securing a respectable and valued social identity” (Willmott, 1986, p. 557). In turn, self-interest rationales have vigorously developed in the “critical approach” that has become dominant or, in the words of Saks (1983, p. 5), “the new orthodoxy” in the sociological studies of professions.

The critical approach comprises different theoretical perspectives that offer a critical view of society. In the accounting literature, many thought-inspiring works have been produced on accounting professionalisation by drawing upon insights from, for example, Weber (Macdonald, 1984, 1995; Chua and Poullaos, 1993, 1998), Marx (Armstrong, 1987; Chua and Poullaos, 1993; Yee, 2009, 2012), and Foucault (Loft, 1986). Within all these theoretical perspectives, the particular notion of “closure” introduced by Weber has remained a principal instrument in the theoretical toolbox of the historians of the accounting profession (Matthews, 2017; Poullaos and Ramirez, 2020).

The notion of closure broadly refers to the process by which a social interest group seeks to “regulate market conditions in their favour, in face of actual or potential competition from outsiders, by restricting access to specific opportunities to a limited group of eligibles” (Saks, 1983, p. 5). In her well-known book, Larson (1977) applies the Weberian notion of closure to the professionalisation process, and constructs a model called the “professional project”. Larson (1977) is especially interested in examining how professions organise themselves within the wider context of power relations:

I see professionalisation as the process by which producers of special services sought to constitute and control a market for their expertise. Because

marketable expertise is a crucial element in the structure of modern inequality, professionalisation appears also as a collective assertion of special social status and as a collective process of upward social mobility (Larson, 1977, p. xvi).

Professionalisation is thus an attempt to translate one order to scarce resources – special knowledge and skills – into another social and economic rewards. To main scarcity implies a tendency to monopoly: monopoly of expertise in the market, monopoly of status in a system of stratification (Larson, 1977, p. xvii).

While acknowledging the importance of the specific attributes identified as composing the *ideal-type* profession, Larson (1977) perceives occupational groups as interest groups utilising those attributes in an exploitative way to achieve the outcome of market control and upward social mobility. The ultimate goal of the “professional project” is for occupational groups to define and defend the interests of their members by creating professional monopoly through a process of closure and exclusion to prevent non-members from accessing professional practice. Within the extant literature on accounting professionalisation in western countries, particularly the Anglo-American world, Larson’s model of “professional project” has gained the most traction, aiding understandings of the sustained efforts made by accountants to achieve “higher remuneration and prestige for their labour” (Willmott, 1986, p. 559) and underscoring the political struggle in the establishment of accounting as a profession. In this vein, accounting professionalisation is critically conceptualised as a process of seeking labour market monopoly to further the economic interests and upward social mobility of accounting occupational groups (Birkett and Evans, 2005). Relatedly, a stylised storyline of accounting professionalisation always begins with the emergence of national professional accounting associations, the closure of the profession through the ascriptive credentialism for membership, the profession’s engagement with the authority of the state, and the embedding of accounting expertise in regulation (Richardson, 2017). The orthodox characteristics of accounting professionalism, such as self-regulation, autonomy, independence, collegiality, and partnership, are produced from this stylised pattern of institutionalisation where national professional accounting associations proactively defend their self-interests by monopolising the provision of professional services (Richardson, 2017).

Critique of critical approach

The Weberian notion of closure opens up an opportunity for researchers to empirically examine both the historical and socio-political conditions under which occupational groups succeed in achieving professional status (Saks,

1983). Chua and Poullaos (1998) claim that, through the notion of closure, it is possible to analyse several dimensions of accounting professionalisation, such as intra-professional competition (e.g. Macdonald, 1984; Walker, 1991), exclusion along race and gender lines (e.g. Kirkham and Loft, 1993; Annisette, 2003), and the relationship between state and profession (e.g. Chua and Poullaos, 1993). While the notion of closure provides useful insights into the dynamics of the professionalisation process, it also suffers from some major pitfalls.

For example, Halliday (1987) contends that the professionalisation model of Larson (1977) allows professions little macro-sociological role other than the legitimation of a monopolistic market position or the abnegation of public responsibility for private gain:

I shall maintain that the corrective pendulum of reaction against an overly benign functionalism has swung too far. A view of professional action that too readily washes away the tensions between self-interest and civility, private satisfaction and public service, autonomy and accountability, prestige and wealth and the helping function, produces a bland homogeneity – a one-dimensional image of professionalism (Halliday, 1987, p. 3).

This view is supported by Corfield (1995, pp. 179-180), who regards Larson's work as "a polite sociological replication of the satirical accounts that depicted the professions as conspirators, out to dupe the lay public for their own ends".

Further insights into the shortcomings of Larson's work can be gained from Matthews's (2017) critical analysis of accounting historians' routine reliance on the model of "professional project". By carefully examining the case of the accounting profession in the UK, Matthews (2017) revisits the important aspects of the accounting professional project, namely, monopoly, social closure, and collective social mobility. Matthews (2017) points out that the monopoly of market and status is used merely as a slogan that lacks real meaning. Pure monopoly of market and status is rare in reality, and the only monopoly achieved by the British accounting profession is the exclusive right to designate themselves "chartered accountants" or "certified public accountants". The erection of credentialism is not simply an artificial barrier to exclude the entry of the lower classes into the profession but an unavoidable necessity for producing competent accountants. A significant proportion of chartered accountants did and continue to have working class backgrounds. Credentialed accountants therefore cannot be argued to be socially exclusive in that total exclusion never exists. Matthews (2017) further casts doubts on the collective motivation of accountants in setting up professional associations as essential to

gaining upward social mobility. Matthews clearly shows that, prior to the formation of professional associations, the British accounting profession was well established and that individual accountants did not form professional associations to pursue upward mobility because they had already become highly respectable.

In summary, despite the many pitfalls, the theoretical approaches as discussed here have provided insights into the phenomenon of accounting professionalisation. However, these theoretical approaches, firmly rooted in the Anglo-American world, have been argued that their ability to propagate wider sociological generalisations are seriously undermined (Torstendahl, 1990). They tend to assume a pluralist society in which the role of the state is conceived as restricted to adjudicating the interests of freely competing groups in society. This assumption reduces their utility and relevance in investigating professionalisation experiences in which the state plays an active role in the process. Still, this does not render them redundant; rather, they may be envisaged as representing one end of a spectrum constructed upon the capacity of accounting occupational groups to freely initiate organisation (Yee and West, 2010). China, a world in itself, presents yet another unique pattern of accounting professionalisation (Poullaos and Ramirez, 2020). One distinctive feature of the Chinese experience is that the state has been found to play a more expansive role in the formation and transformation of the Chinese public accounting profession. As Hao (1999, p. 293) points out, Chinese public accountants did not proactively organise themselves to become a self-regulated body. It is unlikely that a national professional accounting association would have emerged if regulations to constitute it and supportive market arrangements had not been established by the state.

In light of the uniqueness of the Chinese experience, the rest of this chapter will review the extant research on accounting professionalisation in China, developing insights into how this research is developing and identifying the gaps prevailing in the research to date. It then goes on to introduce literature that can help to fill this gap, and thus respond to the research aim and research question of this thesis.

3.2 Research on accounting professionalisation in China

In Paper I, I have conducted a systematic literature review of accounting professionalisation in China covering the period between 1980 and 2021. As shown by this review, the extant literature on accounting professionalisation in China is both large and varied (see Table 3 in Paper I). Many unique Chinese institutional factors (e.g. cultural values and political ideologies) have been incorporated into the extant studies. Given the wide range of research themes, the current body of knowledge has laid the foundation for future empirical and theoretical works. Results of the review, however, suggest that certain factors characterise the nature of research on accounting professionalisation in China.

Nature of the research approach

The first issue identified from the systematic analysis of the literature relates to the explorative and descriptive nature of research. Most researchers have thus far focused on empirical descriptions, seeking to outline the trajectory of Chinese professional accounting development over time. The academic works in this stream of research simply report key events and do not provide much meaningful analysis or interpretation (e.g. Huang, 1987; Xu, 1995; Yang and Yang, 1999; Huang and Ma, 2001; Lu and Saunders, 2005; Chen and Liu, 2019). Indeed, according to Tang (2000), researchers, particularly those from mainland China, tend to use their own wisdom and logic to reach conclusions. The lack of theorisation and the casualness of research methodology inexorably result in achievements that are far from excellent.

Despite the prevalence of academic works that are descriptive in nature, there has existed a growing body of literature that, through rigorous research designs and carefully articulated theoretical frameworks, provide a nuanced understanding of Chinese professional accounting development (e.g. Hao, 1999; Yapa and Hao, 2007; Yee, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2020; Gillis, 2011, 2014a; Macve, 2020). It may, however, be too early to conclude that the extant literature has shown a systematic shift in its research approach. For the field to develop deeper academic knowledge and insights undoubtedly requires both methodological progress and theoretical sophistication (cf. Paper I).

Strong state-centric focus

The second issue identified from the systematic analysis of the literature is the strong state-centric focus. The vast majority of researchers have concentrated on the significance of the state in the development of the Chinese public

accounting profession. For example, as a notable exception to the overly descriptive academic works mentioned above, Hao (1999) focuses on the profession itself by tracing the changes in the organisation of Chinese public accountants in the post-Mao reform era. By drawing upon the organising principles of “market, state and community” as utilised by Puxty et al. (1987), Hao (1999) discusses the incremental construction of the Chinese public accounting profession as part of the state’s larger programme of improving a “socialist market economy”. Both the community and market forces had and would continue to remain under the umbrella of the state. However, Hao’s (1999) application of this framework merely provides a static structural view of the profession and refrains from examining how different forces interacted with each other over time. This is partly because, as emphasised by Puxty et al. (1987, p. 277), although the framework is useful in categorising the forces underlying professional organisation, it has limited potential to shed light on the historical dimension and the political and economic autonomy of states in a broad context¹⁶.

Following the publication of Hao (1999), the state-accounting profession relationship in China has attracted increasing scholarly attention. A prevailing theme is to examine how the state’s political and ideological leadership is tied to the profession and directs professional development. For example, within this stream of literature, there has been a routine reliance on Gramsci’s (1971) “hegemony” analysis (Yee, 2008, 2009, 2012). As Yee (2009, p. 71) puts it: “Through effectively exercising its political and ideological leadership, the state successfully mobilised the Chinese accountants in the implementation of its economic-related agenda. The paper demonstrates that the state has clearly achieved hegemony within the accounting community, and further suggests that the state-accounting profession relationship could be likened to the father-son relationship as encompassed within the Confucian notion of *wu lun*”. Additionally, Zhu et al. (2021) apply Bourdieu’s (2014) theory of the state and the roles of “material” and “symbolic” power in exploring the habitus of Chinese public accountants. Zhu et al. (2021, p. 1) argue that the authority and dominance of the state is essentially a form of cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in “the cognitive structures of key actors in the accounting field in China”.

¹⁶ Chua et al. (2019) add an extra dimension, namely, transnational organisations (e.g. World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF)), to the original framework of Puxty et al. (1987), effectively raising the analysis of professional organisation from the national level to the transnational level.

The extant literature's heightened attention to the state has arguably been accompanied by a relative lack of studies examining the strategic agendas and positions of other national and transnational actors in Chinese professional accounting development, such as the CICPA, the Big Four, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Federation of Accountants (IFAC). To empower an interpretation of these actors beyond the remit of state' dominance, it becomes necessary to break away (at least partially) from a state-centric view and contemplate the constellation of actors, not reproducing what is perceived to be a singular understanding of the state, but permitting the works of these other actors to be made salient and understood (cf. Paper I).

Lack of consistent and holistic understanding of accounting professionalisation in China

The third issue identified from the systematic literature review points to conflicting insights into accounting professionalisation in China. The extant literature tends to define the research domain on the basis of the focused actors, making no scholarly attempt to integrate and present a holistic understanding of the professionalisation process. This is most evident in the efforts of academic works seeking to eradicate the bias, due to the state-centric focus, towards the role of the Big Four in Chinese professional accounting development. For example, Gillis (2011, 2014a) argues that the Big Four have formed part of a “transnational capitalist class¹⁷”, being ideologically reinforced by a discourse of international accounting and auditing standards seen as needed for freely functioning capital markets. In this vein, the Big Four are understood as “hegemonic” – that is, capable of achieving and retaining dominance over the indigenous public accounting profession. This insight into the Big Four directly contrasts to those under the state-centric focus, which claims that the state has and will continue to dominate the evolutionary process of accounting issues, despite increasing western influences in China (Lu et al., 2009). All these studies have assumed that the multiple actors are somewhat isolated from one another or act within their specific arenas. Here, the need for a consistent and holistic approach has been acknowledged by Macve (2020, 2021), who explicitly draws attention to the perspective of “linked ecologies” within which local professional accounting development is regarded as being driven nationally and internationally and that recognises the contradictions

¹⁷ According to Robinson and Harris (2000), the transnational capitalist class is a global ruling class because it controls the levers of an emergent transnational state apparatus and of global decision-making. In the context of accounting regulation, such a transnational capitalist class is composed of the Big Four together with a diverse array of other transnational organisations such as World Bank, the WTO, and IFAC (Suddaby et al., 2007).

therein (Suddaby and Muzio, 2015). Very little research has thus far sought to reveal the patterns and mechanisms of interactions and exchanges among different actors (cf. Paper I).

3.2.1 Analysing accounting professionalisation in China

In order to deepen the understanding of accounting professionalisation in China, this thesis draws upon the theoretical insights of Burrage et al. (1990) into professional formation and transformation. In their study of professions across different empirical contexts, Burrage et al. (1990, p. 203) recognise that any satisfactory analysis of professionalisation patterns requires a clear identification of the groups and organisations whose actions can shape the form and the success or failure of professionalisation. Burrage et al. (1990) show how, across national boundaries, actors such as practitioners, training institutions, users of professional services, and the state have played different roles in the establishment of professional occupations while also influencing the day-to-day practice of professionals and their understandings of their duties and responsibilities. The central idea of Burrage et al. (1990) is that professionalisation is the outcome of the ongoing *interactions* between the actors involved. These actors are said to pursue their own interests and priorities, and engage with diverse resources and strategies in the professionalisation process. In this vein, Burrage et al. (1990) avoid the structural reductionism that views professions as the product of macro-processes such as “modernisation”, and redirect the centrality of studying professionalisation towards the sustained analysis of the interactions between the actors involved. This interaction perspective is, according to Burrage et al. (1990, p. 203), of great significance in that it helps to “clarify further debate by suggesting parameters essential for a theory (of professionalisation)”.

This thesis operationalises the interaction perspective of Burrage et al. (1990) and defines accounting professionalisation in China as the process whereby aspirant actors interact with one another to achieve “occupational settlements” in the wider economic and social arena over time (cf. Paper I). This definition involves several dimensions. First, aspirant actors can range from, for example, individuals to accounting firms, professional accounting associations to state apparatuses to transnational organisations. The professionalisation process is shaped by interactions through which aspirant actors, pursuing their own interests and priorities, utilise diverse resources and strategies to vie for influence over the institutional arrangements that are central to two key aspects of occupational settlements: the organisation of the professional domain and the

practice of professionals within the professional domain. In effect, interaction may take multiple modes.

It is worth noting that, although interactions between actors give order, structure, and meaning to the professional domain, this thesis also acknowledges the significance of the national institutional context within which the Chinese public accounting profession operates, as it ultimately conditions the possibilities for and the character of interactions between actors.

