

Why Trade Associations matter to internationalizing firms: a study from China

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Management and International Business

Sep 2022

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in International Business, The University of Auckland, 2022.

Abstract

The overarching research objective of the thesis is to acknowledge the roles of trade associations (TAs) and to identify to what extent TAs perform these roles. The primary purpose is to learn how TAs as influential actors support the internationalization of Chinese firms. The increasing level of their internationalization has captured scholarly attention in the past two decades although it is not known whether firms are motivated to be involved in TA activities to obtain the competitive advantage required for internationalization. A mixed-method research design is employed to conduct interviews and surveys with TA representatives and firm representatives from various trade associations. Following a theoretical framework (Chapter 2) and the methods deployed (Chapter 3), the thesis is presented as a series of three papers (Chapters 4 to 6).

Chapter 4 finds that TAs have certainly been recognized as a platform for developing international networks. This study identifies three roles looming large in the existing studies: industry voice, broker, and counsellor. In these three roles, TAs collect and disseminate information and have a substantial influence on the internationalization of Chinese firms. This chapter also pinpoints two types of TAs that have been coexisting in China, namely, government-organized TA and grass-roots TA. This study captures nuanced differences between these two types of TAs in serving the three roles.

Chapter 5 examines the way in which TAs are affecting internationalization of Chinese firms. In this chapter, the three roles of TAs in Chapter 4 are examined in association with knowledge acquisition. The chapter identifies TAs' expertise and capacity to motivate the knowledge development of member firms and finds that the empowerment of TAs enables them to represent member firms and mobilize resources for their member firms. Results show that a stronger engagement with TA has a positive effect on knowledge acquisition. Institutional market knowledge and network knowledge arise from the findings.

Chapter 6 discusses possible extensions of the findings in Chapter 4 and 5. Beyond gauging an impact on a broader definition of internationalization, this chapter focuses on overseas foreign direct investment (OFDI), a specific stage of internationalization. TAs are conceived of as a catalyst to promote OFDI strategy in Chapter 6. This paper conceptualizes that a firm enhances its managerial ties through interlocking connections with other TA member firms, and acquires organizational learning to boost OFDI activities.

This study addresses a need to understand and foster greater awareness of the role of TAs in the internationalization arena. This thesis contributes to international business theory by emphasizing how TAs gauge influence on the business practice of member firms.

Acknowledgement

After reflecting on my four and a half years of PhD study, I realize that this journey was full with difficulties and hardships. When new PhD students ask me which stage is most difficult, I have to admit that none of them are easy. However, the fulfilment is also incomparable. I appreciate the training enabled by doing PhD and I am a more confident person now. The language improvement and skillset acquired through the study are priceless achievements. I could not have imagined finishing a PhD degree, which requires perseverance, persistence, and good academic writing.

I want to thank both of my supervisors. Both of them brought the weight of their considerable experience and knowledge to this project. Associate professor, Maureen, thank you for your significant support and insights that helped me write this work. You are like the beacon of my life, always keeping up my morale and cheering me up. When I initially worried if it was too late to start a PhD study, you reassured me that it's never too late to start something. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to Dr. Brent, who offered very humble and soothing advice when I was stuck in my teaching role. I am also grateful to Gordon, who detected my potential and referred my application to my supervisors. Finally, I would like to thank the examiners, especially Professor Siah, whose down-to-earth report provided pragmatic feedback that will be helpful for journal submission.

I would also like to give special thanks to my close PhD colleagues, Ansab, Mario, Aida, Lahiru, and Aakanksha. They were so patient in bearing with my dumping and whining. Thank you for keeping me company when I was in a blue mood, which turned out to be more often than not. I also want to thank my bestie Ying who is not in academia and may never will come cross this acknowledgement. She is so supportive and encouraging when I was hesitated to move to a brand-new country to pursue a degree from scratch. She was always there when I am in doom and gloom, making me stay positive and encouraging me to plough on ahead.

Finally, I want to thank my family members. Thank you to my husband, Kai, who stuck with me through thick and thin. Thanks must also go to my parents, Lianxing and Xiurong, for the endless love and support they have given me throughout my life. Lastly, I want to thank my son, Tony, who always brags about his mom being a PhD, driving me to overcome the hurdles and achieve this degree.

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Paper status at time of submission

Paper status at time of submission: an earlier version of Chapter 4 was accepted and presented in a Journal of Global Strategy PDW and revised based on feedback from the reviewers and conference attendees. A later version of Chapter 4 was accepted and presented at the 2022 Australia and New Zealand International Business Academy (ANZIBA). Chapter 5 was accepted and presented in a Journal of International Business Studies PDW at AIB Asia Pacific Conference 2022 . Chapter 6 was accepted and presented to the 2021 Academy of International Business Conference (AIB).

Thesis formatting and style

This thesis complies with the format of thesis with publication. This thesis uses the American Psychological Association 7th Edition citation format throughout. Reference lists have been removed and aggregated at the end of the document and tables and figures have been renumbered to relate to their sequencing in the thesis overall.

1 Chapter 1 Introduction

This study investigates the overarching research questions: what roles TAs play in a Chinese context and how they affect the internationalization of Chinese firms in such process? The research question aims to gain a deeper understanding of how trade associations (TA) support the internationalization of Chinese firms. By investigating the specific roles that TAs play in this context, this study aims to shed light on their impact on the internationalization of Chinese firms. International Business (IB) scholarship is intrigued by the rapid internationalization of Chinese firms. In particular, we conjecture a possible knowledge acquisition process through the TAs' network. This study investigates the relationship between the role of TAs and knowledge acquisition for internationalization. The findings make explicit the function of TA for the internationalization of their memberships.

An important component of this study is to examine the potentially different roles of two types of Chinese TA in facilitating the establishment of networks. These two types of TA have coexisted in China, namely, the government-organized TA and the grass-roots TA. I surmise that the government-organized TA which were initiated by government ministries and enjoy privileges exert a distinct effect on member firms' ability to acquire the knowledge for internationalization, as compared to grass-roots TAs. The privilege is enabled by representational monopoly wherein government-organized TA have easier access to favourable policies.

1.1 Chapter overview

The rapid internationalization of Chinese firms is a topic of interest to academics, businesspeople and governments globally. Although the importance of networks building in support of internationalization in China has been demonstrated repeatedly, the studies of intermediary agencies like TAs is scant. Little attention has been paid to TAs as a collective form that firms can utilize to engage the government and shape the external environment. There is a need for studies that examine the functions of such intermediaries. Therefore, exploring the role of TAs in providing support to member firms and offering international opportunities would be a valuable contribution to the existing literature. Chapter 1 outlines

the purpose and structure of the thesis, positioning its contribution to the international business (IB) field. Focusing on the entity of TAs, the thesis maps out a landscape in which the roles of TAs stimulate knowledge acquisition in support of internationalization. The thesis aims to identify contributions made by TAs to the growing outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) phenomenon from China. Specially, it links the managerial ties developed by firms through their engagement with TAs and the organizational learning they mobilize for internationalization. This thesis adopts a by-publication format rather than the format of a traditional monograph. The theoretical framework (Chapter 2) and method (Chapter 3) establish the foundations for Chapters 4 to 6, consisting of three research papers presented at conferences. Chapter 4 explores the roles of TA serving as facilitators of networks and identifies the difference of the two types of TAs. Chapter 5 further investigates the relationship between the roles of TA and knowledge acquisition in support of internationalization. Chapter 6 develops a conceptual model to suggest a potential contribution of TAs to OFDI from China by enhancing organizational learning through managerial ties. Chapter 7 concludes the work with an overview of a summary of contributions and managerial implications.

1.2 Understanding TAs as constituents of NGOs

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are the term given to “those nonprofit associations focused on social change via political influence, or to those providing social and humanitarian services in highly politicized cross-national context” (Eden, 2004; p. 564). NGOs “specialize ...in discovering issues relevant for all society, contributing possible solutions to problems, interpreting values, producing good reasons, and invalidating others” (Habermas, 1996, p. 485). The non-commercial goals are emphasized by Baur and Arenas (2014) that NGOs are considered legal, cultural, social and environmental groups without commercial goals. NGOs implement educational and advocacy activities (Balassiano & Chandler, 2010), which are activities aimed at “enhancing citizen involvement and participation in the implementation of decisions to influence and change priorities for allocation of resources” (Schmid et al., 2008, p. 582).

NGOs are assumed as one stakeholder among many others (e.g. Brown & Moore, 2001; Connor & Shumate, 2014). Scholarships in management field have contended that

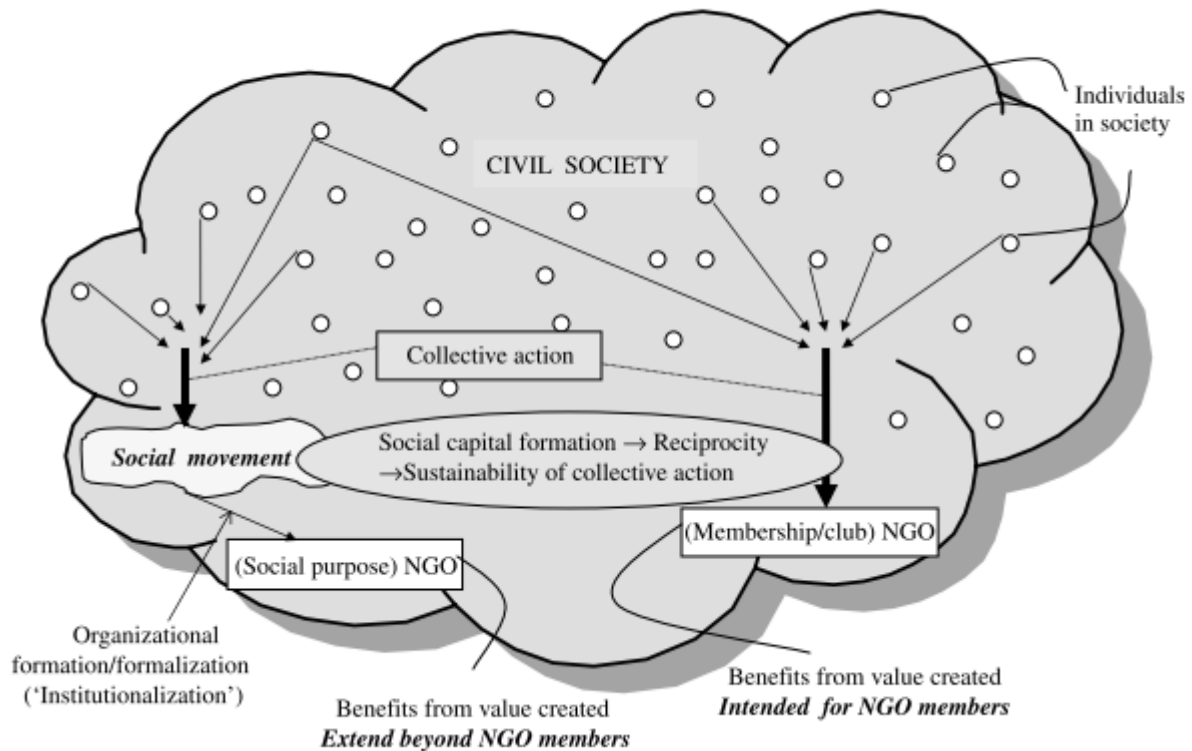
managerial attention has been given to the legitimacy of NGO as legal stakeholders, an alternative to traditional shareholders. NGOs may work with firms or confront with them through actions such as boycotts or protests (Arenas et al., 2009). Firms are motivated to adjust their strategies to meet the ever-changing needs of NGOs for the sake of avoiding perilous consequences (Eesley & Lenox, 2006). Although NGOs were frequently mentioned as one stakeholder, it was found that they are not given enough attention in the studies in which they were considered (Laasonen, 2010).

A wide range of research focused on the business-NGO interface, dealing with the global or international perspective of the business-NGO relationship. Some scholars have acknowledged that the emergence of NGOs has compounded the relationship between business and government (Doh & Teegen, 2002). It is an emerging phenomenon that NGOs leadership is given 'space' in intergovernmental organizations like The World Trade Organization, The World Bank Group etc. (Teegen et al., 2004). Later, numerous articles have focused on the interplay among three dominant actors: business-NGO-government. This means that all interactions among the three actors involve political action, with economic actors (companies), civil society actors (NGOs), and governmental actors (states) all playing a role.

Much contemporary literature can be sourced to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) on the likely impact gauged by NGOs on social and environmental issues. NGOs are able to provide services to urge others to contribute to societal welfare (Teegen et al., 2004). A stream of studies on NGOs is particularly related to multinational enterprises (MNEs) whose foreign investment activities are controversial and draw attention to social and ethical concerns (Doh & Lucea, 2013; Marano & Tashman, 2012). NGOs are actively engaged in recent trade negotiations and disputes and are involved in MNEs' investment projects and decision-making (Doh & Teegen, 2002). NGOs have generated a significant impact on MNEs in global, national and local contexts and on both home and host governments (Teegen et al., 2004). NGOs create a dynamic co-evolutionary phenomenon. Instead of only concentrating on the multinational firm as a well-known global organization (Laasonen, 2010), some other research finds that NGOs and small-to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) jointly work to deploy CSR practices (Huq et al., 2014).

Figure 1-1

Civil society: relevant units of analysis, concepts, and processes



Note. This figure was produced by Teegen et al., in 2004, summarizing relevant units of analysis, concepts, and processes of NGO. From “The importance of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in global governance and value creation: An international business research agenda”, by Teegen et al., in 2004, *Journal of International Business Studies*, Volume (35), p463–483. Copyright 2004 by Elsevier.

Nonmarket environment is used to depict the relationships that a company establishes with two external stakeholders: governmental bodies and NGOs (Doh & Lucea, 2013). It becomes readily apparent that IB scholars are increasingly paying attention to the role of nonmarket environment. NGOs are important actors in the nonmarket environment of firms. A stream of study is rapidly growing in a relevance to the role of NGO in the global setting. IB scholars have increasingly acknowledged NGOs as important participants in the multifaceted relationships between business, government, and NGOs (e.g. Boddewyn & Doh, 2011;

Teegen et al., 2004). Recent trends would seem to indicate that NGOs are growingly operating as institutional “insiders” in both their advocacy and operation roles. As such, NGOs should be included in negotiations during the discourse of investment projects. In their seminal work, Teegen et al. (2004) propose using an NGO lens to extend Peng’s proposition “what determines the international success and failure of firms?”. The role of NGO is prominent when MNEs enter foreign countries, as NGO activism is likely to occur when MNEs generate significant and attributable negative externalities while NGO involvement can help reduce transaction cost and enhance social development (Vachani et al., 2009). Collaborating with NGOs enables firms to access valuable resources and gain a better understanding of the nonmarket environment. Such connections enhance the firms’ capability in different ways, including preferential access to government contracts and subsidies, and being better informed and more attractive to potential partners because of the endorsement of NGOs.

Van Tuijl (1999) distinguished between operational and advocacy NGOs. Advocacy NGOs engage in lobbying efforts directed towards government and corporations, while operational NGOs provide services such as health, education and human relief. Teegen et al. (2004) categorize NGOs into two different types: social purpose and membership/club based on initiatives, as shown in Figure 1-1. Social purpose NGOs aim to promote social change to improve the quality of life in entire communities. Membership NGOs “tend(s) to promote the material, social, or political interests of their own members” (Putnam, 2002, p.11). Environmental protection is the focus among the emerging literature investigating voluntary initiatives to regulations (Tashman & Rivera, 2010). I will not deal with social purpose NGOs in this thesis; however, my thesis focuses on membership NGOs because the overarching research question is to unpack the phenomenon of internationalization. Therefore membership NGOs are appropriate for this study to investigate the organizational practice in the business field.

Service and advocacy are the main offerings of NGOs (O’Connell, 1994). Schmid et al. (2008) defined advocacy as those “activities aimed at influencing the social and civic agenda and at gaining access to the arena where decisions that affect the social and civil life are made” (p. 582). The advocacy roles of NGOs are well established in the literature (e.g. Haack et al., 2012; Cranenburgh et al., 2013). NGOs are often used to develop citizen’s business in

United States (Balassiano & Chandler, 2010). In addition to providing convenient services, NGOs also have a voice in policy debates and can influence issues such as health, education, and civil rights (Balassiano & Chandler, 2010). While many scholars emphasize the advocacy role of NGOs, some critical value is derived from their operational activities (Barrow & Jennings, 2001). For example, the Red Cross provides relief efforts and the World Wide Fund for Wildlife monitors natural resources; such operational activities provide broad societal benefits extending beyond their original mission (Woller & Parsons, 2002).

As illustrated in Figure 1-1, TAs are a form of club, wherein members, in this case, can improve their own utility by joining forces (Teegen et al., 2004). As a club, TAs serve the collective interests of its members. As a voluntary NGO, TA seeks to serve the greater good, even if it means doing so at the expense of individual firm members. The classification of associations membership has been summarized by Bennett (1998) who noted that business associations representing companies and professional associations representing individuals such as instructors, consultants, and some business service providers are the primary focus of academic and policy interest in trade associations. To maintain membership, firms must comply with the rules set by the TA. Failure to do so may result in cancellation of membership and expulsion of the offending firms. This situation could be captured in many cases pertaining to environmental protection. If a manufactory violates the law and their affiliated TA will enforce the regulation and makes individual firms to follow the law though might sacrifice individual interest. TAs are also called membership NGOs.

The existing research debated the peril side of TAs, being self-interested. An extreme example of self-interest would be astroturfing. A small number of large firms formed TAs, disguised like NGOs but actually they are fraudulent. Astroturf campaigns can generally be defined as the activities of fake grass-roots organizations usually sponsored by large corporations. In this thesis, I will not consider those TAs which are bogus NGOs with NGOs mask. I contend that TAs play an important role rather than self-interested or colluding partners of large firms. The thesis directs attention to the prominence of TAs being effective actors though acknowledging the peril whose self-serving objectives are detrimental to society. The focal attention is those genuine TAs who are not self-interested, trying to align the interests of members with social purpose. Those TAs that represent a small number of large firms and aim to advance their interests by launching Astroturf campaigns are excluded

from this research purpose. Drawing parallels to differentiate the commonality and idiosyncrasy of genuine or fraudulent NGOs is beyond the research scope of this thesis. While research on NGOs is abundant, most only tapped into civil society-related NGOs which focus on social issues like discrimination towards minority or environmental protection problems, neglecting the economic or business field. Research has not delved into the dynamism and changes in the policy of phasing out government control over NGOs. Different cultures and political systems embrace varied concepts of NGOs (Yu et al., 2019). The perspective adopted in this thesis is deliberately set within the Chinese context rather than an international focus. Given the unique characteristics of TAs in China, it is necessary to clarify their definition in this context, as they differ from the international context. This research aims to close the research gap whereby studies of TAs in a centrally controlled political regime, in our case, China, are missing. Understanding the sphere of influence of TAs in such a context creates a new avenue for deciphering the internationalization phenomenon.

The following section elaborates on the classification of TAs. Understanding these facets enhances our understanding of TAs and encourages greater recognition of the contributions of this thesis to the field. The classifications of associations have been presented by Bennett (1998). Seven types of association were formed and are summarized:

- (1) Associations of companies: membership is predominantly companies;
- (2) Associations of owner-managers: membership mainly consists of individual business owners;
- (3) Associations of self-employed professionals: membership is formed of instructors, consultants, and some business service providers, primarily focusing on professional, leisure and media services directly supplied to the final consumer customer rather than to other firms;
- (4) Professional associations of individuals: predominantly covering professional services sectors including lawyers, accountants, engineers, managers, medical specialists.
- (5) Mixed associations: these have a spread of membership drawn across all the previous categories of companies—individuals, self-employed, and owner-managers.
- (6) Federations: these are associations of associations whose members are themselves associations.

(7) Chambers of Commerce and industry: these are locally based associations which vary greatly in size, activities, and geographical extent. The main services offered by Chambers are the support of international trade and training.

Teckchandani (2014) also identified seven categories of membership associations: TAs, professional associations, political associations, civic and social associations, social advocacy associations, religious organizations, and labour unions based on a generally used classification developed by North American Industry Classification System. Classifications of associations were also found in a number of social surveys as shown in Table 1-1:

Table 1-1

A summary table of classification of TAs

Types of TAs	Description	Reference
7	Refer to the above discussion	Bennett (1998)
6	Refer to the above discussion	Teckchandani (2014)
15	Apart from trade associations and professional association, these associations are specified: sports, youth, parent–teacher, veteran, neighborhood, seniors, fraternal, ethnic, and literary associations, and self-help groups	Social Capital Benchmark Survey Codebook (2000)
14	Apart from trade and professional associations, these are specified: sports, school, ethnic, fraternal, youth, hobby, literary, veteran, and Greek associations.	General Social Survey Codebook (2004)

The above categories are based on the membership components. Some scholars classify the categories on both dimensions size and function and draw four types of TAs: Powerhouse, fast followers, orators and campaigners. Powerhouse TAs, as the name implies, are large and resourceful organizations. They have a reputation and are trusted, empowered with arbitration between private and public interests. They nurture close connections with government or regulatory organizations and are active actors in the process of making regulations (Streeck & Schmitter, 1985). Fast follower TAs, on the other hand, develop some negotiating powers between private and public interests and own some level of reputation and trust through

information exchange (Rajwani et al., 2015). However, the attention is more directed to internal sectoral activities such as developing new standards, sharing governance knowledge, community building, training and development while giving less weight on lobbying political actors. Orators, another classification of TAs, are normally small in size and the priority of focus is given to effective communication with member firms (Rajwani et al., 2015). There are less direct and frequent engagement with regulatory organizations or society at a broader level. Driving by their members' interests, they are seen to be involved in event management and online engagement. The number of employees of such kind TAs is usually minimum, and low external influence in terms of reputation and trust. They can effectively speak on behalf of members to propagate the objective and intent. In contrast, Campaigners, the fourth category TAs, are engaged in external campaigning and communication (Rajwani et al., 2015). Campaigners normally have a small central administrative team to make decisions. More often, campaigners are devoid of resources to lobby policymakers. They occasionally apply research findings to advocate by representing members, but communication is attached more focus rather than explicit lobbying.

My study is confined to TAs of companies, federations and Chamber of Commerce rather than professional associations. The defining distinction between TAs and professional associations is that professional associations have individual senior staff or managers as their members (Bennett & Robson, 2011). Our focus is the collective action of firms and TAs. As suggested by Andriessse and Van Helvoirt (2010) , Chambers of Commerce initiated an effort to form alliances across sectors in China. As such, federations and Chamber of Commerce fell into our investigated pool. Identifying TAs as meso-level actors between micro firm level and macro national level helps to explain the collective action phenomenon, further peeling off the layer of collective action. After setting the scene by clarifying that TAs fall under the broad NGO category and identifying which categories of TAs fell into the research scope of this thesis, we shift our discussion to why the impacts of TAs on internationalization are worth exploring.

1.3 Why study the influence of TAs on the internationalization of Chinese firms?

The major services of TAs have been recognized by a cadre of scholars. As representative of collective identity, and social and political actors, TAs are perceived as agents of collective identity and provide collective services including government lobbying, technical support, information services, exhibitions and training (Bennett, 1998; Boléat, 200; Mikamo, 2013). Hemphill (1992) delineated the range of TAs activities to collect data, educate member firms and facilitate standards development, debrief insurance programmes, connect with government and render legal assistance.

Doner & Schneider (2000) also summarize the service offering of TAs: macroeconomic stabilization and reform to reduce inflation and increase social stabilization; horizontal coordination including quota allocation and capacity reduction to prevent ruinous competition and alleviate inefficiencies, vertical coordination upstream and downstream to facilitate supply, price, and quality coordination; lowering the costs of information through sharing among members; setting standards to upgrade quality. It is observed that TAs develop templates and monitor industry behaviours in emerging economic sectors. TAs represent a collective voice for member firms to protect them against other collective actors, for example, unions. Member firms have access to information about competitors through activities initiated by TAs (De Figueiredo & Tiller, 2001). TAs are evident in making industry-wide decisions to policymakers (Drope & Hansen, 2009). Among the services, the dominant service is lobbying which channels information and is instrumentally relevant to policy issues (Drope & Hansen, 2009). Weak public administration, inadequate technical competence and political leadership are revealed in most developing country governments in association with the implementation of economic and social regulations (Saez, 1998). Thus, TAs performed a semi-government role: one side, lobbying the government for a collective interest of members; the other side supporting government in carrying out policy implementation.

My study intended to explore a relationship between internationalization and TAs whose current findings are loose (Costa et al., 2017). Collective actions are often coordinated by formal organizations such TAs (Barnett et al., 2002). TAs are formal organizations enclosed with multiple members and represent members' interests in a specific context (Rajwani et al., 2015). Revealed by the existing studies, the main reason to join TAs is to reduce uncertainty through collective action. Member firms share socio-political information (Rajwani et al.,

2015) and ascertain specific services and resources (May et al., 1998). TAs intend to improve the business environment in which member firms run business by pursuing policy initiatives and gaining legitimacy (Lawton et al., 2018). TA gauge influence by shaping public policy in favour of memberships (Schaefer & Kerrigan, 2008). Political actors also trust TAs and use their services for government policy development (Tucker, 2008).

Compared to the year 2000 when the Fortune Global 500 companies from emerging and developing economies account for only 5%, it is estimated that the figure will raise to 46% by 2025 (Marano et al., 2017). Internationalization from China has been gaining prominence in the academic literature by virtue of rapid growth of firms and unusual patterns (Buckley et al, 2007; Child & Rodrigues, 2005). Following the “going out” vision enacted by the Chinese government in 2000 and underpinned in a series of subsequent plans, Chinese investment is encouraged to boost the internationalization of domestic firms (Cozza et al., 2015). The Chinese government hopes to support the domestic economy by achieving industrialization and technological upgrading acquired from outward investment (Gu & Reed, 2013). The One Belt One Road (BRI) policy, is a national vision to bond China with Asia, Africa and Europe, aiming at China’s integration into the global economy and representing the determination of the Chinese government for a more open economy. Since its inauguration in late 2013, BRI has been a foundational national policy. This initiative is perceived as a strategy to show the prowess and increasing reachability of Chinese firms into the global economy (Du & Zhang, 2018).

The burgeoning internationalization of firms from emerging markets has been given growing attention, particularly in China. Though internationalization from China is discussed extensively (Buckley et al., 2007; Cozza et al., 2015; Ramamurti & Hillemann, 2018), the identification of domestic influences and sources of learning for internationalization has received limited attention. Furthermore, there is a lack of systematic research on the impact of TAs in the process of internationalization in the developing world. This is largely due to the fact that such organizations have received relatively little attention. The focus has instead been on the overseas investment of state-owned enterprises, drawing scholars' attention to the ownership of internationalizing firms. Also, the conventional wisdom is that TAs should be researched within the domain of non-profit field to deconstruct its internal governance and operational mechanism (Watson, 2008). In both situations, the role of TAs has been ignored or peripherally mentioned with less textured understanding.

In all countries, there is a very wide array and diversity of TAs (Costa et al., 2017). In China, according to the statistics of China's Exhibition Economy in 2016, there were 16,000 national TAs, whose assets amounted to 253.9 RMB billion and whose annual income reached 112.1 RMB billion (CCPIT, 2018). A cursory examination of the organizational structure of these associations reveals they are closely synthesized with, and operate under, the control of Communist Party institutions (Nevitt, 1996). There is a blurry line between governmental and nongovernment entities. Some current high officials are leaders in national TAs. In many cases, their heads are retired staff from the government system and are able to continue to play a role in the governance of these associations. They have maintained close relationships with their parent government departments and their staff have continued to receive government salaries and benefits.

I will briefly pinpoint the commonalities and differences between Chinese TAs and those in other contexts in this section and further elaborate in Chapter 2. The commonality is that TAs can voice their opinion. However, the question that arises is whose voice is being represented and whose interest is being served? TAs in west country context normally represent the shared interest of firm memberships. They are more autonomous and independent associated with voluntary membership, elected leaders, self-governance and self-funding. TAs in China often have a broader role in promoting the government's economic and political agendas, beyond just representing the interests of their member firms. This is in contrast to TAs in a Western contexts, where their main focus is on representing the interests of their members in policy and advocacy matters. TAs in China are also more hierarchical in structure because of a strong affiliation with the government. The strong affiliation with the government makes TAs considered semi-government. They are featured as nominated leadership by the government and financially rely on the government's funding. The government also has a higher level of involvement in the operation of TAs in China compared to TAs in western countries. These differences may affect the roles and effectiveness of TAs in supporting the internationalization of Chinese firms.

Given the unique role played by TAs, this research intended to probe whether TAs are currently facilitating their member companies to achieve internationalization goals. The existing research either focuses on the pattern or performance of internationalization in China (Clegg et al., 2016; Yuan et al., 2016) or delineates the evolution of TAs in China (Pearson,

1994; Xiao & Lin, 2016). No single research linking the two has been found. Chinese TAs facilitate the ever-accelerated close contacts with other countries and are observed to involve in activities encouraging firms to go abroad (Lei & Nugent, 2018). They are observed to begin more outbound or inbound missions than ever. Foster (2008) finds that the officials of TAs can organize “study tours” or business mission across China and overseas, as well as play visits to trade exhibitions.

This thesis focuses on TAs that are under-researched in the international business field. A handful of studies acknowledge the collaborative role of TAs in export (Boehe, 2013; Brache & Felzensztein, 2019). However, there is an omission of TAs in a bigger picture, inclusive of different phases of internationalization rather than the export stage. TAs are defined in the existing literature as institutional actors (Oparaocha, 2015), as information brokers for SMEs (Leonidou & Theodosiou, 2004), or as organizations to promote export (Wilkinson & Brouthers, 2006). A theoretical basis of TAs from an IB perspective, however, has not been sufficiently explored. Although much scholarly attention has been devoted to the various drivers of emerging markets, the potency of TAs is missing from the extant literature. Studying TAs is complex in a Chinese context due to the fact that civil society in a centrally controlled economy increases the difficulty of understanding of this entity. Therefore, research that investigates TAs in multifaceted lenses is needed.

This thesis examined both knowledge acquisition and organizational learning developed through engaging with TAs. Knowledge acquisition is the process of obtaining new knowledge or information from external sources, such as competitors, customers, and suppliers. This knowledge is accessed through various means, such as attending trade shows and exhibitions, conducting market research, and partnering with local firms. Firms make international commitments either by learning from their own experiences and current activities or by learning from the experiences and observations of others. A stream of organizational learning theories finds that organizations can learn by vicariously observing others, learning from mistakes, and improving efficiency.

My research defines TA as an actor that influences the knowledge and information of member firms. TA networks help to co-create privileged new knowledge from firms’ activities with other members during the interaction process and vicarious learning is achieved. This study investigates both knowledge acquisition and organizational learning,

assuming that the longer knowledge is accumulated, the more likely organizational learning happens.

Our proposed framework suggests that (1) the roles of TAs affect the knowledge acquisition of member firms and (2) organizational learning is enhanced to adopt the OFDI (Outward Foreign Direct Investment) strategy. I will examine the extent to which TAs influence knowledge acquisition in an empirical paper and conceptualize how organizational learning is enhanced through TA networks in a conceptual paper.