In this thesis, the interaction perspective as articulated here mainly serves to set the minimum requirements for analysing accounting professionalisation in China, identify key actors engaged in the formation and transformation of the Chinese public accounting profession, illustrate the varieties of their interactions, and indicate, whenever possible, areas of emerging agreement as well as points of continuing dispute. Such a perspective, however, still does not explicate how and why different actors, with diverse interests, priorities, and resource capacities, interact with one another to shape accounting professionalisation in China. To grasp this dynamic of interactions, this thesis has divided accounting professionalisation in China into three units of analysis.

First unit of analysis: the role of the CICPA in the professionalisation process

The first unit of analysis is to focus on how the Chinese public accounting profession is organised collectively and, in particular, on the role of the national professional association – the CICPA – in the professionalisation process. Here, analytical attention is especially paid to the state-CICPA relationship. In China, the state is acknowledged to play a more expansive role in Chinese professional accounting development (see e.g. Hao, 1999; Yapa and Hao, 2007; Lu et al., 2009), the role of the CICPA can be simultaneously supported and restricted by the actions of the state.

According to Lounsbury (2002, p. 256), in any jurisdiction the formation of professional associations is “a useful indicator of professionalization efforts”. Since China launched the “Reform and Opening-up” policy, the state has relaxed its direct statist societal control and regulated social change through the use of a corporatist mechanism, vividly manifested in its linkages with associationally organised groups or, as in the Chinese term, “social organisations” (社会团体 or *shè huì tuán tǐ*) (cf. Paper II). Such organisations have been used by the state to manage newly emerging social sectors and streamline social development along desired lines of reform (Dickson, 2000). In further analysing the system of Chinese social organisations, Pearson (1994, 1997) noticed a broader trend in the state’s political arrangements whereby

social organisations were seen as capable of exerting greater influence. Based upon the work of Schmitter (1974), Pearson duly theorised the relationship between the state and social organisations within a particular socialist corporatist framework (cf. Paper II).

Pearson viewed the origin of corporatism in China as being driven by the state's desire to pre-empt the emergence of autonomous groups, with the state choosing to *devolve* part of its authority in order to facilitate nation building (cf. Paper II). According to Pearson (1994, 1997), the capacity and willingness of a socialist state to license social organisations and to devolve authority to them is central to the idea of socialist corporatism. Within this mode of operation, a degree of autonomy is granted for social organisations to pursue their own goals. Social organisations can also actively negotiate with the state for greater autonomy to the extent that the political authority of the state would not be undermined. Such a perspective represents the Chinese state as managing a delicate space in which social organisations are permitted to exercise a particular, but potentially shifting, degree of agency (cf. Paper II). In the words of Gallagher (2004, p. 421), the state and social organisations are in constant transition and share a relationship of “mutual penetration, converging interests, and co-optation”. In essence, social organisations in China can be regarded as “autonomous” but within a functional space provided by the state. Paper II has utilised the spirit of this modified corporatist framework to “unlock” and appreciate the particular significance and shifting impact of the CICPA on the development of the Chinese public accounting profession.

Second unit of analysis: the role of the Big Four in the professionalisation process

The second unit of analysis is to focus on the role of the Big Four in the professionalisation process. As the archetypal example of global professional service firms (PSFs), the Big Four are organisations where individual practitioners own or control core assets, resulting in a unique governance style (Muzio et al., 2019). They have the ability to short-circuit systems of accounting regulation and, through their activities and strategies, can build new national as well as global models of accounting professionalism (Cooper and Robson, 2006, 2009; Suddaby et al., 2007; Cooper et al., 2020). Analytical attention is paid to the interplay between the agency of the Big Four in Chinese professional accounting development and the national institutional context that both enables and constrains this agency.

In analysing the expansion of PSFs in new markets, Faulconbridge and Muzio (2015) drew attention to the need to go beyond PSFs and their resources and

to consider how the specificities and practices of the national institutional context influence the ability of PSFs to become involved in processes of local institutional change (cf. Paper III). According to Faulconbridge and Muzio (2015, p. 1196),

The *ability* of PSFs to participate in and shape the direction of (local) institutional change processes is, in part at least, the product of specific conjunctural moments in a host-country whereby local *institutional instability* combines with the presence, resources and strategies of PSFs to redirect the path of institutional evolution (emphasis added).

Specifically, the *ability* of PSFs is categorised in three interrelated dimensions: control over resources such as knowledge, finance, political influence and ecologies of linked interests that PSFs can leverage; control over process, whereby PSFs have embedded presence in relation to decision making; and control over meanings in which discursive forms of power allow PSFs to set the agenda and delegitimise the activities of others (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2015, 2017; cf. Paper III).

The *institutional instability* of local institutional contexts is theorised as existing institutional arrangements that are misaligned with the evolving political economy in that they promote practices unsuited to the realities of the economic environment and have become unsupported by actors endogenous to the institutional arrangements (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2015). By drawing upon Scott's (2014) "three pillars" framework from neo-institutional theory¹⁸ as an analytical device, Faulconbridge and Muzio (2015) contended that institutional instability could be further identified and analysed at the level of the micro-foundations (i.e. regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive) of the institutional arrangement in question. The term institutional arrangement broadly means the constitutive prescriptions of any system that provide stability and meaning to social life (Scott, 2014). When institutional instability exists, it makes endogenous actors more likely to accept the need for change and search for a way forward, in some instances rendering the competencies of PSFs such

¹⁸ It is noteworthy that the intent of Faulconbridge and Muzio (2015, p. 1200) was not to contribute to neo-institutional theory itself, but to utilise the "three pillars" framework as an analytical device to map out, most significantly: (i) the specific elements associated with each of the "three pillars"; (ii) the elements that became unstable at particular conjunctural moments in time; and (iii) the elements that changed as a result of the agency of PSFs. In doing so, the work of Faulconbridge and Muzio (2015), while differing from Scott's (2014) original focus on how conformity occurs through each of the pillars, unlocked at the micro-level the significance of the national institutional context that made possible the agency of PSFs in shaping local institutional change (c.f. Paper III).

as the Big Four increasingly valuable and legitimate insofar as they address unmet requirements in local institutional contexts (cf. Paper III).

However, it is not just institutional instability per se that benefits PSFs and determines the path of institutional change (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2015). PSFs are only able to achieve desired institutional change at conjunctural moments when institutional instability exists alongside the competencies of PSFs that endogenous actors view as better alternatives to the existing host-country institutional arrangements. PSFs therefore need to be temporally sensitive because conjunctural moments emerge incrementally over time as a result of the wider socio-political reforms (cf. Paper III). When all of these contingencies are met, PSFs become role models for the kinds of change needed and become empowered to shape the micro-foundations of the institutional arrangement in question through their ability to control resources, meanings, and processes (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2015). Paper III has drawn upon the work of Faulconbridge and Muzio (2015) to explain how the Big Four, following China's "Reform and Opening-up" policy, have entered and gradually evolved from tentative representative offices to established accounting firms in the Chinese audit market.

Third unit of analysis: the role of individual practitioners in the professionalisation process

The third unit of analysis is to focus on the role of individual practitioners in constructing professional identity. Nowadays, professional practice mostly takes place in the organisational setting of PSFs such as the Big Four (Muzio et al., 2019). The Big Four tend to place constraints on the autonomy of individual practitioners, but also might be significant actors in professional identity formation and regulation (Cooper and Robson, 2006, 2009; Cooper et al., 2020). Analytical attention is paid to the interplay between the subjectivity of individual practitioners and the organisational setting that inculcates appropriate behavioural norms, cultural values, presentational styles, and approaches to professional practice – i.e. individual practitioners' development of knowledge and beliefs that underlie their understandings of what it means to be a professional.

Identity construction is understood as a conscious struggle to respond to the question "Who am I?" It is a key means by which individuals at the micro level interpret and make sense of social phenomena at the macro/meso level (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). The formation and transformation of identity is a much more nuanced and dynamic process of social construction than simple role adoption, largely because it requires that individuals navigate competing institutional pressures and, periodically, experiment with and adopt

provisional identities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Today, organisations such as PSFs have become the main sites “where professional identities are mediated, formed and transformed” (Cooper and Robson, 2006, p. 416). This tension is especially intense in professional identities that are subject to institutionalised pressures of normative socialisation in organisational settings. To unravel this subjective-interpretative process, Bévort and Suddaby (2016) developed a conceptual model by integrating Goffman’s notion of scripts and Barley and Tolbert’s (1997) extension of that notion to a processual view of institutionalisation. Specifically, Bévort and Suddaby (2016) mobilised the construct of *identity scripts* to capture the iterative process by which individuals cognitively reconstruct their selves through engaging in “provisional interpretative reproduction” (p. 18) in which they experiment with potential identity scripts (cf. Paper IV).

Identity scripts refer to observable, recurrent activities and patterns of interaction characteristic of a particular setting (Barley and Tolbert, 1997, p. 98) that, in a Goffmanian sense, encode the social logic of an interaction order (cf. Paper IV). Identity scripts offer a means of understanding micro-events within a particular social context. They are formed, maintained, and transformed in sequential order in what Bévort and Suddaby (2016) regarded as a sensemaking process that individuals use to infuse scripted action with meaning. Identity scripts reflect cognitive frames operating at the individual level of analysis and provide the basis on which individuals subjectively and cognitively interpret, enact, and reproduce institutions (cf. Paper IV).

Individuals enact these scripts through relatively habitual or routinised patterns of interaction. On many occasions, the process of enactment may or may not involve awareness or conscious choice. Nonetheless, once individuals recognise that they are following a script, they will usually provide a standard rationale to explain this. Paper IV has drawn upon the work of Bévort and Suddaby (2016) to explain how individual practitioners have subjectively, through the enactment of identity scripts, embedded the macro/meso structure in their own daily practices and lived experience.

In this chapter, I have explained the theoretical basis for explicating the process of accounting professionalisation in China. More specifically, by drawing upon the theoretical insights of Burrage et al. (1990), I have articulated an interaction perspective to serve as the overarching lens in situating the analysis of this thesis. In order to further explicate how and why different actors, with diverse interests, priorities, and resource capacities, interact with each other, I have chosen three units of analysis underpinned by specific theoretical components.

4. Methodological choices and considerations: exploring accounting professionalisation in China

The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on the methodological framework of this thesis. In particular, this chapter addresses two matters: (1) what types of assumptions underlie this thesis; and (2) what method of data collection and analysis this thesis has utilised. The appended Paper I is a systematic literature review and is excluded from the discussion presented in this chapter.

4.1 Assumptions underlying this research

Underlying every research investigation is a set of ontological and epistemological assumptions that researchers consciously or subconsciously apply (Tomkins and Groves, 1983). They represent researchers' worldviews and tend to shape the very methodological approach to be used (Tomkins and Groves, 1983). Researchers therefore need to take cognizance of these philosophical assumptions so as to be aware of their own beliefs regarding the particular research investigation undertaken (Hopper and Powell, 1985; Chua, 1986). The aim of this thesis is to nuance the hegemony representations of accounting professionalisation in China by examining the interactions between key domestic and international actors involved and the impact of such interactions on the professionalisation process. In this thesis, I base my ontological assumption on social constructionism. The reason for this choice is that social constructionism directs scholarly attention to the significance of social interactions in constituting reality. This perspective is particularly illuminating in view of the central role given in this thesis to interactions

between actors in explaining the development of the Chinese public accounting profession.

At its core, social constructionism maintains that reality is collectively constructed by people through their daily interactions in the course of social life (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015). As Czarniawska (2003) succinctly summarised, the term construction here pertains to both the process and its result. In this sense, one way of seeing social construction is as a process in which people's perception and experience of reality are being shaped by the meanings they attribute to that reality. The other way of understanding social construction is as a social product, one that is made as a result of negotiated interactions between diverse forces. Indeed, scholarly works have notably conceptualised social constructionism via four key tenets: (1) the dual character of society – social constructionism perceives the world as being made, rather than being merely given or taken for granted (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015). Reality is conceived of as being constituted by negotiated (or intersubjective) meanings that, over time, become objective facticity that is reasonably stable though not immutable (Chua, 1986). Neither objective facticity nor subjective meaning can be grasped through observation as people's senses are inherently biased; (2) the constructive function of language – social constructionism recognises that language is not so much a tool with which to comprehend the surrounding world but a fundamental vehicle for us to construct reality (Burr, 2015); (3) the multiplicity of meanings – social constructionism emphasises that multiple realities are produced from interactions among a diverse array of social actors. Meanings are formed and transformed while multiple realities compete for privileged positions to be considered the reality *par excellence* (Berger and Luckmann, 1966); (4) the societal contexts of construction – social constructionism portrays the terms that people use to comprehend the surrounding world as socially, historically, and culturally contingent, dependent upon social interactions for their development (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015).

Social constructionism has been widely accepted by accounting scholars in a range of sub-fields within the discipline as an important intellectual basis for enlightening alternative understandings of accounting (see e.g. Cooper et al., 1981; Hayes, 1983; Hines, 1988, 1991; Covalleski and Dirsmith, 1990; Covalleski et al., 1998). It gave rise to what Morgan and Willmott (1993) described as the “new” accounting research. Rather than viewing accounting as a set of neutral techniques that simply reflected economic activities, the new agenda saw “accounting as constitutive of, as well as constituted by, the social and organizational relations through which it travels and with which it

engages” (Morgan and Willmott, 1993, p. 4). Such a broadening of horizons in accounting research has also invigorated investigations directed towards studying the process of accounting professionalisation (Covaleski et al., 2017). Through the perspective of social constructionism, this thesis has regarded accounting profession not as a fixed, objective, or immutable object but as a socially constructed artefact. In this sense, the process of accounting professionalisation is driven by social interactions, such as collective meaning-making and ongoing negotiation, among multiple actors within a particular contextual setting. When social interactions settle into habitual patterns over time through repetition and stable expectations, the accounting profession would take on an “objective” form, appearing as a structuring force “out-there” (Covaleski et al., 2017, p. 17). The adoption of such an ontological stance in turn necessitates an epistemological position that is geared towards unravelling the context-specific meanings of social actors through reliance on a pronounced “insider”, or emic, view as opposed to a more distanced, or etic, view (Covaleski et al., 2017). The nurturing of such an epistemological position requires that researchers engage closely with those involved in, or affected by the process of accounting professionalisation.

4.2 Methodological implications of social constructionism

The methodological choice typically associated with the above epistemological position is said to adopt qualitative research methods (Covaleski et al., 2017). With regard to accounting professionalisation in China, my reliance on qualitative methods has also seemed appropriate especially given the uncharted waters I was embarking upon. Over the past four decades, the Chinese public accounting profession has been undergoing a fundamental transformation and the broad range of qualitative methods allows me to “leap into the unknown” (Humphrey, 2014) by opening up access to divergent opinions, contested positions, and complex social dynamics in play in the process of accounting professionalisation. This process takes time and changes over time – that is, it is historical (Poullaos, 2009). According to Carnegie and Napier (2017), historical accounting research gains much strength when firmly based in the archive. Nonetheless, the centrality of the archive does not necessarily preclude the significance of other sources of evidence and, in particular, oral evidence obtained through interviews. Carnegie and Napier (2017) continue to explain that oral evidence is able to

capture the testimony of those effectively excluded from the archive. As a key means of extending traditional documentary evidence, oral evidence further augments “our perspectives of the roles, uses and impacts of accounting in a wide array of local, time-specific contexts” (Carnegie and Napier, 2017, p. 81). Drawing upon the insights of Carnegie and Napier, the specific qualitative methods that I have adopted in this thesis mainly comprise the analysis of various archival materials, personal memoirs, and narratives garnered through semi-structured interviews. I intend to use these qualitative methods to produce rich accounts, or “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973), that capture and communicate the complexity of the process of accounting professionalisation. It is through such textual practices that I demonstrate an intimate familiarity with the subject matter as a lived experience and convince readers of my research findings.