In a nutshell, the context of Chinese firms' internationalization provides insight into examining how knowledge is accumulated through engagement with TAs. In this vein, organizational learning theory offers a productive conceptual lens for the continued investigation of high-commitment internationalization. The assumption is that knowledge accumulation from TA network partners opens new opportunities and contributes to the development and growth of organizational learning.

In summary, this thesis aims to acknowledge the roles of TAs and to identify to what extent TAs perform these roles. The five sub-research questions raised in this thesis and how they are resolved in Chapters 4 to 6 are elaborated in the next section. Now we discuss the rationale for each of research sub-question.

1.4 Research sub-questions

Networks are of particular relevance to the internationalization of Chinese firms. Networks can work as a mechanism to access great resources. Entry into a new foreign country is always handicapped by liabilities of newness. Sharing knowledge between firms in networks will ameliorate these liabilities and help firms gain resources like knowledge assets and relationship assets. The foreign market selection and mode of entry are influenced by learning acquired through networks which is crucial to the internationalization process (Coviello and Munro (1995). There are five research sub-questions addressing the overall research question and guiding the design of the research framework. Classic network theory (Jan Johanson & Lars-Gunnar, 1987) proposed that network ties with other firms facilitate internationalization. Based on the network framework, this research aims to provide an avenue for understanding the role

and contribution of TAs. A perspective gained momentum in exploring the roles of TAs would be through a network lens. Relatively limited research has been conducted on the network facilitating role of TAs in a Chinese context. The network constitutes a particularly valuable lens to explain TAs' roles and activities. Oparaocha (2015) defines three types of networks: social, business and institutional networks. Both business and social networks have been extensively researched in the IB field (Gao et al., 2017; Li et al., 2008).

Firms are able to access knowledge, markets, resources, or technologies through networks (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). Network membership provides benefits in relation to development opportunities, improvement of management, and productivity, or advancements in work practices (Miller et al., 2007). Understanding these roles adds a much-needed perspective to capture the phenomenon of the rapid growth of Chinese firms. The firms are encouraged to take leverage of TAs to increase competitiveness. The absence of a comprehensive taxonomy of roles focusing on TAs calls for the attention of scholars. This paper identifies two types of TAs in a Chinese context and aims to provide an avenue for understanding the nuanced differences between government-organized TAs and grass-roots TAs. Two more specific sub-questions were developed.

Research sub-question 1

What are the roles of TA that facilitate network acquisition?

Research sub-question 2

Are two types of TAs different in performing these roles and if it is the case, how are they different?

While the IB field has been traditionally attuned to the interactions between MNEs and NGO in non-market strategy domain (e.g. Boddewyn & Doh, 2011; Teegeen et al., 2004; Vachani et al., 2009), exploration of the roles of TAs assisting in network accomplishment is still lacking. Chapter 4 addresses research sub-questions 1 and 2, seeking to identify the roles of TAs to provide network embeddedness for member firms' strategic behaviour. A breadth of knowledge of homogeneity and heterogeneity between government-organized TAs and grass-roots TAs allows us to take a process perspective within a transitional economy setting.

Academia is called to re-consider the motivation of firms' internationalization through the lens of TAs. TAs may exert a potential long-term impact on members' vision and mission, but the roles of TAs in support of internationalization are not equivocal in the existing literature. The increasing roles of TAs have been particularly pronounced in network building

and information exchange. The use of TAs' network roles fosters the international competitiveness of their member firms and adds another layer of understanding of internationalization. The author brings to light a specific facet of internationalization knowledge acquisition, leading to significant implications for theory and practice.

TAs afford members access to acquire knowledge. Network membership produces the advantages which gain informational assets (Koka & Prescott, 2002), access to trustworthy and timely information and referrals attained from other members (Burt, 1997). Associated with the knowledge-sharing function, TAs bundle the members to generate collective influence. Previous studies have found a direct link between knowledge acquisition and internationalization (De Clercq et al., 2012; Fletcher & Harris, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2013; Mejri & Umamoto, 2010). These findings lead to the third and fourth research questions in Chapter 5:

Research sub-question 3

How do the roles of TAs contribute to their members' knowledge acquisition?

Research sub-question 4

To what extent do the roles of TAs contribute to internationalization through knowledge acquisition?

Chapter 5 addresses research questions 3 and 4 by devolving from anecdotal evidence to the application of a mixed method. I am attentive to how the activities of TAs are related to internationalization knowledge acquisition. This chapter evaluates and assesses the positionality of these three components (roles, knowledge acquisition and internationalization).

Based on research sub-question 1-4, we extend the notion and conceive a relationship between TAs and the later stage of the internationalization process. Member firms can use TAs to avoid the uncertainty of overseas ventures by accruing international knowledge. It is also believed that ties to political actors are enhanced by engaging with TAs. Such political ties enable the member firms to learn OFDI policy earlier and access valuable sources more quickly. In this conceptual study, we add to the literature on the learning of Chinese firms along the path of OFDI by theorising the value of TA networks, linking the engagement with TAs and organizational learning by member firms. Research sub-question 5 is developed:

How do managerial ties developed through TAs contribute to organizational learning towards OFDI?

Chapter 6 proposes that managerial ties developed through TAs entail business ties and political ties building on managerial ties literature. This chapter develops a conceptual model that both types of managerial ties (business ties and political ties) contribute to the aggregation of organizational learning, paving the way for OFDI. This study conceptualizes that a firm enhances its business ties through interlocking connections with other member firms and acquires indirect experiential learning from the experienced member firms with which it interacts. Likewise, this paper extrapolates a potential relationship between political ties and organizational learning.

The mixed method approach used in this research allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the research sub-questions. The qualitative methodology used in the first stage helped to identify the roles of TAs in the internationalization process of Chinese firms. This was achieved through the use of thick descriptions and Nvivo data analysis, which helped to ensure transferability of the findings. In the second stage, a quantitative approach was used to explore the statistical relationship between the identified roles of TAs and the internationalization of Chinese firms. This involved the use of surveys, which allowed for the collection of numerical data that could be analyzed statistically. By using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the research was able to achieve triangulation, which involved cross-validation of the findings from multiple sources of information, including interviews and surveys conducted over time and different waves. This approach helped to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Chapter 2 outlines an initial theoretical framework of concepts which are embedded in the following chapter and guides the research progress. Chapter 4 to 6 are stand-alone chapters but which are also interlocking for certain reasons. I would like to note here that due to the way I wrote this dissertation, there will be moderate repetition when explaining the same concept like TAs. Chapter 7 integrates the empirical findings and summarizes the contribution.

1.5 Thesis contributions

These different streams of research have clearly established the importance of understanding TAs. But prior work has primarily focused on the function and service of TAs. The need for

separate research about the role of TAs in driving internationalization stems from the tempting portrait of this entity. As important sources shaping institutional structure, TAs serve companies in multiple ways. By influencing regulation, government policy, and public opinion, TAs act as an intermediary between the government and the public (Lei & Nugent, 2018; Perry, 2012; Teege, 2003). Aside from the intermediating function, TAs disseminate and exchange information within industries (Bennett, 1998; Doner & Schneider, 2005; Newbery et al., 2016). They are the crux of providing members with a competitive advantage to grow their businesses efficiently and intelligently.

The study situates at the intersection of two streams of research: research on internationalization and research on the general function of TAs considering TAs as NGO, albeit neither stream has addressed the argument of how TAs impact internationalization practice. When taking an exhaustive close-up look at the function performed by TAs, This study diverges from the existing literature, which has primarily focused on the industry representativeness of TAs (Rajwani et al., 2015) and aims to explore a new perspective. From the fresh theoretical perspective of examining the roles of TAs in international expansion, this study advances our knowledge about the future role of TAs in supporting internationalization.

Relatively limited research has been conducted on the impact of TAs in a Chinese context. I argue that TAs constitute an important component of cross-over business, social, and institutional networks. I propose and empirically test propositions that the roles of TAs help members to access networks and facilitate them to acquire knowledge, all of which have relevance and influence in understanding the drivers of internationalization in IB domain. Understanding these roles added a much-needed perspective to capture the phenomenon of the rapid internationalization of Chinese firms. I also intend to identify a taxonomy of knowledge acquired through TA networks. The firms are encouraged to take leverage of TAs to foster international competitiveness.

This study goes beyond existing research mainly constrained to studying the revolution of Chinese TAs and comparing them with their western counterparts. While there are ample studies focusing on the evolving role (Bailey & Rupp, 2006) or the effect of TAs (Teckchandani, 2014), there is a lack of adequate studies on the dynamism of TAs with the implementation of seminal national policy reform. The empirical literature offers many

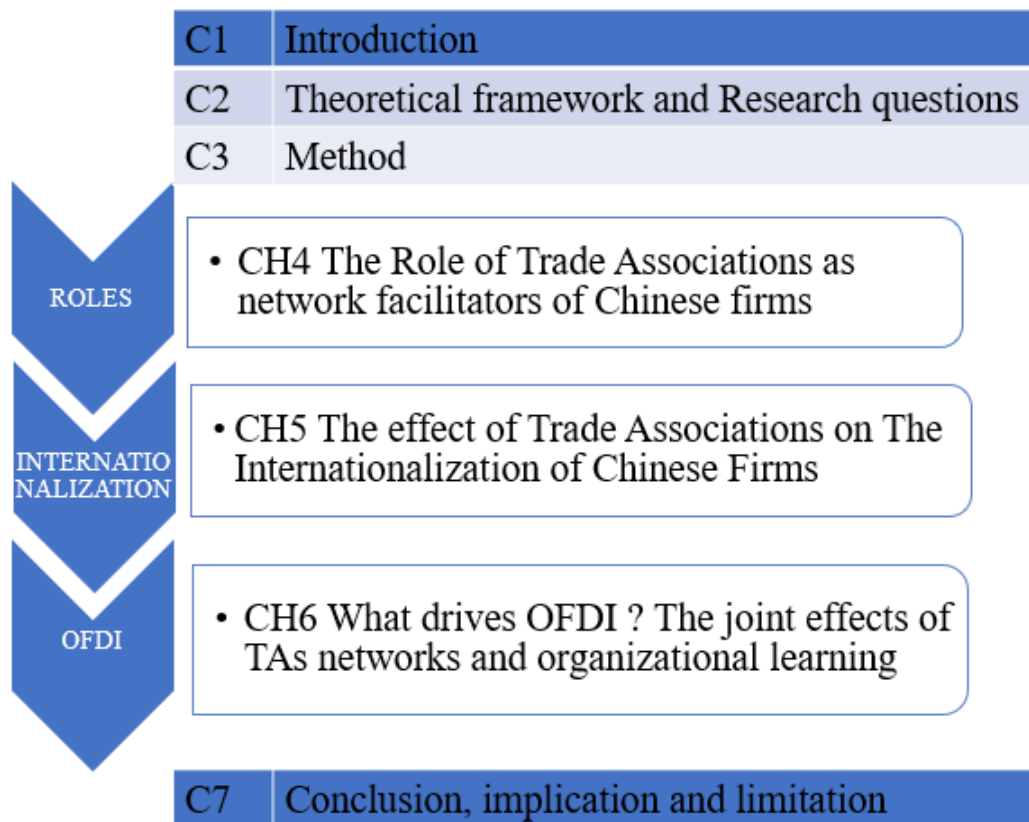
segregated examples of productive activities by government-organized TAs; there are no systematic frameworks to compare the two types of TAs. One of this study's aims is to discover whether government-organized TAs have a different weight of role presentation compared to grass-roots TAs. This research provides the first attempt ever found in the study to differentiate two types of TAs in China in recent years.

1.6 Thesis structure

Chapter 2 delineates the theoretical foundation of each of the sub-research questions and addresses the key concepts. Chapter 3 posits the methodology used in this study and establishes the foundation of philosophy stand. Chapters 4 to 6 tackle a set of research questions pertaining to roles and contributions. Chapter 4 investigates research sub-question 1 and 2 to learn what are the roles of TA through a network lens and the disparity of two types of TAs performing such roles. Chapter 5 takes further conjecture to examine if the performed roles contribute to knowledge acquisition and further support firms' internationalization. Chapter 6 develops a conceptual model to suggest a potential contribution of TAs to OFDI from China by enhancing organizational learning through managerial ties. Chapter 7 concludes the thesis with a summary of contributions and managerial implications. A summative structure of the thesis is shown in Figure 1-2.

Figure 1-2

Overview of the thesis structure



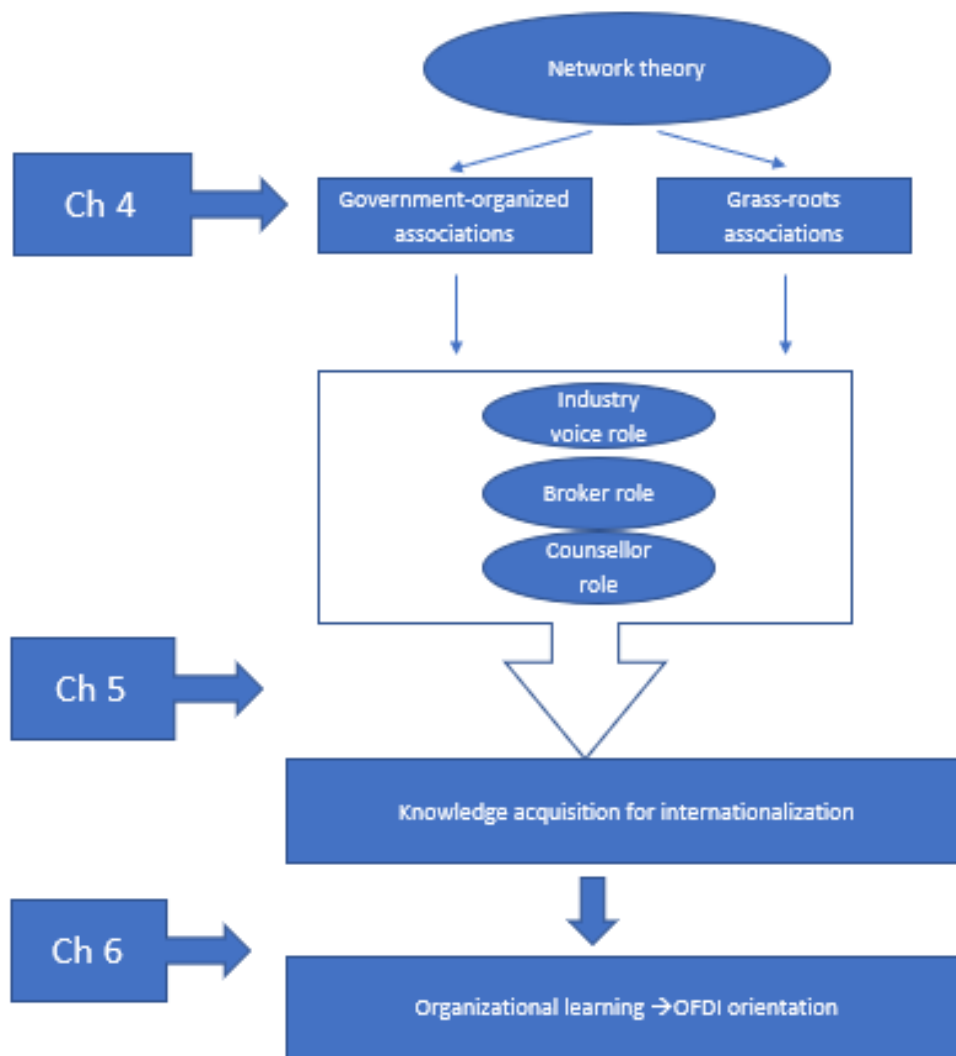
2 Chapter 2 Theory development and research questions

2.1 Chapter overview

Chapter 2 lays the conceptual foundation for how this thesis will be developed. This chapter outlines a framework supporting the three articles in Chapters 4 to 6 and forms the research sub-questions associated with the discussion of the extant literature and current theoretical understanding. This chapter reviews the critical components of each chapter in turn and constructs a progressive theory development. This chapter first defines networks and then provides a holistic review of TA in a Chinese context. The leverage of TAs' roles to develop multiple network engagement stimulates research sub-question 1 and 2. This chapter then examines the relationship between the roles and internationalization knowledge acquisition with the research sub-question 3 and 4. The next section of this chapter goes beyond to conjecture the potential contribution of TAs in motivating outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) and develops research sub-question 5. Figure 2-1 exhibits the overall theory development. This chapter concludes with a summary.

Figure 2-1

Overall theoretical development of individual papers



2.2 Introduction to the theoretical framework

A number of scholars have emphasized the importance of TAs (Bennett, 1998; Costa et al., 2020; Hultén et al., 2012). Despite this, little empirical research has identified how TAs generate influence on member firms' behaviour through networking activities. A dearth of research in civil society investigates the representativeness of TAs speaking on behalf of member firms. We need to examine the related concepts and theories appropriate to the context in which TAs are involved to learn the underlying causal powers explaining TAs' practice and roles. Beginning with exploring heterogeneity, Section 2.3 provides an encompassing review of TAs in various countries. Section 2.4 and 2.5 link the roles of TAs to

acquire knowledge in support of internationalization. A plausible explanation for a potential contribution towards OFDI is presented in Section 2.6.

2.3 Defining TAs in the Chinese context

Rajwani et al., (2015) conceptualize TAs as meta-organizations which are formed of organizations rather than individuals. Reveley and Ville (2010) contend that TAs fit organizational categories seeking to encapsulate large-scale member firms and exhibit the prominent features of ‘meta-organizations’. For example, Olson (1965) argues that such groups have narrowly specific interests. They are not helpful to the general social welfare of the larger population but mainly serve for political action effectively. Boléat (2003) asserts that TAs are member-based organizations which reveal a governance and decision-making system with the representation of the shared interest of their members. TAs are also highly appreciated for their support of innovative entrepreneurial activities, helping entrepreneurs reduce uncertainty and augment industry legitimacy (Esparza et al., 2014).

Empirical studies from a diversity of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives have explored the services and practices of TAs. The mainly prevalent streams of research of TAs draw upon different theoretical lenses varying from social science to economics, international business and management. Although the stream of literature of the social science field views TAs as narrowly self-interested and harmful to society, there are several other views. One stream of scholars is headed by Bennett, who has produced a series of papers focusing on the collective action theory. This theory emphasizes the role of TAs in developing business competitiveness (Bennett, 1999; Bennett & Ramsden, 2007; Bennett & Robson, 2001; Newbery et al., 2016). Another stream of scholars extrapolates the function of TAs from the perspective of non-market strategy. TAs are known as political and social actors in non-market strategy (Marques, 2017), and non-market strategy intends to shape the rules of the game and TAs are instrumental tools to shape the socio-political environment to gain advantages for firms (Baron & Diermeier, 2007). Large-size TAs taking a durable non-market strategy and establishing enduring ties with the government are more likely to gain information on public policy that may influence their member firms' strategic objectives or results (Rajwani et al., 2015). There is also emergent research into the role of TAs in “corporate political activity” (CPA) studies (Deng & Kennedy, 2010). CPA is accepted to be

international business endeavours to influence government in ways favourable to the firm (Marques, 2017). This explores how firms employ TAs to influence policymakers. Using TAs to collect tactic information facilitates policymakers more effectively communicating their policy ideas (Hultén et al., 2012). Lastly, the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature also legitimizes why TAs play a crucial part in extenuating negative social outcomes and advancing positive social change (Marquis et al., 2006).

Existing research also identifies the determinants of TAs' performance (Cadena-Roa et al., 2012; Newbery et al., 2013). Four factors are found to determine TA performance: "group size, levels of trust between local businesses, levels of trust between members, and the type of service offered" (Newbery et al., 2013, p. 979). A positive relationship is captured between member satisfaction with TAs, group size and willingness to pay for continued membership (Newbery et al., 2013). Teckchandani (2014) finds that the sociodemographic variety of an association in which the degrees of member firms' knowledge, information and experience differ are good predictors of the relationship between associations and entrepreneurial practice while the level of participation is not a good predictor of this relationship.

Learning the voluntaristic nature of TAs in different contexts enhances our knowledge of the idiosyncrasy in China where a large number of implicitly compulsory memberships exist. The studies of TAs in different national contexts reveal varied findings of voluntarism of member firms. Bennett (1998b) gives particular attention to voluntary associations in Britain where members can leave the association at their disposal, mainly as a trade-off of the costs and benefits of specific services. There is no privileged status or public law, compulsory membership, significant financial funding, and usually no consistent government policy dealing with associations (Bennett, 1997). TAs do not enjoy privileged status entitled with a level of formal government support and legislation. Spillman (2012) finds TAs are more voluntarily fragmented into rival groups in US. However, some associations are more powerful and their membership is statutory. When associations were empowered with a monopoly role representing the industries considered essential to the country's economy, many of TAs had near-monopolies of representation and the memberships were compulsory instead of voluntary (Doner & Schneider, 2000). The government can award associations a major selective benefit of exclusive access to economic policymakers. These associations have massive bureaucracies and high-salary positions that offer an attractive career choice for small businesspeople (Doner & Schneider, 2000). Lane and Bachmann (1997) find that

although membership is not mandatory, some German industry associations make it de facto mandatory in some sectors because of peer pressures. In Austria, there is a legal membership structure of associations within Austria's system of economy, whose memberships are compulsory, automatically gaining the operation license of the company and thus encompassing all Austrian companies in operation (Bennett, 2000). It has also been found that state-mandatory memberships are normal in many areas of the developing world (Doner & Schneider, 2000). In the Korean case, for example, the government empowers associations with a monopoly of industrial representation and TAs are considered pivotal to the country's health and security (Doner & Schneider, 2000). Compulsory membership from the government is also typically the case for associations in the Arab world (Doner & Schneider, 2000).

The related concepts of NGOs are quite nebulous in China. When conceptualizing Chinese NGOs, the Chinese regulatory environment, which differs from those of Western countries (Saich, 2000; Zhan & Tang, 2016), should be taken into consideration. NGO in a Chinese context usually includes both the more independent organizations and those set up by governments purposely to perform social welfare functions (Ma, 2002; Saich, 2000). While "NGO" is conventionally used for these types of organizations, it is clear that this term is quite different from NGOs in the West setting because of the restriction of autonomy functions (Gåsemeyr, 2017; Ma, 2002a; Ma, 2005; Saich, 2000). NGOs within the Western model are believed to be autonomous and to have the freedom to oppose the government with the features of "formally organized, private, self-governing, non-profit-distributing, socially-oriented, public benefit promoting, and voluntary" (Yang et al., 2016, p. 2295). However, such autonomy and freedom are heavily lacking in Chinese NGOs (Ma, 2002).

Chinese NGOs are classified into three categories: Social organizations, non-governmental non-commercial enterprises, and foundations (Ma, 2002; Yang et al., 2016). Social organizations entail diverse associations, Chambers of Commerce as well as federations. Non-governmental non-commercial enterprises are institutions not making profit and providing social or professional services rather than products (Ma, 2002). Foundations aim to raise funds for charity (Yang et al., 2016). Member-based voluntary TAs are classified into the group of social organizations (Zhao et al., 2016) that are referred to as NGOs based on the conceptualization of official documents, incorporating all institutions and organizations not in the government system and serving as non-profits (Ministry, 2013). By definition, most

Chinese TAs, especially those at the national level, cannot be defined as commonly recognized NGOs within a dual registration era (Ma, 2002). This uniqueness is derived from the blurry line between government and NGO due to historical origin.

Before establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC), China already had a rich tradition of TAs. After the establishment of PRC, TAs were merged with government ministries and this operation mode of TAs was maintained for several decades until 1990s. By responding to the call for a streamlined government, some previous government agencies were transformed into TAs and a boom in TAs was witnessed afterward. Membership of this type of TAs is mandated, and the leadership is usually performed by government officials. Plenty of these associations shared office space with government compounds and financially relied on government support. During these years, nearly all TAs in China were established to serve the government, which explains why they were financially supported by the government.

Notwithstanding, the redeployment of former administrative agencies greatly magnifies the resources and personnel of these TAs. It is common for many TAs to be led by retired government officials (Nie & Wu, 2021; Ji, 2018). These associations have maintained close relationships with their parent government department and their staff have continued to receive government salaries and benefits. Given the growing economic prominence of the constituencies of these associations, the potential for further evolution in this sector is strong. TAs are found to have self-regulation, conducting annual accreditation and implementing industry-specific self-disciplinary covenants (e.g. Bennett & Ramsden, 2007; Lyon & Maxwell, 2004; Gao & Tyson, 2017). The existing literature has indicated that TAs also develop cognitive and regulative mechanisms to influence member firms (Greenwood et al., 2002). Apart from directly influencing, they also play indirect roles such as regulation enforcement. For instance, TAs provide the government with their tacit knowledge to develop a new regulatory framework and strengthen implementation.

Alongside economic reforms, the Chinese government called for more presence of TAs serving as the coordinator between the government and firms. Also, it is becoming urgent to give greater authority to TAs to make independent decisions. In recent years, the Chinese government embarked on a new policy from 2013 which requests TAs to be self-sufficient instead of relying on the government's financial support (Yang et al., 2014). These TAs are officially decoupled from government ministries from 2015 in accordance with realigning the

relationship between government and society (State Council, 2015). The policy also cultivates and gives priority to the development of TAs and other social organizations.

To sum up, the role of government involvement in the TAs substantially influences the practices of TAs in China. The leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is a priori for the existence of TAs (Yang, 2013). TAs have to accept the supervision of CCP and the senior leadership of many TAs are de facto current or retired government officials. The closer to the policymakers, the higher chance to involve in public policy processes. The existing research has revealed that different level of government involvement has impacted on the internationalization of Chinese firms. It is reasonable to speculate that TAs in China contribute to internationalization more or less. For the government-organized TA whose ownership is affiliated with government agencies, they can help the memberships to overcome barriers to internationalization such as information asymmetry and market friction, providing the knowledge needed for internationalization. TAs bridge institutional knowledge gaps between industry and government and between the local and the global. Membership of government-organized TA in the initial stage was compulsory and the leaderships were featured as bureaucracies. Their services conform to the interests of the government. A close relationship with such TAs makes it possible for governments to allocate resources and authorize project permits. The close relationship between government-organized TAs and government agencies can also allow firms to gain access to privileged information about policy changes related to export and OFDI, which can be crucial in preparing for regulatory compliance and applying for permits and credits. Moreover, the intermediary services offered by TAs can provide firms with leads on overseas business opportunities and knowledge of foreign markets, helping them to secure market power and legitimacy. By assisting member firms with their internationalization efforts, TAs can also help local governments in China fulfil their KPIs for OFDI, which is considered an important indicator of achievement in an official career.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of TAs in China as a tool for the government to communicate its policies and support to businesses. The concept of transmission belts was brought up by Unger & Chan (1995). The government's collective goal is expressed to the enterprises through top-down transmission while enterprises' needs and wants are reflected through the bottom-up transmission belts. TAs can act as a

transmission belt to help convey the government's policies and guidance to companies, especially in times of crisis.

By elaborating on the characteristics of Chinese TAs, we are intrigued by how they can yield impact on the internationalization decision of firms. A starting point is to learn the features of internationalization so that we would gain a better understanding of why the activities of TAs are associated with driving international expansion. We shift the focus away from the definition and elaboration of TAs in the Chinese context to the discussion of the internationalization of Chinese firms, particularly, overseas venture of Chinese firms as an integral part of the internationalizing strategy captures our attention.

2.4 Internationalization of Chinese firms and OFDI

Internationalization is a process in which a firm increases its engagement in international activities and comes as a result of international activities of inward and outward cooperation (Lehtinen & Penttinen, 1999). Since China opened its doors to foreign trade and investment, the past two decades have witnessed rapid and remarkable growth in the internationalization activities of Chinese firms. Traditional modes, such as exporting and more intensive operational modes, such as OFDI are embedded within the internationalization activities (Luo & Tung, 2007; UNCTAD, 2008). Some Chinese firms follow the traditional pathways to expand internationally in small and incremental steps; others take large steps featured as "born global" (Clegg et al., 2016). The exponentially rapid growth of outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) by emerging market firms is a noticeable recent tendency (Buckley et al., 2007; Yiu et al., 2007). Ownership, firm-specific advantage and drivers are plausible accounts of the forces shaping international expansion strategies FOR Chinese firms.

The international expansion strategies are not only deployed by state-owned firms but also small-to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The ownership perspective offers insight when conducting research on Chinese enterprises' internationalization behavior. State-owned firms have more resources and make aggressive act to invest overseas in that Chinese governments encourage and support them to go abroad. However, the conventional wisdom that SMEs cannot commit to internationalization because of limited resources are not supported. SMEs

have developed rapidly and they also contribute to foreign trade and are actively engaging in export.

Mainstream international business theory posits that firm-specific factors are quintessential to explain the internationalization phenomenon. A prevailing theoretical lens to explicate international behavior is the firm-specific advantage perspective. Internationalization could be a result of a firm's intangible capability such as innovation. Internationalization is more likely to be triggered in the milieu of Chinese firms with firm-specific advantages like R&D. Possession of imperfectly imitable and sustainable resources may result in commitment to OFDI. These advantages are typically difficult for competitors to imitate, which can give Chinese firms a unique position in the global market. Moreover, having sustainable resources means that firms can continue to reap benefits from their investments over the long term, which may motivate them to commit to OFDI. OFDI is more noticeable in the high-technology industry. A new tendency is that more Chinese companies prefer cross-border merger and acquisition (M&A) to access strategic assets and conquer competitive disadvantages.

When evaluating the drivers and determinants of internationalization, a comprehensive research framework is developed that it builds on different perspectives. The involvement of Chinese government is paid substantial attention by many scholars. The unique institutional and industrial environment drive the investment of Chinese firms in foreign countries (Buckley et al., 2007). Some specific regulatory policies aim to encourage firms to engage in OFDI (Buckley et al., 2007). Some government at the province or city level becomes a powerful ally to MNEs (Luo et al., 2010). They have implemented policies to affect the development of product markets and legal systems in support of the internationalization of firms. The supportiveness from home government as important determinants of OFDI is verified by a stream of studies (Gaur et al., 2018). The scholarly research on the determinants of OFDI also identified asset-seeking as a motivation for this strategically driven internationalization process. Chinese firms use OFDI as a springboard to acquire asset such as knowledge or markets. Asset-seeking investments allow them to alleviate the latecomer or newcomer deficiencies.

Chinese firms have internationalized unconventionally in three ways that differ from traditionally incremental models (Ramamurti & Hillemann 2018). Chinese firms have internationalized rapidly rather than progressively (Deng, 2009; Peng, 2012); they have entered geographically remote markets, like developed countries (Quer et al., 2012; Ramamurti, 2012); and they have adopted high-commitment modes of entry like mergers and acquisitions (M&As) (Deng, 2007, 2009; Peng, 2012). Taken together, these three features represent the heterogeneity of internationalizing Chinese firms. While multiple factors might lead to the leapfrogging of Chinese firms in internationalization, a network approach offers a plausible explanation.