Here, attaining “convincingness” in the figuration of “facts” is key to the quality of social constructionist research (Lowe, 2004). I treat the issue of convincingness by addressing what Messner et al. (2017) perceive as “building blocks” of generating convincing accounts, namely, the *credibility* of research design and *authenticity* of research findings.

The credibility of a research design starts from a “fit” between the research aim and design (Messner et al., 2017). Considering the aim of this thesis, I choose a research design allowing me to capture the processual nature of how accounting professionalisation evolves. Such a research design will likely generate more convincing accounts in that it is longitudinal in character – i.e. data are collected to analyse change and continuity between historical events over time rather than snapshots of individual historical events in time. In terms of data collection and analysis, I implement the strategies of what Patton (2014, p. 944) terms “systematic in-depth fieldwork” and “systematic and conscientious analysis of data” to enhance the credibility of the research design. Specifically, “systematic in-depth fieldwork” involves increasing my exposure to the empirical field. In this thesis, this includes, for example, staying in the field for a prolonged period of time, gaining access to archival materials that are often not available, and conducting skilful interviews with multiple informants. In each case, the goal is to deepen my understanding of what is happening in the empirical field. Additionally, “systematic and conscientious analysis of data” refers to my use of coding in analysing the collected data. As a widespread practice in qualitative data analysis, coding means that particular data points (e.g. interview passages and archival material sentences) are identified as instances of theoretical constructs that are either predefined or emerge from the coding process itself (Messner et al., 2017).

The authenticity of research findings inheres in the extent to which a study can elicit the richness of the collected data (Messner et al., 2017). Authentic writing is important because it shows that, conclusions drawn by me are based upon an in-depth understanding of the empirical field, such that readers are convinced that I have “been there” (Parker, 2012). Moreover, authentic writing is also important so as to effectively communicate to readers the complexity of the subject matter in question and to provide readers with the phenomenological details that are necessary to fully grasp this complexity. The goal is to help readers to “see” the empirics through (almost) the same eyes as I do. To this end, I seek to present some of the empirics in the form of, for example, quotations from interviews and excerpts from archival materials. These are chosen because they are powerful in the sense that they illuminate a point that I wish to make particularly strongly. They often contain vivid examples and expressions, such that rephrasing in my own words would be somewhat cumbersome and eliminate much of the appeal provided by the specific example and the language used by the interviewees provide. In this respect, authenticity will also likely depend on the research design of this thesis. It is hardly possible to generate an authentic account if the data that have been collected are not sufficiently rich.

Taken together, the social constructionist stance as illustrated here has essential implications for the research design of this thesis. The following sections first introduce the overall research design, presenting a general picture of the qualitative methods used to examine accounting professionalisation in China, and then continue by discussing the specific research design, including data collection and analysis, of each of the appended empirical papers.

4.3 Research design

Capturing the lived realities of accounting professionalisation requires that researchers immerse themselves in the accounting field (Dirsmith et al., 2015; Covalleski et al., 2017). This involves close and prolonged engagement with related field actors (see Table 3), producing “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of the professionalisation process. Particular care needs to be taken over the prominence of, and scale of reliance on, any pre-specified theoretical framework. The main concern dwells in its likelihood of introducing bias and premature closure to the subject matter under investigation, as Humphrey (2014, p. 55) vividly explains: .

Table 3. Timeline of fieldwork activities.

Fieldwork activities	2016	2017	2018	2020
	<p><i>October/November:</i> Semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Chinese public accounting profession (15 days in Beijing)</p>	<p><i>February:</i> Public archival material collection (5 days in Beijing) <i>April/May:</i> Semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Chinese public accounting profession (10 days in Beijing) <i>May:</i> Public archival material collection (5 days in Beijing) <i>August:</i> Public archival material collection (5 days in Beijing)</p>	<p><i>February:</i> Semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Chinese public accounting profession (5 days in Beijing) <i>February:</i> Non-public archival material collection (5 days in Beijing) <i>December:</i> Semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Chinese public accounting profession (5 days in Beijing) <i>December:</i> Non-public archival material collection (10 days in Beijing)</p>	<p><i>March:</i> Follow-up semi-structured interviews with previous interviewees (5 days online)</p>

After all, it is hardly a path of discovery when you already know much about what you are going to discover before you set off on your journey. Rather than a voyage of discovery, qualitative research heavily structured around a pre-determined/given theory has parallels, metaphorically, with the monotonous routines of the daily commuter trip.

However, an idealistic position of “the researcher as a blank sheet” is impossible to attain (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018). Personal beliefs, values, and preparatory reading on the subject matter will unavoidably imbue him or her with prior theoretical perspectives. Researchers who commit to understanding the lived realities of accounting professionalisation still need to develop a sense of theoretical agnosticism (Dirsmith et al., 2015). That is, theories are useful if and to the extent that they help researchers to make available a deeper level of understanding of the substantive issues in the world of public accounting. In this sense, this thesis has been largely empirically driven and informed

4.3.1 Delving into realities: archival materials and semi-structured interviews

As stated earlier, I have collected empirical evidence mainly through archival materials and semi-structured interviews with a number of representatives from the Chinese public accounting profession to elicit their opinions and perceptions of accounting professionalisation in China (see Table 4).

Table 4. Summary of data collection methods.

Documentary evidence	Oral evidence
<p>Archival materials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a timeline and specify the actors involved • Understand events, activities, issues, and their sequence of development • Provide accounts of interactions between actors, their shifting positions and strengths • Unveil decision-making process underlying the formulation of policies and strategies 	<p>Semi-structured interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specify the actors involved, their experiences, thoughts, and perceptions • Reflect upon interactions with other actors • Disclose events, activities, and issues not captured by documentary evidence • Clarify and corroborate documentary evidence

Archival materials: staying on the ground

Archival materials often cover a long span of time and contain very specific names, references, and details of events (Lee and Humphrey, 2006). Systematic searches for relevant archival materials are of great importance in

the data collection plan. In this thesis, archival materials take the form of both public and non-public records. For public records, they primarily comprise: newspaper reports, announcements, and memoranda from both Chinese and international websites; personal memoirs written by important figures in the development of the Chinese public accounting profession; official histories of Chinese auditing; publications from the MOF, the CICPA, China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC), IFAC, IMF, and World Bank as well as foreign and indigenous accounting firms; open speeches by Chinese and international accounting regulators; as well as legislative documents such as accounting laws and regulations.

Most notably, this thesis also accumulated a rich corpus of non-public records, particularly those internal documents of the CICPA held in the CICPA's archive centre in Beijing. Access to the internal documents of the CICPA (which have not been utilised by prior studies of the Chinese public accounting profession in English-language scholarly works) was granted to me after I had submitted a formal research request (in both Chinese and English) to the Secretariat of the CICPA. When I first entered the CICPA's archive centre in February 2018, I was greeted by row on row of filing cabinets jammed with records of innumerable individual members and reports of proceedings. After the shock of the first encounter, I realised that the CICPA had given me access to what may well be a unique body of data. On the shelves and in boxes were dozens of volumes of minutes of meetings from routine secretariat sessions, speeches of officials within the CICPA, correspondence files between the CICPA and other significant actors such as state apparatuses, accounting firms (and sometimes their practitioners), foreign professional accounting bodies, and transnational organisations, internal memos on policy discussion and policy formulation, studies of critical concerns, strategic plans for Chinese professional accounting development, and miscellany stretching back three decades. These internal documents provide vivid delineations of the CICPA's strategic intentions and its interactions with other significant actors over time.

Semi-structured interviews: making it personal

Interviews have become essential sources of evidence in qualitative studies. The well-informed interviewees can provide vital in-depth insights into affairs or actions, and they can also provide shortcuts to the prior history of such situations, helping researchers to identify relevant sources of evidence (Scapens, 2004; Lee and Humphrey, 2006). The intent of this thesis is to elicit opinions and recounted experiences of interviewees concerning accounting professionalisation in China. It is also intended to present new information that

is not disclosed in documentary evidence, to clarify, corroborate and supplement archival materials.

However, interviewing can be tricky in a relatively conservative country such as China in which the political and cultural environment restricts people from talking openly when it comes to sensitive issues. Attracting interviewees was thus a labour-intensive and time-consuming process that required painstakingly identifying and individually inviting people to contribute to the study. The fact that I am a native Chinese speaker and used to practice as an auditor in Deloitte China entailed certain advantages in accessing sites such as the CICPA and accounting firms in China, and in gaining trust from interviewees. It also enabled me to probe more sensitive questions about which foreign researchers might find it difficult to get answers. The personalisation of the research process helped me to feel a greater connection to each interviewee, preserving the complexity and integrity of the subject matter under investigation from the interviewees' perspective and using some of the interviewees' language. In this thesis, interviewees ultimately comprised senior officials and practitioners from regulatory bodies as well as international and domestic accounting firms. The interview questions were formulated in accordance with the research question of this thesis. This was because the research question communicated the focus, scope, and importance of the research being undertaken, by highlighting what needed to be explained through the research process (Mahama and Khalifa, 2017). Here, an extensive review of the prior literature helped me to understand the assumptions underlying the research question and to develop and mobilise familiar terminology to describe aspects of the research question that would become the focal points of the interviews to be conducted. The subjects ultimately incorporated into the interview questions were selected for their topical nature and everyday familiarity. Before the start of each interview, the interview questions were sent to the interviewee.

During the course of the interviews, no attempt was made to retain consistency in the questions asked beyond the pre-specified interview questions. Rather, information gathered in previous interviews was selectively shared with interviewees to spark further reflection on and discussion of issues perceived to be critical by interviewees. As the study progressed, there was a tendency to emphasise these critical, more complex questions as a consensus emerged concerning the simpler issues. In addition, my interpretations were shared with selected interviewees to elicit their views as to their applicability.

In general, data collection from archival materials and semi-structured interviews continued to "the point of redundancy" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985,

p. 202), such that it reached theoretical saturation where and when new or distinctive themes, events, or experiences ceased to emerge (Dent, 1991). Below, I describe the data collection process for each of the appended empirical papers, offering examples from each one as required.

Paper II

The purpose of Paper II was to examine the strategic significance of the sole professional accounting association in China – the CICPA – in the development of a Chinese home-grown public accounting profession. To systematically capture the CICPA’s shifting roles and strategies over time, Paper II made extensive use of archival materials, especially those newly unearthed internal documents from the CICPA’s archive centre in Beijing, coupled with the implementation of a number of semi-structured interviews with senior representatives from the CICPA and senior partners from the Big Four and indigenous accounting firms.

The internal documents of the CICPA provided detailed minutes of the activities of its governing body – the CICPA Secretariat. For example, there was a wide range of issue files in which all matters discussed by the leadership since the inception of the CICPA were recorded, including all correspondence and committee/department reports. Such materials were, however, reasonably common. What was rather unusual were the deliberations of the CICPA Secretariat regarding the trajectory of Chinese professional accounting development. These deliberations opened up a much richer source of information: they laid bare the “black box” of the CICPA strategy-formulation process. Consequently, I had a rare opportunity to “observe” the internal dynamics of the CICPA through a one-way mirror.

To extend the information obtained from the internal documents of the CICPA, four additional sources were drawn upon. The first three were the personal memoirs of individuals who had influential roles in Chinese professional accounting development, namely, Ding Pingzhun (former Secretary General of the CICPA), Sir John Stuttard (former Chairman of Coopers & Lybrand in China), and Wang Jun (former Vice Minister of the MOF). The last one was the official history of audit in China edited by Li Jinhua (former Head of China’s National Audit Office). These additional sources all provided important historical narratives as to the strategies of the CICPA.

The rich corpus of documentary evidence was further supplemented with insights from semi-structured interviews (see Table 5). The interviewees were selected mainly because of their knowledge of the Chinese public accounting profession or their direct involvement in the work of the CICPA. They included

senior officials in the CICPA and senior partners from both foreign and indigenous accounting firms. All interviewees had more than 20 years of work experience in the profession. In total, fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted at the interviewees’ premises in Beijing between 2017 and 2018. Interview questions were designed to explore how people perceived Chinese professional accounting development, in particular the role of the CICPA. For example, interviewees were asked to elaborate on their perceptions of the CICPA’s position and related strength *vis-à-vis* the state and other actors, such as the Big Four and IFAC. Interview questions also probed the impact of the CICPA’s policies and strategies on the structuring of the Chinese public accounting profession. Interviews lasted between 1 and 3½ hours and were transcribed; if they had been conducted in Chinese, they were translated into English by the present author. The accuracy of the translations was cross checked by another author in the research team.

Table 5. Background information on the interviewees in Paper II.

Interviewee	Qualification	Institution	Position
A	CPA (China)	CICPA	Senior Official
B	CPA (China)	CICPA	Senior Official
C	CPA (China)	CICPA	Senior Official
D	CPA (China)	KPMG China (毕马威华振)	Senior Partner
E	CPA (US)	PWC China (普华永道中天)	Senior Partner (Retired)
F	CPA (China)	PWC China (普华永道中天)	Senior Partner
G	CPA (China)	Deloitte China (德勤华永)	Partner
H	CPA (China)	Deloitte China (德勤华永)	Partner
I	CPA (China)	Deloitte China (德勤华永)	Senior Partner
J	CPA (China)	Deloitte China (德勤华永)	Senior Partner
K	CPA (China)	ShineWing (信永中和)	Senior Partner
L	CPA (China)	Reanda (利安达)	Senior Partner
M	CPA (China)	Ruihua (瑞华)	Senior Partner
N	CPA (China)	BDO Lixin (立信)	Senior Partner
O	CPA (China)	Grant Thornton (致同)	Senior Partner

Paper III

The purpose of Paper III was to examine the establishment of the large international accounting firms (currently known as the Big Four) in China since the country’s implementation of the “Reform and Opening-up” policy in 1978, demonstrating the significance of the Big Four’s agency as well as the local institutional context whose political, economic, and legal conditions both enabled and constrained the Big Four’s capacity for agency. To shed light on the dynamic interplay between the Big Four and the local institutional context,

Paper III adopted the same data collection method as in Paper II, combining extensive review of archival materials with semi-structured interviews with senior representatives of the Chinese public accounting profession.

Within the accessed archival materials, the official histories of the Big Four were initially crucial for understanding their overall development in China; particularly important were insights into the firms’ strategies, goals, activities, and achievements over the years. In light of the fact that firms’ histories tend to privilege their own voices and truths (Cooper and Robson, 2009; Cooper et al., 2020), the personal memoirs of significant individuals (i.e. Ding Pingzhun and Sir John Stuttard) were cited to provide detailed accounts of key events that firm histories did not specify. Furthermore, a number of internal CICPA documents as accumulated in Paper II helped to illuminate the strategies and actions of as well as the interplay between the Big Four and the CICPA, and the local institutional context within which the Big Four operated.

The documentary materials were further supplemented with insights from interviews with a number of senior representatives of the Chinese public accounting profession (see Table 6). The interviewees were selected primarily because of their important role in the historical expansion of the Big Four in China, and they included senior officials from the CICPA and senior partners from both the Big Four and indigenous accounting firms. In total, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted at the interviewees’ premises in Beijing between 2016 and 2017. Given the purpose of Paper III, the interview questions generally revolved around, for example, the activities engaged in by the Big Four in China, the obstacles faced by the Big Four, and the interplay between the Big Four and Chinese regulators such as the MOF, CSRC, and CICPA over time. They were particularly helpful in reflecting upon major issues involved in the process of the Big Four’s expansion in China. Interviews lasted between 1 and 3½ hours and were transcribed and translated by the present author.

Table 6. Background information of the interviewees in Paper III.

Interviewee	Qualification	Institution	Position
A	CPA (China)	KPMG China (毕马威华振)	Senior Partner
B	CPA (US)	PWC China (普华永道中天)	Senior Partner (Retired)
C	CPA (China)	PWC China (普华永道中天)	Senior Partner
D	CPA (China)	Deloitte China (德勤华永)	Partner
E	CPA (China)	Deloitte China (德勤华永)	Partner
F	CPA (China)	Deloitte China (德勤华永)	Senior Partner
G	CPA (China)	Deloitte China (德勤华永)	Senior Partner
H	CPA (China)	(Former) Coopers & Lybrand China	Senior Partner
I	CPA (China)	CICPA	Senior Official
J	CPA (China)	CICPA	Senior Official

Paper IV

The purpose of Paper IV was to study the formation of individual auditors' professional identity in the specific organisational setting of a large accounting firm in China, describing the process of how commercialism has become subjectively institutionalised by individual auditors. To capture such lived experiences, Paper IV relied upon a series of semi-structured interviews with auditors working in a Big Four firm in China. The primary reason for choosing the Big Four is because it is not always possible to gain access to audit firms to conduct field research (Gendron, 2000), especially when the research topic has become increasingly sensitive. One of the Big Four firms in China eventually agreed to participate in this study.

In total, seventeen auditors were selected for interview (see Table 7). All interviews were conducted at the firm's premises in Beijing in 2016. Twelve of the interviewees were senior auditors with at least three years of practicing experience. Obtaining the perspectives of senior auditors is valuable for two reasons: first, they are less socialised than audit managers or partners and thus experience a fluid state of identity construction; and second, as the backbone of audit firms, they have actively participated as both instigators and targets of socialisation. The other five interviewed auditors form a group comprising two audit partners, one audit director, and two audit managers. Their perspectives are also important as they are responsible for setting the "tone at the top". Gaining the perspectives of both newly minted and more experienced auditors could provide a variety of generational experiences, enabling a longitudinal view of professional identity formation and transformation. Interview questions were designed to generate information about the interviewees' backgrounds (including their education, level of professional staffing, and the role they played in the accounting firm), their perceptions of everyday practice, and reflections on their own professional identity formation and transformation. Interviews lasted an average of one hour and were transcribed and translated by the present author.

Table 7. Background information on the interviewees in Paper IV.

Interviewee	Educational background	Position	Years of practicing experience
S1	Master in Accounting	Senior Auditor	3
S2	Bachelor in English Language	Senior Auditor	5
S3	Master in Finance	Senior Auditor	4
S4	Master in Accounting	Senior Auditor	3
S5	Bachelor in Accounting	Senior Auditor	4
S6	Bachelor in Accounting	Senior Auditor	4
S7	Master in Accounting	Senior Auditor	4
S8	Bachelor in Accounting	Senior Auditor	3
S9	Master in Accounting	Senior Auditor	3
S10	Master in Chemistry	Senior Auditor	5
S11	Master in Finance	Senior Auditor	4
S12	Bachelor in Accounting	Senior Auditor	5
M1	Master in Finance	Manager	6
M2	Bachelor in Economics	Manager	7
D1	Master in Accounting	Director	13
P1	Bachelor in Accounting	Senior Partner	20
P2	Bachelor in Economics	Partner	14

4.3.2 Meaning-making: organising and interpreting data

In this thesis, the data analysis began by organising, transcribing, and editing the empirically collected raw data into a suitable form so that it could provide the basis for higher-level analysis. For archival materials, this involved systematically restructuring the data in a longitudinal way and regrouping the data according to the nature of the issues in question. For semi-structured interviews, this involved carefully transcribing each interview, and presenting the transcript in a logical manner while maintaining the richness of the opinions and experiences shared. Although the initial organisation of data was a time-consuming and onerous task, it provided an opportunity for me to immerse myself in the empirical evidence. Indeed, as discussed before, social constructivist research is not constrained by or wedded to previously specified theoretical frameworks. The various theories adopted in this thesis (as shown in the appended empirical papers) are not used to determine an *a priori* classification scheme for the data, nor are the theories “tested” in any conventional sense. The role of theories with respect to this thesis is to enable “the expression of a subjective reality more than the clarification of an objective one” (Ahrens and Chapman, 2006, p. 819). To treat the empirical evidence fairly and to produce compelling analytical conclusions, I have applied an analytic strategy of thematic analysis, which generally involves “identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within data” (Braun and Clarke,

2006, p. 79). The reason for this choice is the advantages of the flexibility of thematic analysis. Indeed, according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 78), qualitative analytic methods can be loosely categorised into two camps. Within the first, there are methods bounded to, or stemming from, a particular theoretical or epistemological position. These include, for example, conversation analysis (e.g. Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2008), grounded theory (e.g. Corbin and Strauss, 2015), discourse analysis (e.g. Potter, 2004), and narrative analysis (e.g. Riessman, 1993). Within the second, there are those methods¹⁹ that are essentially independent of theory and epistemology, and can be applied across a diverse array of theoretical and epistemological positions. Thematic analysis is firmly in the second camp, and is compatible with the social constructionist research that I have undertaken in this thesis. Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides me with a flexible analytic tool that can potentially generate “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of the collected data.

Thematic analysis is a practical starting point for illuminating both archetypal and unique understandings, unearthing points of commonality and contrast in realities, and identifying relationships between themes, thus revealing connections suggestive of interdependence rather than just discrete issues. The guiding principle of thematic analysis is to break down textual and verbal accounts into prevailing themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) provide an applicable and operable framework, dividing the process of thematic analysis into six linked sub-phases (see Figure 4). It revolves around applying a pattern-matching technique through which repetitions of opinion within each textual/verbal account, as well as replications of opinions across the dataset, are highlighted and loosely clustered. In this process, risks associated with the possible drawing of inferences from the symbolism underlying the empirically collected data might be mitigated by incorporating methodological triangulation across sources of evidence. As noted by Bernard and Ryan (2010), what points towards a theme’s significance is how often it is repeated, whether it is culturally pervasive or culturally bound, the reactions to violations of the theme, and how expressions of opinions are contextually constrained.

¹⁹ It is noteworthy that content analysis is another method that is sometimes treated as similar to thematic analysis. However, according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 98), content analysis tends to “focus at a more micro level, often provides (frequency) counts, and allows for quantitative analyses of initially qualitative data. Thematic analysis differs from this in that themes tend *not* to be quantified”.

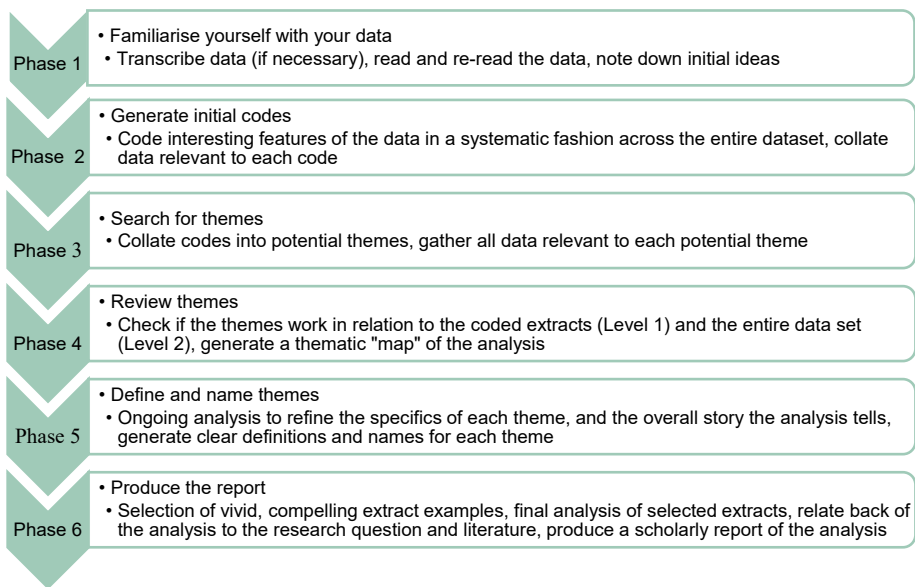


Figure 4. Summary of the six phases of thematic analysis.
Source: adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87).

Here it is important to note that the intent of the above framework is to demarcate thematic analysis clearly, rather than to serve as a rigid “recipe” that limits variability in how the method is applied. Within this broad framework, I have engaged with different forms of thematic analysis in the appended empirical papers.

Paper II

As discussed before, Paper II built on a rich corpus of archival materials, especially internal documents of the CICPA, supplemented with a series of semi-structured interviews. The aim of analysing the different sources of data was to bring to the fore the strategic significance of the CICPA in the development of a Chinese home-grown public accounting profession. All archival materials were initially read through several times to identify and sequence critical CICPA initiatives, guidelines, and policies (see Appendix 2, Paper II). Keyword searches of all archival materials were also utilised to affirm the main stages of development and the identity of, and relationships between, key actors involved. To uncover the deep structural meaning embedded in the data collected, an interpretative content analysis with a focus on understanding the strategic intentions of the CICPA was then conducted.

Both archival materials and interview transcripts were coded in ways that helped to delineate the salient themes surrounding the historical evolution of the role and function of the CICPA. This necessitated various re-readings of empirical materials in seeking to draw connections and patterns in the data and to determine implicit categories of meaning. This iterative process enabled me to decide upon how the coded data should be best interpreted and which were the most revealing and pertinent documented statements and interview quotations to use in Paper II.

Paper III

Similar to Paper II, Paper III also relied on the data collection method of combining archival materials with semi-structured interviews. The aim of analysing the empirically collected data was to examine how the Big Four established their presence in China since the opening up of the country in 1978, showcasing the significance of the Big Four's agency as well as the local institutional context. Given the aim of the paper, the collected data were first sorted, classified, and registered according to the origin and date so as to construct a structured database on the expansion of the Big Four in China. Based on the database, a chronological written narrative of the historical events that took place was created. I then familiarised myself with those accounts by re-reading and immersing myself in the data. Finally, the accounts were condensed and those accounts that were relevant to the aim of the paper were coded. All codes and data extracts were collated to identify potential themes that could represent broader patterned meanings. Collectively, the data analysis process produced a rich, detailed, and complex account of important conjunctural moments in the Chinese institutional context and the activities engaged in by the Big Four to influence local institutional change at particular conjunctural moments in time.

Paper IV

As noted before, Paper IV sought to examine how individual auditors formed and transformed their professional identity in the specific organisational setting of a Big Four accounting firm in China, demonstrating the subjectivity involved in the institutionalisation of commercialism. After transcribing every interview, the interview guide was pressed into service as a template with which to break down each transcript into themes. The amassed data were analysed through multiple and extensive re-readings of all transcripts. For each paragraph, the main themes viewed as the essence of the discussion were highlighted in the margin of the corresponding transcript. To organise the data in terms of the main themes emerging from the coding process, the coded

segments of data in each transcript were categorised thematically. Throughout the process, I constantly compared all the themes to ensure analytical consistency. Finally, to select the quotations included in the paper, representative comments were identified and reviewed in context.

4.3.3 Reflections on methodological choices

This section provides a critical reflection on the challenges encountered during the research process, and highlights how these challenges might have influenced the progress of the research and its emerging results. One of the main challenges I encountered was how to differentiate the analytical levels of accounting professionalisation. This challenge is mainly methodological, since it is difficult to delineate a clear-cut boundary between different levels of interactions. To overcome this challenge, I decided to start by tracing significant actors and their activities in the professionalisation process. While this effort eventually led to the emergence of the specific research foci on the CICPA, the Big Four, and the practitioners themselves, it posed a methodological challenge in terms of how to capture accounting professionalisation as a multilevel process that spans the structuring of the profession, the significance of international accounting firms, and the identity formation and transformation of individual practitioners.

Capturing such a multilevel phenomenon makes great demands of data collection from multiple data sources. It requires a degree of breadth as well as depth in the data collected. The quality and usefulness of the data were underpinned by the researcher's data collection techniques as well as methodological consciousness – i.e. the ability to critically reflect upon the strengths and limitations of the data sources chosen.

With regard to archival materials, many of them were quite difficult to retrieve. My access to the CICPA's archive centre in Beijing greatly facilitated and expanded the search for relevant textual materials. However, the archive centre was not all inclusive; for certain archival materials, particularly those published by international accounting firms containing critical information on their early activities in China, I contacted each of the related accounting firms and, in several cases, they rejected my request to access such materials. As a result, I had to spend a long time wandering through Chinese markets specialised in recirculating second-hand/vintage books and managed to obtain those archival materials that I needed. It is noteworthy that conducting research based on the use of archival materials involves a range of issues that need to be made explicit. According to Carnegie and Napier (2017, p. 76), the content

of archival materials may reflect “the biases of their preparers or arbitrary choices of archivists”. Most of the written records I consulted were prepared for specific purposes and for certain readerships other than that of the present thesis. In this respect, archival materials are very active in both *enabling* and *limiting* what I can see, know, understand, and accept as “real”. Moreover, in the research process, to go beyond the mere transcription of archival materials, researchers need to “impose some structure on the material” (Napier, 2009, p. 42). This inevitably leads to differences among researchers in their conceptions of and intended deliverables from their narratives. My epistemological position favours the view that history is constructed by researchers’ own interpretations of the facts that they collect, analyse, and communicate. One potential pitfall in relation to such an epistemological position is what Decker (2013, p. 156) terms “the silence of the archives” – i.e. the “selective silencing by the researcher” through the inclusion or exclusion of historical evidence when archival materials are over-abundant. As Decker (2013, p. 170) explains, “All selection of archival material for narrative, whether through sampling, causal analysis or exemplary selection, involves reconstruction, representation, and therefore silencing”. Consequently, interpretations of the past are based on what survives and is available from the past (Carnegie and Napier, 2017). In this thesis, I have adopted the widely recommended technique of *triangulation* to mitigate the potential pitfalls in relation to the use of archival materials. Here, triangulation refers to the use of a variety of data sources in the study of the same phenomenon (Hopper and Hoque, 2006). In this respect, one particular strategy that I have implemented is to gather archival materials from more than one collection. A second strategy was to, as will be discussed below, conduct interviews with senior representatives of the Chinese public accounting profession. I found interviews to be valuable, not simply because it was possible for me to check my interpretation of the records against the recollections of the interviewees. An additional advantage was that some of the interviewees had documentation of their own, such as personal memoirs, which effectively supplemented the records available in other archival materials.