Feature 1 - Rapid Internationalization

Chinese firms capture incredible growth in the international market both for state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private-owned enterprises (POEs). The Chinese government has vigorously encouraged internationalization, pushing forward Chinese SOEs to invest overseas. The Chinese government implemented various initiatives to entice firms to go global, granting firms interest-free loans to invest abroad (Zhou, 2018). Chinese SOEs enjoy political privilege, a soft budget constraint that is believed to be unfair competition (Cannizzaro & Weiner, 2018; Sheng et al., 2011). The SOEs acquire multiple sources and funding that lead them to adopt multiple simultaneous patterns rather than gradually growing patterns. Government preferential treatment offers them paramount opportunities to be on competitive advantage (Cannizzaro & Weiner, 2018). SOEs have been capturing a rapid pattern of internationalization and POEs are recognized as another main force of being internationalized. Learning from the local markets, POEs' subsidiaries imitate the processes of manufacturing products with the acquisition of technological knowledge and utilisation of networks (Srinivasan et al., 2007).

Feature 2 - Going beyond the Geographical Boundary

In contrast to the traditional Uppsala model, even when oblivious of foreign market knowledge, Chinese firms invest in the country with the more noticeable and available networks and where the firm can quickly become acquainted, often in near-neighbouring countries (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Chinese firms execute a mixed internationalization

strategy, expanding regional and psychically distant markets (Wu et al., 2016). They do not hesitate to invest in culturally distant developing countries (Kang & Jiang, 2012) or culturally distant developed countries (Quer et al., 2012). They prefer to collaborate with other firms owning complementary resources for the purpose of internationalizing (Lei & Chen, 2011). They maximally leverage the resources of the external network and expand into more distant locations.

Feature 3 - High Commitment Mode

A growing number of Chinese companies are using cross-border M&A to access and accumulate strategic assets in order to tackle their competitive disadvantage (Deng, 2009). The acquisition is the only means to master some state-of-the-art knowledge and processes and supports the global sales network as well as the service system. Networking in the international arena helps to improve the level of trust among investors that speed up acquiring capital (Partanen et al., 2008).

The drivers behind firms from the emerging market going international have been a subject of growing interest in the IB domain. Small-to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with limited resources face a higher level of challenges and difficulties in extending footprints in foreign markets. In the wake of these difficulties, the potential of SME from the emerging market has never been more promising, and the need for scholarship to address the puzzles in the field of internationalization of SMEs in emerging economies has never been greater. A central problem is why and how some SME entrepreneurs but not others recognize and exploit opportunities. This paper posits that opportunity recognition and exploitation are influenced by entrepreneurs' engagement with TA. TAs, however, are always ignored by scholars in the IB field. This omission is fuelled by a lack of awareness of this entity and empirical data supporting the assertion.

2.4.1 Outward foreign direct investment (OFDI)

It is revealed that the stock of OFDI from Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) has increased from \$564.8 billion in 2007 to \$2,016.2 billion in 2016 (UNCTAD, 2008, 2017). In recent years, more and more Chinese firms are engaging in OFDI driven by China's economic transformation and domestic production overcapacity. Many Chinese firms

have accelerated the globalization of innovation or leapfrogged in other countries to become important competitors in the global market by engaging in outflow investment. In 2013, China announced its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initiative to promote trade, commercial and infrastructure associations with 65 countries in the regions of Asia, Africa, and Europe (Yan et al., 2018). BRI has been a key focus since its inception. Although the blueprint policy has served as a platform for those Chinese enterprises (Li et al., 2019), very few scholars have investigated how TAs support the belt and road initiative, which has been a policy-mandated national priority in China since its inauguration. In an effort to serve their industries, TAs affect government policy and regulation or public opinion, representing the collective needs of their members (Rajwani et al., 2015). Effective advocacy is critical in communicating with both government and the membership. A key to fostering a strong working relationship with governments is effectively advocating the policy. The high level of engagement in supporting governments facilitates the relationship between the government and the member firms.

A body of studies (Cui & Jiang, 2010; Gaur et al., 2018; Luo & Bu, 2018) suggest that Chinese outward investors are encouraged to enter and compete in foreign markets with government support. Governments at all levels are encouraged to help OFDI orientation of firms with the application of tax and financial subsidies and with the support of laws and programmes (Li et al., 2018). The intermediary organizations such as TAs should be explored in line with the BRI initiative to create opportunities for cluster players working together to “go global” (Li et al., 2018). All TAs, regardless of national and regional levels, are responding to the national call and have pulled out all the stops to support this policy, as TAs have been considered a crucial force for social and economic progress. Participating TA networks can improve the innovation performance of Chinese SMEs (Qiao et al., 2014). Although not all OFDI activities are related to BRI, overseas investment related to BRI is prevalent in the last decade. TAs are found to assume importance in support of this initiative (Li et al., 2019). They are united in their effort to serve BRI by briefing the significance of this national policy. Bridging organizations like TAs offer a package of services to facilitate the understanding of the national project. Provided with government –initiated advantage or governmental subsidies, SME might have successful entry in the BRI zone countries (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2018). Affiliation to TA and proximity of activities to TA allow SME more channels to access the information of BRI policy and financial incentives. The TAs take full advantage of the media and promote the image of the member firms. By offering

comprehensive services in brand display and project docking, TAs contribute to international cooperation and global collaboration. Exporting firms receiving sufficient support from TAs have a higher propensity to expand to OFDI.

Rauch (2001) finds that, by offering comprehensive services in brand display and project docking, TAs contribute to international cooperation and global collaboration. Ethnic associations serve as a source of information on new technologies and market development by providing mentoring services to members with entrepreneurial aspirations. Some OFDI associations facilitate information exchange among member firms through networking and such networking activities help SOEs avoid investment risk or form strategies to address legitimacy issues of concerns (Li et al., 2018). The China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) is an organization that is charged with organizing trade fairs and events in the promotion of the BRI Initiative, while the Belt and Road Global association is another ad hoc organization to coordinate multiple efforts, encouraging member firms to invest in the Belt and Road countries.

TAs inevitably play an important role in the international expansion of Chinese firms because of their idiosyncratic manner in which some TAs are highly associated with the government and the involvement of the government has a strong effect on the internationalization of Chinese firms. This effect is manifested in various forms. TAs' affiliation with government agencies and their services impact the willingness and ability of firm memberships to internationalize.

2.4.2 Network approach

Having a closer look at these three idiosyncrasies, I found it easy to detect a commonality, with the network approach being embedded in these three features. An extensive body of studies has shed light on multiple aspects of internationalization (Conconi et al., 2016; Freixanet, 2012; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Verbeke et al., 2018). Adopting a network approach will gain some heuristic explanation of an enterprise's stimulus for internationalization. It has been argued that there is a need for a new model of internationalization (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015), because the quality of network ties which provide necessary sources is influenced by a firm's networking capability (Zahra et al., 1999). Thus network development should be intentionally nurtured to capture international

expansion opportunities (Welch & Welch, 1996). The new phenomenon of the internationalization processes of substantial born-global firms and high technology-based firms could not be explained by the old model which proposes a gradual internationalizing process (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015; Child et al., 2017; Ojala, 2009). To explicate the grounds of these new internationalization processes, we detected a common feature. The networks and network relationships play a prominent role when we are attempting to understand and explicate the rapid internationalization of the firms. The firms' foreign-market entry choices are associated with the influence of different network relationships in that varied network relationships lead to different information distribution and entail different network resources (Lo et al., 2016; Ojala, 2009).

The network approach to the internationalization of firms has been the pivotal interest of many IB scholars (Chen & Chen, 1998; Costa et al., 2015; Oparaocha, 2015). Firms are more frequently involved in international business and need to learn to be accustomed to the particular milieus of foreign markets. Coviello and Munro (1995) were some of the first to opine that networking activities influence international expansion patterns through transactions with foreign clientele. Inkpen and Tsang (2005, p.147) define networks as follows:

Networks include a wide range of forms, including intracorporate business units, strategic alliances, franchises, R&D consortia, buyer-supplier relationships, business groups, TAs, government-sponsored technology programs, and so on.

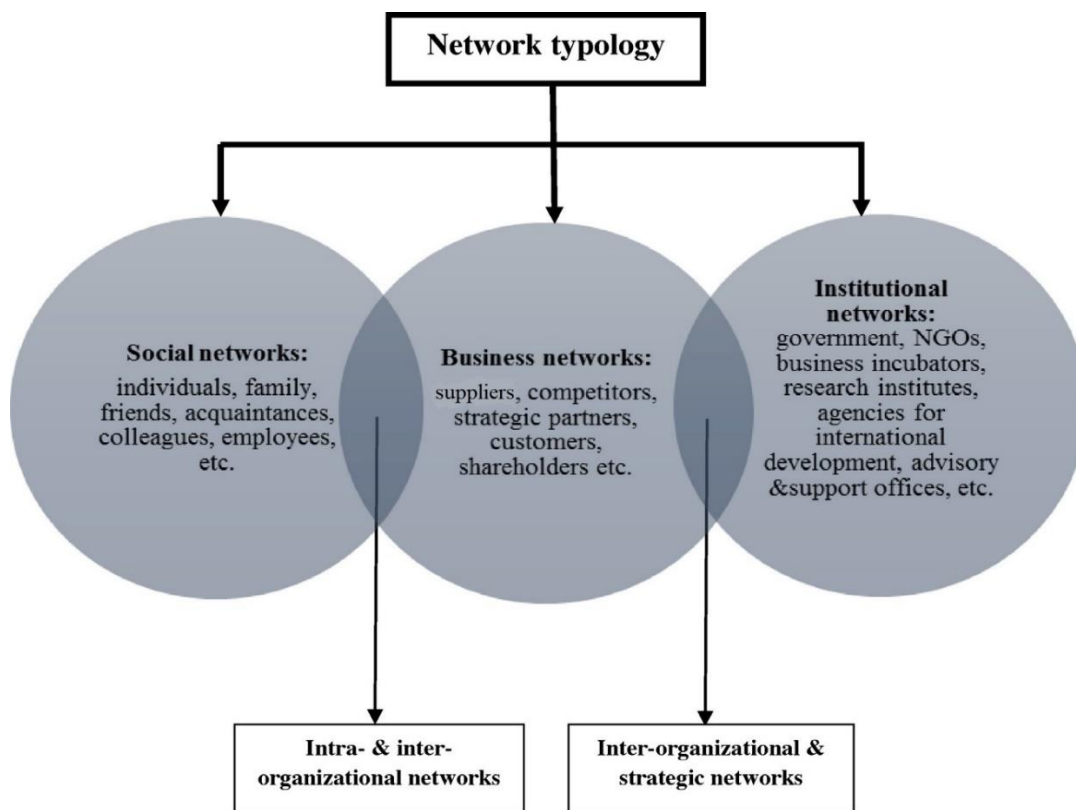
Santos et al., (2014) add that networks provide firms with a body of resources and information about markets and clients, enhancing the chance of survival and success. According to their study, strategic partnerships help in expanding the market and providing access to a resource which is not internally generated. Moreover, networks promote social interaction and generate trust and reciprocity as a consequence, which is conducive to knowledge transfer (Almeida & Kogut, 1999).

When considering the network perspective on firms and business markets, firms are assumed to be involved in multiple business relationships, including important suppliers, customers and other business partners (Johanson & Vahlne, 2003). Numerous benefits are constituted owing to various networking activities. Members inside are able to achieve competitive strength by amplifying the benefits of size and working on projects such as joint research,

export marketing and manufacturing (Chetty & Holm, 2000). Networks provide firms with a body of resources and information related to markets or clients, enhancing the chance of survival and success (Santos et al., 2012). Moreover, networks are intentionally and strategically configured in the hope of fulfilling the company goals at a specific time and helping the company to sustain the hardship of the specific time. Beyond dyads of business relationships, relationships with institutions gradually gain more prominence through the benefit gleaned for business development.

Figure 2-2

A network typology for understanding general network characteristics and intersections



Note. This figure was produced by Oparaocha in 2015, summarizing network typology. From “SMEs and international entrepreneurship: An institutional network perspective”, by Oparaocha in 2015, *International Business Review*, 24 (5), p. 861-873. Copyright 2015 by Elsevier.

Referring to Figure 2-2, Oparaocha (2015) defines networks into three types: business networks, social networks and institutional networks. Both business networks and social networks have been extensively researched in IB (Clarke et al., 2016; Gao et al., 2017; Li et al., 2008; Li et al., 2014). Gao et al., (2010) are attentive to institutional networks in IB to better understand their influence on the internationalization of firms. Institutional networks, whose actors include governments, TAs and agencies for international development, are under-explored (Costa et al., 2017). TAs are an essential component of the institutional network (Ahmadian & Abdolmaleki, 2018). Identifying as bridges, TA can create a platform for people to strengthen ties with institutional networks (Oparaocha, 2015).

Social network is defined as a set of relationships connecting an individual with other people (Ellis, 2011). Through an interlocking relationship, information is disseminated and new opportunities are spawned. The diffused information might be ground-breaking to offer exogenous opportunities; therefore, it is important to be equipped with the ability to recognize novel opportunities. Member firms affiliated with TAs are more likely to capture the opportunities because of learning from the forerunners within TAs. *Business networks* involve relationships originating from repeated economic exchanges (Vasilchenko & Morrish, 2011). A business network is defined as “a set of two or more connected business relationships, in which each exchange relation is between business firms that are conceptualized as collective actors” (Anderson et al., 1994, p 2). Business networks expedite internationalization by providing synergistic relationships with other firms to complement resources at different stages (Vasilchenko & Morrish, 2011). *Institutional networks* can be conceptualized as relationships associated with formal institutions such as governments, unions, business incubators, research institutions, etc (Ahmadian & Abdolmaleki; 2018). Institutions provide a wide range of services and improve the firms’ knowledge and resources as well as internationalization activities (Séror, 1998). When a firm expands its footprint in foreign markets and fights off sociocultural and resource liability, this type of networking sets out to eliminate the institutional void and capture international opportunities (Szyliowicz & Galvin, 2010).

This thesis, however, argues that TAs are not limited to the development of institutional networks but also contribute to developing social and business networks. This study does not comply with previous studies which contend that TA is only an institutional network actor. Engagement with TA will build social, business and institutional networks. TA network is

extrapolated to have a triple network with all three traditional forms of network. Membership of TAs is an important subtype of network resources (Ranjay Gulati, 2007). TAs afford members access to informational resources and network membership produces the baseline advantages which gain informational assets (Koka & Prescott, 2002), access to referrals attained from other members and trustworthy and timely information (Burt 1997). TAs networks enable “enterprises to participate in negotiations, mobilize enterprises for regional economic cooperation, and improve cooperation between firms and the government” (Qiao et al., 2014, p.216). TAs are more reachable to information on the latest industry technology and the newest standard. Pittaway et al., (2004) find that innovation performance and productivity are impacted by the network relationships nurtured with TAs, who are situated in a central position within their network of members to diffuse information on industry preferences or market demands. Equipped with the information diffusion function, TAs bundle the members to generate collective influence. TAs also nurture social ties due to the interactions through versatile formal and informal event projects. Network legitimacy developed through social ties is tempting to solicit the interests of business partners, accelerate transactions, and offer economic benefits (Dacin et al., 2007).

There is evidence that network ties established with TAs facilitate SME internationalization. A substantial literature focuses on the relationship between TAs and the internationalization of SMEs. Costa, et al. (2017) developed a better understanding of how institutional networks impact SME internationalization by exploring the specific role of the industry associations. New knowledge is also obtained by the member firms about the specific information and channels of sharing information in support of SME internationalization (Costa et al., 2017). Qiao et al., (2014) confirm that industry associations networks enhance firm value, help SME gain resources and maintain a competitive edge. TAs help SMEs obtain advantageous tax rates and long-term bank loans and be awarded more subsidies. Boehe’s (2013) seminal work finds that membership in local industry associations promotes the likelihood to export.

A myriad of studies identify and evaluate the benefit of participating in TAs. Newbery et al., (2016) categorize the benefits sought by members of TAs into info-social benefits and instrumental benefits. Acquiring info-social benefits allows the member firms to reduce isolation, exchange peer support, exchange general information, and access local knowledge and sounding board. Instrumental benefits such as new customer contacts, greater visibility to customers, and improved reputation are gleaned. Membership association is able to enhance

entrepreneurial activity by offering access to resources that enable entrepreneurs to expand business (Teckchandani, 2014). It is revealed that TAs which are the often-ignored type of reciprocal association, are playing a key role in the legitimacy of creative industries (Esparza et al., 2014). TAs can aid emerging industries to gain recognition and representation encountering challenges (Esparza et al., 2014).

2.4.3 Activities of TAs

Gulati et al., (2012) define meta-organizations as a combination of firms or individuals not formed by authority but by a united goal. Being ‘meta-organization’, TA is a third-party member-based organization with voluntary membership (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). In order to explore and explain the relationship between TAs and entrepreneurial activities, Teckchandani (2014) examined three characteristics of TAs including sociodemographic diversity, multiple memberships, and levels of engagement. Sociodemographic factors include demographic characteristics like age, gender and social characteristics like occupation, education and income (McPherson et al., 2001).

The extensive literature finds support that variations between sectors exist due to business concentration (for example, Bennett, 1996a; 1996b). Scholars have suggested that firms in high concentration industry (such as the automotive sector) are more likely than those in low-concentration sectors (such as agriculture) to consider TAs as effective (Schuler et al., 2002). The size variations within the sector also matter and firms of similar size are found to be relatively easier to cooperate (Bennett, 1999). The level of government intervention also makes a difference because the intervention stimulates the need for a more organised response (for example, Bennett, 1999).

Several mainstream functions could be informed from the established literature. Among them, collective identity is a close relevance to which the function and roles of TAs are researched (Rajwani et al., 2015). Scholars have defined collective identities as “groups of actors ... organized around a shared purpose and similar outputs” (Wry et al., 2011, p. 449). TAs make an effort to improve the business environment of member firms by following policy (Lawton et al., 2018). They also gauge the impact on their industry by sharing standards and governance system through conveying knowledge on regulation and

opportunities (Lawton et al., 2014). TAs protect and enhance the reputation of member firms and lend legitimacy to their business activities within and outside the membership (Tucker, 2008).

Collective actions are inclined to be successful with a facilitator's support; TAs are potential facilitators, and others include civil society organisations or trade unions (World Bank 2008). However, the engagement of TAs as collective action facilitators is still limited (Pieth, 2012). TAs have representativeness as a collective entity and one of their objective priorities is to educate and inform the government and industry. TAs' political engagement varies substantively across sectors. Some of them are highly active and others are not. TAs provide direct support to member firms alongside a collective representation of member interests (Bennett & Ramsden, 2007). Taking China Packaging Federation (CPF) as an example, CPF aims to promote the development of China's packaging industry. They are chiefly responsible for scrutinizing the progress of enforcement of the Code and regulations of the industry. Another responsibility is to develop standardized industrial conduct and to arbitrate among members when price disputes arise in the pursuit of fair competition. Other than these, CPF participates in the development of national and industrial standards, implementing the standards and monitoring industry behavior and keeping the interested public informed. It is acknowledged that TAs play an important role in developing industry standards. Acting as informal regulators, TAs develop industry standards and help stimulate industry sustainability (Rajwani et al., 2015). Being aware of the industrial standard and producing the products in conformity with such standards will benefit the member companies.

The brokering activities of the TAs have been repeatedly mentioned in previous studies. SMEs are introduced into nested business networks abroad and collaborate with overseas partners through brokerage activities (Tang, 2011). Brokerage activities are critical for the acquisition of foreign business resources. Foreign business resources mainly comprise intangible items such as information, knowledge and contact about foreign markets. Informal interaction or exchanges with the established or potential network actors enhance acquiring such resources through occasions of trade fairs or business events (Tang, 2011). As a platform, TAs are a springboard and implement a series of strategies to serve the member companies to go global. Individuals and companies access information during interaction with other individuals and firms (Casillas et al., 2009). The central tenet of this idea is derived from the concept that opportunity recognition relies on the multitude of information

owned by senior management (Kizner, 1973). The senior management of firms which are affiliated with TAs owes international organizational and social networks and has a bearing on international opportunity recognition (Casillas et al., 2009).

TAs can provide member firms expert and advisory services, technology support, and market intelligence (Oparaocha, 2015). Likewise, extant studies also suggest member firms are aware of the support service available and rendered by TAs (Oparaocha, 2015), as TAs are one such source of external resources. In some European countries, TAs as intermediary bodies have a direct training function though this tends not to be the case in Britain; TAs are considered training facilitators rather than training providers (Pollitt & Mellors, 1992). Actually, TAs can be partners in the delivery of courses by defining training needs and involving in the design of courses (Pollitt & Mellors, 1992). One of the jobs is to organize professional training on doing business and trade in relation to international and economic rules and regulations. The training is usually thematic for each session varying from Chinese enterprises “going abroad” to government subsidies. This paper argues TAs in the Chinese context have unique capabilities serving the purpose of the Chinese government. Simultaneously, governments must have the unique resources that an enterprise needs. A firm keeping an eye on unseen opportunities should engage with TAs to assess more political resources since the Chinese government controls valuable resources.

2.4.4 Research sub-question 1

Relatively limited research has been conducted on the impact of TAs in a Chinese context. The network constitutes a precious lens to explain TAs’ roles and activities. sociodemographic variations empower people of different clusters to interface and thus maximize their likelihood to approach information, resources and opportunities. TAs can diversify members’ social networks by connecting them with other TAs. Multiple memberships stimulate more conducive connections because these connections grow out of existing contacts and produce unique information (Paik & Navarre-Jackson, 2011). My theoretical framework diverges from the existing studies which focus on a relatively narrow scope of institutional actors, mainly home country government and social purpose NGOs; and forms my argument underpinning the roles of TAs as the facilitator of various networks.

Research sub-question 1

What are the roles of TAs that facilitate network acquisition?

2.4.5 Research sub-question 2

Another central theoretical premise is that government-organized TAs and grass-roots TAs would behave in different ways. Government-organized TAs who transformed from bureaus or were established by the government to serve the Communist Party have a certain number of mandated memberships, resulting in a larger membership density. However, it is doubted that such TAs could represent the industry because of a lack of voluntarism. Given that, I would expect a lower level of industry representativeness role of government-organized TAs. I also champion a view that government-organized TAs would be equipped with more resources due to their close bonding and quick access to the government. A most salient feature is to acquire first-hand government policy or regulation information, allowing the member firms a longer time span to adjust their marketing strategy. To grasp similarities and differences between the two types of TAs, sub-research question 2 is developed:

Research sub-question 2

Are two types of TAs different in performing these roles and if it is the case, how are they different?

2.5 Knowledge acquisition

2.5.1 Knowledge acquisition in the process of internationalization

A growing strand of international new venture research studies the causes, processes, and outcomes of the decision of international expansion. Learning and knowledge have been a common thread in uncovering the phenomenon. The relevance of knowledge for internationalization pertains to the decision-making of founders in the early stage. A bewildering array of sources of knowledge acquisition promotes early internationalization (De Clercq et al., 2012). The knowledge is crucial to early internationalization and helps us gain a thorough understanding of how internationalization decisions are formed (De Clercq et al., 2012). A number of international new venture studies attempt to understand the rationales, progress, and consequences of the decision to expand foreign markets. A normal thread is recognized pertaining to the role of knowledge and learning (Oviatt & McDougall,

1994). On this basis, we will be in a position to link up TAs with knowledge acquisition. Knowledge flow is developed when companies engage with TAs; given the particular attention of this study on internationalizing firms, I contend the knowledge for internationalization is accessed by the member firms of TAs.

Knowledge plays a crucial role in internationalization as it is considered learning progress, in which increasing international commitment is the result of knowledge acquisition (De Clercq et al., 2012). Previous studies find that lacking international knowledge inhibits venturing overseas as firms tend to avoid risk and operate in regions with the highest experience and knowledge (Casillas et al., 2015). The preceding knowledge of foreign markets enhances managers' confidence in their capability to expand in overseas markets. The confidence of ventures is boosted by the prior knowledge of navigating the fears of reaching beyond borders (Casillas et al., 2015).

It has been seen that very young firms' learning is enhanced by managerial contacts inside and outside the firm (De Clercq et al., 2012). This body of research has proved vigorous and has made significant findings (De Clercq et al., 2012). Another wide array of studies of international SMEs find that knowledge acquisition through network activities is an important component in elucidating SMEs' capabilities to seize emerging international opportunities (Coviello, 2006; Prashantham & Dhanaraj, 2010). It is also manifested that knowledge acquisition is key for new ventures to improve resource proficiency and capture opportunities. In examining the venturing practice, knowledge acquisition resulting from network ties is noteworthy. The advantages of information enable a firm to plan beforehand to gain resources and unleash greater awareness of opportunities (Jiang et al., 2018).

The process of learning knowledge and obtaining the information needed for business success are hastened when firms are engaged in networking. Keeping a good relationship with government agencies increases the chance of the firms to reap crucial benefits, particularly, "inside information." Such information related to government policy trend allows the firms to better prepare for potential risk and future contingency. Chen and Wu (2011) find that firms may be cognitive of policy changes with regard to export and FDI and then acquire essential regulatory resources like low-rate credit and quicker approval. Nevertheless, some SMEs that do not have a close connection with key government agencies are in a less competitive

position. They do not have equal access to government support and shortcuts to approach scarce resources (Zhang, et al., 2012).

2.5.2 Research sub-question 3

While the established literature has researched multiple network ties in China, a large portion of the research has centered on the major effects produced by government ties and business networks (Li et al., 2008; Wu, 2011). It has disregarded the roles of a firm's associations with TA. To the best of our knowledge, the contingent value of TAs has not been examined. This void is surprising because linkages to TAs are considered one of the key sources of obtaining the body of knowledge.

Knowledge of opportunities is triggered through the interaction among members. Extant studies identify vicarious learning derived from indirect sources, where hearing or observation plays an essential role in making the decision to incept internationalization early (De Clercq et al., 2012; Srinivasan et al., 2007). TAs encourage companies to develop their social networks, formulate alliances, pursue advice, generate and improve business ideas, and achieve the extra needed for successful internationalization. Owolabi and Pal (2013) find that TA membership in central, eastern and European countries has considerable influence on obtaining more domestic private or foreign bank loans. The financial resource as a critical resource for international expansion might be acquired with the aid of TAs. The obtainability of financial resources on SMEs' usage of TAs is also detected by Hultén et al., (2012). It is recognized that TAs initiate some export programmes to promote the international operations of their member firms (Freixanet, 2012). This thesis is an attempt to identify their impact on acquiring knowledge. This leads to research sub-question 3:

Research sub-question 3

How do the roles of TAs contribute to their members' knowledge acquisition?

2.5.3 Research sub-question 4

Knowledge perspective is a key account of internationalization, according to a multitude of studies (Fletcher & Harris, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2013; Casillas et al., 2009).

Internationalization is a learning process generating new knowledge based on previous

knowledge (Casillas et al., 2009). The general knowledge of internationalization concerns similar features about the operation of marketing or manufacturing in different foreign markets and such knowledge can be acquired with the assistance of TAs (Rhee et al., 2002). Country-specific knowledge refers to knowledge featuring a particular foreign market and might only be gained through direct experiential learning (Rhee et al., 2002). Export managers view trade shows organized by the TAs as an efficient means of gaining knowledge about overseas markets (Wilkinson & Brouthers, 2006). However, it is also argued, that although sometimes TAs provide first-hand information about overseas markets, this information was not substantially used or considered useful by firms (Costa et al., 2017).

The findings of these studies postulate vicarious learning shaping early internationalization decisions as a result of resemblance. Vicarious learning is indirect learning through observation. The generally known types of vicarious learning involve learning from network partners. It is argued that the existence or growth of foreign contacts facilitates possibilities for early internationalization (Casillas et al., 2009). It is found that SOEs are able to collect information and implement investment strategies by emulating peers (e.g., time of entering, mode choice of entering and country choice) and organizational activities accepted by the foreign market (Henisz & Delios, 2001). The successful ventures take advantage of TAs' network to obtain knowledge on alliance practices, including selecting, negotiating and monitoring partners (Prashantham & Dhanaraj, 2010). TAs are perceived as aggressive players in the field of export promotion of state-sponsored export promotion programmes (Wilkinson & Brouthers, 2006).

In summary, a significant effect of TA network is found and a whole set of services have been offered to help companies overcome the obstacles of internationalization. An implicit assumption underlying the previous literature suggests a new avenue for deciphering the internationalization phenomenon.

Research sub-question 4:

To what extent do the roles of TAs contribute to internationalization through knowledge acquisition?

Based on the discussion, TAs' contribution to access knowledge in support of internationalization looms large. We extend the view that TAs could literally stimulate OFDI.

The next section leading to research sub-question 5 proposes a potential contribution of TAs to enhance OFDI by gaining organizational learning for member firms.

2.6 Managerial ties and organizational learning

2.6.1 Managerial ties

Managerial ties are generally viewed as “senior managers’ boundary-spanning activities and their associated interactions with external entities” (Geletkanycz, 1997, p. 654). Sheng et al., (2011) found that formal institutional resource is not enough for new investment in an emerging market. The quintessential element of managerial ties is networking, which gives an individual the ability to mobilize personal contacts and allows a firm to cooperate with others for the sake of obtaining or sustaining a competitive edge. Managerial ties aid firms in overcoming environmental uncertainties (Li & Zhou, 2010), acquiring rare resources (Li et al., 2008), and improving firm performance (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Two types of managerial ties are emphasized by the existing studies in China: (1) business ties: ties with managers of other firms, which are horizontal and between peers, and are conceived as an opportunity for interfirm relationships; and (2) political ties: ties with government officials which are vertical, between superiors and subordinates (Peng & Luo, 2000). Political ties imply a unique phenomenon that top managers in transitional economies have to nurture a good relationship with government officials. Even after two decades of reform, government officials at various levels still possess significant autonomy to allocate resources and authorize project permits (Walder, 1995). Due to the need to minimize environmental uncertainty, managers spontaneously retained a “disproportionately greater contact” with government officials (Child, 1994, p. 154).

Managerial ties assume particularly crucial significance to firm growth in China. On the one hand, the use of managerial ties as a channel to speed up business transactions is traditionally rooted. A key to obtaining scarce resources and gaining legitimacy is knowing the right person even when China is transitioning from a regulated market to a free market economy. Interpersonal ties built on executives’ social identities are critical in realizing business transactions. On the other hand, the underdevelopment of formal institutions also drives the use of managerial ties. Chinese firms are urged to use managerial networking to enforce

contracts and reduce transaction costs when higher institutional uncertainty occurs (Li, 2002; Luo, 2003). I conjecture that TAs' network configuration is one source of managerial ties; business and political ties are developed through TAs respectively. Personal connections embedded within managerial ties enables individual business a way to gain the necessary recourses to initiate an OFDI strategy. When top executives cultivate personal relations outside the boundaries of the firms, it is possible that the firm adopts aggressive posture to leapfrog into an overseas market. Likewise, top managers' political ties enable firms to acquire first-hand information about OFDI, helping them to circumvent rules and promote OFDI because of policy information benefits and political legitimacy. The firms are able to acquire the requisite permits and financial resources that can facilitate the overseas investment process (Acquaah, 2007; Sheng et al., 2011). In particular, managers in emerging economies strive to nurture good networking relationships with government officials as the quicker regulatory permits and licenses allow them to conduct foreign investments. I delve into each type of managerial tie further in Chapter 6.

2.6.2 Organizational learning

Learning is a crucial precondition for the success of any internationalizing firm (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). March (1991) proposed that exploitative learning and exploratory learning are the most important types of organizational learning. These learnings reflect different knowledge production capabilities, and affect the nature of generated knowledge and the necessary behaviour to create knowledge (Özsomer & Gençtürk, 2003). Exploitative learning is derived from knowledge and skills on the basis of the firms' current experiences (Li et al., 2014). Exploitative learning is based on ex-ante knowledge stock and is path-dependent in nature, with the character of "the refinement and extension of existing competencies, technologies, and paradigms exhibiting returns which are positive, proximate, and predictable" (March, 1991: p. 85). Exploitative learning emphasizes efficiency, control and reliability (Auh & Menguc, 2005). In contrast, exploratory learning is featured as learning that is completely new to the current experiences of the firm (Li et al., 2014). The keywords in exploratory learning activities are "search, variation, risk-taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, and innovation" (March 1991:p. 71). It is highly essential that this type of learning is related to experimentation with new alternatives (Benner & Tushman, 2002). Exploratory market learning involves the acquisition and use of knowledge from outside the

organization's current customer base and competitor boundaries. The firms are exposed to new and heterogeneous information deviating from the firm's established skills, knowledge, and experiences and gain exploratory learning (Kim & Atuahene-Gima, 2010).

Exploitation focuses on knowledge and experience that firms "already own" whereas exploration emphasizes "new" knowledge and experience. One hand, exploitative learning allows firms to gain incremental learning benefits. When firms have established one sale branch in the target market, they have acquired local knowledge. By acquiring accumulated knowledge, they can undertake OFDI which incur fewer learning and adaptation cost when new branches are set up (Tang et al., 2020). A key assumption of driving OFDI is that firms can exploit the stock of their existing firm-specific advantages. OFDI activities require firms to manage unexpected and convoluted contexts. They need learn and develop new skills to. On the other side, the firms are demanded to conduct substantial local learning, intensively interacting with local governments, suppliers and customers. They have built up local networks and gained exploratory knowledge. Firms of emerging economies are noticed to overcome the liability of foreignness by leveraging local networks in overseas markets.

2.6.3 Research sub-question 5

While the literature on learning is extensive, learning acquisition derived from TAs has received relatively little attention. Firm innovation could benefit from external ties suggested from studies through the lens of social networks (Powell et al., 1996) and capability development could also be gained as a result of interactions with other firms (Ang, 2008). Furthermore, previous research has mostly examined the effects of social ties at individual level rather than joint level (Zhou et al., 2019). This omission fuels an unsettled issue in explaining firm innovation: interactive effects derived from the repository of ties when firms maintain a portfolio of social ties (Zhou et al., 2019). Managerial ties enable Chinese SMEs to approach and obtain complementary resources owned by network partners that could be assessed and acquired with the availability of managerial ties (Chen & Wu, 2011; Yiu et al., 2007). Research sub-question 5 is conceptualized.

Research sub-question 5

How do managerial ties developed through TAs contribute to organizational learning towards OFDI?

2.7 Chapter summary & conclusions

The theoretical framework paved the way for understanding the thesis development. The interlocking relationship between papers is illustrated in Figure 1-2 and Figure 2-1. The thread dotting the stand-alone papers is our curiosity about TAs and its contribution to internationalization. The broad question addressed in this thesis is “what roles TAs play in a Chinese context and how they affect the internationalization of Chinese firms in such process”, and five specific research sub-questions have been developed in this chapter.

3 Chapter 3 Methods

This chapter sets out the methods used in this thesis to address the research questions in Chapter 1 and further explained in Chapter 2. Section 3.1 develops a discussion of ontology and epistemology to lend legitimacy to the method deployed. In this section, I cover the research paradigm and arguments of methodological fit for pursuing mixed methods. Following this, the decision of mixed-method research (MMR) is articulated. Within that framework, this thesis has brought together a (qualitative) interview study and a (quantitative) survey study. Section 3.2 maps out an overall research design with the time frame. Sections 3.3 and 3.4 outline the procedures of qualitative and quantitative approaches respectively. Following this, the interview data collection procedure scrutinizing the selection of TAs in a Chinese context is explained. I then outline the survey data collection methods, the data collection timeline and the participants. How the interface of data is managed through steps taken to integrate mixed data types and sources is articulated in Section 3.5. The methodological choices are shown in Table 3-1.

Table 3-1

Table of methodological choices for individual paper

	Title	Research question	Method
C4	The role of trade associations as facilitators of networks	What are the roles of TA that facilitate network acquisition? Are two types of TAs different in performing these roles and if it is the case, how are they different?	Qualitative
C5	The effect of trade associations on the internationalization of Chinese Firms	How do the roles of TAs contribute to their members' knowledge acquisition? To what extent do the roles of TAs contribute to internationalization through knowledge acquisition?	Mixed-method

C6	What drives OFDI? The joint effects of TAs networks and organizational learning	How do managerial ties developed through TAs contribute to organizational learning towards OFDI?	Conceptual
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3.1 Research Approach

Our paradigmatic assumptions are a fundamental axiom that influences how we study a certain phenomenon. Kuhn's (1996) concept of paradigms is explained as "shared beliefs within a community of researchers who share a consensus about which questions are most meaningful and which methods are most appropriate for answering those questions" (Morgan, 2007, p. 53). A research paradigm constitutes a set of (shared) beliefs and assumptions about how we envision reality, human nature, and the nature of organizations (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). A hierarchical framework including epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and method is proposed by Crotty (1998) to present the philosophical and theoretical assumptions. Crotty's (1998) conceptualization of the four-tier hierarchical levels of perspectives is useful for consistency in making methodological choices: from the broad epistemological perspective (e.g., objectivism, subjectivism) to the theoretical perspective (e.g., postpositivism/positivism, constructivism), to methodology (e.g., experimental research, ethnography), and to the methods (e.g., sampling, observation). This thesis adopts a mixed epistemological perspective that incorporates both objectivism and subjectivism, as well as a pragmatic philosophical stance. The methodology is a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews and surveys.

3.1.1 Philosophical paradigm

Research methodology is the general research process with the inclusion of a theoretical foundation, data collection and analysis (Collis & Roger ; 2003). Researchers employ research methodology to probe their research questions (Silverman, 2000). Researchers should consider the philosophical paradigm when making methodological choices for any study (Morgan & Smircich; 1980). Choosing where and when to collect rigorous and relevant data was decided by my ontological and epistemological stances.

Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of reality or existence in general. The terminology ontology as a philosophical stance has been identified with the meaning of “what is reality?”, “what exists?”, “what units make it up?”, and “what it looks like?” (Creswell, 2013, p.19). Questions of ontology are concerned with what entities exist and how they can be organized according to similarities and differences. Laughlin (1995) proposes that human behaviour is part of ontology and the researcher finds the reality through human behaviour assumptions. An objectivist view revolves around the ontological assumption that “The social world external to individual cognition is a real-world made up of hard, tangible and relatively immutable structures” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 4). Put simply, the social world exists independently of those who live in it. Contrary to this assumption, the subjective view focuses on the assumption that:

The social world external to individual cognition is made up of nothing more than names, concepts and labels which are used as artificial creations whose utility is based upon their convenience as tools for describing, making sense of, and negotiating the external world (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 4).

If ontology is about what kind of entities exist, then epistemology is about what we know and how we know what we know. Epistemology is the study of how we know, dealing with the means of producing knowledge and scepticism about different knowledge claims.

Epistemology is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge and analyses the nature of knowledge and deals with the means of production of knowledge. The positivist epistemology, which seeks to “explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 5), has been challenged by the phenomenologist (Lee, 1992).

Phenomenological epistemology emphasizes the importance of learning the processes through human beings who hypothesize an association with the world (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). If one objectively believes in reality and wishes to use a positive approach to acquire knowledge, a quantitative approach is preferred. On the other hand, those with a subjective ontological orientation and phenomenological epistemological assumption prefer a qualitative approach. Therefore, this thesis utilizes a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative approaches, assuming a combination of subjectivist and objectivist positions.

3.1.2 Mixed-methods research

MMR research is frequently attached to research practice, and is acknowledged as the third major research approach or paradigm, in accordance with qualitative and quantitative research (Johnson et al., 2019). “MMR is defined as research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches” (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p.4). Johnson et al. (2007) offer a composite definition:

MMR is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (p. 123)

Postpositivism, constructivism, transformative and pragmatism are the four acknowledged philosophical stances; only the transformative and pragmatism worldviews match MMR (Hall, 2013). Postpositivism assumes the existence of one reality that can be known objectively while constructivism believes multiple realities exist that can be known in various ways (Schoonenboom, 2019). Johnson and Gray (2010) find that constructivism is appropriate philosophy for qualitative research and postpositivism is appropriate for quantitative research. Structured, quantitative methods and data support postpositivism and unstructured, qualitative methods and data lend support to constructionism with contextual understanding (Geelan, 2015; p. 611-612). Since postpositivism and constructivism are incompatible with the nature of research objects and our knowledge of them (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), it seems MMR embraces a philosophical paradox. Two further paradigms for MMR are further explained by Harrits (2011): transformative and pragmatism worldviews. The transformative paradigm proposed by Mertens (2003) as a paradigm for MMR places “central importance on the lives and experiences of marginalized groups such as women, ethnic/racial minorities, members of the gay and lesbian communities, people with disabilities, and those who are poor” (Mertens, 2003, p139-140). The application of this paradigm is limited to only a small portion of social science research.

Historical philosophical incommensurability between paradigms is reconcilable through emerging paradigms, such as pragmatism (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism is argued by many people (e.g. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) from historical figures to contemporaries, including the ideas of employing “what works” using various approaches and valuing both subjective and objective knowledge. Pragmatism breaks down the boundary

between positivist and constructivist ways of knowing to look for the realistic meaning for both (Biesta, 2010). By using abduction, pragmatism “moves back and forth between induction and deduction—first converting observations into theories and then assessing those theories through action” (Morgan, 2007, p. 71). Abduction is a rearrangement of the reasoning sequence of deduction and induction (Peirce et al., 1923). Induction is the approach employed where theory is systematically generated from data while deduction is relevant to develop propositions from current theory and test them in the real world (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Pragmatism rejects either-or views on constructivism and positivism, and rather embraces both points of view (Subedi, 2016). The blend of paradigms is possible. Guba and Lincoln (2005) pose and answer the following question:

Is it possible to blend elements of one paradigm into another, so that one is engaging in research that represents the best of both worldviews? The answer, from our perspective, has to be a cautious yes. This is especially so if the models (paradigms) share axiomatic elements that are similar, or that resonate strongly between them. (p. 201)

A research method could be related to one or more paradigms (Greene, 2000; Pitman & Maxwell, 1992). The actual influence of ontological and epistemological assumption is underestimated in the pragmatist position and oversimplified. The postpositivist tends to view reality as singular and tends to support or reject the hypothesis while the constructivist views reality as multiple and actively looks for multiple perspectives from participants. I argue philosophical assumptions certainly influence research purposes and actions and should be considered when making the methodological choice.

First, for an ontological assumption, I believe that the human world (which is the focus of human and social science) is composed of many and multiple realities. I agree with qualitative research that our thoughts, experiences, feelings, and emotions are real. I agree with quantitative researchers that there are objective realities that can impact us. Secondly, researchers could be a mix of objective and subjective in epistemological orientation (Subedi, 2016). Drawing on the idea that theories can be both generalizable and contextual, pragmatism develops transferability (Shannon-Baker, 2016), which transferability refers to the possible internal and external connections revealed by data about a phenomenon (Jensen,

2008). Put in another way, transferability allows researchers to “investigate the factors that affect whether the knowledge we gain can be transferred to other settings” (Morgan, 2007, p. 72). Pragmatic researchers can maintain objectivity during data collection and analysis and subjectivity in their own reflections.

Pragmatism substitutes for the older philosophy of knowledge claim (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln, 2010). A pragmatist approach is characterized as the adoption of both quantitative and qualitative assumptions as they conduct their research (Creswell, 2014). Pragmatism as an umbrella philosophy has obtained substantial support as a stance for mixed-methods researchers (Feilzer, 2010). It is inclined to solve real-world problems rather than on assumptions about the nature of knowledge (Feilzer, 2010). Pragmatism can serve as a philosophical stance for social research irrespective of qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods.

At both a philosophical and practical level, MMR is appropriate for the theoretical framework of this thesis. While not all methodologies and methods are compatible within a single overarching inquiry, this thesis recognizes the validity and potential complementarity of qualitative and quantitative methods. A MMR design is most appropriate for this study because the quantitative portion examines the measures developed in the qualitative study and provides greater context to quantitatively test the qualitative results, thereby providing a fine-grained understanding of the research issues than the use of a single research approach alone. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) discuss how the mixed methods movement has taken “qualitative methods out of their natural home, which is within the critical, interpretive framework” (p. 9). Greene et al., (1989) conclude that mixed methodological studies have five strengths: triangulation (converging and corroborating results from different methods of same phenomenon); complementarity (elaborating, enhancing, illustrating and clarifying the results with results from the other method); (c) development (using the results from one method to help inform the other method), (d) initiation (exploring paradoxes towards a reframing of the research question), and (e) expansion (expanding the breadth and depth of inquiry by leveraging different inquiry components of different methods).

Qualitative research provides a pathway to understanding TAs in a Chinese context, identifying key elements embedded in this entity. The results of qualitative data were used as a basis to develop a questionnaire for quantitative data collection (Gunbayi, 2020). Thus, the

author found answers to the roles of TAs in the qualitative strand and found answers to what extent roles performed by TAs affect knowledge acquisition in the quantitative strand. These two approaches are integrated with different stages from establishing a theoretical framework, devising research design, collecting and analysing data to drawing conclusions (Shannon-Baker, 2016). MMR aims to unpack the phenomenon and offer a more granular understanding that would otherwise not be gained by using one approach alone (Creswell & Clark, 2011). In summary, I apply a pragmatism philosophy in this thesis by assuming a combination of subjectivist and objectivist positions. The mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches is in line with the pragmatist philosophy. Not only does the philosophical stance support my decision to choose MMR, but the methodological fit suggests the adoption of MMR. The next section elaborates how MMR is appropriate for the methodological fit.

3.1.3 Methodological fit

Edmondson and Mcmanus (2007) suggest making methodological decisions by drawing on prior work, research questions, research design and the intended contributions. The research question, researcher's ontology and prior knowledge are considered the primary drivers in selecting research methods in this study. My study is keenly interested in creating an avenue of probing Chinese firms' internationalization through the lens of TA. The intricate complexity made the chosen method varied on purpose. The objective is to understand the actions of two different kinds of organizations (TA and firms) and the processes that interconnect them. A poor match among prior work, research questions and methods will induce the problem in which the research fails to examine what he/she intends to explore by using an inappropriate methodology. A certain method is needed to allow the collected data to form the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon (Barley, 1990). Table 3-2 is an overview of the methodological fit which integrates my philosophical stance, prior knowledge and research questions. I clarify the relationship between my paradigmatic stance and my methodological choices to create internal consistency. Although not all researchers believe that paradigms are helpful (Maxwell, 2011), I defend that the wise use of paradigms allows researchers to guide decisions (Shannon-Baker, 2016). Paradigms can help a novice researcher align their choices with their values (Shannon-Baker, 2016).

On the basis of prior work, intermediate theory research suggests new theoretical relationships or constructs. By integrating qualitative and quantitative, such studies validate new constructs through triangulation (Jick, 1979). The researchers can interpret the phenomena in a more plausible way with the integration of quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative study involved focus group, interviews, content analysis and archival records and different techniques all have their roles to play. The interviewer aims to learn participants' implicit meanings of their experiences to build a conceptual analysis of them (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). The use of survey is appropriate for quantitative analysis by drawing implications from this data to analyze present relationships (Bashir, 2017).

While qualitative methods are more suitable for nascent theory, quantitative methods are proper for mature theory and intermediate theory can be well served by a combination of both. The mixture of qualitative data explaining a phenomenon and quantitative data rendering preliminary tests of relationships can add insight and rigor—when appropriately applied (Jick, 1979). At the same time, effectively integrating qualitative and quantitative data can be difficult (Greene et al., 1989), and there is a risk of losing the strength of either approach on its own.

Most organizational learning research has relied on qualitative studies that provide rich detail about cognitive and interpersonal processes but do not allow explicit hypothesis testing... Many team studies, on the other hand, utilize large samples and quantitative data but have not examined antecedents and consequences of learning behaviour...I propose that, to understand learning behaviour in teams, team structures and shared beliefs must be investigated jointly, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. (Edmondson, 1999, p 351)

I aimed for a methodological fit between the components of my thesis, the type of data collected and the collection procedures I performed (Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007). To address the research questions, I employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology. The mixed method increases the comprehensiveness and consistency of the overall findings through combining quantitative and qualitative approaches and methods (Creswell, 2014). Researchers can construct, interpret and have a deeper understanding of the researched phenomena through qualitative approaches and methods and researchers can study

relationships among variables and by using quantitative approaches and methods (Riazi, 2017).

Table 3-2

Methodological fit and choices in this thesis

Methodological fit	
Paradigm	Pragmatism Pragmatism is outcome-oriented and interested in determining the meaning of things (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2006)
Shared belief in the scholarly community	Argues for more MMR as TAs need more exploratory and confirmatory analysis in the IB field.
Research Question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What are the roles of TAs in facilitating network acquisition? -Are two types of TAs different in performing these roles and if it is the case, how are they different? <i>(exploratory study using qualitative data)</i> -How do the roles of TAs contribute to their members' knowledge acquisition? -To what extent do the roles of TAs contribute to internationalization through knowledge acquisition? <i>(exploratory sequential mixed methods using measurement developed from qualitative interviews into quantitative surveys)</i> - How do managerial ties developed through TAs contribute to organizational learning towards OFDI? <i>(Conceptual)</i>

Prior Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The applied theories are intermediate theory serving by a blend of both qualitative and quantitative methods. • The combination of qualitative data to help elaborate a phenomenon and quantitative data to provide preliminary tests of relationships can promote both insight and rigor (e.g., Jick, 1979). • The theories are not mature enough to offer established constructs to examine the roles of TAs and explain the relationship between the roles of TAs and knowledge acquisition. • New constructs and provisional theoretical relationship will be proposed by this thesis.
Contribution to Literature	<p>Link the role of TAs with firms' internationalization;</p> <p>Foster greater awareness of the role of TAs;</p> <p>Increase the general level of understanding and appreciation of the TAs and its influence on the internationalization of members;</p> <p>Shed light on the unique nature of China as a business context.</p>
Methodology	<p>Qualitative: gain progressive knowledge about the roles of TAs.</p> <p>Quantitative: look for a measurable relationship between the roles of TAs and its contribution to the internationalization of Chinese firms</p>
Role of the researcher	<p>Interpretation of the data is based on the participants' answers and my understanding of the world and reality.</p>

3.2 Overall research design

Normally, there are three issues concerned with MMR design, including the sequence of collecting data, the priority or weight given to the quantitative and qualitative study, and the research process where the qualitative and quantitative stages are connected and synthesized (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Ivankova et al., 2006). MMR timing indicates the temporal relationship of collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative and analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Greene et al., 1989). A sequential study was employed in this study rather than a concurrent study. Weight is explained as the relative importance of the qualitative and

quantitative methods when answering the research questions (Creswell & Clark, 2007). In this thesis, priority was allocated to the qualitative approach. This decision was influenced essentially by the research objective, which was to explore the relationship between the role of TA and internationalization knowledge acquisition. Qualitative methods are believed to be potent when the phenomenon being investigated is highly complicated and where theories are scant (Dul & Hak, 2008). As stated earlier, the roles of TAs in support of internationalization are still in their infancy, a robust theoretical fundamental is missing in this area. More than that, our knowledge about the relationships between roles of TAs and firm knowledge acquisition is limited. In such a situation, the qualitative study is more powerful regarding understanding the phenomenon and adding knowledge to the field.

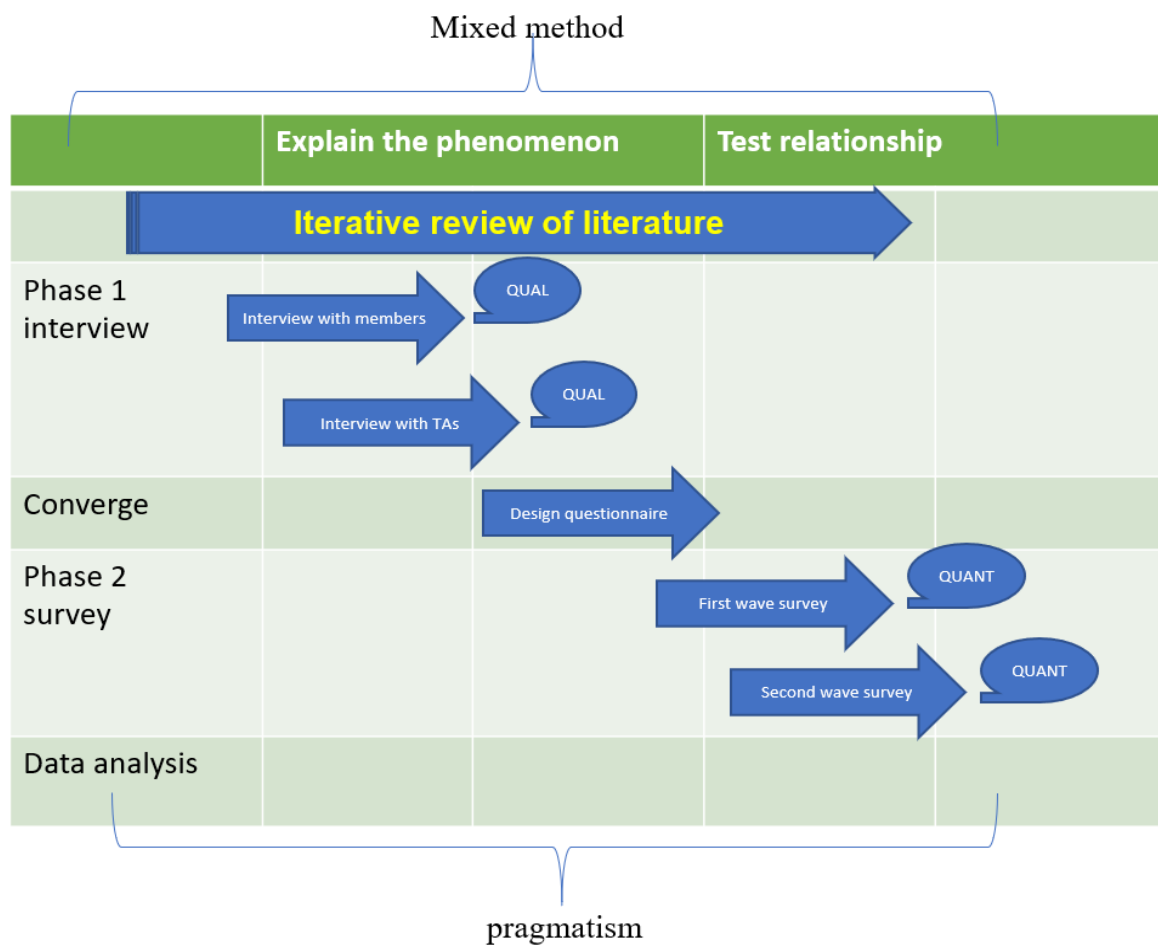
The research problems and purposes play a priority in the qualitative strand within our design. The researcher and the research problem are more qualitatively oriented without knowing what constructs are important to study, and established quantitative instruments are not available (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The purpose of including a quantitative strand in the exploratory design is to provide a test of the qualitative exploratory findings on a larger scale. This design involves moving from the constructivist principle applied in the first phase to the postpositivism principle that is associated with statistical trends. As a result, multiple worldviews are combined in this design, and the worldviews shift from one phase to the next.

In this thesis adopting MMR where the inductive results from a qualitative approach can serve as inputs to the deductive goals of a quantitative approach, the qualitative strand aims to understand the roles of TAs. The quantitative strand intends to address how the roles of TAs impact knowledge acquisition and to what extent the roles of TAs impact internationalization through knowledge acquisition. The two-phase exploratory design is progress in which the researcher starts by collecting and analysing qualitative data in the first phase and conducts the second phase research based on the qualitative findings. The goal of quantitative data collection in the second phase is to test or generalize the initial qualitative findings. My study began with a qualitative exploration of the roles of TAs. During this phase, I conducted semi-structured interviews with informants to represent different types of TAs and varied industries. These interviews generated two types of qualitative data: transcripts of the interviews and interviewer notes. The different dimensions of the roles of TAs were unknown. I need to dig into this phenomenon with interview data before we could quantify the findings with a larger population. The data and research were conducted sequentially: first

to explore a phenomenon and then to measure it. The second quantitative phase was dependent on the findings of the first phase. After creating an instrument from the qualitative findings, the study moved into its second quantitative phase. Building from the qualitative findings, the author could develop a survey scale as constructs of the three dimensions of roles. The author administered roles instruments along with additional measures hypothesized as being related to the dimension of knowledge acquisition. This survey was administered to member firms across industries. A point of data interface occurs when the author synthesizes their initial qualitative phase with the quantitative phase in a later stage. Below is an overall methodological framework developed in Figure 3-1.

Figure 3-1

The methodological framework



Research sub-question 1 & 2

The role of context is prominent in IB phenomena. In line with this thinking, context is a “dynamic array of factors, features, processes or events which have an influence on a phenomenon that is examined” (Michailova et al., 2014, p. 130). The network theory I draw on is an intermediate theory and my attempt is “to reinvestigate a theory or construct that sits within a mature stream of research in order to challenge or modify prior work” (Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007, p. 1165). Although previous studies have investigated the inter-firm network, third parties like TAs have not been given sufficient attention. It is dynamic as it changes over time and is influenced by events (Johns, 2006). I integrate the role of context significantly by focusing on seminal policy which leads to the evolution and transformation of TAs. Qualitative method is appropriate for addressing research sub-question 1 and 2.

Research sub-question 3 and 4

The impact of TAs on the practice of internationalization is a novel question and needs the examination of new connections among phenomena. To the best of my knowledge, no established measures were developed to examine the roles of TAs in enhancing internationalization. The extant studies primarily focus on the general functions performed by TAs while the investigation in the Chinese context remains scant. Therefore, a mixed-method approach is adopted by integrating qualitative and quantitative data to help establish the external and construct validity of new measures through triangulation (Jick, 1979). Based on the research objectives, the research design entails a two-stage empirical process. In the first stage, I did an exploratory qualitative study with participants whose companies were members of the TA. The qualitative interviews were drawn on different literature to propose a theoretical relationship. In the second stage, the set of measurement items was subjective to quantitatively test through a survey administration. Before starting the survey, a pre-test was conducted with several managers of member firms.

Research sub-question 5

This research sub-question was addressed using a conceptual paper. The purpose of this paper is to suggest some ways that TA can shape OFDI strategy of member firms through engagement with TAs. Based on the findings of Paper 1 and 2, I identified the roles of TAs and how they contributed to the internationalizing process. A conceptual paper is appropriate because the focus of this paper is to propose new relationships among constructs. Instead of

testing them empirically, the conceptual paper acknowledges the phenomenon and draws attention to the captioned theme. The conceptual framework integrates the concepts surfacing from Paper 1 and 2 and research propositions were derived.

3.3 Qualitative Research Approach

The research interest is conducive to inductive theory development. With inductive reasoning, various theoretical aspects are expected to be combined to build a generalization (Liehr, 1999). In an attempt to address the research problem of the roles of TA and the generated influence on firm internationalization, I tried to synthesize many aspects of different theoretical perspectives and establish a generalization of application in the IB field (Liehr, 1999). Except for network theory, the main theory applied in the present research, knowledge acquisition from the internationalization theory was also integrated into this study. This inductive way integrates different theoretical perspectives, aiming at building generalization. The study intended to move from a Chinese context, utilizing the conclusion to a regional level, like the emerging economy. With limited extant theory, the deduction is not considered realistic as the sole strategy for this research (Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007). Apart from the “what” (what is the role of TAs), the “how” (how do TAs influence the practice of firm internationalization) is another core question. The inductive method excels at explaining processes and “how” questions.

3.3.1 Data collection

Sampling is the process of choosing a subset sample from a larger population of interest with the purpose of addressing the study’s research question (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003a). Purposive sampling schemes that choose key informants are employed by the researchers because they perceive the selected cases will generate a breadth of information pertaining to the phenomenon being investigated ((Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process tends to be non-random; however, a researcher can randomly select the key informants to minimize key informant bias. The “gold standard” of determining the sample size for purposive sampling is saturation (Guest et al., 2006; p. 60). To achieve saturation, a researcher collects and analyses cases to the point when no new information is provided by additional sampling cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I once worked at Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC), a

legal body established in 1966 aimed at creating opportunities for Hong Kong's businesses, especially small-to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). My previous work experience allows me to be acquainted with a variety of TAs. I sought the consent of a senior administrator of TAs and the TA forwarded my contact to potential participants. These indirectly contacted participants could approach the researcher to take part in the research if they were interested. The selection procedure started with the identification of the most suitable cases. Selected TAs were membership-based and the following criteria were used for selection:

- TAs mainly focused on certain industries (except one Chamber of Commerce which is not constrained in a specific industry and one federation which is composed of TAs);
- TAs focused on the industries which are on the continuum from less likely export-oriented to highly export-oriented;
- The member firms are varied in firm size

Another procedure is the identification of types of TAs:

- Government-organized TAs which originated from government bureaus or were supervised by the government before 2013
- Grass-roots TAs which registered after 2013 and voluntarily formed

A purposive sampling approach was employed, following Guest et al.'s (2006) recommendation, resulting in the selection of a total of 14 TAs for interviews. These TAs were identified through acquaintances from the author's previous work and referrals from government contacts, with 32 TAs approached and 14 accepting the interview requests. The interviews were conducted over a 12-month period from October 2020 to October 2021, with a total of 30 interviews (15 TAs representatives and 15 member firm companies) conducted. The informant details can be found in Appendix A. The study used a comparative approach to contrast the perceptions of TAs senior administrators versus member firm representatives, providing new directions on the roles of TAs rather than relying solely on self-reported findings from TAs.

The industries of TAs enclosed in my sampling covered traditional industries like tea, medicine and freight forwarding and new technology like software and outsourcing. New

emerging industries like AI, incubators and cross-border e-commerce are also included in the sample. Maximizing sectors variation alleviates the criticism raised by Rialp et al., (2005) that internationalization studies tend to focus on high-technology sectors and ignore the other complex processes that often occur (Coviello & Jones, 2004).

In addition, I also included negative cases to strengthen the external validity of our findings; the companies that are identified as less frequently participating in the activities of TAs were included. The negative case is also important and saturation of negative case is also needed. When constructing a theory, those negative cases should be given equal attention (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). In order to identify those cases with less engagement with TAs, I asked the point of contact of TAs to recommend some member companies. Less engagement is defined as inactivity in participating in events organized by TAs, i.e. ignorance of training or seminars held by TAs and even those who plan to opt-out from TAs. I conducted semi-structured interviews that allowed me to gain context-rich information to have guided and focused communication with the participants (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). An interview protocol was used to ensure that the same topics were covered for all the firms (Appendix D). The protocol was based on the previous literature review and summarization.