For semi-structured interviews, beyond the painstaking effort to recruit participants, the most challenging part was how to enable people to activate their voices, express their realities, and know that their voices were being heard. These issues have been well reflected upon in the extant literature on conducting research interviews. For example, Alvesson (2003, 2011) advocates the scaling down of expectations about how much researchers can actually rely on the interview method, arguing that researchers need to be sceptical about the data collected by research interviews. The romantic view

of research interviews is “grounded in an image of a potentially honest, unselfish subject, eager or at least willing to share his or her experiences and knowledge for the benefit of the interviewer and the research project. The interviewee then supposedly acts in the interests of science. The view of the interviewee as an informant illustrates this assumption” (Alvesson, 2011, p. 29). Nevertheless, interviewees may have other interests than advancing science by providing information. They may be politically aware and politically motivated actors with a particular interest in how socially significant issues are represented. This does not necessarily suggest that they would cheat or lie. Honesty and political awareness do not necessarily conflict with each other (Alvesson, 2011). Some interviewees not using the interview mainly for their own political purposes are very likely to tell the (partial) truth as they know it, but in ways favourable for them, and may not disclose truths disfavoured either for them or their organisations (Alvesson, 2011). Furthermore, interviewees may also have problems expressing reliable knowledge (or data that can be further refined to knowledge) because of the potential difficulties in translating their version of the world into the research interview context (Alvesson, 2011). In this respect, the interview process is designed to elicit a certain discourse that is not a mirror of reality, but one constructed under the influence of the subjectivity of interviewees. Accordingly, the interview account becomes a construction of the specific questions asked and as “what people think, feel and value, as well as do, in various everyday life situations” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 29; cf. Qu and Dumay, 2011). In this thesis, I have used several available techniques to mitigate the potential pitfalls in relation to the use of research interviews. For example, before each interview, I sought to build familiarity with and cognizance of each participant’s background so as to develop conversation connectors. During the course of the interviews, I actively listened, discretely recorded, and thought clearly. Furthermore, I constantly assured participants that my role as a researcher was not to assess them but to learn from their lived experiences, such that I would encourage participants to speak in their everyday language. Between interviews, I allocated myself adequate “thinking space” to allow for reflection and data interpretation, through which previously unidentified issues arose and informed subsequent data collection. More particularly, my previous practicing experience and my knowledge of the broader Chinese accounting community were conducive in establishing trust and rapport with each participant. This allowed participants to talk relatively freely and confidently about their experiences. By virtue of such close connection between the researcher and participants, I was able to access and appreciate implicit information imparted through body language, the tone and pace of voice, and

silence, as well as to seek verbal elucidation and augmentation of points made by participants in a non-threatening interview setting.

Besides the above-mentioned challenges of data collection, yet another challenge revolves around data analysis. One immediate issue is the translation of data (e.g. interview transcripts and archival materials) collected in Chinese into English. It is acknowledged that translation involves the risk of losing the nuances of the data (Feldermann and Hiebl, 2020). This is particular the case when certain Chinese expressions do not exist in the same way in English. In this thesis, I conducted the translation in a way that could ensure the survival of the original meaning and sense of what was said in Chinese. This was done by having colleagues cross check the accuracy of the translations and by keeping some of the words in the original language to preserve the nuances of the data. Another issue is that the data analysis process is affected by researchers' backgrounds and lived experiences. By taking a social constructivist stance, each individual account was regarded as unique, and this uniqueness became a central element of the data analysis. To safeguard against the risk of researchers being burdened by normative assumptions, I have sought to maintain a "reflexive approach" characterised by a conscious and consistent effort to view the subject matter from different perspectives, avoiding the *a priori* privileging of a single, favoured perspective (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). In effect, reflexivity usefully stimulates interplay between producing interpretations and challenging them. It includes opening up the phenomena through exploring more than one set of meanings and acknowledging ambiguity in the phenomena and the line(s) of inquiry favoured (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). Additionally, I also benefited from reviews provided by colleagues and supervisors, which served as an extra layer of "sense check" of my interpretations of the data.

4.3.4 Research ethics

Given the extent of data access required in this thesis, several ethical issues had to be highlighted and addressed. Access to the CICPA archive centre was one of the main issues. Before I set off to the archive centre in Beijing, it was necessary to obtain official consent from the CICPA. As the richest and largest social organisation in China, the CICPA's archive centre had not previously been accessed for English-language accounting studies. I submitted a formal research request (in both English and Chinese versions signed and stamped by my home university) to the Secretariat of the CICPA, stating basic information regarding my thesis work: (1) the aim of the research; (2) the time of the visit;

(3) the types of archival materials needed; and (4) the promise of confidentiality. Written consent was later obtained from the Secretariat of the CICPA. During my on-site data collection, I strictly followed the CICPA's internal protocols on archives covering important issues such as data access, data storage, and data sharing. All printed internal documents that were provided by the CICPA, such as minutes of meetings and internal speeches of CICPA leadership, were safely stored by me and prohibited from being shared with a third party.

Furthermore, with regard to selecting participants for interviews, I also started by sending potential interviewees official research requests signed and stamped by my home university. In these official research requests, I explained in detail: (1) the aim of the research; (2) the use of the data collected; (3) the promise of confidentiality; and (4) the form of research output. Consent was usually obtained verbally. It was made clear to all participants that they could withdraw their consent at any time. Such verbal consent was renewed when follow-up interviews were needed. Before each interview, the related participant had received a copy of interview questions and been clearly informed that the information provided by them might appear in foreign scholarly works. All participants were assured of anonymity. During the course of the interviews, participants often shared their experiences of and reactions to various aspects of changes in the Chinese profession, giving the impression that the information provided was not secretive but "well-known in the inner circle". That said, on some occasions, participants stated that the issue being discussed was sensitive and required that their comments be "off the record". To fully ensure that providing candid information would not lead them into difficult situations (e.g. potential legal problems or political embarrassment), in the final manuscripts I assigned each participant a code name to ensure privacy and, more importantly, ensured that any statements they made could neither be associated with nor traced back to them.

5. Summaries of the appended papers

The purpose of this chapter is to provide summaries of the four appended papers that constitute this thesis before moving to the final concluding discussion chapter.

Paper I

Taking stock and moving forward: A systematic literature review on accounting professionalisation in China, 1980-2021.

Since China adopted the “Reform and Opening-up” policy in 1978, Chinese accounting has been undergoing a rapid transformation, with the re-emergence of the public accounting occupation in 1980 marking the start of a new chapter in Chinese accounting history. In the past four decades, the Chinese public accounting occupation not only re-emerged, but also evolved into a profession, legitimised by a supporting legal and regulatory framework and its own national professional accounting association – the CICPA.

Paper I reviews the research on accounting professionalisation in China to develop insights into how the research is developing, offer a critique of the research to date, and outline future research directions and opportunities. Specifically, it follows a methodological approach of systematic literature review to identify, select, and analyse the extant literature on the Chinese public accounting profession. In total, a sample of 68 academic works was included in the review process.

The paper finds that the extant literature has produced useful insights into the processes and underlying motivations of accounting professionalisation in China, demonstrating that the Chinese experience has differed, to a large extent, from the often western-biased understandings of accounting professionalisation. However, due to the lack of a common theoretical vernacular and an agreed upon focus, the extant literature presents a

fragmented and contradictory picture, making attempts to accumulate prior knowledge in the field increasingly difficult.

The paper ends with a discussion of the alternative path to be taken to overcome the incongruity arising from conflicting analysis of and insights into accounting professionalisation in China. This includes, for example, delineating the overall domain with a coherent definition of professionalisation that draws analytical attention to interactions between national and transnational actors, rather than national or transnational actors operating in isolation.

Paper II

The strategic significance of the CICPA in the making of a Chinese home-grown public accounting profession.

Within the extant literature on accounting professionalisation in China, increasing scholarly attention has been paid to the role and significance of the state and global accounting firms such as the Big Four, with the relative strategic significance of the role of the CICPA not being a major debating or focal point. The few studies that have focused on the role and strategies of the CICPA with regard to the organisational aspect of professional development in China have typically represented the CICPA as principally implementing state policy and serving state interests, without contemplating the capacity of the CICPA to pursue strategic intentions of its own. To further illuminate the CICPA's capacity for agency, Paper II draws upon the conceptual framework of "socialist corporatism" to provide a detailed, longitudinal study of the role and strategies of the CICPA in building a Chinese public accounting profession, one that mainly comprises and is controlled by indigenous accounting firms and practitioners, since the late 1980s.

Drawing on previously unaccessed archive materials and a series of interviews with senior representatives of the Chinese public accounting profession, this paper finds that, in pursuing a nationalistic approach of professional development, the CICPA has been required to maintain a delicate balancing act *vis-à-vis* the state – on some occasions pursuing strategic intentions of its own and on others visibly having to follow specific state requirements and accept direct intrusion in the Chinese public accounting profession. The revealed role and strategies of the CICPA show that the empirical story of professional development in China is more nuanced and complicated than the current, established position in the extant accounting literature.

The paper ends with a discussion of the CICPA's experience as a socialist corporatist organisation that reflects the elements of both autonomy and state control. Consequently, the CICPA's capacity for agency emerges as both delicate and fragile, requiring ongoing reinterpretations of and adaptations to changing socio-political conditions. Most significantly, the interaction between the CICPA and the Chinese Communist Party is producing a type of professionalism that emphasises political standing and a commitment to "nation-state building". In this respect, the Chinese public accounting profession now looks to be diverging from current western-based audit systems, connecting itself more closely with particular Communist Party doctrines, with important implications for what audit may come to represent in a modernising China.

Paper III

The interplay between global accounting firms and national institutional contexts: The establishment of the Big Four in China from 1978 to 2007.

Understanding the particular history of how the Big Four navigated and established themselves in a particular country has contemporary relevance and utility in that it illuminates the process by which they helped shape accounting and auditing thoughts and practices, and induced change in local institutions. Within the extant (although limited) literature on the Big Four's expansion in China, there is a contested understanding of their agency in effecting local institutional change. Paper III revisits previously published histories and analyses of the Big Four's expansion in China, and provides a more insightful understanding of this expansion. Drawing upon the extant literature on professional service firms (PSFs), the paper illustrates the dynamic process by which the Big Four entered China and evolved from tentative representative offices to established accounting firms in the Chinese audit market.

Based on an extensive analysis of archival materials and interviews, the paper finds that the Big Four's expansion in China has been deeply intertwined with the country's socio-political and economic transition under the "Reform and Opening-up" policy. It reveals important conjunctural moments in history that provided the Big Four with important windows of opportunity to actively shape local institutional change to their own interests.

The paper ends with a discussion of the need to direct scholarly attention to both the significance of the national institutional context and the agency of the Big Four. Indeed, control of the expansion process has not been fully realised by the Big Four, as they are affected by the actions of important endogenous actors such as the Chinese state and the CICPA. The witnessed interactions

imply continuous change in the Big Four's surrounding institutional context and consequently in their capacity for agency.

Paper IV

The institutionalisation of commercialism in the audit profession: How auditors constitute the commercial self in a large Chinese audit firm.

An important aspect of the process of accounting professionalisation revolves around how auditors construct the particular identity of the “ideal professional”. This particular identity entails a shared understanding of what being an “ideal professional” means, an understanding that can influence auditors' behaviours and alter their sense of self at work. Within the extant literature on the construction of auditors' “ideal professional”, there has been increased scholarly attention to the repressive power of organisational imperatives (i.e. driven by the expectations and requirements of accounting firms), ignoring the positive power possessed by individuals whose interpretation and subjectivity can also contribute to the formation of the “ideal professional”. In light of this gap in the literature, Paper IV concentrates on auditors' professional life and draws upon the conceptual framework of “identity scripts” to examine the processes by which auditors subjectively construct their commercial self in a Big Four audit firm in China.

Based on the qualitative research method of informant interviews, the paper presents an analysis of prevalent discourses identified in the Chinese organisational setting and finds that, within the “clan-like” structure of the audit engagement team, three recurring discourses (i.e. the client relationship, value-adding, and career) are powerful scripts in constructing individual subjectivity wherein the ideal of “professionalism” has been re-enacted to rationalise the incorporation of more commercialistic elements. In line with the wealth of literature on auditor socialisation, these discursive scripts are produced through auditors' on-the-job experiences.

The paper ends with a discussion of these scripts as not just concerned with self-presentation, but as important sources of self-formation and self-definition. Rather than being imposed externally, a “commercial self” is actively constructed by individual auditors and leads to the institutionalisation of commercialism in the public accounting profession at the micro level.

6. Concluding discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to return to the research aim and research question of this thesis, illuminating how accounting professionalisation in China has evolved through the interactions of key domestic and international actors over time. This chapter also discusses the contributions of this thesis in relation to the previous research.

6.1 Accounting professionalisation in China

Since China's "Reform and Opening-up" in 1978, accounting professionalisation in China has been shaped by ongoing interactions between a wide array of actors. In contrast to the current, established hegemony analysis, neither the Chinese state nor the Big Four were found to be fully capable of dominating the process of accounting professionalisation in China. This process is more complicated than that recognised in prior studies, involving the interactions between the Chinese state, the Big Four and other actors including, most significantly, the CICPA. The interactions between these actors are also relevant for the identity construction of individual practitioners.

In general, this thesis provides several core insights that help to deepen our understanding of accounting professionalisation in China. First, amid China's socio-economic and political transition, the Chinese state has played a pivotal role in re-constructing the Chinese public accounting profession. In contrast to the state-centric hegemony analysis, the state is here not treated as a monolith. It is defined as the Chinese government controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, which, through the mediation of the MOF and the CSRC, has the authority to decree the practices that public accountants must follow, while also maintaining an enforcement mechanism. This definition further clarifies the actors that constitute the Chinese state, which sets the stage for delineating the interactions between the state and actors from outside the realm of the state. Second, in the process of accounting professionalisation in China, conjunctural

moments appear when the Chinese state renders the competence of actors from outside the realm of the state, such as the Big Four, increasingly valuable and legitimate insofar as they address unmet requirements in the local institutional context. Outside of conjunctural moments, the Big Four would not have been allowed by the Chinese state to enter and exercise agency in the Chinese public accounting domain. This suggests that the Big Four's capacity for agency is temporally sensitive. Third, actors enter into the Chinese public accounting domain with their own distinctive interests, priorities, resources, and strategies, and interact with one another in various modes, falling specifically into five categories:

- Posturing: the actor in question purposefully showcases and impresses another actor in the hope of being accepted as legitimate.
- Negotiation: the actor in question enters into a strategic dialogue with another actor and seeks to resolve an issue in a way that all actors find acceptable.
- Contention: the actor in question enters into a dispute with another actor and seeks to counter another actor's priorities and interests.
- Coordination: the actor in question enters into a collaboration with another actor and seeks to work together in an organised and effective way.
- Alignment: the actor in question purposefully adjusts to following the directions and serving the requirements of another actor.

Interactions lead to the diffusion of ideas and practices between actors, spurring adaptation. Fourth, interactions between actors have various impact on accounting professionalisation in China, especially with respect to the organising rules, norms, and values that underpin the development of the Chinese public accounting profession.

Based on the changes in strength in positions between different actors over time, the following sections will further discuss the above core insights within three distinct historical periods. Table 8 summarises the key aspects emerged from the discussions.

Table 8 Interaction of actors and the process of accounting professionalisation in China.