This study also adopted a process-oriented approach where identifying and scrutinizing research informants is on-going along with the research process. The original focus of this study was member firms and it had not planned to interview the top management team of TAs. However, along with the interview progress, I changed my mind and included the representatives of TAs as interview targets when I realized that the member firm representatives have very limited knowledge of the history and establishment roots of TAs. Thinking back to my initial interest in identifying government-organized TAs and grass-rooted TAs, I reconsidered the sample frame and went beyond interviewing members of TAs. The informants of TAs were required to be familiar with TAs' history and they were mainly the Chairman or general secretary of TAs. Only with familiarization with TAs could the informants respond to questions about the types of TAs. With the inclusion of senior management representatives of TAs based on their role, I could reap rigorous and inclusive data addressing the research question.

3.3.2 Informant selection

Informants of member firms of TA

A special guide was developed to ensure the interviews yield relevant and rich information. The questions embraced a detailed description of activities engaged in by TAs. Also, the interviewees were encouraged to involve in the discussion how knowledge is obtained within TAs networks and how the knowledge acquired might assist their firms in expanding international business. Furthermore, two scenarios were considered: for the firms without any export or internationalizing behaviour, I enquired about the possibility or intention of being internationalizing; for those firms which were already involved in internationalization, I shifted the focus to how the networking activities with TAs assisted them in maintaining the edge. The interviewees were first asked general questions such as what the industry of their firms is, which TA their firms were affiliated with and what was their general impression of this TA. The interviewees were allowed to engage in the conversation gradually.

Senior administrative representatives of TAs

This group was not in the original informants' pool but was added to the interviewee scheme later. When the member firms were asked questions concerning their general knowledge of the affiliated associations, they had poor knowledge of them including the organizational structure, the process of leadership election or the financial issue. The protocol for senior administrative representatives of TAs included questions regarding the budget, leadership, administrative function and autonomy of decision-making. The interviewees were also asked about their perception of differences in performing different roles. The interviewees were encouraged to discuss the role of TAs, knowledge obtained within TAs networks, and how the knowledge acquired might assist member firms in expanding international business.

3.3.3 Procedures

The interviews were conducted through Wechat and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes, were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. The progressive interview allowed the researcher to identify patterns across interviewees and explore consistencies and inconsistencies between the organizations (Corley & Gioia, 2004). When conducting in-depth interviews, researchers prefer face-to-face interviews; telephone interview was seen as appropriate only for short interviews (Harvey, 1988), or structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994), or in some particular situations (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). However, no

significant differences were found between face-to-face and telephone interviews by comparing the transcripts Campus (1994). Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, recorded and all interviews were then transcribed and translated into English.

WeChat (WeiXin in Chinese) is a mobile instant text and voice communication app. As the most widely used social networking tool, WeChat has gained popularity and has become an influential social media platform (Gao & Zhang, 2013). Wechat as the most popular social tool, was the main way to collect contact information. However, the inception of interview through WeChat was a difficult journey full of trial and twists. In line with Chinese culture, *guanxi* played a significant role. Yang (1988, p. 409) defined *guanxi* as “pre-existing relationships of classmates, people from the same native-place, relatives, superior and subordinate in the same workplace, and so forth”. Testing, trial, teaming and trust are embedded in *Guanxi*.

It is interesting that a friend request in Wechat was not approved if you merely requested to be a friend. However, if your request indicated that you had a mutual connection and were acquainted with a third person (senior administrative representative of TAs), it is more likely that your friend request would be accepted. Based on the author's personal experience, requesting the third person to formally introduce you to the potential interviewee in advance is crucial. Then comes another intriguing phenomenon, there is no doubt that group chat formation was effective. It was observed that the author was able to approach the potential informant successfully in this way. The point of contact in TA would initiate a group WeChat including him/her, the author and the potential interviewee of the member firm. Normally, the point of contact would greet and introduce the author to the other person (representative of member firms). Following this, the author's friend request must be approved and the interviewee was very cooperative because they knew you were a friend of the contact rather than a stranger.

3.4 Quantitative Research Design

3.4.1 Research Design

The respondents who participated in the follow-up survey were typically not the same individuals interviewed in the first initial phase. Since the quantitative phase aimed to empirically test how the roles of TAs affect knowledge acquisition and generalize the findings to a population, different participants were approached in the following survey stage. In addition, the second phase requires a large sample size allowing adequate statistical tests and potentially making assumptions about the population in question. When the supplemental approach is quantitative, the researcher must keep each approach separate until the point of interface. Though the studies produced by Costa et al., (2017) and Doner and Schneider (2000) confirm the earlier finding that TAs play a part in international business, methodological weaknesses limit their potential contribution. Many articles offer little empirical data, and this study adopted a quantitative survey to explore the relationship between engagement with TAs and internationalization performance. Despite growing attention paid to this entity, there is a dearth of quantitative evidence on the interplay of the TAs and internationalization.

3.4.2 Data collection method

The present study has defined its population as exhibitors and visitors participating in trade fairs. Field data were collected during two trade fairs for which the author hired two university students and provided them with training before data collection. The researchers took the opportunity of the China Beijing International Fair for Trade in Services (CIFTIS) to collect the first wave of data. CIFTIS is the first all-inclusive platform specializing in trade in services, covering 12 sectors of trade in services defined by the World Trade Organization. The researchers also accessed the sample during Chinese Export Commodities Fair, the most widely recognized and most organized international trade show hosted by China. A randomized sample of subjects included the exhibitors who were stationed at the company booth and buyers visiting the international trade show. Technically, each respondent was initially asked if their company was affiliated with one or many TAs. Then, the exhibitor and visitors were instructed to answer the paper questionnaire in person. 132 surveys were responded to by trade fair visitors who were affiliated with at least one TA). Of 132 surveys, 4 cases were dropped as they were not complete.

3.4.3 Procedures and data analysis

In an exploratory design, the researcher first collects qualitative data, analyzes it, and then uses the information to develop a quantitative follow-up phase of data collection. The questionnaire constructs and items were developed based on the results of interviews. The quantitative strand thus builds on the qualitative one. To enhance the questionnaire's readability and ensure valid results, pre-tests were conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the questionnaire was given to three Business School professors at University of Auckland to seek consultation on instrument development to guarantee the validity of the survey and an English version was devised. Following the revision, a back-translation procedure was adopted to ensure validity in a cross-cultural setting. This procedure guarantees translation accuracy. In the second stage, managers and field experts were invited to search for possible misunderstandings in concepts or definitions, language errors and other potential problems. Feedback led to various adjustments and alterations to the items and questionnaire. These tasks were undertaken to ensure adequate face and content validity.

Several procedural measures in the questionnaire design, data resource and analytic phases were applied to avoid common method variance. First, I used multiple-item constructs rather than a single-item construct for predictors (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, significant attention was dedicated to the clarity of wordings of all questionnaire items used for the constructs in order to enhance the respondents' comprehension and retrieval of information from memory.

Table 3-3

A summary of the questionnaire

Statement items	Construct	Purpose
Section A Q1-4	Membership characteristic	To assess multiple memberships and membership duration as well as the level of engagement
Section B	Understanding of the role	

Q5-11	Industry voice role	To assess how the TAs perform an industry voice role
Q12-19	Broker role	To assess how the TAs perform a broker role
Q20-25	Counsellor role	To assess how the TAs perform a counsellor role
Section C	Knowledge acquisition	To know the extent to which the knowledge is acquired
Section D	Company background information and internationalization	Measure control variables

The questionnaire was implemented in person by two Chinese-speaking university students. The firm demographics information enclosed in the firm is non-identifiable data. The respondents were from various industries making the sample fairly heterogeneous and also allowing us to investigate industry disparity.

3.5 Data analysis

Triangulation is a growing interest of mixed methodology in the last several decades (see Denzin, 1978). In an exploratory design, a qualitative phase is a priori to develop the next quantitative phase. The quantitative strand is conducted based on collecting and analyzing qualitative data. Three stages of analyses are involved, initial qualitative data, the follow-up quantitative data and interpretation of connecting the two databases. The researcher attempts to generalize the initial qualitative exploratory findings in the quantitative stage. The point of an interface when the initial qualitative data are used for the following quantitative research is of great importance. Although the development of the instrument was not the primary research objective, measurements of TAs' roles were developed to address the research question. During the initial qualitative phase, quotes patterns were recognized and they were grouped into categories and broad themes. The themes were turned into the constructs to be measured and the scale items capturing the constructs were developed to be assessed by the survey instrument. A general approach that we recommend has been adapted from DeVellis (1991) 1) grounding in the theory and deciding what you intend to measure; 2) developing an item pool and devising short items in a readable way; 3) determining the measurement scales

and the construction of the instrument; 4) having experts to review the items pool; 5) thinking about the validity of the scales; 6) conducting pre-test for validation 7) assessing the reliability and item-scale correlations of the items; 8) finalizing and optimizing the scales.

When a sequential exploratory approach is adopted, the follow-up quantitative instrument is based on qualitative data collection. Drawing on the qualitative findings, selective and synthesized information is used to develop the measurement scale for the following quantitative phase. In this study, I used the qualitative categories to devise the questionnaire drawing on specific phenomena, formulating the expression of roles into items and creating likert-type scales. For this study, the quantitative phase has less priority than the qualitative phase. The quantitative approach is less likely to involve a complex quantitative-based research question that necessitates sophisticated quantitative data analysis. I analyzed the qualitative and quantitative data separately using “cross-validation” or triangulation and “quantizing” the qualitative codes for statistical analysis. Methodologically, this study emphasized the importance of having this pragmatic approach to their data. In spite of having dissonance at the integration stage, I followed Arnon & Reichel’s (2009) suggestion, using a pragmatic perspective to still emphasize the “shared meanings” created as a result of the integration. Shared meaning-making offers practical solutions to social problems.

3.6 Ethical issues

This study gained approval from The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee for review and approval gained on July, 2020 (Ref 024778). In phase 1, the first step was to get the approval of TA and member firms. The senior administrator of TA recruitment participant information sheet (PIS) and the member firm permission PIS were distributed prior to interview. Then they were asked to sign a consent form (CF) agreeing or not agreeing to their organisation participating in the research. The organizations that agreed to participate in the research were asked to indicate who would be receiving the interview and the intended person would be requested for another CF. Given so, three CFs were developed including the senior administrator of TA interview CF, owner/CEO interview CF and employee interview CF. CF ensured that the respondents had full understanding of the research objectives and their options. In phase 2, a questionnaire PIS was developed to indicate why this survey was being done and what their involvement would be. Since

university students were hired for data collection, a Third-party CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT was also instrumented. All these documents are in Appendix G.

4 Chapter 4 Paper 1 The Role of Trade Associations in China as Facilitators of Networks

4.1 Introduction

Trade associations (TAs) are defined as “a formally organized named group, most of whose members - whether persons or organizations - are not financially recompensed for their participation.” Knoke (1986, p.2). There is a wide array and diversity of TAs in all countries (Costa et al., 2017). As of the end of 2014, there were 310,000 associations in China (Zhang, 2015). In China, 693 out of 1,905 firms (36.38%) have TAs membership (Qiao et al., 2014). Chinese governments at all levels irrespective of national, provincial or city levels, have given considerable importance to trade fairs and business conferences, and TAs in China have responded to the call to initiate a diverse range of events. Until 2018, 407 large-scale trade fairs and expos were organized by national TAs, involving 2,630,000 companies as well as 35,750,000 visitors, 93 of these trade fairs were within the top 3 ranking of their kind in the world (CCPIT, 2018).

This paper focuses on TAs, a neglected topic in international business. TAs are defined in the existing literature as institutional network actors (Oparaocha, 2015), information brokers for small-to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Leonidou & Theodosiou, 2004), or organizations to promote export (Wilkinson & Brouthers, 2006). However, a theoretical basis about TAs from an international business (IB) perspective is not sufficiently explored. Although much scholarly attention has been devoted to the various drivers of emerging markets, the potency of TAs is missing from the extant literature. Studying TAs in China is complex because civil society in a centrally-controlled economy is convoluted. The fast-changing government policy for TA compounds the understanding of this entity, making thorough comprehension a very difficult task. Due to historical reasons and economic reform, two types of TAs have emerged. The government-organized TA are closely affiliated with government agencies while grass-rooted TAs own more autonomy to operate independently. Therefore, research that investigates TAs through multifaceted lenses is needed. Two central research questions have been developed. Research question 1: What are the roles of TA that facilitate network acquisition? Research sub-question 2: Are two types of TAs different in performing these roles and, if this is the case, how are they different?

Our study provides insights into the under-researched context of TAs in China. This study aims to extend beyond the existing research, which has mainly been conducted in the NGO study field, by exploring technology assessments (TAs) within a centrally-controlled regime and comparing them with their western counterparts. More importantly, contrary to the traditional wisdom that either focuses on either TAs themselves (Drope & Hansen, 2009; Esparza et al., 2014) or member firms (Bailey & Rupp, 2006; Brache & Felzensztein, 2019), this study has explored and compared the viewpoints of representatives from both TA and member firms. Theoretical extensions and empirical evidence imply that network building through TA is important for member firms to grow competitiveness. The implication of this research that the member firms appreciate the network intermediaries of TA will also enable TA actors to improve their expertise and acquire skills to provide better services to members.

This study is organized as follows: first, I unpack TA through the network perspective, elucidating the roles of TA in facilitating networks. After an integrated review of theoretical concepts, I present the activities of TAs as a facilitator to enhance networks. Following this, a delicate discussion of two types of TA is laid out. Then the research method is elaborated and empirical findings are reported. I conclude with a discussion and implications for managerial practice and future research.

4.2 Theoretical framework

4.2.1 Definition of TAs

Rajwani et al., (2015) conceptualized TAs as meta-organizations which are organizations who are formed of organizations rather than individuals. Some social science strands of literature identify TAs as self-interested groups which intend to influence regulation via political campaigns (Stigler, 1971). For example, Olson (1965) argued that such groups with narrowly specific interests, being not helpful to the general social welfare of the larger population, sustain to catalyse for political action effectively. Boléat (2003) asserts that TAs are organizations that are based on their members and their governance and decision-making systems represent their members and act in the shared interest of their members. TAs are also valued for their support of innovative types of entrepreneurial activity, as they help entrepreneurs to reduce uncertainty and increase industry legitimacy (Esparza et al., 2014).

4.2.2 Network perspective

Oparaocha (2015) defines three types of networks: business, social and institutional. Both business and social networks have been extensively researched in the IB field (Clarke et al., 2016; Gao et al., 2017; Li et al., 2008; Li et al., 2014). Social work includes family members, schoolmates, colleagues from previous jobs, and fellow members while business networks are concerned with the relationship with suppliers, competitors, and other strategic partners. Information is yielded and shared through social networks of friends and relatives and business networks of suppliers such as manufacturers or distributors. Networking events, and social activities develop stronger social and business networks, allowing the germination of trust between firms. Institutional network ties refer to “linkages with various domestic institutions such as government officials and agencies, banks and financial institutions, universities, and TAs” (Yiu et al., 2007, p. 524). Institutional networks play a critical role in advancing firms in emerging economies (Zhang et al., 2016). Yiu et al., (2007) contend that institutional networks assist firms in emerging economies such as China to better navigate the transitional institutional environment as they shift from central planning to market reliance. This is because these firms rely on institutional networks to operate within the market.

Although TAs are commonly recognized as an essential component of institutional networks (Oparaocha, 2015), this study challenges the previous studies that suggest TA are only institutional network actors. Costa et al., (2016, 2017) emphasize the role of TAs as institutional supporting agencies and they restrict TAs as institutional network construct. My study examines TAs as potential network actors beyond traditional institutional actors and proposes that engagement with TA can lead to the creation of social, business, and institutional networks. In this paper, I speculate that a firm engaging in TAs networks will acquire an important source of variation in the attainment of member firms’ competitive capabilities and shape their strategic manoeuvres. By identifying networks of TA, the present study enriches our understanding how TAs enable member firms to access triple networks.

4.2.3 TAs as network resource facilitators

TAs are embedded within political and social networks (Rajwani et al., 2015). By aligning the network perspective with the existing study of TAs' practices, I am attentive to the roles of TAs that are most closely related to a network perspective. Each role of TAs offers a variety of services. For the purpose of supporting firms' growth, TAs act as collaborative networks, sharing more strategic information with their memberships and organizing collaborations and information flows between them. Further explanations and examples will be discussed below. This may particularly be the case for SMEs in institutionally weak settings. SMEs also do not have formal lobbying departments in place, suggesting their lack of a professional in-house team to implement lobbying activities, unlike multinational enterprises (MNEs) and large firms (Bennett & Ramsden, 2007).

TAs are engaged in collective action for the benefit of membership (Esparza et al., 2014). The World Bank defines collective action as "a collaborative and sustained process of cooperation between stakeholders. It augments the impact and credibility of individual action, brings vulnerable individual players into an alliance of like-minded organizations and levels the playing field between competitors" (World Bank Institute, 2010, p.1). TA members are supposed to have a shared vision representing the united goals and ambitions. Being observed sharing a collective vision in the network, members are like-minded and will interact with one another. Thus, it is likely to activate mutual understandings and exchange of knowledge. Another key feature of TA is the involvement in government and business relationships. Business-government relations are inevitably indicative of firms' resource endowment. Unique information about government policies is always difficult to obtain but interacting with the government might ameliorate such information asymmetry (Frynas et al., 2006). The downside of weak ties between business and government is that firms are unlikely to receive government policy information in a timely manner. The absence of such information will also limit the firm's ability to access more resources.

Bridging relations concerns the relations between a focal organization and others (Burt, 2000) while bonding relations concerns the relations among the members of a given organization or other aggregation (society, the world, etc.). The most salient cognitive attribute of TAs is the ability to bridge and bond member firms with other firms within TAs and with firms outside. Being proactively involved in economic activities, TAs are bestowed with development into larger and more vibrant TAs. The important broker role in boosting export has been recognized in a myriad of studies (Costa et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2019; Schembri et al., 2019).

A wide array of broker activities is provided by TAs, including organizing trade exhibitions and conferences, forming trade missions, providing business matching services and collaborating with overseas TAs to refer to business opportunities. TAs perform an intermediary role by bringing the related transacting parties altogether. They not only link firms and make them mutually approachable but perform as central orchestrating hubs (Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006). They connect members to orchestrate both tangible and intangible resources. TAs emphasize enhancing members' collaboration (Wang & Gooderham, 2014). Provan and Kenis (2008) assert that TAs are the nodes of the information flow. Information diffusion among the member firms is mobilized by bonding and bundling activities produced by TAs. Being members of TAs, a firm is accessible by another firm (Boehe, 2013). Such reachability increases the members' potency to discover and spread knowledge. They can exchange information and are more likely to discover novel information and apply it to their competitive advantage (Zaheer & Bell, 2005).

The attention was focused on business networks and institutional networks which are created or enhanced by TAs. Surprisingly, the social network enabled by engaging with TAs has largely been ignored. We use the term "informal relationship" to indicate this kind of interaction between an individual representative of a member firm and that of other member firms. Member firms typically designate a person to join TAs' activities, depending on the occasion. For big events like forums or symposiums, CEO or other top-level managers may participate, while sales managers may represent member firms in activities like trade fair. TAs' activities provide important platforms for gathering and giving out information, and the informal relationship developed through interactions may lead to new business client leads. Our argument expands beyond the individual level to the firm level. The business leads or earlier knowledge of likely trends initiated from the individual level may be upgraded and realized at the firm level. TA's networks, as a means of social exchange with similar-minded business owners or managers, allow individuals to strengthen ties and gain access to limited resources that can be conquered by strong ties because trust brings reciprocity. The social capital generated in social networks facilitates access to resources and opportunities and enables firms to capitalize on the opportunities.

When reconfiguring the firms' constellation of resources, capabilities and priorities which shape the parameter of their ability to grow, the leverage of TAs' services is legitimated. Through TA, member firms are able to access a rich repertoire of resources. This has never

been promising for SMEs in a non-advantage position in competing with large firms. TAs are recognized as one of the two relatively well-known forms of networks, the other being consortia (Marques, 2017). Networks provide member firms with a wide range of resources, including knowledge and information (Sorenson & Stuart, 2008), capital and legislation (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). The variety of resources that provide TAs with the potency and ability to create value has been recognized in a myriad of studies directly and indirectly. Owing to the limited resources, services rendered by TAs would be of great importance for SMEs. Recent research finds that TAs play a crucial role in facilitating the upgrading of SMEs' capabilities by providing diverse practical knowledge, establishing mentoring relationships, and fostering collaborative inter-firm relationships (Mesquita et al., 2007; Perez-Aleman, 2011).

4.2.4 The two types of TAs in a Chinese context

While the existing literature has examined various network ties in China, the role of TAs has been overlooked. Prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, there was a long-standing tradition of TA in the form of merchant associations during the late Qing Dynasty (1890 to 1911) (Ma, 2005). Although these associations were merged with government ministries in the early 1950s, the development of TAs was impeded for nearly a decade-long period due to the sociopolitical chaos of the Cultural Revolution. The resurgence of TAs was observed in the 1980s. Starting from the 1990s, as China moved towards a free-market economy, a diverse range of TAs were established to reduce direct Communist Party control over society and act as intermediaries between the state and the public. The government is believed to overly take up the management role, "which it should not have managed, is not in a position to manage, or actually cannot manage well" (Saich, 2000, p.128). As a result, intermediary organizations were called upon to expand their role. TAs have been instrumental in assisting the government during the economic transition, and the government played a key role in establishing and managing such organizations. Membership of these associations is typically mandatory for firms, with government officials often dominating the leadership. Many of these associations share office space with government agencies and rely on government funding. Often, the office space is dedicated to the association, with its name and logo printed below that of a government department. To overcome the institutional voids stemming from the imbalance between institutional reforms

deficiency and transitional economy, firms tended to use TAs to breed interpersonal relations with the government and nurture trust (Doh et al., 2017). Networking within TAs is discernible to be a facilitator for these relations.

In the wake of the NGO's potency and the surprising surge of new institutions, the Chinese government urged to put these organizations under legal control. The dual registration was a result of such regulatory reform from 1998 to 2012. TAs must obtain approval from government agencies performing as a "supervisor" and then register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA). The dual registration provided a mechanism ensuring that NGOs work within strict parameters (Yang et al., 2016). Two distinct growth patterns emerged as part of the process of national administrative reform (Watson, 2008).

The government-organized TAs evolved as intermediaries for the major industrial sectors. It is a top-down pattern as described by Ma (2002), in which the government undertook a major obligation for the operation of TAs. They largely parallel the old industrial-sector ministries. Similar organizations are not allowed to co-exist at the various administrative levels and as a result, there cannot be two national associations within one sector (Watson, 2008). Only one association was chosen to represent each industry at the state, province and city-level (Unger, 1996). They are singular, compulsory, non-competitive, and hierarchically ordered (Zhang, 2015). The state granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective industries in exchange for specific controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports. Their memberships comprise key enterprises within the sector, and they play a role similar to industrial associations in other countries (Watson, 2008). It was found that a clear hierarchy exists in the government-organized TAs. Some current senior officials and even more retired officials hold leading posts in national TAs, having a role in setting the agenda of TAs. Moreover, the staffs of government-organized TAs are on the government payroll.

On the other hand, many grass-roots TAs emerged. The enterprises whose ownerships are private form voluntary associations to represent and protect their interests in a bottom-up direction. These voluntary associations provide essential services including distributing market knowledge, delivering technical training, and offering dispute resolutions. Many associations have attained the trust of their member companies. A prominent feature of grass-roots TAs is greater or even complete autonomy. The initiative of bottom-up associations is

to serve their members' interests instead of the instrument of the state (Zhang & Zhu, 2018). They are organized according to market principles rather than administrative principles (Li et al., 2018).

One apparent difference between the situations confronted by Chinese TAs established before 2013 versus those that started afterwards was the abolition of dual registration. Moving into 2013, instead of registering with dual administration, the abolition of the double registration mechanism (State Council, 2013) allows TAs more autonomy. This policy concedes a greater level of independence to TAs in that they are no longer mandated to affiliate with a supervisor before they register with MOCA. Tremendous progress is made that allows TAs a relatively higher level of autonomy to make autonomous decisions (Yang et al., 2016). The independence of TAs is to be encouraged, and governmental intervention is to be reduced. Decoupling means that the relationship of operation or purported affiliation between administrative agencies and TAs should be detached. Governments at all levels have gradually cut official ties between governments and TAs.

4.3 Methods

4.3.1 Research setting

This study adopted a qualitative approach in responding to the calls to promote theory development in the international business arena. Qualitative research is unstructured and exploratory in nature (Babbie, 1986). A qualitative method will be appropriate for investigating the novel phenomenon and inductively analyzing the nature of the research question (Yin, 2003). The qualitative method is preferable in situations in which “the main research questions are ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions [and] a researcher has little or no control over behavioural events and the focus of the study is a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2014, p.216).

A purposive sampling approach was used (Guest et al., 2006) and the informants that fell into my interview pool are shown in Appendix B and C. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to detect and select information-rich data in the face of limited

resources (Patton, 2002). The selection procedure started with the identification of the most suitable cases. Selected TAs were membership-based and the following criteria were used for selection.

- TAs mainly focused on certain industries (except one Chamber of Commerce which is not limited to a particular industry and one federation which is composed of TAs);
- TAs focused on the industries which are on the continuum from less likely export-oriented to highly export-oriented;
- The government-organized TAs which originated from government bureaus or were supervised by the government before 2013
- The grass-roots TAs which registered after 2013 and voluntarily formed
- The member firms are varied in firm size

30 interviews were conducted with a variety of TA administrators and member firm representatives. A total of 30 interviews were conducted over an eight-month period from October 2020 to June 2021; 15 representatives of TAs and 15 representatives member firm companies. These industries covered traditional industries like tea, medicine, freight forwarding, and new technology like software and outsourcing. New emerging industries like artificial intelligence (AI), incubators and cross-border e-commerce were also included in the sample. The informants of member firms were required to be familiar with TAs with which they are affiliated. Only with the familiarization with TAs, were the informants able to respond to questions about their engagement with TAs.

A total of 8 government-organized TAs and 6 grass-roots TAs were included in the study. These two types of TAs can be distinguished along three dimensions. Firstly, whether TAs are established from top-down or bottom-up. Government-organized TAs are initiated by the government and have mandatory membership, while grass-roots TAs are bottom-up and membership is voluntary. Secondly, the registration year of the TA is used as an indicator to distinguish them. TAs founded after 2013 are primarily grass-roots and based on voluntarism.

Semi-structured interviews were able to generate context-rich information through guided and focal communication with the participants (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). To ensure the interviews yield relevant information, I developed a special guide The protocol was based on

the literature review and theory development. The interviews started with general background questions (Appendix D), then the questions embraced a detailed description of activities engaged with TAs. The interviewees were allowed to engage in the conversation gradually. The interviews were conducted through Wechat and lasted from 40 to 60 minutes. The transcripts were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed and translated. This progressive focus of the interviews allowed for targeted data collection in our attempts to identify patterns across informants and consistencies and inconsistencies across TAs.

4.3.2 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze and report patterns within data. Among the three approaches (induction, deduction and abduction) driving the researcher's interest in the area (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I adopted an abductive thematic analysis. Moving backward and forward between the data, I aimed to identify the convergence of themes and patterns (Bizzi & Langley, 2012). In the first-order analysis, deductive coding was incorporated. The codes in deductive coding were theoretical themes or concepts derived from the extant literature and research purpose. I used a different level of transcript units for coding, including words, sentences, and paragraphs, and tested the codes using actual transcripts. In a deductive coding approach, the number of codes is limited and derived from the theoretical framework (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The theoretical framework was developed into a coding framework in which a pre-determined list of codes is created in the coding frame (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). As this study aimed at examining networks enhanced by TAs, I sought evidence relevant to establishing social, business and institutional networks. The interviewees were invited to discuss their perceptions about these activities. Following this, inductive coding was gauged to probe the unexpected findings and emerging new themes. The inductive approach is relevant when doing an exploratory study or when no theoretical concepts are immediately available to help you grasp the phenomenon being studied (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Initially, 220 codes were created which were narrow and precise, enabling the capture of complexity and diversity of data.

When the initial codes were reviewed in the second cycle of coding, higher-level categories were generated following the method outlined by Gioia et al., (2013). The codes were examined for patterns and integrated into theoretically informed categories. Next, I analyzed

the connections between the codes, exploring similarities and differences. The abductive approach was used to identify surprises in the data and to rethink existing theories (Pierce, 1978). After coding, the coding was combined with memos which are the researchers' ongoing reflections. Emergent findings were examined in the extant literature, thus strengthening the internal validity of the research (O'Gorman & Evers, 2011). NVivo 12 was used in the initial coding stage to search and refine the qualitative data and manual coding was used in later phases to identify the pattern and categories. An interviewee code is attached as Appendix E.

4.4 Results

The traditional wisdom that TAs are part of institutional networks is further confirmed. A firm representative affiliated with a logistics association mentioned that they developed institutional networks with more international organizations. Their firm was introduced to World Cargo Alliance (WCA), the world's largest and most powerful network of independent freight forwarders. They also joined Global Logistics Network (GLN), an umbrella organization comprising leading independently owned and operated companies specializing in the logistics industry, encompassing freight forwarders and transportation intermediaries. The representative of a trademark association also acknowledged the salient role of TAs as intermediary organizations to bridge firms with other institutional networks such as the host country government. This informant gave an example of how they led member firms to attend a renowned international conference and made the trip fruitful. For example, a brand must apply for a trademark through a local licensed law firm. When APPLE entered the Chinese market and applied for a trademark in China, it was required to obtain it from the local regulatory bureau, which meant that they needed to hire a local licensed law firm.

Our role is to build a platform for them. We attend various events in other countries. Our member firms (law firm or IP agency) have met law firms and IP agencies in those countries. They have exchanged cases and then created an opportunity for them to cooperate (BJTA2R1, June 29, 2021).

Going beyond this notion, informants widely acknowledged that engagement with TAs also allows the development of business networks. TAs actively liaised with other organizations

for the member firms to develop business leads. A software company appreciated the referral by the outsourcing association they are affiliated with:

The software outsourcing association we are affiliated with has a close relationship with a software association in Japan. Once a time, a big Japan bank started to develop business in China and sought outsourcing partners. The general secretary of this association learned and recommended us because we owned outstanding AI expertise. We had a meeting with this bank and finally came to an agreement to establish a partnership. This bank entrusts us because of the referral and endorsement of these intermediary organizations. The trust in the early stage saved us time that we can fix a meeting by cutting to the chase instead of touching base (BJTA4M5, Dec 2, 2020).

Another firm also gave a vivid example of how they refer business leads to other member firms. This firm's primary business is big data service, but a client requested them to install an office automation system that is outside their scope of expertise. They recommended another software company which ultimately pitched a big project. Many firm informants acknowledge that they are unable to meet every demand of their clients, and therefore they may collaborate on a project with another firm that possesses complementary expertise. Developing and leveraging business networks are, especially during the pandemic. A firm representative whose firm produces security inspection equipment innovated the security inspection with a temperature thermometer. Their products were popular and exported to many countries. However, the logistics firm they were using had many delays. Thanks to the help of TAs, they were able to gain access to the top management of that firm and attend a meeting.

By setting up a meeting through TA, we met the decision maker of the logistics firm and developed a strategic partnership. We are assured to be given priority and they ensure that our cargo can get on board and arrive in the designated country on time. I give you this example because it is evident that the member firms are like the dots and TAs connect the dots. With the help of TAs, the communication channels are much smoother and quicker (BJTA4M6, Dec 4, 2020).

Affection and friendship embedded within a social network are detected. It is believed that interaction promotes relationship building. An informant disclosed that the study tour participants would have a dinner after the company visit organized by TAs, allowing them to

nurture social networks. A firm representative confirmed that these business dinners always ended with in-depth communication and strengthened friendships. TAs create opportunities for member firms to socialize by organizing sports or other entertainment. The fact that top managers become close friends is not rare. An informant mentioned TAs has a Wechat group whose members are all CEOs and there are active talks in that group. They meet regularly for some outdoor activities. Entrepreneurs are exposed to more like-minded and develop camaraderie. They are exposed to more unexpected opportunities via friends or acquaintances developed through TA networks.

Based on the findings of the interviews, several activities emerged that support TAs in facilitating networks. One such activity is acting as an intermediary or bridge between member firms and the government, advocating for collective interests of their members. TAs were also found to play a role in coordination and monitoring activities within their networks. In the results section, sub-categories of these activities will be presented, while the argument of themes will be reserved for the discussion section. Overall, these activities highlight the important role that TAs play in facilitating networks and serving as valuable resource for their member firms.

Representing collective actions

TAs played a discernible role in representing the industry. As discussed by Bennet (1997a), TAs can perform a critical role as information providers. They can represent a major conduit with government officials to obtain specialized and updated information that they need to work out policy responses to societal and economic issues (Bennett & Ramsden, 2007). Member firms breed connections with policymakers because of the substantial political resources and capability developed by TAs, allowing them to engage in lobbying and other forms of political activity (Minto, 2016). The Beijing software outsourcing company TA has pooled a comprehensive stock of opinions through various channels to learn the situation of virus-hit domestic and foreign enterprises and to reflect their bottlenecks and problems to the government. The association voiced out the problems and sought the government's response. The vice general secretary revealed:

Being a TA, you must be a platform to gather updated information about the industry and voice out. You need to reflect the opinion upward through various channels. The sooner you reflect, the quicker the government rolls out the tailor-made policy. In this

case, the government policy supporting the software outsourcing industry during COVID was rolled out only after a week (BJTA5R1, Nov 27, 2020).

Developing standards

TAs were involved in developing standards (Hannibal & Knight, 2018) and standard development is the chief contribution of associations (Bennett, 1998). “Industrial standard reflects the extent to which the product should meet an established or expected technical specification with regard to uniformity of engineering, methods, processes and practices” (Hannibal & Knight, 2018, p. 1122). The standards were not limited to the product or service. Member firms were invited to contribute to multi-faceted standard developments at many stages. In light of the new industry, standardization is urgently needed as the industry starts from scratch and stringent standards allow fast development. For example, as an emerging phenomenon, the business incubator industry has gained prominence and the government’s attention. The classifications of incubators are intricately complex, like vertical business incubators, seed accelerators, start-up studios, etc. A well-known member firm of an association in the business incubator industry jointly worked with the government to dissect and articulate the code of incubators standards. With the growing attention turned to service, service standards need to be explicitly recognized. The Government of Zhongguancun zone (Silicon Valley in Beijing) launched the “Golden Seeds” project and rolled out a “butler service” which is a one-to-one service to customize service packages and cultivate firms’ strategies growth. The butler service aimed to offer a liaising service for technology companies. The full-scale range of one-stop butler services included the offer of office space and venture capital financing. The plan attempted to render innovative services related to technological and financial issues, like expressed approval channels for funding application. As this TA representative mentioned, how a professional butler was qualified to this role needed a certain standard and this association was responsible for developing the standard. Sometimes, TAs work with related agencies and government agencies to formulate industry standards. Taking a TA whose members are electronic firms in Guangdong region as an example the local government carried out e-commerce pilot projects and outsourced the task to this association working with other regulatory agencies to implement this project and developed standards.

Access to government

The unequal distribution of information between governments and firms has long been a debated issue, as not all firms have equal access to information related to government regulations. The government entrusts TAs for the plausible reason that they are believed to provide intelligence to the government in a real-time manner. For example, in terms of AI security, an AI association in Shanghai had the power to provide intelligence to Shanghai government agencies. TAs can provide accreditation of members and governments will scrutinize and decide which firms are eligible for government subsidy. The business-incubator association provided official accreditation, an especially important resource for member firms which are mainly incubators and could gain subsidy from the government through the high-tech firm accreditation system. It was the identical case for the electronic-firm association in Guangdong. In order to apply the subsidy from government funds, member firms were required to reach certain standards. This TA was in charge of accreditation, but why is it so important to pass it? The subsidy could even be as high 3 - 4 million US dollars, aiming at promoting e-commerce development in rural areas.

Trade fairs and expos

Trade fairs and expos were frequently mentioned as a platform to develop business leads. Member firm 9 confirmed that they actively participated in Shenzhen logistics Expo launched 15 years ago and gained prominent attention. The expo as the premier event for the logistic industry provided far-reaching insights and ideas. They met new clients and promoted the firm image. TAs play an informational nexus role by intensifying the frequency, breadth and depth of information exchange. Taking China International Clothing & Accessories Fair as an example, this fair was scheduled to be held on March 2020, but no trade fairs were allowed because of the pandemic. Given the need to keep physical distance among people, all exhibitions across China were cancelled. The organizers cancelled the event but hoped that they could hold it in April 2020. However, they realized it was still impossible to launch the show then and decided to launch a virtual trade show in April rather than wait until May 2020, because the fashion industry is seasonal. Ultimately, the apparel association developed an applet which provided the technical base of this show.

Trade missions

TAs have consistently brokered information between the member firms and other related actors. Trade missions were considered effective in meeting customers, agents, representatives and distributors and making business contacts. As the representative of the software sourcing association in Beijing said:

We took them to foreign countries like Malaysia, India. The mission delegates went there to develop business hoping to find some partners, buy a company, or establish a branch there. Three or four delegates in one mission maybe keen in such investment and some projects would have some on-the-ground achievements later. This also happened to the mission to Europe. When our business mission went to Europe, some of the delegates did not have business there before and they approached potential partners and cooperated them in a later phase, like Poland (BJTA5R1, Nov 27, 2020).

In line with the findings presented from the interview with the above-mentioned TA, the activities like trade mission and trade fair organized by the business-incubator association were perceived as useful and inspiring. As member firm 8 stated:

I think the usefulness of the trade mission may still be quite significant. Unlike in the past when trade missions were primarily organized by the government and looked more like casual travel, nowadays, trade mission is more targeted. Before our departure to overseas, we clearly know which companies I will meet, which scholars and experts I will visit, and what purpose I will achieve (BJTA8M7, Nov 22, 2020).

The output of trade missions can vary depending on the case. While some may result in potential business opportunities by meeting unexpected partners, others may not yield the same outcome. One member firm highlighted that different firms have different perspectives on the effectiveness of organizing trade missions.

Some delegates might feel the trade mission is 120% worthwhile. Some others might not achieve the desired goal. There is a need to follow up to see if the project will hit the ground (GDTA3M15, Jan 24, 2021).

Conferences/forums/competitions

TAs helped firms promote their image and establish brand recognition for an individual or collective business. Among these events, trade conferences and competitions were most recognized by the member firms. Member firm 4 mentioned:

We normally don't showcase at a domestic trade fair, but we will attend some large-scale conferences as the representative of government affairs department. We may go to the conference to broaden our horizons and find out if there are any potential partners (BJTA4M6, Dec 4, 2020).

The efforts to make the event stand out and capture more attention than other similar events were evident through TAs' manoeuvring in organizing the event. They invited influential speakers and even made it a visual feast to be very tempting and memorable. The representative of AI association in Shanghai highlighted their effort to create gimmicks for the events:

For World Artificial Intelligence Conference this year, we will invite Bill Gates. We invited Jack Ma and Musk last year and the year before. We developed eye-catching gimmicks to promote the event across the world. Whether you are investors or young people with unique ideas, or any people interested in the AI industry, we hope that you will pay attention to this three-day event in Shanghai (SHTA1R14, June 3, 2021).

A platform for cooperation

Cooperative interactions between members were found to be present in all of the interviewed TAs. Trust and referrals were frequently mentioned as important factors in these interactions. Accumulation of knowledge and building of trust will increase the eventual greater commitment (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Member firm 10 informant elaborated a successful story by working with another member firm.

Our customers want to invest in a bio-pharmaceutical firm. We lack specific knowledge of bio-industry. Later, we met a medicine incubator called Jingwei through this association. This company used to make medicines before, and they created a vertical incubator on their own. Jingwei is very familiar with this field. We follow them to invest in the beforementioned bio-pharmaceutical firm. Otherwise, we are not confident in investing in this company (BJTA8M8, Nov 24, 2020).

Consistent with the opinion of the business-incubator TA in Beijing, member firms acknowledged more cooperation rather than competition within TA network. TAs were considered to be a platform to provide complementary resources. As member firm 14 of the logistics association in Shenzhen stated:

The member firms within our TA have less competition and more cooperation because each of us may have different strengths. Every company has to play with its strength. Our business in Australian and New Zealand markets is mature, other companies have developed business in French or Southeast Asia. If the company got an order whose destination is Australia, they would outsource the order to us (GDTA3M14, Feb 25, 2021).

The advisory activities of TAs are acknowledged by scholars (Bennett, 1998; Costa et al., 2017). Findings also suggested that TAs provided essential legal support and counselling services for their member firms embarking on the internationalization journey. This support mainly involves sharing the legislative changes, the commercial changes in markets, tax information and entities that act as intermediaries for the demanding regulation and legislation in foreign countries. The software outsourcing association in Beijing organized thematic seminars and workshops. Through workshops or training, the members have been informed of the industry-wide business opportunities. Sometimes, these workshops were criticized as less influential than more targeted or tailored workshops. The thematic workshops that offer both information and instruction for firms are more useful than general seminars tapping into international issues (Abonyi, 2015).

We organized a lot of activities like we have a training this afternoon. You have to do more training so that the member firm could become more bonding with you ((BJTA5R1, Nov 27, 2020).

Not surprisingly, the logistics association in Shenzhen also offered a wide variety of counselling services. This was manifested by member firm 9. The association has a delegated lawyer to address general inquiries free of charge. If it was not a general inquiry and a lawyer would provide actual service, the member firms were able to enjoy discounted service fees. Another advantage is that some of these third-party agencies are endorsed by the association and have gained the trust of member firms. As a result, there is no need to verify their qualifications.

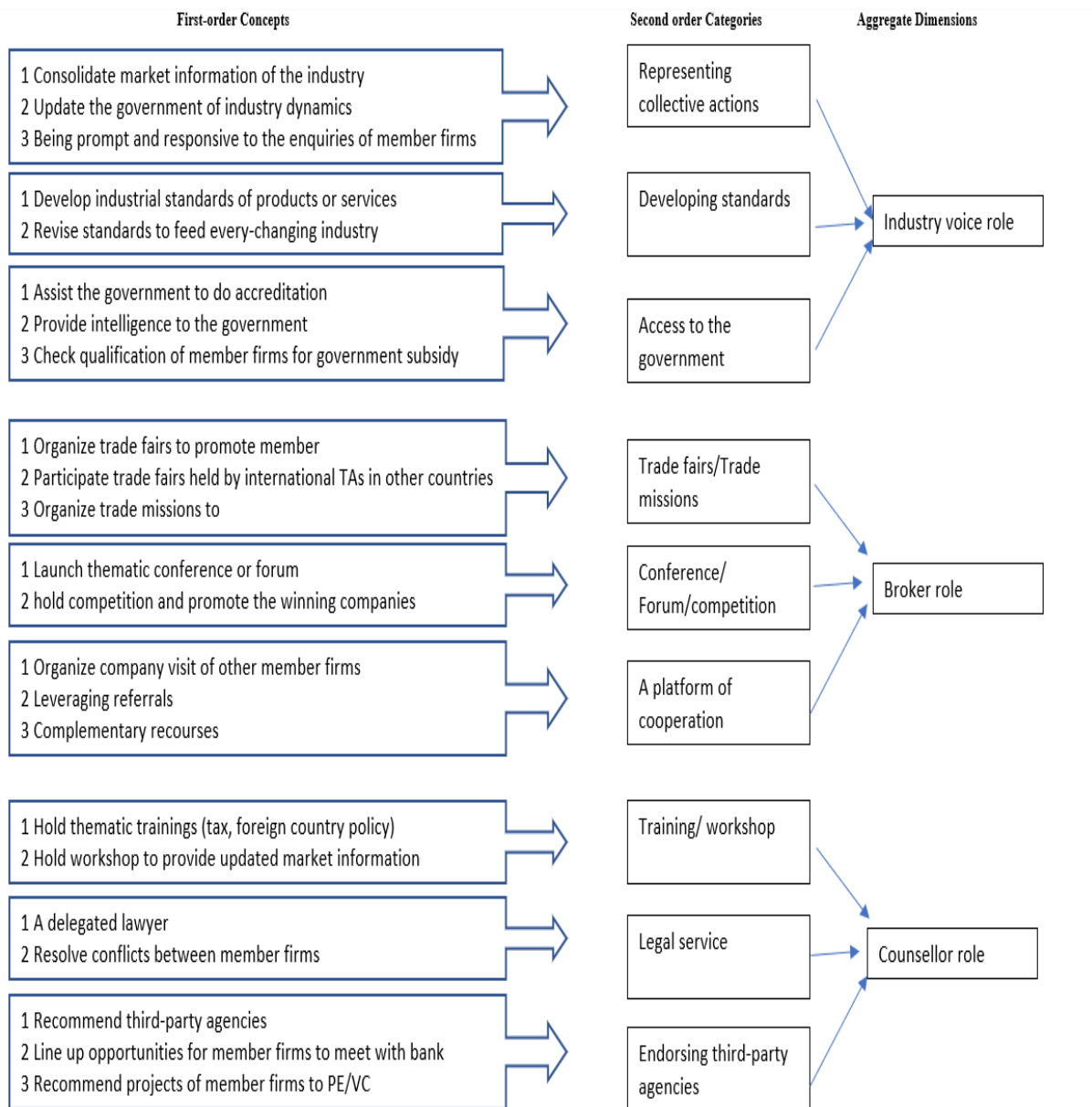
Relying on TAs network, member firms can overcome the lack of government policy knowledge. Member firm 10 told:

We often rely on various government subsidies that provide us with support. We often ask my association for this kind of consultation. They always assist the government in formulating these policies. So they are very familiar with the bureaus and the government's supporting policies (BJTA8M8, Nov 24, 2020).

Beijing has a broad base of industrial parks which are the locale of incubators, technology-based companies and many of these firms are relatively small or medium-sized in the infancy stage which have no government affairs department, as large firms do. Given this, the role of the association would be of great importance. TAs provided a guide for the firms in the incubators through their development. They advised when and how the start-up should apply for patents, software copyright, and trademarks. They advised what funding they should apply for national or city high-tech projects. They even recommended at what stage they can apply for some incentives specializing in certain countries. TAs helped some small or mini entrepreneurial companies from scratch without missing critical regulations, enjoying the preferential policies. Now some TAs even offer upfront service to suggest the registration address. For example, if it were a technology-based company, TAs recommended the company to register an address in a specific industrial park; if it were a biomedical-based company, it would be suggested to register in another industrial park to enjoy the favorable policy. Figure 4-1 provides an overview of the data structure.

Figure 4-1

Data structure of Chapter 4



The second research question attempted to better understand the nuanced difference between government-organized TAs and grass-roots TAs. It was revealed that both types of TAs showcased no difference in performing a broker role. Both of them were engaged in organizing versatile activities to boost member firms' image. The weight of mainstream activities was found to be equally allocated among them, mainly trade fairs, conferences and company visits. The presentation of the industry voice role was more obvious in government-organized TAs compared to grass-roots TAs. A slightly higher presentation of counsellor roles was found in government-organized TAs compared with grass-roots TAs. Some representative quotes indicative of the difference are shown in Table 4-1.

Table 4-1

Representative quotes

	Government-organized TAs	Grass-roots TAs
Industry voice role	<p>“We often write reports for the government. This year, the city government is also planning a lot of long-term plans, we are involved in this.” (GDTA4R13)</p> <p>“This function was transferred to our association by a government department. For example, our association assists the government to proceed with pharmacist certificate and GMP registration certificate.” (GDTA1O10) (GMP: Good Manufacturing Practice)</p>	<p>“Whether it is a government-organized or grassroots TA, the ability to provide desired services and have extensive representation in the industry is crucial to satisfying member firms. Without sufficient representation, it is difficult for TAs to attract the attention of member firms.” (BJTA7R8)</p> <p>“They can represent your extensive members in this industry if the governance of grass-roots TAs is good.” (BJTA7O8)</p> <p>“Government-organized TAs are more representative because of the government’s endorsement. They are provided with resources and the support of the government.” (SHTA1R14)</p>
Counsellor role	<p>“The government may give different subsidies for different projects. For example, we have more funds allocated for rural e-commerce pilot counties.” (GDTA4R13)</p> <p>“Our characteristic consulting service is like this: take full advantage of our memberships. Many of our member companies are e-commerce platforms, service providers, operating organizations, and training organizations. They can work with each other by our matching service. Like, software, AI, legal lawyers as well as intellectual property, and</p>	<p>“You need to acknowledge the need of member firms. We will send out questionnaires. In the questionnaire, member firms are asked what financial products are needed.” (SHTA1R14)</p> <p>“We wish we are government-organized TAs. They are more likely to get government contracting offerings.” (BJTA4R5)</p>

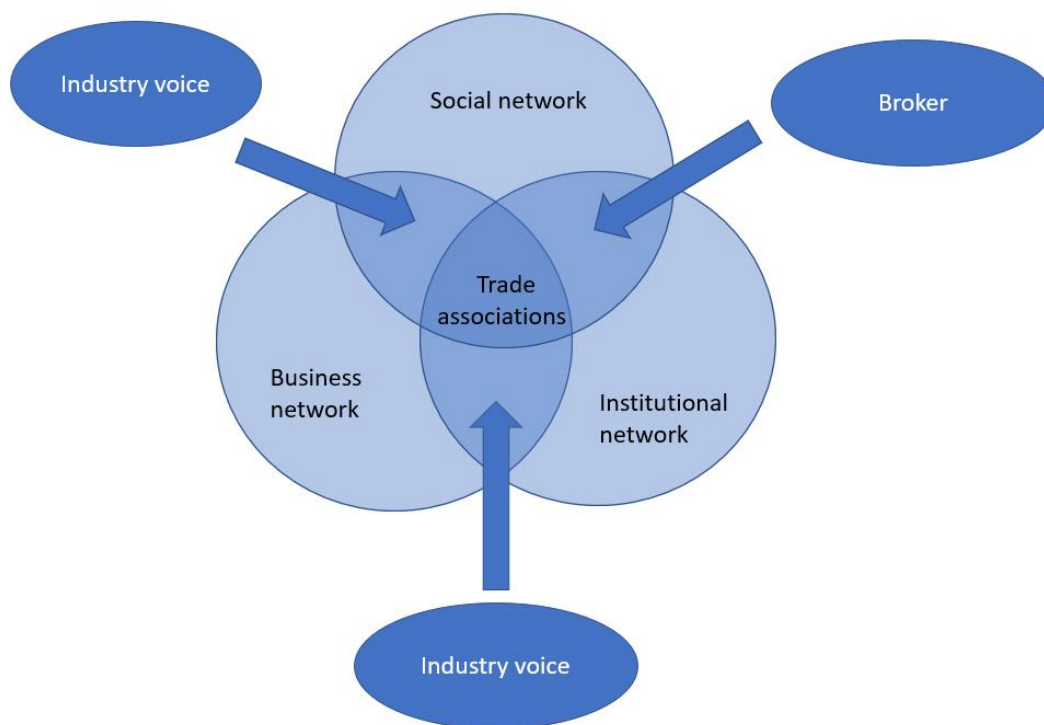
	we know what they need, we match e-commerce platforms for them.” (GDTA4R13)	
Broker role	<p>“What the member firms most want to participate in are investment promotion conferences hosted by various platforms through us because they all have specific needs. For example, when you come to Guangdong for investment promotion, the events are segmented by industry, which allows those who want to settle in to easily find the right opportunities. If I introduce the platforms to them, many members will sign up for the events.”GDTA4R13)</p> <p>“Every year, our association holds a major event called the China International Trademark Brand Festival. Before the pandemic, we had nearly 200 foreign lawyers and experts attending this event, as well as representatives from the National Intellectual Property Office, local intellectual property bureaus, enterprises, and various agencies and universities. We also invite experts in the field of intellectual property to participate and share their insights on the platform, including the development of the industry and the domestic and international economic situation.” (BJTA2R3)</p>	<p>“I think that associations are a great platform for networking from a personal perspective. Because in our industry, I cannot possibly have so many opportunities to get to know so many peers on my own. As an incubator, we understand ourselves as a hub for information exchange and integration. This is a distribution activity, so I need a large amount of information to be gathered here before I can distribute it to others.” (BJTA8M9)</p> <p>“For example, when the Zhongguancun Ecological Association organizes a roadshow or conference, people have the opportunity to see the showcased projects. They can screen and find the projects that are suitable for their investment or support.” (BJTA8M10)</p>

4.5 Discussion and conclusion

We have found the facilitating role of TAs to enhance the hybrid network (Figure 4-2). The results presented above clearly indicate that TAs play a role in propelling hybrid network development. I have explored this under researched actor, using a network perspective to synthesize the disparate roles. I attempted to explain in what activities firms can utilize TAs to enhance competitiveness by acquiring various networks.

Figure 4-2

TAs' facilitating role in strengthening the hybrid networks



A granular understanding of the government-organized TAs and grass-roots TAs allows us to encapsulate the complex Chinese context. Recognizing both types of TAs as active actors affecting member firms adds another layer of knowledge when we conceive the drivers of member firms gaining competitive advantage enhancement. Businesspeople prudently establish political connections because the government controls the key sources. Due to the lower level of a free-market economy, it is necessary for business owners to build a close relationship with the government which assists in overcoming market obstacles. Overall, this study elucidates that TAs are closely relevant and can exert regulatory, political or social

pressures on business activities regardless of large or small firms. The policy that aimed to promote the marketization of the establishment and operation of TAs led to an increase in the similarity rather than diversity among TAs. In other words, it led to greater isomorphism among TAs. By probing the under-researched roles of TAs in a centrally-controlled regime, we map the key insight and values of utilizing TAs as a tool to pool resources. Looking closely at TAs evolving into vibrant operations following the abolition of dual administration, this unseen approach zooms our attention to a more profound and intricate accounting of the TAs capacity and capability. Three roles of TAs in support of the hybrid network development of member firms emerge as a result of inductive coding. I will explicate them in turn in the following discussion.

4.5.1 Industry voice role

TA is involved in government policy-making and can provide member firms access to political benefits. The support of the government explains the recent intensive OFDI of Chinese firms. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to a direct examination of a dyadic relationship between firms and government, or a greater proportion of focus has been given to activist NGOs that challenge or seek to modify corporate action (Doh, & Guay, 2004). However, firms in China are more likely to sense and seize the opportunity to bond with the government through TAs' network because of their semi-government background. TAs influence cooperative political action: policymakers take advantage of the potency of TAs to influence policy outcomes and appreciate the information provided by TAs (Hultén et al., 2012). In the eyes of officials, it is more pragmatic and governable to supervise individual firms with the assistance of TA. When the policymakers are recognizant of and appreciate the role and empower the TAs, TAs act as informal regulators of industry activity considered at political intelligence (Rajwani et al., 2015).

Taken together, TAs are considered an industry voice in support of the collective needs and goals of the members (Rajwani et al., 2015). As the "industry voice", TAs speak representing their members to governments, regulators and other opinion formers (Rajwani et al., 2015). They are also engaged in collective strategies that include developing standards that benefit the industry as a whole (Barnett & King, 2008) by creating consensus (Rysman & Simcoe, 2008) and proceeding with accreditation (Maxwell et al., 2000). TAs work to develop and

maintain standards for their industry (Kshetri & Dholakia, 2009). Our findings support that such collective action is explicitly detected in an emerging industry, in our case, the business incubator industry. TAs have opportunities to influence corporate conduct via direct or indirect influence.

In emerging economies where resource dependencies on the government are stronger, firms are expected to develop political connections to access critical political resources and shield themselves from the perils of political extortions (Peng & Luo, 2000). Mediating in the political choice about what is thinkable and doable is a major role of TAs as a collective representative. Prior research has found that TAs influence the government's and member firms' relationship (Zhang, 2018). TAs in western countries are commonly associated with lobbying activities, which aim to influence the government (Lawton et al., 2013; Mellahi et al., 2016). TAs in China, a centrally-controlled regime, rarely exhibited the effort to influence government's decision but unshakably followed the government's guiding. TAs are found to less actively influence the external environment through such means as lobbying for obtaining more favorable government policies. Despite the absence of lobbying attempts, TAs are still seen as entities to develop institutional networks for member firms. They serve as a bridge to enhance connection with the government and other international TAs. TAs create influence (Schaefer & Kerrigan, 2008) and establish reputational trust with political actors (Tucker, 2008). TAs develop strong political resources and specialized political capabilities to generate access to policymakers and allow them to engage in lobbying and other forms of political activity (Minto, 2016). Member firms might be acquainted with other international TAs and milk the opportunities because TAs which they are affiliated with might have an interlocking relationship with other international TAs. Taken together, industry voice role boosts institutional network growth for the member firms.

4.5.2 Broker role

Networking with the firms regardless of within or outside TA develops resources such as information and personal referral which can induce new business opportunities (Burt, 2000). Particularly, when other members are familiar with the market irrespective of the home country or host country, they play a broker role in bridging the domestic and foreign markets. It is more likely to build mutual trust and rapport if a potential partner is referred from a

reputable member company. Brokering opportunities also help in lowering information asymmetries. A potential foreign partner might be referred by another member who is believed as a reliable information resource (Lamin, 2013). Such referrals are crucial due to the concern of the potential risk and nebulous outcomes associated with internationalization activities. The high risk and uncertainty can be mitigated if not avoided when cooperating with reliable partners.

The broker role emerges throughout the reported findings. The reported study shows how TAs take leverage of various activities or events to offer business opportunities for member firms. These activities translate into business leads generated through interaction with potential clients. Broker role not only exists between TAs and member firms but also between member firms. Interacting and networking with other member firms yield useful information influx and spawn new opportunities. Prima facie evidence is equivocal that the cooperation grows out of the competition. In many cases, the cooperating logic outweighs the competing logic. Collaboration and cooperation prevail rather than furious competition. Trade mission, as an important brokering activity, is highlighted by the informants but they also agree that there is no unanimous standard to measure the effectiveness of trade mission because the delegates have different expectations. However, it is believed the travel-oriented mission is not appreciated and the tailor-made mission is more trenchant. This will be demanding for TAs to design the programme and feed the various needs of the delegates. The broker role assumes significance in breeding social networks.

4.5.3 Counsellor role

The legal provision is critical for companies to manoeuvre within the regulations and legislations of foreign countries and some TAs render legal service offerings. Some TAs offer technical assistance to support research and development (R&D) and internationalization projects (Costa et al., 2017). Pollitt and Mellors (1992) found that only a quarter of British firms sought the advice of their association, and the counsellor role is inadequate. There is a need for TAs to feed the requests of members. However, the previous study found that TAs as consultancy agents are not fully used (Bennett, 1999). The services involved in this role can include training services (government policy and market intelligence), legal services support (arbitration advice), and recommendation of third-party services etc.

I have identified a counsellor role of TAs that provides advisory services. The counsellor role adds our knowledge of TAs' usefulness, increasing the general level of appreciation and understanding of how TAs serve the member firms. Bennett (1998) argued that TAs provided high interconnectedness services though the services were considered low cost, low intensity, low frequency and low duration. This was challenged by our findings that TAs were perceived to be resourceful because of offering a repertoire of counselling services. TAs can help SMEs overcome limited resources and access varied resources including capital and legal knowledge. The counselling and training provided by TAs enact a preliminary push for the international expansion of the member firms. It has been found that companies began their internationalization activity with the support of TAs. These captivating findings are aligned with the findings of Wang et al., (2012) who contend that institutional environments boost firms' internationalization when the institutional organizations advocate those firms to inaugurate international expansion. The member firms are informed about international trade agreements and bilateral agreements. TAs also render negotiation support to the members to alleviate trade barriers and reduce all types of barriers, enabling access to markets. The counselling service can be delivered via a variety of workshops. Some TAs organize workshops targeting the education of tax or human resources of foreign markets where the companies intend to internationalize.

In a highly resource-constrained and volatile environment, resource configurations for firms are of great importance. Focusing on the diverse resource provided by TA, I conjecture the counsellor role of TAs as the link to an external source of advice. Through this approach, scholars can examine how firms can extract valuable benefits from TA networks, which can help us better understand how firms can utilize external resources by engaging with TAs. Member firms are likely to expand business networks through TAs' counsellor role. TAs will recommend and endorse some third-party agents, creating a platform for member firms to obtain support. For example, TAs invite a calibre quality PE (private equity) / VC (Venture Capital) to select and invest in certain projects of member firms.

Networking with TAs could be converted to other valuable resources—resources that organizations can leverage to enhance their successful operation in a given environment. TAs playing the above roles provide more accessible and applicable network resources to member firms. A revealing new look encourages firms to consider engagement with TAs in their

strategy canvas. The opportunities bequeathed the roles of TA is derived from nurturing and developing network befitting member firms. Brokering activities enable the establishment of a broad spectrum of relationships. Network perspective gained momentum in explaining TA's roles in influencing firms' strategic activities.

A further look at the heterogeneity of government-organized TAs and grass-roots TAs allows us to hazard a guess that the abolition of dual registration policy's rolling out did make a difference. The government-organized TAs and grass-roots TAs paralleling in different trajectories are moving towards a more isomorphous feature. The nationwide policy stimulating the state's purchasing of services from TAs allows a financial windfall for both types of TAs (Spires, 2020). Borrowing one informant's words, TAs can represent the industry and survive irrespective of whether it is government-organized or grass-roots only if its core competitiveness is recognized widely. Since TAs are undergoing a transitional revolution, some government-organization TAs hold significant power and have access to unique resources. Rolling out a national policy is a long-term blueprint and makes it evident that not every TA grows and operates at the same pace. A paucity of disparity is still found at this stage.

Government-organized TAs exhibited a higher level of industry voice role compared to grass-roots TAs. Because of historical background, memberships of government-organized TAs are mandatory and thus embrace a higher membership density. Though grass-roots TA are expected to be less representative, some grass-roots TAs stand out because of their prominent performance, actively forming activities and delivering appreciated services to the member firms. The broker role presentation seems to be equally shown between the two types of TAs. Either government-organized TAs or grass-roots TAs serve member firms with the provision of promotional activities. Trade fairs and trade missions that create opportunities to meet business contacts are easily found throughout TAs' activities. The capacity of grass-roots TAs in a counsellor role is weaker compared to government-organized TAs, as the latter are more likely to receive government contracting opportunities. Government-contracting service, the frequently mentioned term, directed our attention to a new phenomenon.