Period	Contextual background	Content of interaction					Impact of interaction on organising rules, norms, and values	Impact of interaction on prevailing meaning of professionalism
		Aspirant actors	Interests and priorities	Resources and strategies	Modes of interaction			
1978-1992	The rise of Deng's reformist ideology (e.g. the decision to revitalise the Chinese economy)	The Chinese state (i.e. the State Council, the MOF), the Big Four	<i>The Chinese state:</i> to ensure state supervision of tax inflow in the larger project of economic reforms; to improve the technical competence of Chinese accounting practitioners. <i>The Big Four:</i> to gain initial foothold in China.	<i>The Chinese state:</i> the state's coercive authority. <i>The Big Four:</i> the control of "advanced accounting and auditing technology".	The Big Four engaged with the MOF through posturing.	- Public accountants were organised as an extension of state control. - The practice of public accountants was to serve as government examiners of foreign-invested enterprises.	Political	
1992-2007	The furthering of Deng's reformist ideology (e.g. the decision to build a socialist market economy; the accession to WTO membership)	The Chinese state (i.e. the State Council, the MOF, the CSRC), the CICPA, the Big Four	<i>The Chinese state:</i> to address the issue of the "dual-audit" system; to address the issue of fraudulent practices of indigenous accounting firms. <i>The C/CPA:</i> to build a home-grown public accounting profession. <i>The Big Four:</i> to embed and consolidate presence in China.	<i>The Chinese state:</i> the state's coercive authority. <i>The C/CPA:</i> the state's delegation of administrative authority. <i>The Big Four:</i> the control of "advanced accounting and auditing technology"; to capitalise on MNCs' demand for audit services; to leverage China's WTO negotiations.	The Big Four engaged with the MOF through negotiation; the C/CPA engaged with the Big Four through contention; the C/CPA engaged with the CSRC through coordination; the C/CPA engaged with the MOF through contention.	- Public accountants were organised as an independent profession. - The practice of public accountants was to safeguard the socialist market economy order.	Technical	
2007-present	The furthering of Deng's reformist ideology (e.g. the decision to facilitate Chinese enterprises going abroad; the integration of the Chinese Communist Party in new social sectors)	The Chinese state (i.e. the Chinese Communist Party, the State Council, the MOF), the C/CPA, the Big Four	<i>The Chinese state:</i> to serve the grand mission of nation-state building. <i>The C/CPA:</i> to build a home-grown public accounting profession. <i>The Big Four:</i> to maintain a leading presence in China.	<i>The Chinese state:</i> the state's coercive authority. <i>The C/CPA:</i> to work with the state's agendas.	The C/CPA engaged with the MOF through alignment; the C/CPA engaged with the Chinese Communist Party through alignment; the C/CPA engaged with the Big Four through contention.	- Public accountants were organised as an independent profession. - The practice of public accountants was to serve the Chinese Communist Party's grand mission of nation-state building.	Nationalistic	

6.1.1 Initial destabilising changes: early reforms in the Chinese public accounting domain (1978-1992)

In this thesis, China's "Reform and Opening-up" was identified as a fundamental disruption in the local institutional context, which initiated a period of profound socio-economic and political transition of Chinese society. This period of transition weakened the earlier structural constraints – i.e. the Maoist ideological principles of class struggle primacy, central planning, and public ownership (Ezzamel et al., 2007; Xu et al., 2013, 2018) – on actors, leaving them with greater opportunities for agency than they had before the commencing of the reform. When structural conditions were in a state of flux, actors were able to construct their own realities with respect to accounting professionalisation in China.

The MOF, authorised by China's highest administrative organ – the State Council – to regulate accounting work in China, was a critical actor in initiating the re-construction of the Chinese public accounting profession, which had disappeared during the Mao era (see also Hao, 1999; Yapa and Hao, 2007; Lu et al., 2009). The MOF's initial interests and priorities in accounting professionalisation in China were to carry out state economic supervision in the larger project of economic reforms (Paper III). Accordingly, the MOF utilised its coercive authority to establish the legislative infrastructure that stipulated the institutional arrangement of *guà kào* (挂靠) (Paper III). The *guà kào* arrangement served primarily as a skeletal framework for organising the newly emerged Chinese public accountants. Under this arrangement, Chinese public accountants were to be state administered and Chinese accounting firms were to be established with the backing of government bodies (e.g. state or state-affiliated agencies). In contrast to the state-centric hegemony analysis that has focused on analysing the *guà kào* arrangement, this thesis expands the scope of empirical analysis. The findings of this thesis further show that, after the stipulation of the *guà kào* arrangement, the MOF's interests and priorities turned to improving the technical competence of Chinese accounting practitioners, most of whom had been deprived of systematic accounting training and education opportunities during the ten years of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). On 21 February 1981 the MOF issued a document – *Several Opinions on Strengthening the Training of Accountants*, emphasising the cultivation of accounting practitioners that are both "socialist-minded and professionally competent" (Paper III). The MOF actively mobilised Chinese accounting practitioners to take stock of their own accounting experience but

also to absorb foreign accounting theories and practices. In this process, the MOF rendered the competence of the then Big Eight as valuable in improving the technical competence of Chinese accounting practitioners, creating a specific conjunctural moment in history that made possible the Big Eight to exercise agency in the Chinese public accounting domain (Paper III).

The Big Eight had rather different interests and priorities from those of the MOF with respect to accounting professionalisation in China. They particularly regarded the professionalisation process as something they could actively participate in so as to enter the new Chinese audit market (Paper III). The Big Eight responded to the need for professional training in China and worked towards entering the Chinese audit market. At the beginning of their entry, the Big Eight emphasised the need for their presence in China by using politically acceptable phrases and carefully framing the need for accounting reforms in line with the priorities of China's socialist regime. In doing so, they adopted a notably open-ended view as to how the Chinese public accounting profession could be developed. This careful framing of the need for accounting reforms, which was devoid of any radical attempts at influencing the local institutional arrangement of public accounting, could be explained by the Big Eight's then relatively peripheral position in the Chinese public accounting domain. The strategy used by the Big Eight to influence the Chinese public accounting domain was geared towards compromising with rather than confronting the MOF, over the *guà kào* arrangement. In effect, the Big Eight's interaction with the MOF was characterised by posturing – i.e. showcasing and impressing the MOF with the Big Eight's "superior" technical competence in the hope of being accepted as legitimate. The Big Eight specifically positioned themselves as the knowledge experts for China, controlling the resource of "advanced accounting and auditing technology". Such positioning also enabled them to coalesce other domestic actors (e.g. the Chinese SOEs) through training activities to construct a shared vision of "best international practices" (Paper III). This finding further expands the extant Big Four-centric hegemony analysis, which centred their empirical focus on analysing how the Big Eight mobilised *guanxi* to enter the Chinese audit market in the 1980s. For example, Gillis (2011, p. 74) notably concluded that "during the Big Eight's first decade in modern China in the 1980s, their principal focus was to build the (*guanxi*) relationships that would allow them to prosper".

The interaction between the Big Eight and the MOF had limited direct impact on the organising rules, norms and values derived from the incumbent *guà kào* arrangement. Due to their then tentative presence (in the form of representative office) in China, the particular view of the Big Eight on how public accountants

should be organised was not to seriously contest the view of the MOF which, through the *guà kào* arrangement, stipulated Chinese public accountants to be an extension of state control, capable of serving as government examiners of foreign-invested enterprises. Nonetheless, the interaction between the Big Eight and the MOF was still significant. In the 1980s, the Big Eight had helped to diffuse into the Chinese public accounting domain an alternative view of the organising rules, norms, and values of public accounting, emphasising a methodology of independent professional practice derived from the western societies. As seen in the following period, with the advance of China's economic reforms, western accounting and auditing practices were increasingly accepted by domestic actors, rendering the competence of the Big Eight increasingly valuable and legitimate as they addressed unmet requirements in the local institutional context.

6.1.2 Episodes of contention: growing challenges in the Chinese public accounting domain (1992-2007)

In 1992, after having resolved the lingering ideological divide over the pursuit of market-based reforms within the Chinese Communist Party, the 14th Party Congress officially announced its decision to establish a socialist market economy. One direct manifestation of this increasing reliance on market forces was China's formation of two domestic stock exchanges in Shanghai and Shenzhen. The establishment of the socialist market economy also reduced the conception of western accounting and auditing practices as ideologically and politically alien to China (Ezzamel et al., 2007; Ezzamel and Xiao, 2015).

Set against these significant changes in the wider institutional context, the MOF's interests and priorities were to resolve the issues associated with the then "dual-audit" system in China (Paper III). Under the "dual-audit" system, the MNCs in China were subject to audits conducted by both global and indigenous accounting firms, which greatly increased the financial burden of MNCs. The Big Eight's MNC clients voiced their concerns to the MOF the impact of the "dual-audit" system on their business in China. The importance of the Big Eight to MNC clients in China convinced the MOF that the foreign accounting firms played an instrumental role in attracting FDI. In this process, the MOF rendered the competence of the Big Eight as increasingly valuable, creating another conjunctural moment in history that made possible the Big Eight to exercise agency in the Chinese public accounting domain (Paper III). Here, the identification of this conjunctural moment further refines the extant Big Four-centric hegemony analysis that appeared to have overstated the

firms' capacity for agency in the 1990s. For example, when analysing the work of the Big Four in the 1990s, Gillis (2011) treated the massive amount of FDI in China as a "hegemonic project" that would certainly let the Big Four establish a dominant position. Gillis (2011, p. 107) concluded that "with foreign investment (from MNC clients) constituting such a large portion of China's economy, the Big Four were destined to have large practices in China even if they failed to gain the domestic (clients) market".

The Big Eight's interests and priorities were to further embed and consolidate their presence in the Chinese audit market (Paper III). The Big Eight responded to and interacted with the MOF through the form of negotiation – i.e. strategic dialogue aimed at resolving the issues associated with the "dual-audit" system in a way that both actors found acceptable. The Big Eight proposed a joint-venture arrangement, arguing that their resource of "advanced accounting and auditing technology" would benefit those indigenous accounting firms that partnered with them. The MOF was receptive to this arrangement. By the end of 1992, the then Big Six were all allowed to establish joint-venture accounting firms, successfully gaining the right to conduct statutory audits in the Chinese audit market.

Shortly after the establishment of the joint-venture accounting firms, the rise to significance of a new actor, the CICPA, in the Chinese public accounting domain further complicated the interactions between actors. In contrast to the extant hegemony analysis that has commonly regarded the CICPA as an arm of the state (see e.g. Yee, 2008, 2009, 2012; Gillis, 2011, 2014a), the findings of this thesis suggest that the CICPA has been able to exercise a greater degree of agency than that represented in the literature.

More specifically, as the national "professional body", the CICPA was initially established under the auspices of the MOF in November 1988 to organise the then increasing number of indigenous accounting firms and practitioners. Since its establishment, the CICPA's interests and priorities have been to implement a nationalistic approach to professional development so as to build a Chinese public accounting profession comprising and controlled by indigenous accounting firms and practitioners (Paper II). In 1992, the CICPA was conferred a crucial resource – i.e. the MOF's delegation of administrative authority (e.g. approving the registration of accounting firms and public accountants), making the CICPA a significant regulator of the Chinese public accounting profession (Paper II). In the following years, the CICPA's pursuit of its own interests and priorities led to contention with the Big Six, which sought to further expand in China, and also with the MOF, which had somewhat distinct priorities in terms of Chinese professional accounting

development. The term “contention” denotes the dispute between the CICPA, the Big Six, and the MOF, who aspired to counter one another’s interests and priorities.

The first episode of contention was between the CICPA and the Big Six. The Big Six were eager to control the Chinese audit market, whilst the CICPA was keen to acquire the resource of “advanced accounting and auditing technology” to fulfil its pursuit of a home-grown public accounting profession. With the Big Six’s diffusion of their “advanced accounting and auditing technology” in the Chinese public accounting domain, the CICPA appeared to have adapted to replicating the traditional western concepts of professionalism and, in particular, what Suddaby et al. (2007) call the “professional trusteeship”, which places the notions of independence and public interest ahead of commercial elements. The Big Six, consistent with their shift from a trustee logic to a commercial logic, placed greater emphasis on the commercial exchange of expertise as a rationale for expanding the “boundary” in both geographical and disciplinary senses (Suddaby et al., 2007). In order to counter the expansion of the Big Six in China, since the mid 1990s, the CICPA has launched a series of regulatory campaigns against the Big Six (Paper III). More significantly, the CICPA also made concerted efforts to create the “Big One”, a Chinese-originated accounting firm on a scale that would allow it to compete directly with the Big Six in both national and international audit markets (Paper II). Here, the CICPA’s creation of the “Big One” was a very important part of the development of the Chinese public accounting profession, effectively connecting established literature on the entry of global accounting firms in China (e.g. Gillis, 2011, 2014a) with the future-oriented domestic and international challenges that such firms could face from the establishment of Chinese “Big N” firms (e.g. Macve, 2020). In practice, the escalating audit scandals of indigenous accounting firms interrupted the CICPA’s creation of the Chinese “Big One”. More significantly, it fostered a growing sense of crisis within the reform-oriented state leaders, particularly in Zhu Rongji (the then Vice Premier of the State Council), who embraced the efficacy of globalisation to facilitate the restructuring of the domestic economy and prioritised China’s deeper external integration in the form of WTO membership. Zhu Rongji had always believed integrity to be the cornerstone of a market economy. The disregard for independence and the lack of professional ethics on the part of both indigenous accounting firms and indigenous public accountants was largely the result of years of operating under the *guà kào* arrangement. Such was the real, deep-seated issue highlighted by the audit scandals. To address Zhu Rongji’s concerns about the fraudulent practices of indigenous accounting firms, the CICPA, with the coordinated support from the CSRC, implemented

a disaffiliation programme under which indigenous accounting firms had to sever connections with their sponsoring government bodies, driving indigenous accounting firms to reform in line with the western approaches used by the Big Six to improve audit independence (Paper II). The term “coordination” denotes collaboration between the CICPA and the CSRC, who sought to work together in an organised and effective way. Here, the disaffiliation programme was itself the product of the CICPA’s interaction with other domestic and international actors including, notably, the CICPA’s contention with the Big Six and the CICPA’s coordination with the CSRC. This illustrates the complex nature of the interaction, which simultaneously took multiple modes and involved multiple actors.

In effect, such complex interaction had significant impact on the organising rules, norms and values underpinning the development of the Chinese public accounting profession. It drove the Chinese public accounting profession to move away from the direct control of the state, to be reorganised as an independent profession, capable of safeguarding the socialist market economy order. These new developments, however, did not prevent Zhu Rongji from continuing to voice his concerns about the quality of indigenous accounting firms. To ensure China’s smooth transition towards a market-driven economy, Zhu Rongji had come to the view that the then Big Five should be taken as a “role-model” (Paper II and Paper III). This favourable stance towards the Big Five directly affected the efforts of the CICPA to create the Chinese “Big One”. More significantly, the favourable stance rendered the competence of the Big Five as legitimate. This created the last conjunctural moment identified in this thesis, making possible the Big Five to assume the role of powerful agents of institutional change in the Chinese public accounting domain (Paper III). As China was entering the final stage of the WTO accession, the Big Five piggy-backed on the priorities of other international actors such as the WTO, forming an ecology of linked interests that together sought to expedite and extend measures relating to the construction of the wider neo-liberal economic and social order. This ecology of linked interests was leveraged by the Big Five to resolve the CICPA’s existing administrative constraints on their operations in China (Paper III).

In light of Zhu Rongji’s promotion of the Big Five, the CICPA contemplated that a more suitable approach would be to resume the creation of the Chinese “Big One” through implementing stronger oversight of indigenous accounting firms (Paper II). This directly led to the second episode of contention, which was between the CICPA and the MOF. This particular episode of contention has not been captured and analysed in the extant hegemony analysis.

In September 2001, the CICPA publicly advocated to the MOF the building of a self-regulatory regime under which its administrative authority and respective ability to oversee accounting firms could be further strengthened. Such public advocacy on the part of the CICPA met with a strong response from the MOF. The MOF perceived the building of a western-style self-regulatory regime as insufficient to fully address the fraudulent practices of indigenous accounting firms. The MOF's stance was reinforced by the ongoing regulatory reform in the US after the Enron scandal. In November 2002, the MOF chose to terminate the CICPA's devolved administrative authority (Paper II). Initially, the CICPA was not receptive of this change and, over the following three years, had made concerted efforts to have the MOF reverse its stance. However, in the face of a strong state, the CICPA's such efforts turned out to be futile. The loss of the crucial resource of administrative authority significantly impacted the CICPA's capacity to create the Chinese "Big One". This finding reveals that, although the CICPA has been able to exercise a greater degree of agency than that typically represented in the literature, its capacity for agency is still contingent upon the action of the Chinese state (Paper II).