Our finding implied that perceptions of TAs are influenced by historically entrenched norms and expectations. The overarching findings are 1) Government-organized TAs are considered representative of the shared interest of members because of historical origins. To go deeper

into this point, they are believed to be closely bonding with the government compared to grass-roots TAs. In this line of thought, firms tend to prefer joining government-organized TAs for resource interaction; 2) While government-organized TAs are generally perceived as being better equipped to provide advisory services, some grass-roots TAs have gained recognition for their innovative service offerings. In recent years, the emergence of government-contracting services, also known as purchase-of-service arrangements, has influenced the behavior of TAs. Effective and capable TAs have been able to develop government-nonprofit partnerships by fulfilling public service responsibilities through paid services.

To conclude this paper, I highlight three main contributions. The qualitative nature of this study allowed us to gain a rich set of information given the broad spectrum of TAs' activities and strategies. Firstly, there is a surprising neglect of TAs as networking facilitators. Hybrid network support is vital for the development and expansion of Chinese firms, therefore, it should be in the interest of a broader range of stakeholders, like governments, firm top management, and public institutions. The findings are revelatory on how the firms can acquire resources through TAs' networks and overcome the deficiency of limited resources to enhance competitiveness. Established networks spur newly formed networks, allowing for the development of quick inter-firm partnerships (Freeman et al., 2010). Newly formed networks lead to tacit knowledge, which enhances the firm's absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). By introducing a framework for studying TA in an IB domain, this study increases the awareness of how some resource-constrained Chinese firms have grown and started to internationalize.

Another central contribution of the current article is its comparative approach, which contrasts the perception of TAs senior administrators versus the member firms' representatives. Using this comparative approach, we sought to complement and provide new directions on the roles of TAs. The dyadic relationship between TAs and member firms is worth noting, and the discrepancies captured in the findings highlight the need for TAs practitioners to refine their strategies and improve their services to meet the expectations of their member firms. This is more valuable than relying solely on self-reported findings from TAs.

4.6 Empirical implications and limitations

Empirical implications

I believe these findings have key implications for the existing literature of TAs and suggest avenues for future research and theory development of the emerging economy. When analyzing an emerging economy firm's behaviour, our role identification can serve as an alternative lens to learn a firm's knowledge recognition and capture. My arguments are built on the rationale for participating TA. Network managers must opt for these alternatives and take full advantage of TAs. TA serves as a proxy between members and governments. Being acquainted with TA may render them access to government resources like policy and incentives. Entrepreneurs aiming to expand internationally can mobilise foreign market knowledge and reap fastened international learning when interacting with peers within TAs. To enhance their international competitiveness and promote growth, firms can benefit from obtaining tacit knowledge through engagement with the TA network. Collaborating with other member firms through inter-firm partnerships can result in mutual knowledge benefits.

Self-reflection on the endogenous roles stimulates TA practitioners to develop additional services to enhance the ability to serve the purpose of the internationalization goal. TAs with a great deal of institutional capacity and abundant resources usually undertake a larger range of different activities. It is inferred from this empirical study that more representative associations exhibited high member density, the ability to provide valued resources to their members. For example, TAs without providing counsellor service should include the service to meet the emerging demand of member firms. TAs are urged to incorporate more tailor-made programmes to feed the needs of member firms. Although some efforts of TAs are observed to help member firms capitalize on internationalization (Boehe, 2013; Bennett & Robson, 2001), the strength of engaging with TAs is dubious and not widely recognized. It is suggested that the managers of associations provide more targeted knowledge desired by member firms.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations that have been identified in this paper. A follow-up study may be instrumental in teasing out the effects of TAs on internationalization. The methodological approach adopted for this study is qualitative, normally implying difficulty in generalizing findings. Nevertheless, the pivotal contribution of qualitative research resides in the explicit depiction and analysis of the particularity of a context under investigation. Therefore, it is considered an optimal option for addressing the exploratory nature of the particular context of TAs in this case. However, future research can apply a quantitative methodology to complement the qualitative insights offered in this study.

Although the informants of member firms are senior management, they are not business owners or founders and can not delineate the story of a firm growing fast after becoming a member firm. While the informant is appropriate for this study's purpose, senior management's views might differ from those of entrepreneurs. Standing in the shoes of entrepreneurs will induce different thinking of TAs' deemed roles exhibited in this paper. Particularly, interviews with entrepreneurs will enrich the storytelling of TAs' contributions. Future studies with business owners would enrich our understanding of the deployment of TA to facilitate network attainment.

5 Chapter 5 Paper 2 The Effect of Trade Associations on The Internationalization of Chinese Firms

5.1 Introduction

Trade associations (TAs) as intermediaries in the milieu of strategic business choices need to be explicitly recognized. Neglect of TA networks in catalysing the process of internationalization is surprising, since being a member of TAs may help firms develop capabilities (Kahl, 2014; Minto, 2016) in the provision of knowledge and expertise (Lawton, Rajwani, & Doh 2013). In spite of the noticeable importance of TA for firms, industries, and governments, academia has dedicated surprisingly little attention to understanding them as a focal entity in the IB domain. This study will address the overarching research question: How do the roles of TA contribute to their members' knowledge acquisition? To what extent do the roles of TAs contribute to internationalization through knowledge acquisition?

This study has multifaceted contributions to research on the role of TAs in the IB field and intends to bring scholarship's attention to TAs' roles. By offering a series of refinements and extensions to the drivers of internationalization through the lens of TA, this study adds knowledge to IB field. TAs studies are imbued with two theoretical approaches corporate political action (CPA) (Elsahn & Benson-Rea, 2018; Hultén et al., 2012; Lawton et al., 2013) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Guay et al., 2004; Marquis & Qian, 2014). Inherent within these strands of studies is the notion of TAs, which firms could leverage to deploy CPA or CSR strategy. I extend the line of internationalization theory by highlighting the roles of TA and its contribution to internationalization. Although we know a great deal about how multinational enterprises (MNEs) leverage non-market strategy involving CPA and/or CSR to seek to manoeuvre, we know little about how resource-constrained small-to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) pursue TA activities. By focusing on TAs, this study enables us to develop a taxonomy of roles that are indicative of business entities of all sizes and types. It will go beyond existing research which mainly focuses on MNEs which are large and in the post-internationalization stage and suggest an avenue to SMEs which are relatively small and have not yet started the internationalization journey.

TAs help firms internationalize by acquiring knowledge and bridging the information gap between member firms and foreign market opportunities. This study focuses on how TAs

influence member firms' knowledge acquisition and pave the way for internationalization. More specifically, I am attentive to what activities of TAs influence member firms' internationalization. This paper proposes an integrated model concerning the role that TAs plays in developing knowledge of member firms which are the stimuli of internationalization. I attempt to fill the literature gap regarding company internationalization by proposing a discernible role for TAs. For my purpose, I take the starting premise that engagement with TA is a wise strategy to be adopted by member firms. Following this, I put forward a model to propose the facilitating role of TA to help member firms develop knowledge and thus facilitate the internationalization process. Finally, this paper offers a conclusion and empirical implications based on the proposed model.

5.2 Theoretical framework

5.2.1 Activities of TAs to perform the three roles

Network perspective constitutes a particularly valuable lens to investigate the internationalizing firms with TAs' involvement. TAs facilitate member firms to acquire social, business and institutional networks while interactions with TAs enable member firms to garner information and aggregate nonmarket capital. My initial interest is confirmed by the findings shown in Paper 1 that TAs can leverage three roles to gain hybrid networks. I am motivated to delve into these three roles and discover the profound weight of the influence of TAs on internationalization.

Overall, this study is revelatory to clarify that TAs are closely relevant and can exert political, regulatory or social pressures. Initial interest is generated growing out of the increasing recognition of TAs with their role in facilitating member firms' capability to gain resources. A comprehensive explanation between the role of TAs and knowledge acquisition is not available in the current literature of TAs, in large part due to theoretical fragmentation. It is time to move TAs towards the forefront of research, enabling a deep understanding of this entity and underlining its growing importance. Industry voice, broker and counsellor which are identified to develop networks explained the plausible reasons that member firms join TAs. By gaining social and business networks, member firms foster informal relationships with managers of other member firms and formal relationships related to business activities.

As an intermediary actor, TAs provide a platform for firms in different markets to interact and consequently initiate international business activities. Paper 1 found the de facto central position of TAs which facilitated the network establishment, these networks become a platform of collaboration, dialogue and strategic alliance between members. Below are the activities in support of these roles.

Collective activities

TAs are engaged in collective action for the benefit of membership (Esparza et al., 2014). TAs are considered an industry voice in support of the collective needs and goals of the members (Rajwani et al., 2015). As the “industry voice”, TAs represent their members to governments, regulators and other opinion formers (Rajwani et al., 2015). The important role of TAs has been prominent, inter alia, during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have pooled firms’ feedback and have reported to the government, having a considerable effect on state policy adjustment. For instance, business owners are keenly concerned with capital chain rupture issues when resuming work. In response to this problem, a freight-forwarding TA in Shenzhen lobbied the transportation bureau agencies to provide subsidy support for its member firms.

There are numerous examples of firms joining TAs to seek collective action and provide complementary resources with other partners. The government's collaboration with TAs for their specialized expertise is also observed. TA engagement aims to tap into valuable resources and enhance business-NGO–government interface. Setting standards is another way that TAs reduce information costs for buyers. Doner and Schneider (2000) find that TAs play roles in setting standards for more sophisticated manufactured exports. Taiwan Electrical Appliances Manufacturers’ Association (TEAMA) developed a quality-control agreement among producers of specific electrical products to protect their reputation in the international market.

Self-regulation where member firms are subject to some test or accreditation that assures customers of their standards, conduct or qualifications, is growingly recognized. TAs are increasingly important drivers for businesses’ self-regulation to operate in a sustainable way. Self-regulation is defined as a regulatory process whereby an industry-level (as opposed to a

governmental or firm-level) organization sets rules and standards (codes of practice) relating to the conduct of firms in the industry (Marques, 2017). By monitoring, closely scrutinizing and enforcing over its members, TAs drive firms jointly to regulate their collective action to avoid common threats or destructive competition. Lane and Bachmann (1997) argued that self-regulation developed mutual trust and benefits industry competitiveness.

TAs offer services of accreditation in many cases. The existing research finds that government counsels TAs and work closely with TAs in developing regulatory framework and strengthening regulation enforcement. By providing expertise and knowledge to governments, TAs are trusted by the government to create responsible laws, regulations and standards to safeguard the industry. For example, TAs are in a strong position to provide accreditation of members, enabling the association to claim representation of businesses that conform to an industry code of practice. For TA, accreditation schemes are a way to minimise the risk of free rider behaviour by combining actions that generate collective benefits (lobbying government agencies) with services that generate individual benefits (being recognized as an accredited provider of a product or service). TAs made the decision if some member firms failed to meet the requirements of being given accreditation. TAs help their members find out the problem and improve the flaws. By applying pressure, member firms either made progress to pass the accreditation or were expelled from the TA.

Brokerage activities

Brokerage activities are of significance to gaining foreign business resources for international expansion. The foreign business resources consist of intangible proprietary foreign market information, knowledge and contacts. Informal interactions and information exchange with existing or potential partners through business events enhance such resource acquisition (Tang, 2011). Cooperative networks have important implications for society (Connor & Shumate, 2014). TAs can improve the speed and efficiency of member firms by facilitating dialogue, disseminating information, and brokering compromises (Bailey & Rupp, 2006). The relationships in networks are triggers of the inauguration of internationalization. A firm's current business networks can form a bridge to enter new markets (Sharma & Johanson, 1987). The decision-makers made the internationalization choice due to a serendipitous interface with other member firms. Specifically, brokerage activities by TAs introduce SMEs

into associated business networks abroad by collaborating with overseas trade offices and associations to locate potential local partners (Tang, 2011).

Business events like trade exhibitions can be conducive to promoting business. Hosting essential events of exhibiting the goods and services to buyers and businesses, TAs help firms promote the image and establish recognition of brands either for individual or collective businesses. Through the opportunities to meet with other players, the process of learning is enhanced. The various trade shows inform members about shifts in demand and new marketing trends, and exhibitions are also an excellent way to network with potential customers. Conferences and forums have been major services provided by TAs to feed the needs of member companies. TAs make joint efforts with international organizations and partners on numerous conferences to increase member companies' presence in international trade and economy. Unlike trade exhibitions, some countries give importance to trade missions to attract overseas investment. In order to attract new business investment, create job opportunities and improve both state and local tax bases, the state government uses trade missions as a strategic programme to solicit the interest of businesspeople (Wilkinson & Brouthers, 2008).

Sometimes, a third party, rather than a potential importer or exporter, detects a trading opportunity such as a government agency, bank, or TAs (Ellis, 2011). The importance of outside third parties in the initiation of exports has been acknowledged in the literature (Brache & Felzensztein, 2019). The important broker role of TAs in boosting export has been recognized in a myriad of studies (Costa et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2019; Schembri et al., 2019). A wide array of broker activities are provided by TAs, organizing trade exhibitions and conferences, forming trade missions, providing business matching services and collaborating with overseas trade associations to refer to business leads.

Advisory activities

TAs are used as a supplier of advice and are considered the most important information source (Bennett & Ramsden, 2007). TAs are found to provide expert and advisory services, technology support and market intelligence to member firms (Oparaocha, 2015). The extant studies also suggest member firms are aware of the support service available rendered by TAs (Oparaocha, 2015). By rendering consultancy services, TAs also perform a counsellor role.

TAs are one such source of external resources. Identifying as providers of advisory services and gatekeepers to valuable connections (Hanssen-Bauer & Snow, 1996), TAs provide practical assistance by offering practical advice on taxation, export and payroll and so on. Government work in cooperation with TA to provide business assistance, so TAs have a prominent training and counselling role in supporting SME internationalization (Costa et al., 2017). Sometimes, TAs offer technical support research and development (R&D) of member firms (Costa et al., 2017). Export managers view workshops organized by the TAs as an efficient means of gaining knowledge about overseas markets (Wilkinson & Brouthers, 2006). However, it is also argued that although sometimes TAs provide first-hand information of overseas markets, this information is not substantially used nor considered useful by firms (Costa et al., 2017).

TAs also act as an arbitrator to mediate business disputes among members. In this way, TAs can provide a more swift, transparent, and low-cost resolution than court orders. TAs can tackle disputes among members because of their specialism and intermediate status. Because of fostering trust-based inter-firm relations, TAs ensure the validity of commonly accepted norms and interfere when arbitration is needed. Reported by Zhang (2007), a local leather suppliers' TA has founded two arbitration committee, one for disputes in manufacturing and the other is for disputes in transactions. This TA resolved 112 disputes in 1996 alone, was widely recognized in the industry and is considered a consultant by the local government.

5.2.2 Knowledge acquisition for internationalization and hypothesis development

Knowledge-based views constitute an important perspective in the research which focuses on early internationalizing firms. This particular salience of the knowledge-based views in understanding international growth has also been acknowledged by Autio et al., (2000). Various kinds of knowledge are required in pursuit of internationalization. The general knowledge of internationalization is concerned with operations in different foreign markets, such as similarities in the marketing or manufacturing process that can be acquired with the assistance of TAs (Rhee et al., 2002). Country-specific knowledge features a particular foreign market and might only be gained through direct experiential learning (Rhee et al., 2002). Several major types of knowledge are discussed by a body of scholars. Eriksson et al.

(1997, p. 7) stated that market-specific knowledge demands “presence abroad, exposure to the situation abroad, and interaction with specific customers, intermediaries and other firms” to be useful. Through business activities, the idiosyncratic experiences of partners as well as knowledge of the specific market’s organization are obtained by the firm. Firms are able to acquire knowledge of the specific market and own experiences of dealing with partners of that market through business activities. Market-specific knowledge can thus be difficult and costly to obtain, but is critical for the successful development of international operations (Lord & Ranft, 2000). The other type of knowledge, internationalization knowledge, is a general type of knowledge that does not relate to a specific market or country (Fletcher et al., 2013; Zahra et al., 2000). Internationalization knowledge is a firm-specific experience of organizing internationalization, accumulated over time. This type of knowledge could be applied in tackling international opportunities and developing operations in different markets.

The neglect of TA in enhancing knowledge acquisition is a shame because TAs are considered one of the key sources of obtaining knowledge. A myriad of studies concludes that TAs constitute an important source of knowledge (Child et al., 2017; Costa et al., 2020). TAs enable members to access to acquire knowledge. Network membership produced the bottom-line advantages which gain informational assets (Koka & Prescott, 2002), access to trustworthy and timely information and referrals attained from other members (Burt 1997). TAs are able to reach the knowledge of the latest industry technology and the newest standard. TAs are situated in a central position within their network of members to share knowledge on industry preferences or market demands. Associated with the knowledge-sharing function, TAs bundle the members to generate collective influence. Previous studies have found a direct link between knowledge acquisition and internationalization (De Clercq et al., 2012; Fletcher & Harris, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2013; Mejri & Umemoto, 2010). Based on the broader claim of knowledge theories, we attempt to explore an underlying mechanism, and suggest that the roles of TAs influence internationalization.

TAs are in a position to enact a collaborative environment, providing more specific information and facilitating knowledge sharing among members (Costa et al., 2020). TAs representing the shared interest of the membership conduct their own market research and the policymakers appreciate the market intelligence. They are versed in acquiring marketing information and conveying it to the government through various marketing studies or reports. A reciprocal relationship is developed that TAs which are considered important think tanks

will also have access to critical first-hand knowledge of government policy and regulations, sharing such information within member firms and making the availability of knowledge easier for member firms. I first hypothesized that:

H1 The industry voice role of TAs is positively related to knowledge acquisition of member firms.

The creation of diversity in TAs' activities to provide knowledge for members can be captured in organizing a variety of different activities. These events play an important role in the initial stages of foreign market entry. Business relationships could be fostered through trade fairs to identify overseas partners. Also, the events provide repeated occasions for resource interaction and bolster the existing relationships. Hypothesis 2 is formed to shed a perspective that TAs improve the process of knowledge acquisition of member firms by virtue of the broker role.

H2 The broker role of TAs is positively related to knowledge acquisition of member firms.

Business advice and consultancy are barriers for many firms. By becoming a member of an association, a business can enjoy the services of TAs. TAs conducted workshops or seminars for members, which covered different issues like financial advice, export advice and general business information. Access to banks, lawyers or consultants are easier with the provision of advisory service of TAs. Also, TAs undertake education and training, allowing members to learn from others.

H3 The counsellor role of TAs is positively related to knowledge acquisition of member firms.

Knowledge perspective allows us to advance our understanding of the internationalization phenomenon (Casillas et al., 2009). As Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul (1975, p. 306) state: "The basic assumption is that internationalization is the consequence of a series of incremental decisions and the most important obstacles are lack of knowledge and resources." Based on prior knowledge, companies can acquire, absorb, and use new international knowledge to venture (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). The knowledge acquired through experience is most valuable for overseas venturing decisions (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). Eriksson et al., (1997) defined internationalization knowledge as the kind of knowledge drawn on the experience of the company's abilities and resources to enter foreign

markets. By being aware of foreign market opportunities, internationalizing firms can overcome resource insufficiency, which often hinders SMEs' international expansion (Lu & Beamish, 2001). Discovered from the extant studies, there is a broad spectrum of knowledge acquisition types which are derived from three broad groups: (1) individual-level knowledge; (2) company-level knowledge; and (3) inter-organization level knowledge (Casillas et al., 2009). In this study, I posit knowledge acquisition generates inter-organization level knowledge.

Knowledge acquisition has been acknowledged *a priori* to explain the internationalization initiative by a handful of scholars (Fletcher & Harris, 2012; Zhou, 2007). However, a commonality to set up a mediation relationship between those accountable factors and internationalization is that all these have been identified to affect the internationalization by extant studies. The influence of TAs on international expansion is not captured by the existing research and this study is exploratory to investigate if such relationships indeed exist. Apart from the unknown relationships between the role of TAs and the internationalization of firms, it is also unclear if TAs support their member firms to acquire knowledge regardless of the qualitative or quantitative studies what we have perused. These assumptions for a mediating effect are not sufficient and made up co-opt for another layer of thinking to consider knowledge acquisition a moderator.

Brache and Felzensztein (2019) confirmed that a stronger engagement with TAs had a positive effect on export performance. The informants that we interviewed in the first stage implied that recognition of the importance of TAs is in line with the level of engagement with TAs they are affiliated with. The instrumental help rendered by TAs will be more acknowledged when the member firms actively interact with TAs and join their activities. The instrumental help rendered by TAs will be more acknowledged when member firms actively interact with TAs and join their activities. To respond to calls for quantitative empirical analysis of the link between the role of TAs and internationalization, this study explores knowledge acquisition as a potential condition that moderates the effect of TAs on internationalization. The effect is strengthened when member firms acquire a higher level of knowledge. Combining all the theoretical arguments and findings revealed in Stage I, I summarize a moderated model to portray an indirect effect of TAs on the internationalization performance through knowledge acquisition: When the member firms of TAs acquire more

knowledge, they are more engaged in internationalization; however, when they acquire less knowledge, they are less involved in internationalization.

With the identity as institutional organizations, TAs perform the role of industry voice by representing different firms in an industry or mediating between multi-sectors (Costa et al., 2016). TAs yield influence through collective action joined by the member firms. External networks may expedite access to acquire resources leading to international operations and collective action of creating public goods to generate such networks (Brache & Felzensztein, 2019). It is found that minority entrepreneurs seeking to unite with other members of the same ethnic group pursue new international opportunities (Inouye et al., 2020).

Acknowledging the existence of information is not sufficient to make the internationalization decision. Levering trustful and collaborative environments provided by TAs to share knowledge is crucial for making a decision of internationalization (Costa et al., 2017). Taken together, I am interested in a direct or indirect link between the industry voice role of TAs and international operation. H4a and H4b are formed to address this puzzle:

H4a. The industry voice role of TAs is positively associated with the internationalization of member firms.

H4b. Knowledge acquisition positively moderates the influence of the industry voice role on internationalization such that the higher the level of knowledge acquisition, the stronger the influence of the industry voice role on the internationalization of member firms.

Although social network brokerage is argued to be less influential in a collectivist culture (Xiao & Tsui, 2007), business success was found to be associated with networks rich in structural holes (Burt & Burzynska, 2017). TAs can circulate knowledge and information through multiple means and at different levels of intensity. They can serve as brokers of information or as ‘bridging ties’ enhancing structural holes (Burt, 1992). Trust, obligation and norms are developed during the activities of TAs and generate an exchange of reciprocity with the inclusion of mutual support (Sonnemans et al., 2006). Furthermore, we acknowledge that the value of associational activity may be culturally determined (De Clercq et al., 2010). The activities of TAs are driven by culture-ingrained elements including varied forms of trust and norms governing personal relationships (Curtis et al., 2001). NGOs in a Chinese context are acknowledged for brokering functional arrangements in restrictive but relatively flexible institutional settings and circumventing formal restrictions (Gåsemyr,

2017). Therefore, we are further triggered to explore the relevance of this broker role with internationalization. The hypothetical relationships between the broker role of TAs and internationalization performance are formed herein H5a and H5b.

H5a The broker role of TAs is positively associated with the internationalization of member firms.

H5b. Knowledge acquisition positively moderates the influence of the broker role on internationalization such that the higher the level of knowledge acquisition, the stronger the influence of the broker role on the internationalization of member firms.

By providing training and counselling services, TAs provide an initial boost for member firms to plan for international expansion (Costa et al., 2017). TAs assume an important role in counselling and training providers to support SME internationalization (Costa et al., 2017). The legal support provided is also fundamental for companies to operate within the laws and rules of foreign countries. Some technical support is also provided for research and development (R&D) and internationalization projects. To capture the essence of this role, we conceptualize positive relationships between the counsellor role and internationalization performance.

H6a The counsellor role of TAs is positively associated with the internationalization of member firms.

H6b. Knowledge acquisition positively moderates the influence of the counsellor role on internationalization such that the higher the level of knowledge acquisition, the stronger the influence of the counsellor role on the internationalization of member firms.

In the following methodology section, the sample selection and procedures used for data collection in this research are delineated. Finally, the study's main findings resulting from the analysis of the database of 128 member firms are presented and some directions for further research are identified.

5.3 Method

5.3.1 Setting and design

A mixed-method research design is considered to be most appropriate for this study because the quantitative portion will examine the measure developed in the qualitative study and also provide greater context for quantifying the qualitative results, thereby providing a more fine-grained understanding of the research issues than the use of a single research approach alone. The research design entailed a two-stage empirical process based on the research objectives.

Phase 1 addressed the research question by adopting a qualitative approach, I interviewed representatives whose companies are members of TA, using a purposive sampling approach (Guest et al., 2006). I recruited and conducted interviews with TA representatives and firm representatives from around 14 TAs (Appendix A). The sectors varied, including manufacturing, IT and retailing but not limited to these. They were required to be familiar with TA with which they were affiliated. The 30 initial exploratory interviews lasted 40-60 minutes each through WeChat.

Phase 2, the set of measurement items was subject to quantitatively test through a survey. Based on interviews and an inclusive literature review, I developed an English version of the questionnaire and translated it into Chinese. A back-translation was made to ensure conceptual equivalence. Before starting the survey, a pre-test was run with two member firm managers for potential definition misunderstandings or language errors.

Field data were collected during two trade fairs. The author hired two university students and trained them before collecting data. The researcher leveraged two events. The first wave of data was collected during the China Beijing International Fair for Trade in Services (CIFTIS), the first all-inclusive platform specializing in trade services, covering the 12 sectors of trade in services defined by World Trade Organization. The researchers also accessed the sample during the Chinese Export Commodities Fair (all called CANTON fair because the fairground is in Guangzhou), the most widely-known and planned international trade show hosted by China. A randomized sample of subjects included the exhibitors who were in charge of the company booth and buyers visiting CANTON. Technically, respondents were initially asked if their company was affiliated with one or many TAs. Then, the exhibitor and visitors were instructed to answer the paper questionnaire in person. 132 surveys were responded by trade fair visitors who are affiliated with at least one TA). Of 132 surveys, 4 cases were dropped as they were not completed.

Demographic information

In this sample, many companies have multiple association memberships and the average number of memberships is 3. In addition, the average membership duration is 10 years.

Table 5-1

Demographic information

	Mean	S.D.	Range
Multiple memberships	3	2.83	19
Membership duration	10	7.44	31
Number of employees		Number	%
1-50		21	16
51-100		24	19
101-500		43	35
501-2,000		25	20
over 2,000		11	9
Approximate annual revenue US\$		Number	%
<80,000		1	1
80,000-160,000		3	2
160,000-1,600,000		21	16
1,600,000-4,800,000		21	16
4,800,000-16,000,000		26	20
16,000,000-84,000,000		24	19
>84,000,000		28	21

5.3.2 Measures

Independent variable (IV)

The roles of TA (Section B in the survey Appendix F)

The role construct was composed of three variables: “industry voice”, “broker” and “counsellor”. All multi-item measures of independent variables in this questionnaire applied 7-point Likert scales, with 1 indicating ‘strongly disagree’ to 7 = ‘strongly agree’. Based on the multi-item measure, I could iterate to find a best-regression model (Haowen Chen et al., 2015). IVs were each measured by six to eight behavioural descriptive statements (21 items in total).

- “Industry voice”: Seven indicators were included at this stage: the elements of member firms’ representation and self-regulation.
- “Broker role”: This factor included eight elements: delve into the information brokering activities with other firms within TAs and with firms outside TAs’ network.
- “Counsellor role”: Included in this factor were the elements about the examination of activities of TAs in support of member firms with counselling services.

Dependent variable (DV)

Knowledge acquisition (Section C in the survey Appendix F)

I used an eight-item scale to assess the extent to which the member firm's perceptions of the knowledge they acquired through engaging with TAs were reflected. The respondents were asked to indicate the type of knowledge the association provided and specify the level of agreement or disagreement in relation to that specific knowledge (using a seven-point scale, 1= “not at all,” and 7= “very much”). The indicators captured different facets; for example, Table 5-2 shows all the scale items and their descriptions.

Internationalization (Section D question 9 in the survey Appendix F)

Export ratios have been the most widely adopted measure representing firms’ involvement internationally (Jiang et al., 2016). The export ratio refers to a percentage of total sales in order to measure the extent to which a firm internationalizes (Yeoh, 2004). This study measured internationalization performance through one single-item measure: the survey asked respondents to provide the percentage of total sales generated by exports.

Earlier discussion has elaborated why a moderating effect was proposed rather than a mediating effect in the session of hypothesis development. The moderation effect is being chosen rather than a mediation effect because the conditions of existence of mediation effect in this paper are not fully met. According to Baron & Kenny (1986),

To establish that the mediation effect exists, four conditions must hold, that is, the independent variable must affect the mediator in the first equation; the independent variable must affect the dependent variable in the second equation; the mediator must affect the dependent variable in the third equation; and the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable must be less in the third equation than in the second.

For our study, the extant literature and findings of studies with focal focus on TAs did not support our first equation, which posited that TAs influence knowledge acquisition, nor did it support our second hypothesis, which suggested that TAs have an impact on internationalization.

Control variables

The engagement of TAs by firms is often acknowledged by scholars when investigating cooperation between the two. Knorrinda (1999) reported that firms intensively engaging with a TA also gained better firm performance. The same conclusion was drawn by Schmitz (1999) with the analysis of 65 shoe manufacturers in Brazil. In this study, I argued that engagement with TAs, which referred to the levels of participation, was a plausible account explaining the relationship between the roles of TAs and the perceived knowledge acquisition by member firms.

Another control variable was multiple memberships. Multiple memberships can diversify members' social networks with the connection to additional associations. Members of sociodemographically diverse associations can build diverse social networks (Teckchandani, 2014). Multiple memberships might help member firms acquire unique information because the sources are not connected to each other (Paik & Navarre-Jackson, 2011). Therefore, I included multiple memberships as a control variable to see if it would make any difference in anticipating the relationship investigated.

Gruen et al., (2003) suggest further research using demographic features may provide additional knowledge on maintaining membership (e.g., membership duration). Therefore, this study included membership duration as a control variable to see if membership duration would influence the level of knowledge acquisition and the progress of internationalization.

Firm size is typically measured by the number of employees and annual sales. In this study, firm size was measured using two dimensions: number of employees and annual sales revenue, with the latter being determined by the firm's yearly income. As a control variable, firm size was closely associated with knowledge acquisition (Zhou, 2007). In accordance

with the existing literature, larger firms that own more resources and capabilities tend to acquire foreign market knowledge, and such knowledge is inclined to be translated into international commitment (Zhou, 2007).

5.4 Findings

5.4.1 Measurement model

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was first conducted on the independent variables. Four items were dropped due to low factor loadings with manually setting three factors. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate the unidimensionality and reliability of the roles of TA. The AMOS 25 software package was employed for this purpose. After running the item parceling transformation, 8 items remained, with KMO of 0.824 and a significant Bartlett's test. RMSEA is most important threshold to measure the model fit and the remaining 8 items achieved a best model fit. Three clusters of items accounted for 79 % of the total variance of explanation. The model fit was optimized by several round of CFA iterations, leading to the following goodness-of-fit for the (CFA model: $\chi^2/df = 1.24$, GFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.994, SRMA=0.79, RMSEA = 0.04).