6.1.3 Towards occupational settlement: the embedding of the Chinese Communist Party (2007-present)

In order to rebuild its status as a significant actor in the Chinese public accounting domain, the CICPA changed its interests and priorities regarding the nationalistic approach to professional development, and interacted with the Chinese state and, in particular, the Chinese Communist Party through alignment. The term "alignment" denotes the adjustment of the CICPA to follow the directions and serve the requirements of the Chinese Communist Party. The findings of this thesis, for the first time in the accounting literature on China, shed light on the CICPA's relationship with the Chinese Communist Party.

More specifically, in May 2007, the CICPA issued a document entitled the *Opinions on the Promotion of Accounting Firms to Develop Larger and More Competitive*. This document represented a considerable shift in the CICPA's nationalistic approach to professional development in China. It outlined a 5-10 year plan to develop 10 internationalised indigenous accounting firms and 100 firms of significant scale in what became known as the "Larger and More Competitive" strategy. In essence, the CICPA was pushing indigenous accounting firms towards a style of operation similar to that of the global

accounting firms, with a significant component of the “Larger and More Competitive” strategy being directed to support the internationalisation of indigenous accounting firms. The CICPA hoped that, through internationalisation, indigenous accounting firms would be able to raise their core competitiveness and, most importantly, increase their capacity to support Chinese domestic enterprises’ “going out” (i.e. international expansion) – a policy formulated by the Chinese Communist Party as significant to the furthering of economic reforms after China’s accession to WTO membership (Paper II).

Faced with the loss of the crucial resource of administrative authority, the CICPA adopted the strategy of aligning itself with the MOF. It now represented its adapted role as, in practice, that of a “lobbyist” seeking to advise the MOF in the formulation of policies and regulations central to the development of the Chinese public accounting profession. The CICPA’s alignment strategy prompted the emergence of collective action. In a process that would take over one year, the MOF and the CICPA worked together to elevate the “Larger and More Competitive” strategy into a nationwide imperative, particularly through obtaining the State Council’s endorsement. In October 2009, the State Council formally endorsed what had become a new MOF document entitled *Notice Regarding Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the CPA Profession*, which is typically referred to by its issuance number – “Document 56”.

Document 56 incorporated much of the CICPA’s original “Larger and More Competitive” strategy, including its proposed segmentation of accounting firms. Most significantly, though, Document 56 introduced explicit political expectations of the CICPA, stressing that the CICPA was to have the function of “serving, coordinating, and maintaining internal discipline” underpinned by “a solid political guarantee” (Paper II). In China, seeking a “political guarantee” is a way of securing legitimacy for the pursuance of particular, desired social agendas and necessitates connecting closely with the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. Beyond the requisite informal and formal discussions and meetings, a “political guarantee” fundamentally requires the installation of Communist Party branches in social sectors – a process commonly known in China as the “Party-building work” (党建工作 or *dǎng jiàn jīan gōng zuò*). In October 2009, the MOF substantiated its political expectations of the CICPA by issuing the *Notice on Further Strengthening the Party-building Work in the CPA Profession*. This notice formally outlined the necessity of Party-building work in the profession, stating that it was consistent with the interests and priorities of the Communist Party in consolidating its

base in new social sectors to serve the grand mission of nation-state building, and making it clear that the CICPA had to carry out such work to expand the Party's organisational coverage in the profession. The CICPA then chose to frame this requirement to serve the political demands of the Communist Party in terms of helping to develop the Chinese public accounting profession.

The interaction between the CICPA and the Communist Party had particular impact on the norms and values underpinning the development of the Chinese public accounting profession: the spirit of the CICPA's "Larger and More Competitive" project now had a very vivid political dimension attached to it, incorporating the commitment to grow the Chinese public accounting profession with the obligation to serve the Communist Party's grand mission of nation-state building through enhancing the presence and influence of the Communist Party within the profession. In practice, the CICPA articulated three "integration points" to be established between the Communist Party and Chinese accounting firms, namely, the Party's involvement in accounting firms' decision-making process, provision of professional services, and construction of internal culture (Paper II).

The Party-building work has made significant progress in indigenous accounting firms. Such integration with the Communist Party was found to have impacted their operations from on at least two levels: (1) at the organisational level, the governance structures of these accounting firms have been interwoven with the Communist Party priorities through mechanisms such as concurrent posts (e.g. the Party secretary can hold an administrative role); and (2) at the individual level, the line between audit techniques and the Party-building work has become increasingly blurred. Chinese practitioners working in these firms not only need to know accounting and auditing standards but also need to uphold another set of political acts (e.g. wearing the Party badge when practicing) (Paper II).

By contrast, the Party-building work in the Big Four has encountered difficulties, as certain foreign partners were concerned about the purpose of such work, arguably resulting in a limited impact of the Communist Party doctrines within these firms. Indeed, senior members of the Big Four in China were more entrepreneurial and consistent with Big Four partners in western and particularly Anglo-American societies, emphasising the commercial exchange of expertise (Paper IV; see also Spence et al., 2017). In such organisational settings, Chinese practitioners, by drawing upon the surrounding, commercially-driven discourses, tend to actively construct their own commercialised professional identity through individual interpretation and subjectivity. However, with the gradual advance of the Party-building

work and the diffusion of the Communist Party doctrines in the Big Four, it will be necessary to observe the future adaptation of the Big Four and the impact that this may have on practitioners' understanding of what it means to be a public accountant in these firms.

Overall, the CICPA's connection of its "Larger and More Competitive" strategy with the interests and priorities of the Communist Party gave strong political backing to the status of indigenous accounting firms. Such political backing greatly legitimated the CICPA's interests and priorities in developing a home-grown profession and, more importantly, secured the crucial support of other Chinese state actors. The CICPA has expressed its clear desire to maintain its strategic alignment with the state (Paper II). Indeed, within such strategic alignment, the CICPA, through the activities of the state, has obtained the functional space to pursue its nationalistic approach to professional development. At the moment, indigenous accounting firms are able to develop head-to-head with the Big Four in China within the legal framework and rules of the unified market (Paper II). This indicates that a relatively stable Chinese public accounting domain, centred on a very nationalistic approach to professional development, has been established.

6.2 Contributions and further insights

The interaction perspective advanced here is more productive as it helps one to view accounting professionalisation in China as an open-ended process with multiple occupational outcomes. In the past four decades, the prevailing meaning of accounting professionalism in the Chinese public accounting domain appears to have transitioned as circumstances changed, being gradually constructed as political, technical, and nationalistic.

Based on this interaction perspective, this thesis offers a number of further insights that may serve as a "vantage point" for conducting future research on the development of the Chinese public accounting profession. These insights are the subject of discussion in the following sections of this chapter.

6.2.1 The double-hand of the Chinese state: maintaining the functional space for the development of the Chinese public accounting profession

By presenting the development of the Chinese public accounting profession as the outcome of interactions between different actors, each with their own distinctive resources, interests, and priorities, this thesis draws scholarly attention to the contested nature of the process of accounting professionalisation wherein the state is characterised not simply as dominant. In this thesis, the state is found to have engaged with other actors (e.g. the CICPA and the Big Four) in the process of accounting professionalisation by pursuing a dual policy of negotiation and compromise to motivate compliance, on one hand, and coercive enforcement, on the other. This double hand of the state is generally understood as the “China model”, referring to “China’s approach to the establishment of free-market capitalism under the umbrella of an authoritarian one-party state that emphasises political stability above all else. In short, the China model is a combination of economic freedom and political oppression” (Bell, 2015, p. 179). It reflects a fundamental dilemma embedded within Deng Xiaoping’s reformist policy of balancing the preservation of political orthodoxy (i.e. building “socialism with Chinese characteristics” under the Communist Party leadership) against pushing forward reforms to make China a “strong” country (i.e. achieving the goal of the “Four Modernisations”) (Schram, 1988). In terms of the development of the Chinese public accounting profession, this thesis sees the state as maintaining a dynamic functional space wherein both economic freedom and political oppression are the obvious means by which social order is constructed. In this vein, the story of accounting professionalisation in China is one of a “disengaging” state that created structures and has gradually loosened them (at least partially) to the extent that the authority of the state is not challenged. This particular relationship between the state and the Chinese public accounting profession opens up different possibilities for change to the institutional arrangements of the Chinese public accounting profession. The direction of change, however, is not irreversible, since new socio-economic conditions and political struggles can arrest and reverse outcomes.

6.2.2 The CICPA and the development of the Chinese public accounting profession

While pursuing what many other national professional bodies have done (i.e. seeking to build a home-grown and credible profession), the CICPA has also

done something rather more unusual in the way it has engaged with the established powerhouses that are the Big Four. In other countries, the development of the national profession has been characterised by the rise and dominance of the Big Four; in contrast, the rise of the national profession in China is currently being defined in terms of the restructuring of the established influence and power of the Big Four (see also Samsonova-Taddei and Humphrey, 2014; Macve, 2020).

This was largely done by the CICPA through employing a critical rhetoric aimed at challenging the status of the Big Four, devising concrete policies in favour of the indigenous profession, and meeting the political demands of the state. In return, the CICPA was able to build momentum for the cultivation of recognisably indigenous accounting firms to become China's own "Big N" firms, which would be capable of becoming true alternatives to the Big Four domestically and globally. The shifting nature of the CICPA's capacity for agency reflects the elements of both autonomy and state control embodied in the concept of socialist corporatism. On one hand, the CICPA can be regarded as an "social organisation" (社会团体 or *shè huì tuán tǐ*) created in the social space proffered by the state under Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening-up" policy. The CICPA's agency derived from the state's transferring of various duties and tasks in relation to accounting firms and public accountants during the post-Mao reform era. On the other hand, the CICPA is a "public-service organisation" (事业单位 or *shì yè dān wèi*) operating under the auspices of a state that retains the power to intervene as circumstances necessitate. This tension between functioning as an "independent social" and a "public-service" organisation has very much characterised the history of the CICPA over the last four decades. Consequently, the CICPA's capacity for agency appears to be both delicate and fragile, requiring interpretation as well as adaptation to changing socio-political conditions over time.

6.2.3 The Big Four and the development of the Chinese public accounting profession

With their advancing power, global accounting firms such as the Big Four have long been recognised as political and cultural actors embedded in networks traversing the business and political milieus acting on the stage of professionalisation, regulation, and organisational management (Cooper and Robson, 2006, 2009; Cooper et al., 2020). The expansion of the Big Four in China is another episode in these firms' longer history of global expansion.

The Big Four's expansion in China has been deeply intertwined with the country's evolving institutional context. The agency of the Big Four was found to be most significant at specific conjunctural moments when their competence coincided with the forms of institutional instability emerging in the Chinese public accounting domain and the new requirements generated. Outside of these specific conjunctural moments, the Big Four would not have been able to overcome initial barriers, to shape institutional change in the selective ways they did and establish a leading presence in the Chinese audit market. Control of this expansion process was not fully realised by the Big Four as they were affected by the actions of other actors such as the Chinese state and the CICPA. The interactions witnessed imply ongoing change in the Big Four's surrounding institutional context and, consequently, in their capacity for agency. This insight lends further support to the previous research that has underscored that the successful establishment of the Big Four in new markets, while bolstered by their work in actively shaping local institutional arrangements of public accounting, is inevitably made possible by the evolving national institutional contexts (see e.g. Caramanis, 2002; Ramirez, 2010).

6.2.4 The individual practitioners and the development of the Chinese public accounting profession

An important aspect of the process of accounting professionalisation revolves around how individual practitioners construct the particular identity of the "ideal professional" (Chua et al., 2019). This particular identity entails a shared understanding of what being an "ideal professional" means, an understanding that can influence auditors' behaviours and alter their sense of self at work. As seen in Paper IV, individual practitioners themselves are obviously the key actors in their own development. By examining the experience of auditors in a Big Four accounting firm in China, this thesis advances the literature on the commercialisation process in the public accounting profession by demonstrating that, in addition to the coercive force of macro-institutional structures imposed by accounting firms, there is also a cognitive component operating at the micro level of individuals whose interpretation and subjectivity can further enact institutional change. Notably, individual practitioners construct their identities through the taking up of surrounding identity scripts. The recurring identity scripts within the clan-like audit teams are especially powerful together because they are not externally imposed on the interviewees but are enacted by the self, exercised on the self, and rationalised as critical to the self's emerging commercialised professional identity. The prevalence of these scripts both mediates explanations of events

and legitimates demanding practices, potentially rendering alternative accounts of life and work problematic or at least muted. At the same time, individual practitioners learn to regulate the self in ways that legitimate their claims to a commercialised professional identity.

This insight has important implications for understanding the commercialisation process in the public accounting profession. Although external influences cannot be denied, the influence of scripts on individuals is often modulated by their reflective gaze, which is involved in trying to make sense of surrounding events. In the process, scripts can be reflectively ignored, rejected, adhered to, and translated by individuals (Gendron and Spira, 2010). Once scripts are adhered to, the individual's identity is more or less established: he or she then acts as a bearer of scripts in daily practices.

In summary, this chapter has illustrated in greater detail the ways in which interactions between actors have shaped the process of accounting professionalisation in China over time. As shown in Table 8, studying this process through the interaction perspective requires the analysis of an array of actors operating at a range of different scales. Each actor has a distinct set of interests, priorities, resources and strategies, and interacts with one another in various modes. Such a perspective helps to further uncover the empirical story of Chinese professional accounting development.

7. Implications and future research directions

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the implications of the findings of this thesis for accounting professionalisation in developing countries in the globalised era. It also suggests directions for future research based on the contributions made in this thesis.

7.1 Implications for accounting professionalisation in developing countries

Over the past several decades, accounting professionalisation, which was traditionally governed by nation states, has become increasingly transnational in nature. International harmonisation of financial accounting and auditing standards (around IFRS and ISA), together with pressures for the mutual recognition of professional credentials obtained in other jurisdictions, are nowadays dismantling what some prominent representatives of the accounting services industry (i.e. the Big Four) refer to as “national regulatory barriers” to the creation of a global market in accounting services and a global professional workforce (Arnold, 2005, 2009, 2012). Such transformation has further evolved and accelerated in the context of what is commonly referred to as the new international financial architecture (NIFA) – a regulatory regime that Wade (2007a, p. 115) calls the “standards-surveillance-compliance” system. As a response to several major financial crises in the 1990s, this regime has been drafted by a US-led institutional complex. International financial institutions such as IMF, World Bank, and Financial Stability Forum, and a gamut of private organisations (e.g. International Accounting Standards Board and IFAC), have been used to formulate and enforce these standards of “best practice”. The theory was that countries whose institutions complied more with these standards would gain better access to finance than those that complied less, and that this would induce them to comply, reducing systemic risk in the

international financial system as a result (Wade, 2007a, 2007b; cf. Humphrey et al., 2009). Within the framework of NIFA, transnational accounting regulation has emerged as, in the words of Humphrey and Loft (2009, p. 222), “a contested interplay between a range of market actors and private and public (regulatory) authorities”. In effect, it is a “moving puzzle”, a developing form of coordinated network governance where the international regulators and the international profession are bound together by moral suasion rather than international law (Humphrey and Loft, 2009, p. 223).

Nevertheless, for accounting professionalisation in developing countries, the consequences of this transformation are non-trivial. Indeed, the regime adopted by the international institutions that make up the NIFA is one that has been criticised for being dominated by the US and a few other advanced western capitalist countries, allowing developing countries very little influence. Wade (2007a) contends that the “standards-surveillance-compliance” system has essentially fostered a narrowing of the policy space, pushing the Anglo-Americanisation of developing countries:

It pushed national economies toward one particular kind of capitalism – the Anglo-American type – and shrunk the scope of “policy space” for these countries still further than did the prescriptions of the Washington Consensus. Where the latter insisted on liberalizing the market, deregulation and fiscal austerity, the Post-Washington Consensus could be summed up by the commandment: “standardize the market” (Wade, 2007a, p. 116).

This narrowing policy space is manifested in the domain of accounting professionalisation whereby a complex nexus of interlocking institutions, including transnational professional and regulatory organisations and international accounting firms, are among those promoting that a peculiar type of professionalism, deeply rooted in Anglo-American societies, could and should be made universal across the world (Suddaby et al., 2007; Muzio et al., 2013; Boussebaa and Faulconbridge, 2019). In this process, for developing countries, the roles and strategies of traditionally state-based regulators, namely, national professional bodies, are said to be constrained by the transnational arena governing the accounting profession (Hopper et al., 2017). For example, in his analysis of the development of Greek professional accounting development, Caramanis (2002) concludes that certain dominant nation states (i.e. advanced western capitalist countries such as the US and the UK) and transnational regulatory organisations exert significant influence over other nation states, which often cede power and have little scope in deciding their own path *vis-à-vis* their national professions:

In the internationalised economy and polity of the globalisation era, inward-looking ideologies and discourses rooted in nationalist sentiments ... are increasingly the politics of losers (Caramanis, 2002, p. 401).

Caramanis (2002, p. 404) advances something akin to an “end of the state” thesis when he emphasises the “retreating elements of the sovereign nation-state system”, with decision-making authority in many important areas of national professions being surrendered to international institutions.

However, just as the relevance of IFRS and western-based accounting and auditing practices to developing countries has been questioned²⁰, so may the associated efforts to influence the organisation of accounting practitioners. Current transnational accounting regulation is likely to lock in the position of Anglo-American models of accounting professionalisation. The route to professional development is often seen to be the route of unmediated convergence to Anglo-American models of accounting professionalisation, supplemented with domestic institutional reforms to make convergence viable. This convergence has become, for all practical purposes, a substitute for a development strategy despite its shaky empirical basis and how it seriously distorts policymakers’ priorities, potentially curbing the ability of developing countries to carry through policies that favour the growth of their own accounting professions (Hopper et al., 2017). Indeed, according to Poullaos and Uche (2012), developing country professionalisation processes that are based upon Anglo-American models have tended to facilitate the domination of local accountancy arenas by a small cartel of international accounting firms (i.e. the Big Four), thereby fostering training geared to “outside” needs and inhibiting the generation of valuable context-specific knowledge. If one believes that “the accounting systems of a developing country should be relevant to the country’s needs rather than parody another country’s system” (Wallace 1990, p. 6), one might also be concerned if a developing country were to mimic or be otherwise influenced by the professionalisation processes of Anglo-American societies, in whole or in part (Poullaos and Uche, 2012). The question then becomes: What strategies are still viable for accounting professionalisation in developing countries today?

The Chinese experience provides further empirical support to the argument that, in the face of transnational accounting regulation, national professional bodies in developing countries are still prominent and need strengthening to

²⁰ See, for example, Wallace (1990), Wallace and Briston (1993), Perera (2012), and Hopper et al. (2017).

protect their fledging professions from the domination of the Big Four (Samsonova-Taddei and Humphrey, 2014; Hopper et al., 2017). According to Samsonova-Taddei and Humphrey (2014), two major competing tendencies can be observed in the recent strategic development of national professional bodies: on one hand, a growing homogeneity reflected in an embracing of global initiatives and arrangements and, on the other hand, increasing national-level heterogeneity and resistance to, or even rejection of, such globalising forces. Such tendencies are underpinned by a hierarchy of influence, wherein certain professional bodies play a more active role in (re)shaping the global priorities for practice and regulation, rather than merely following and complying with global initiatives and arrangements (Gillis et al., 2014; Samsonova-Taddei and Humphrey, 2014).

More particularly, the CICPA's agency as revealed in this thesis suggests the need for non-market measures of intervention and for centring accounting professionalisation on "development" principles rather than "standardisation" principles. Concretely, this would entail stronger preferences for a nationalistic approach to accounting professionalisation, and more legitimate scope for protection against the foray of established foreign powerhouses in the form of the Big Four. A central prescription for a "catch-up country" like China appears to be: to allow the playing field to operate freely, its late-developing public accounting profession must first be raised by *artificial measures* to that stage of development to which the Anglo-American professions have been elevated by head-start advantages. For the CICPA, the core tenet of nationalism is not anti-globalisation but that China must find its own unique path towards professional accounting development in the globalised era. This core tenet is operationalised by the political discourse of "building socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Hughes, 2006) in which the Chinese nation state has to be built by gaining access to the world's most advanced science and technology and creating commercial and cultural exchanges with all foreign countries but, concomitantly, rejecting anything deemed not to fit "Chinese characteristics" (Ezzamel and Xiao, 2015), including ideas or practices interpreted as threats to China's own interests. This discourse emphasises the selective importation of western state products to achieve a "synthetic combination of the best elements from the traditional and the modern, east and west" (Min and Galikowski, 1999, p. 160). This nationalistic approach is pragmatic in nature, deeply rooted in the Chinese philosophy of how to deal with western influences: "adapt foreign things to Chinese needs" (洋为中用 or

yáng wéi zhōng yòng). Informed by this approach²¹, the CICPA has envisioned the formation of a Chinese profession by selectively absorbing western accounting and auditing practices while still retaining an independent Chinese identity (i.e. a profession mainly comprising and controlled by indigenous accounting practitioners).

In pursuing this nationalistic approach to professional development, the CICPA must maintain a delicate balancing act *vis-à-vis* the state, on some occasions pursuing strategic intentions of its own and on others visibly having to follow specific state requirements and accept direct state intrusion in the Chinese public accounting profession. In this respect, the state-accounting profession dynamic in China is very different from the kind of interest group dynamics experienced in western, and particularly Anglo-American, countries.

In the western context characterised by a pluralist state, national professional bodies have been critically regarded as interest groups, or more potently, as “inescapably political bodies” (Willmott, 1986, p. 574), that derive power “from their organisational capacity” and seek to “continuously secure from the market and the state the right to control and regulate the supply of, and influence the demand for, accounting labour” (Willmott, 1986, p. 574). Accordingly, the role of the state is often examined within the context of how a profession seeks “to use the state merely to give it privileges, and to back up its power of monopolization and of self-regulation over its members” (Collins, 1990, p. 16). However, in the Chinese context characterised by a strong state, the CICPA was created in the social space proffered by the state as its responsibility for economic affairs shifted from direct interference to indirect administration. Within the overall framework of socialist corporatism, the CICPA obtains a certain degree of “autonomy”, and yet simultaneously the growth and range of that autonomy is subject to state intervention. In such a power dynamic, the state is managing a delicate space in which the CICPA is permitted to exercise a particular, but potentially shifting, degree of agency. Distinct from western professional bodies’ efforts to separate the profession from the state and secure “complete professional autonomy”, the CICPA – a late-starting body situated in the nexus of transnational accounting regulation – has been more pragmatic so as to gain control over the local trajectory of

²¹ A contrasting approach can be found in the experience of accounting professionalisation in the Czech Republic during the post-socialist transition era. With the government’s adherence to libertarian ideology and *laissez-faire* policies, the main unintended consequences of the transition era in accounting were that the principal gainers were the then Big Six. The domination of the Big Six helped the formation of a Czech profession that was relatively free of local control and lacked a distinctive Czech dimension (Seal et al., 1996, p. 505).

accounting professionalisation. To achieve this end, the CICPA has been working to strike a balance between state intervention and autonomy and also to become a catalyst for broad-based professional development efforts. Here, this balancing between state intervention and autonomy as manifested in the experience of the CICPA suggests an alternative state-accounting profession dynamic for fashioning the process of accounting professionalisation. I refer to this dynamic as “cooperative professional autonomy” under which professional development is the outcome of a synergetic process that combines the effects of active state intervention and the concerted efforts of the profession. The CICPA has facilitated the institutional embeddedness of the Chinese public accounting profession into the state structure to secure momentum for professional development. In particular, it has accepted a more intimate relationship with the Chinese Communist Party, securing a “political guarantee” from the Party-state to promote indigenous accounting firms in return for the CICPA committing to instil much greater Party representation and influence within such firms. Most significantly, Party membership has provided Chinese accounting practitioners with a sense of recognition and belonging to a “community” dedicated to the service of state modernisation through professionalism. The interaction between the CICPA and the Chinese Communist Party is producing a type of professionalism that emphasises political standing and a commitment to “nation-state building”. Consequently, the Chinese public accounting profession looks to be now diverging from current western-based audit systems whereby professionalisation is critically portrayed as being mainly driven by economic self-interest and as a strategy for the accounting occupation’s collective social advancement that helps to secure market monopoly power (Macdonald, 1995; Richardson, 2017); rather, it is connecting more closely to particular Communist Party doctrines, with important implications for what audit may come to represent in a modernising China. In this respect, it is perhaps conceptually more useful to leave the term “professionalism” open, more akin to a floating signifier than being conceived of in essentialised fashion, with meanings ascribed to it *a priori* (Spence et al., 2017). Much extant accounting literature with a focus on Anglo-American empirical contexts tends to define professionalism along lines such as “independence” (Suddaby et al., 2009) and “quality of service provision” (Sweeney and McGarry, 2011). Such definitions are, however, problematic in that they cling to notions of what a public accounting profession is, was, or perhaps should be (Spence et al., 2017), reflecting a somewhat unreflexive nostalgia for a “golden age” – when professional accounting labour was untainted by commercial concerns – that probably never existed (see e.g. Walker, 2004). In light of the Chinese experience, professionalism takes

different forms at different times; accordingly, the meaning attached to professionalism is largely malleable as a result of an array of key actors vying for influence over the institutional arrangements of the Chinese public accounting profession.

Taken together, China's embrace of accounting professionalisation appears to be on China's, rather than on the west's terms. China appears to be not completely beholden to the US or to transnational regulatory organisations. Given the sheer size of accounting firms in China (which are still rapidly expanding), it seems "inevitable that this will alter the balance of the structure, management and culture of the current international accounting firms (e.g. the Big Four) and may also alter the structure and processes of transnational accounting regulation and standard setting" (Macve, 2020, p. 643; cf. Paper I). The historical development of an increasingly significant Chinese public accounting profession provides a substantial counterweight to the extant representations in the literature (see e.g. Caramanis, 2002) of the dominant players and influences on national professional accounting development. The current transnational accounting regulation needs to reflect a wider concern with slowing the momentum towards the "standardisation" of national professions around Anglo-American models. Conversely its mandate and priorities need to reflect a concern with expanding national "policy space" (Wade, 2007a) that is responsive to local socio-political and economic demands.

7.2 Future research directions

For research on actors at the national level. The Chinese state has undoubtedly attracted the most scholarly attention. The extant literature tends to represent the Chinese state as comprising the various "agencies of the government, with authority to decree the practices that accountants must follow and to maintain an enforcement mechanism" (Hao, 1999, p. 288). It is surprising that there is a paucity of studies focusing on the particular significance of the Chinese Communist Party in the professionalisation process. As an additional layer of governance, the Chinese Communist Party operates in parallel with and controls the government at all levels of the national hierarchy (Zhang et al., 2014). At the moment, the Chinese Communist Party has established a significant presence in the Chinese public accounting profession through the installation of Party branches. Paper II has made initial efforts to open up the relationship of the CICPA with the Chinese Communist Party. The day-to-day impact of such a relationship on Chinese professional accounting development

merits more research in the future, especially with respect to whether the CICPA's support for indigenous accounting firms and its need to balance the delicate relationship with the Chinese Communist Party is stimulating the development of distinctive conceptions of accounting professionalism in China (see also Chua et al., 2019; cf. Paper I).

For research on actors at the international level. Little has been done to illuminate the significance of transnational accounting agencies such as IFAC in the process of accounting professionalisation in China. In seeking to enter the world stage and advance its global presence, the CICPA became a member of CAPA in 1996 and subsequently became a member of IFAC in 1997. However, little has been asked about the implications of such a strategy for the state as well as for the local public accounting profession (Poullaos and Uche, 2012; Chua et al., 2019). In particular, the CICPA's admission into IFAC was a complex political process characterised by a decade-long negotiation between the CICPA and IFAC. With the growing importance of transnational accounting governance, research that fosters an understanding of the strategic agendas and activities of the CICPA and how it relates to transnational accounting agencies would be a welcome addition to the literature on accounting professionalisation in China. Part of this relationship can be explored through, for example, examining the role played by the CICPA representatives in these agencies, as they are now making increasing contributions to international accounting and auditing institutions such as International Accounting Standards Board and International Auditing and Assurance Standards Board (see e.g. Macve, 2020).

Yet another research possibility relates to the development of accounting firms in China. It is clear that the entanglement of local norms and values (e.g. *guanxi* and a paternalistic leadership style) in China means that the Big Four in China cannot function in the ways they do in western societies (Gillis, 2014b). Today, with the global expansion of Chinese companies, many indigenous accounting firms need to follow their clients and expand overseas either through establishing their own international networks or joining existing second-tier international networks (Macve, 2020). There is still much to be learned about the operation of these indigenous accounting firms, their expansion strategies and tactics, their interpenetration of local and global values and practices, and their influence within and in connection to international networks. Given the dominant size that Chinese member firms may have within such international networks, significant questions can be asked about how international accounting firms, hitherto Anglo-American dominated and part of the neo-

liberal world order, may change, providing a key field for future research of wide interest (Macve, 2020; cf. Paper I).

For research on individual practitioners. At the moment, although as important aspects of accounting professionalisation in China, issues in relation to individual practitioners represent a nascent research field that has not been thoroughly studied and warrants more scholarly attention in the future. It is especially important to understand how macro-level constructs trickle down and diffuse to the micro level and become relevant to the identities and practices of individual practitioners. In other words, future research needs to link the different levels of analysis to gain an understanding of how the interplay between national and international influences has affected the formation and transformation of identities and practices at the individual level. For example, the organisational processes and standards of the Big Four are recognised to have coexisted with the priorities of national actors, meaning that there are multiple sites “where professional identities are mediated, formed and transformed” (Cooper and Robson, 2006, p. 416). The influence of the Big Four can arguably complement if not displace national occupation-wide norms regulating how individual practitioners behave and how professional services are produced and consumed (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012). As such, further studies of individual practitioners themselves and the impact that competing national and international influences and sources of authority and legitimacy have on their identities and practices seem to be urgently needed. After all, it is individual practitioners who must fulfil the institutional requirements, which are “subject to interpretation, manipulation, revision, and elaboration by those subject to them” (Scott, 2008, p. 430). In light of the rapid changes in the Chinese public accounting profession over the last four decades and the ever-changing mindsets of new generations of CPAs exposed to university education (in China and abroad) and overseas experience, examination of individual-level dynamic is necessary to generate a deeper understanding of how conceptions of accounting professionalism are constructed (Macve, 2020; cf. Paper I).

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