DV knowledge as a composite of eight items was found with good Cronbach's Alpha 0.924. KMO was good 0.912 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant. All the measures were highly reliable with reliability coefficients of more than 0.72. EFA was also performed to detect the heterogeneity of DVs and two subscales were found. These two factors were labelled institutional knowledge and market knowledge. Two factors obtained in EFA conducted again without the "offending items" explained 73% of the variance.

To evaluate the measurement quality, I further examined construct reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). All items load significantly on their corresponding latent construct, with all loadings over 0.7. The convergent reliability of all constructs after purification was greater than 0.9 with all AVE >0.5 (see Table 5-2). All four factors had a Cronbach's alpha of over 0.8, above the cut-off value of 0.7 recommended by Nunnally (1978).

Table 5-2*Scale reliability and convergent validity*

	Factor loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Industry voice		0.918	0.96	0.924
My association acts as a representative body for the industry	0.961			
My association brings member firms together	0.961			
Broker		0.875	0.922	0.797
My association organizes trade fairs	0.892			
My association organizes conferences/forums	0.856			
My association organizes trade missions	0.929			
Counsellor		0.894	0.93	0.816
My association selects and recommends third-party services	0.886			
My association provides legal services	0.944			
My association helps address disputes among member firms	0.879			
Knowledge		0.924	0.935	0.642
Government policy and regulation	0.732			
Government support, grants and loans	0.72			
Business leads	0.872			
Meeting potential clients	0.819			
Cooperation opportunity	0.86			
Image promotion	0.842			
Technology	0.776			
The provision of resource	0.775			

I also checked the discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). For a more rigorous criterion to obtain discriminant validity, it is recommended that the AVE of each construct should exceed the squared correlations between the latent variable and every other one, which further supports discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 5-3 exhibited the examination results that the former (diagonal elements) was greater than the latter (off-diagonal elements), indicating that discriminant validity criteria are satisfactory. Table 5-4 also presents descriptive statistics and correlations between the constructs of the study.

Table 5-3*Discriminant validity*

	Industry voice	Broker	Counsellor	Knowledge acquisition
Industry voice	0.961			
Broker	0.61	0.893		
Counsellor	0.443	0.599	0.903	
Knowledge acquisition	0.579	0.521	0.575	0.801

Table 5-4*Pearson's Correlations*

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Multiple membership	3.066	2.831	1									
2. Membership duration	10.549	7.444	0.186**	1								
3. TA engagement	5.008	1.79	0.203**	0.083	1							
4. Number of employees	2.847	1.19	0.292***	0.256***	0.133	1						
5. Annual sales	5.016	1.515	0.218**	0.379***	0.223**	0.616***	1					
6. Industry voice	5.543	1.505	0.155+	0.123	0.447***	-0.002	0.149+	1				
7. Broker	5.626	1.356	0.074	0.073	0.323***	0.017	0.111	0.61***	1			
8. Counsellor	4.904	1.54	0.013	-0.007	0.225**	-0.144	0.08	0.443***	0.601***	1		
9. Knowledge	4.496	1.329	0.151+	0.061	0.42***	-0.024	0.186**	0.568***	0.509***	0.569***	1	
10. Internationalization	3.248	1.338	-0.265**	-0.023	0.006	-0.163	0.000359	-0.051	0.17+	0.295***	0.108	1

5.4.2 Hierarchical multiple regression analysis

I used hierarchical moderated regression analysis to test the effects of the three roles of TAs, knowledge acquisition, and the interaction between the roles and knowledge acquisition on the extent of internationalization. This method was chosen because it allows for the determination of the order in which variables are entered into the regression equation, and also controls for certain variables. The first regression captures the variance accounted for by the set of control variables, while the second regression captures the variance accounted for by the corresponding group of independent variables. Additional multiple regression analyses were conducted with the original independent variables and the moderating variable included, which allowed for the examination of the contribution of different variables. I took additional steps to calculate the variance inflation factor (VIF) for searching problems with multicollinearity. The VIF for each individual variable was below 2.8 well below the 10.0 cutoff which was not concerned (Neter et al., 1985). Table 5-5 shows the results of the hierarchical regression analyses.

Table 5-5

Hierarchical regression on knowledge acquisition

	Model 1		Model 2	
control variables	β	S.E.		S.E.
Multiple membership	0.087	0.044	0.076	0.036
Membership duration	-0.01	0.017	-0.03	0.014
TAs engagement	0.354***	0.068	0.142 ⁺	0.061
Number of employees	-0.222*	0.126	-0.08	0.108
Annual sales	0.255*	0.106	0.14	0.088
INDUSTRY VOICE			0.25***	0.093
BROKER			0.078	0.104
COUNSELLOR			0.341***	0.084
R2	0.202		0.478	
Adj R2	0.165		0.438	
F	5.473***		12.027***	
F change (M2 over M1)			6.554	
⁺ P-value < 0.1				
* P-value < 0.05				
** P-value < 0.01				
*** P-value < 0.001				

Model 1 consisted five control variables. Among the control variables, three factors had significant effects. One significant finding was that those who engaged with TA more frequently had a higher level of knowledge acquisition ($F = 5.473, p < .001$). Firms with fewer number of employees were inclined to have more knowledge acquisition ($F = 5.473, p < .05$). The higher annual sales the member firms had, the more knowledge was acquired ($F = 5.473, p < .05$).

Model 2 tested the configurational effects, which showed that two roles had significant, positive relationships with knowledge acquisition ($F=12.027, p < 0.001$). When the three predictor variables of roles were included in conjunction with the control variable (model 1), the significance was substantially from 5.473 ($p < .05$) to 12.027 ($p < .001$). Adding the three roles significantly explained more variance ($\Delta R^2=0.276, p < 0.001$) from Model 1 to model 2, which suggests that the configurational model can better explain the relationships between the roles of TA and knowledge acquisition.

With respect to control variables, I detected a positive and significant effect of TAs' engagement in model 1 and a positive and marginally significant effect in model 2. These results may be interpreted as a testimony to the importance of frequent involvement with TAs in order to acquire knowledge better. I also noted that the number of employees seemed to be negatively related to knowledge acquisition and annual sales were positively related to knowledge acquisition. Both were indicators of firm size. Perhaps these findings suggested that the member firms with fewer employees but higher annual sales were more likely to gain knowledge.

To test the rest of the hypotheses, I used a moderated hierarchical regression model (Bedeian & Mossholder, 1994). It is appropriate to test both the main and interaction effects with this method. This enabled us to explore if the interaction effect model performs better than the main effect model (Bedeian & Mossholder, 1994; Chung, 2007). The results are shown in Table 5-6. Model 3-4 tested our hypotheses regarding the main effect of roles on internationalization and model 5-8 tested our hypotheses regarding the moderating effect of knowledge acquisition on internationalization. Control variables were entered in the first step (model 3); following this, the main effect predictor variables (the types of roles and knowledge acquisition) were included in the second step (model 4); and, the interaction effects were entered in the third step, each one at a time (model 5–7), and, afterwards, all

interactions at once (model 8). The baseline model 3 embraced control variables. As part of our research question was to compare the moderating effect of knowledge acquisition on the relationship between roles (industry voice, broker, counsellor) and the extent of internationalization (export ratio), we needed to focus on these two-way interaction terms. Consequently, Model 5 examined the moderating effect of knowledge acquisition on the industry voice role-internationalization relationships; Model 6 tested the moderating effect of knowledge acquisition on the broker role-internationalization relationships; and Model 7 evaluated the moderating effect of knowledge acquisition on the counsellor role-internationalization relationships.

Table 5-6

Moderated hierarchical regression on internationalization performance

	DV export ratio					
	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Mode 8
control variables						
Multiple membership	-0.277** (0.049)	-0.311** (0.04)	-0.317** (0.043)	-0.329** (0.042)	- 0.309** (0.04)	-0.295** (0.042)
Membership duration	0.027 (0.019)	0.107 (0.015)	0.084 (0.016)	0.085 (0.016)	0.099 (0.015)	0.095 (0.016)
Frequency of TAs	0.085 (0.078)	0.02 (0.067)	0.04 (0.07)	0.005 (0.069)	0.017 (0.066)	0.036 (0.069)
Number of employees	-0.181 (0.144)	0.032 (0.122)	-0.059 (-0.054)	-0.066 (0.122)	0.018 (0.121)	-0.016 (0.13)
Annual avenue	0.166 (0.125)	0.009 (0.104)	0.079 (0.061)	0.1 (0.109)	0.037 (0.105)	0.064 (0.113)
Main effect						
INDUSTRY VOICE		-0.128 (0.101)	0.036 (0.096)			-0.122 (0.108)
BROKER		0.033 (0.122)		0.168 (0.097)		0.024 (0.125)
COUNSELLOR		0.321* (0.1)			0.344** (0.86)	0.378** (0.11)
Knowledge acquisition			0.047 (0.102)	-0.001 (0.102)	-0.12 (0.101)	-0.077 (0.113)
Interaction						
Industry voice & Knowledge			0.019 (0.055)			0.122 (0.072)
Broker & Knowledge				-0.058 (0.068)		-0.05 (0.1)

Counsellor & Knowledge					-0.044 (0.46)	-0.108 (0.078)
R2	0.109	0.181	0.155	0.135	0.183	0.197
Adj R2	0.062	0.111	0.082	0.061	0.112	0.089
F	2.337	2.853*	2.274	1.059	2.91*	1.823 +
+ P-value < 0.1						
* P-value < 0.05						
** P-value < 0.01						
*** P-value < 0.001						

Main effects Model 4 reported the results of testing the main hypothesized relationships as direct effects (H4a-H6a). Contrary to our expectation, the industry voice role was found not to be associated with internationalization ($b = -0.128$, $p = 0.319$). H4a is not supported. The broker role did not significantly improve the performance of internationalization of Model 5 and H5a was not supported ($b = 0.033$, $p = 0.824$). The counsellor role in internationalization is confirmed, as it significantly and positively influenced the extent of internationalization of the sample firms. H6a was supported ($b = 0.321$, $p < 0.05$).

Regression analysis for testing the moderating effects of roles on internationalization through knowledge acquisition (H4b to H6b) was performed. I adopted the mean centering technique. I found no evidence for significant roles-knowledge interaction effects on internationalization performance. Regarding the moderating role of knowledge acquisition, the effect of the interaction of industry voice with knowledge acquisition on internationalization (H4b) is non-significant ($b = 0.019$, $p > 0.10$). I also proposed in H5b that knowledge acquisition may enhance firms' broker role in internationalization. This hypothesis was not supported either ($b = -0.058$, $p > 0.10$). The addition of the counsellor-knowledge interaction (H6b), which conceptualized the knowledge acquisition significantly improved the explanatory power of Model 8 is also not supported ($b = -0.044$, $p > 0.10$).

With respect to control variables, I detected a negative and highly significant effect of multiple membership and internationalization performance. This finding might suggest that it is unnecessary to register as many members as possible since more memberships do not bring a greater knowledge acquisition.

Common method bias (CMB)

Collecting data via a self-administered survey may cause CMB problems. Respondents were asked to perceptually assess both the independent and dependent variables in this study and thus the possible presence of common method bias arises. However, some researchers argue that CMB is trivial and CMB does not jeopardize the validity of findings although it may still be a limitation of our study. To ensure against CMB, future research can use procedural remedies such as temporal separation or psychological separation (Podsakoff et al., 2003). I am not able to apply procedural remedies like sending surveys with DVs and IVs separately. But I employed several tactics to minimize CMV, firstly, my predictors are all multiple items constructs. Secondly, by using regression with interaction effects, the effect of CMV is mitigated because the respondents are unlikely to be guided by a cognitive map. Most importantly, the data was collected in two waves and I performed ANOVA to test if there was any difference between subgroups. Finally, Harmon's factor test was conducted, and all the measurement items were loaded into an exploratory factor (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results showed an eight-factor solution in which the largest factor explains only 24% of the total variance, indicating that CMV was not a major concern in my data.

5.5 Discussion and conclusion

TAs have a fundamental role in developing public goods and exchanging ideas and information (Porter, 1998). They offer a service package, including seminars, conferences, function and analysis of data, product certification, and legal counselling (Lisowska & Stanisławski, 2015). In order to justify the analysis of the roles of TAs, this research addressed the first question: How do the roles of TAs contribute to their members' knowledge acquisition? Following this, I addressed the inquiry of to what extent the roles contribute to internationalization through knowledge acquisition. The 1st stage qualitative finding disclosed that member firms confirm that TAs perform such roles. The quantitative findings support that the industry voice and the counsellor roles of TAs are positively associated with knowledge acquisition. However, the survey findings fail to support that the broker role is significantly related to the knowledge acquisition of member firms. Moreover, knowledge acquisition was not established as a moderator to contribute to the

internationalization of member firms. The rest of this section is devoted to an elaborate discussion.

5.5.1 TAs and knowledge acquisition

My motivation to advance internationalization knowledge theory through a network lens is stimulated by the fact that not every firm is well connected to rich resources like MNCs. What are the strategies that SMEs in emerging markets use to expand the international market? To what extent do the TAs drive member firms out of the domestic market and into international markets by enabling them to acquire internationalization knowledge? Networking with TAs could be converted to other valuable resources that organizations can leverage to enhance their successful operation in a given environment. TAs are able to convert resources to be more accessible and applicable for member firms through their broker role. A revealing new look encourages firms to consider TA's network engagement in the strategy canvas. This study creates an avenue of internationalization knowledge theory building on TAs' three facilitating roles of networks.

Industry voice role

The results provide prima facie evidence and yield useful insights that an industry voice role contributes to the knowledge development of member firms. The study shows how the collective representation of TAs will provide member firms with certain types of knowledge. TAs represent a collective voice and in turn gain the trust and will be empowered by the government for a higher level of enactment. In many cases, governments rely on TAs to issue certifications because of the limited manpower. It is more than hinted that accreditation is another major service entrusted by governments for TAs to evaluate member firms. Identifying an industry voice role is crucial for member firms to reflect opinions to the government. The present study enriches our understanding of how the government maintains their control over firms in society through TAs' involvement.

Broker role

In line with the strategy of building market channels overseas, member firms actively participate in trade fairs. Attention is also focused on conferences that launch competitions, providing opportunities for member firms to showcase their advantages. Private equity/venture capital firms may leverage such opportunities to scrutinize projects and make decisions on venture investments.

Reaping the benefits of nurturing connections with other member firms within a TA was revealed by the informants. Company visits lined up potential cooperation opportunities, and further collaboration might be realized following networking activities. Orchestrating information and bridging interaction between member firms continually refines and optimizes member firms' opportunities for future expansion. The study found that member firms actively responded to calls for event participation. Through a marketing lens in the context of the global business environment, TAs' efforts to create opportunities for member firms to learn about foreign markets were recognized. A broker role has become particularly pronounced nowadays.

Firms enhance knowledge of other firms with informal interactions and the knowledge is more likely to transfer. Saxenian (1990) explains how people meet at trade shows, industry conferences, and the series of seminars, talks and social activities organized by local TAs. People form connections, exchange market and technical information, and develop new business opportunities (Fernhaber et al., 2011)

Counsellor

When reconfiguring member firms of the constellation of resources, and capabilities which shape the access and accumulation of knowledge, the activities and services provided by TAs should not be neglected. A central tenet of this paper is that the roles served by TAs over time shape member firms' knowledge acquisition. In particular, growing out of the resource constraints, SMEs need to leverage TAs network to equip them with more resources to get rapid internationalization.

The survey findings clearly indicate that the use of a counsellor role is positively related to the knowledge acquisition of member firms. The level of a counsellor is related to the service of TAs: how they select and recommend third-party services; how they provide legal services

and how they help address disputes among member firms. Engaging with TAs that provide a higher level of service is more likely to result in knowledge acquisition. The quantitative findings support the idea that TAs performing a collective role of industry voice and counsellor can facilitate knowledge acquisition.

My study extends the line of knowledge theory. There is a surprising neglect of TAs as a form of channel to facilitate firms to develop knowledge. I offer a series of refinements and extensions to the internationalization knowledge theory which has lost sight of the claim of the role of TAs. Reflecting the broader identical influence of TA was captured by the results of this study. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the TAs' weight of influence in the export proximity of member firms and the influence of TAs in a pre-internationalization stage is surprisingly missing (Boehe, 2013; Brache & Felzensztein, 2019). Obfuscating and blurring the power of TAs is a shame; and looming large roles of TAs adds our knowledge of a close-up look at the fast-paced internationalizing Chinese firms in the milieu of global competition. Based on both interviews and surveys, the taxonomy of knowledge surfaces and fosters a greater awareness of the appropriateness of different kinds of knowledge acquired through TAs network. The activities contributing to different types of knowledge are summarized in Table 5-7.

Institutional knowledge

Among the fragmented knowledge mentioned, knowledge of government policy is particularly important. TAs are considered to be the mediators and facilitators between enterprises and the government. In the context of strategic management, it is crucial to acknowledge and utilize government incentives. The state has delegated some incentives to the associations such as export and import quotas and training programmes. In this paper, this type of knowledge is defined as institutional knowledge. Along with other scholars, institutional knowledge includes a broader range of knowledge “import/export, regulatory product (including, for the first time, institutionally required technical methods and ingredient and quality standards), financial reporting and taxation, intellectual property protection, and health, safety and human resources knowledge related to manufacturing production compliance” (Bell & Cooper, 2018, p. 485). The member firms highly value their access to government policies and regulations, and TAs are seen as a crucial link between the

government and these firms. According to an informant, incubators often struggle to be profitable, making favorable government policies essential for their success. Another type of institutional knowledge that is important for member firms is legal knowledge, which includes up-to-date information on laws and regulations related to labor, finance, taxation, and financial trends. During workshops or salons, middle and high-level managers of member firms are observed to exchange such information.

Network knowledge

Network knowledge involves both social and business networks that facilitate the internationalization of firms (Mejri & Umemoto, 2010). Business activities are not only influenced by their own experience but also by the knowledge acquired through relationships with other actors in the network (Gulanowski et al., 2018). Deciphering the knowledge acquired through TAs is an inductive procedure, and a wide array of knowledge is obtained when engaging with TAs. TAs are believed to orchestrate various resources. As a member of the business incubator association in Beijing pointed out, “The endorsement backed up by government enables us to entrust TAs. TAs are capable of reconciling conflict and matching resources. When approaching TAs, they might offer an insightful suggestion of recommending a beneficial business partner or recommend a business lead”. Sharing and exchanging information accelerates the progress of being acquainted with foreign markets. Burt (2007) emphasizes the importance of local information which is available to brokers familiar with the local milieu. With the provision of information from TAs, the member companies feel less risky when they enter the new arena.

Table 5-7

A summary of activities generating knowledge

Role	Institutional knowledge		Network knowledge		
	Host/home government policy	Market knowledge	Business leads	Business matching	Resources
Industry voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Lobby the government to refine policy -Obtain updated policy knowledge through meeting with the officials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Serve the government to produce industry report 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Online Golden Seed platform supported by the government to offer business matching 	
Broker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Learn the host country by participating in promotional events like cocktail jointly organized by TA and the host country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Visit model companies and learn success stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Collect business leads through trade fairs -Exposure to new clients through conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Meet potential partners or clients through trade missions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Meet overseas talents to projects through TAs' referral -Orchestrating information and pooling network resource

Counsellor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Gain the government incentive and financial knowledge through training -Tax reducing knowledge -Home country laws and regulations like labor law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Legal institutional knowledge of the host country was conveyed through workshop -Produce a market research report requested by a member firm 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Introduce bank, PE/VC to membership to address finance problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The third-party companies are entrusted because of TAs' endorsement and saves the time of member firms to check reliability
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An initial finding from this analysis suggests two types of knowledge, highlighting the role of TAs in supporting internationalization, creating and communicating identity, and influencing relations with member firms. Institutional knowledge encompasses market knowledge and knowledge of the home and host countries' government policies. Existing research has found that the government plays a supporting role in driving Chinese firms to internationalize. Government policies related to subsidies and incentives are critical for emerging industry companies. The more up-to-date the government policies are, the more important they are to enterprises. Firms often have limited knowledge of government policies and they often resort to searching on websites. However, these websites are full of jargon and fail to explain regulations in an understandable way. Therefore, Chinese firms can take advantage of TAs to understand regulations and apply incentives with the assistance of TAs. The second type of knowledge is network knowledge, which serves as a valuable resource for reducing firms' costs in their initial entry into a new host market. This knowledge can be utilized in different phases of internationalization.

Results from the surveys indicated that stronger engagement with TAs had a positive effect on knowledge acquisition. This finding is consistent with the results of Brache and Felzensztein's (2019) study, which found that stronger engagement with TAs located in the company's export market positively affected export performance. The frequency of engagement with TAs was identified as an indicator of knowledge acquisition, suggesting that member firms who engage more frequently with TAs are more likely to acquire knowledge.

5.5.2 TAs and internationalization

Knowledge enables a textured understanding of internationalization opportunities identification and exploration (Zahra et al., 2000). Knowledge, one of the key factors, enhances the internationalization process as a result of a sequential approach. “The basic assumption is that internationalization is the consequence of a series of incremental decisions and the most important obstacles are lack of knowledge and resources” (Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975, p. 306). The decision to venture abroad is made on the basis of the prior knowledge acquired through experience (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). Large companies may acquire the knowledge required for their foreign expansion by actively participating in

knowledge-sharing activities at either individual or company level (Coviello & Munro, 1995). The stock of knowledge is transferred in the information exchange and the entrepreneurs are able to access resources or operate new companies (Lindsay et al., 2003), as well as the organization itself by establishing relationships with customers, suppliers, institutions, etc. (Johanson & Vahlne, 2006).

Only counsellor role is found to have an effect on internationalization performance. When member firms consider TAs to undertake a higher level of counsellor role, they tend to have a higher level of internationalization. No positive impact on the extent of firms' internationalization has been found for either the industry voice role or the broker role of TAs. One plausible explanation is that a large proportion of the sample is middle to large-size companies. 40% of our sample has annual sales over five millions (US\$) and 30% of sample has a number of employees over 500 pax. These member firms initiate internationalization through self-developed competitive edges rather than the outcomes of joining TAs.

The puzzle is the prominent broker role that many scholars emphasize contributes neither to acquiring knowledge nor enhancing internationalization. This counterintuitive finding is interesting as it contradicts some of the previous research. Member firms actively participate in events including trade fairs and conferences to become exporters in the existing literature (Boehe, 2013). Tapping into such opportunities is likely to promote resource and capability-building efforts and is likely to occupy markets abroad actively. But the survey findings do not support the proposition that the broker role of TAs increases the level of internationalization. This might suggest more information access or sharing does not guarantee better knowledge acquisition. It was apparent that in many of the cases, respondents mentioned they monetized internationalization opportunities through other non-TA networks. Especially, firms have multiple channels to acquire knowledge in the information of technology (IoT) age. The traditional way of showcasing products and meeting new clients at trade fairs or conferences is being replaced by new channels such as the booming social media industry. Another reason behind this shift may be due to the inertia of trade associations (TAs). Some member firms participate in TA activities as a formality, especially in the case of government-organized TAs. These member firms engage with TAs to show respect for their semi-government ownership, rather than to derive any real benefit from the association.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, this study does not necessarily identify the grounds on which knowledge boosts internationalization. One plausible reason for this is that while knowledge may be acquired, it is not necessarily assimilated or effectively disseminated. For successful entry into foreign markets, knowledge must be absorbed and diffused throughout the organization. If knowledge acquisition is not followed by dissemination, the level of internationalization may be limited. TAs mediate between member firms and help them collect foreign market lead information, but many member firms believe that the pivotal decision to internationalize is based on self-developed competitive edge rather than influenced by TAs.

5.6 Implication and future research

Serving as an intermediary, TAs speed up the flow of institutional information between member firms and governments. The information mediation role of TAs, making member firms access a higher stock of information, has been lauded with the evidence exhibited in this study. TA per se should be “rich” in information, knowledge, and referrals. In our study, we found that senior management of TAs are visionary and are willing to take bold steps to innovate the governance of TAs. TAs should enhance their role as counsellors to offer more export-related services to member firms. Furthermore, they should develop strategies that strengthen the collaborative ties within member firms and actively promote opportunities for various collaborations in pursuing knowledge sharing. In parallel, my findings are suggestive of implications for the practice of member firms: SMEs should be cognizant that multiple memberships will not be necessary and put a stake in the ground of a TA worth joining. The referrals, information and shared resources through TAs are of great value to establish increasing contact with overseas buyers and reducing the entering the foreign market cost. Consequently, TAs should devise measures to improve joint ties among members. Members are advised to participate jointly in trade fairs, share the purchasing cost of raw materials and common components and even hire designers.

I selected the independent variable, moderating variables, and control variables from the same questionnaire. Future studies can divide independent and dependent variables into two questionnaires to avoid common method bias. Although the use of single-item measure has been legitimized as valid as multiple-item measurements Bergkvist (2015), a problem may

arise that I use the export ratio as the measure of internationalization performance. Another problem is potential sampling bias. The reason why member firms of this study are more engaged (mean of engagement is 5.008 out of 7 on scale) is that surveys were circulated in trade fairs and those respondents were more active to be involved in activities organized by TAs. Those firms that did not find value in TAs or who are not engaged would have left the TAs so would not constitute part of the sampling frame. Future studies should collect survey data from different sources to also include less engaged member firms.

6 Chapter 6 Discussion and conceptual Paper 3

6.1 Enhanced managerial ties through TA networks

(extrapolated from Paper 2)

The findings drawn from Paper 1 allow us to embrace a broader vision with TAs, landing on the domain of IB field. By acknowledging the three roles of TAs in facilitating networks building, we gain a textured understanding of TAs. I find evidence that their member firms developed social, business and institutional networks through engagement with TAs. Managerial ties are defined as senior managers' external relationships with the business community (business ties) and government and regulatory officials (political ties) in Chapter 2. This classification is reminiscent of our discussion of hybrid network development in Paper 1. TAs have an obvious relevance to network development as found in Paper 1. Managerial ties affect firms' ability to foster relational networks with the business and political community (Peng & Luo, 2000). Earlier findings of facilitating roles of TA on hybrid networks extend the notion of managerial ties. I extrapolated that TAs enhance firms' managerial ties since they can support network development. It is conceivable that TAs also facilitate the establishment of managerial ties. Actors in a network may impact the utilization and cultivation of managerial ties because managerial ties represent managers' social connection with the external community. Since TAs facilitate member firms to acquire hybrid networks, this also implies that managerial ties are strengthened in association with strong network development. When the member firms develop more hybrid networks, they are likely to cultivate a higher level of managerial ties.

Member firms of TAs are intertwined either horizontally, being at similar stages of production or vertically, going through various stages of production. TAs are found to link member firms through vertical (buyer–supplier) or horizontal (technology, information, or other resource-sharing) relationships (Doner & Schneider, 2000). Formal and informal relationships with other firms are formed among member firms within TA networks. TAs regularly work to control markets for the interest of their members (Doner & Schneider, 2000). Also, they attempt to improve the efficiency of member firms and ease them from the increasingly competitive pressures through activities of collaborative procurements and sub-contracting (McEvily & Zaheer, 1999).

Business networks have been described as sets “of two or more interconnected business relationships in which an organization is embedded” (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 2). Business networks actors include suppliers, competitors, strategic partners, customers and shareholders etc. It is evident that TAs facilitate member firms to acquire business networks as a result of Paper 1. The findings of Paper 1 also exhibited the presence of institutional networks triggered by TAs. Along with thick institutional networks, member firms are inclined to have strong political ties with government. Political ties refer to senior managers’ relationships with officials at various levels of governments, officials in industry bureaus, and other regulatory organizations. It is expected that firms’ dense ties with powerful governments allow them to capitalize on economies of scale. Shi et al., (2014) argued that top managers’ political ties are vital for the success of firms in China. Paper 1 also revealed that managers of member firms of TAs would be involved in interpersonal relationships. A distinguishing feature of network ties between members in TAs is that they are established as a result of interpersonal relationships developed from informal social gatherings and meetings. Economic actions are deeply embedded in networks of interpersonal relations (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998; Uzzi, 1997). Like-minded members of the association, through common background and aspirations may foster a congenial sense of cooperation (Granovetter, 1985). Senior managers’ business ties enhance the firms’ ability to obtain information (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Senior managers are more likely to acquire tacit information with strengthened ties with suppliers or customers, like specific information about the business processes, market and technical knowledge of suppliers and customers (Yang et al., 2015). Managerial ties enable access to information from reputable sources that those without ties cannot access (Li et al., 2008). Networking among member firms develops resources such as information and personal referral which can induce new business potentiality (Burt, 2000). Particularly, when other members are familiar with the market regardless of their home country or host country, they play a broker role in bridging the domestic and foreign markets. A rich range of resources of political influence, equipment and certain capabilities will also be acquired (Oh et al., 2006). It is more likely to build mutual trust and rapport if a potential partner is referred from a reputable member company. Brokering activities via TAs also helps in reducing information asymmetries that member firms are entitled more opportunities to gain valuable information. A potential foreign partner might be referred by another member who is believed to be a reliable information resource (Lamin, 2013). Such referrals are crucial due to the concern of the potential risk and nebulous outcomes associated with

internationalization activities. Cooperating with reliable partners can alleviate the high risk and uncertainty during foreign market entry.

Hinted from the finding in Paper 1, TAs are active actors enabling member firms to access networks. It is plausibly reasoned that TAs also reinforce managerial ties of member firms. Member firms establish interlocking relationships by sharing operational resources (raw materials, production facilities, technologies, financial capital, or distribution channels) and strategic resources (information, experience, or knowledge). Managerial ties of member firms are reinforced coupled with stronger networks. Managerial ties are of great importance to firms and they are used to coordinate transactions in China (Zhang & Li, 2008). Networks facilitate inter-member social connections and provide platforms for knowledge exchange. The following discussion elaborates on the learning and knowledge in support of internationalization.

6.2 organizational learning through TAs (extrapolated from Paper 2)

We extend the knowledge acquisition inquiry into organizational learning. Knowledge is defined as the ability to “apprehend and use relationships among critical factors in such a way as to achieve intended ends” (Autio et al., 2000, p. 911), while learning is defined as the ability to “acquire new knowledge that the venture can use in its operations” (Zahra & Hayton, 2008, p.199). Internationalization is itself a learning process in which the firm starts from varying levels of prior knowledge and generates new knowledge based on its overseas practice (Casillas et al., 2009). Learning has been suggested to be a multidimensional event, involving individual, group, and organization levels that interconnected by a knowledge transfer process (Crossan et al., 2011). We found strong evidence that TAs help member firms to acquire knowledge in Paper 2. Going beyond this notion, we extrapolate that TAs also play a part in influencing firms’ organizational learning.

A large body of literature on organizational learning focuses on the concepts of exploratory and exploitative learning. Drawing on existing knowledge, exploitative learning takes full leverage of what is already known and produces incremental knowledge with moderate but certain and immediate returns (Schulz, 2001). Exploratory learning is used to explore new

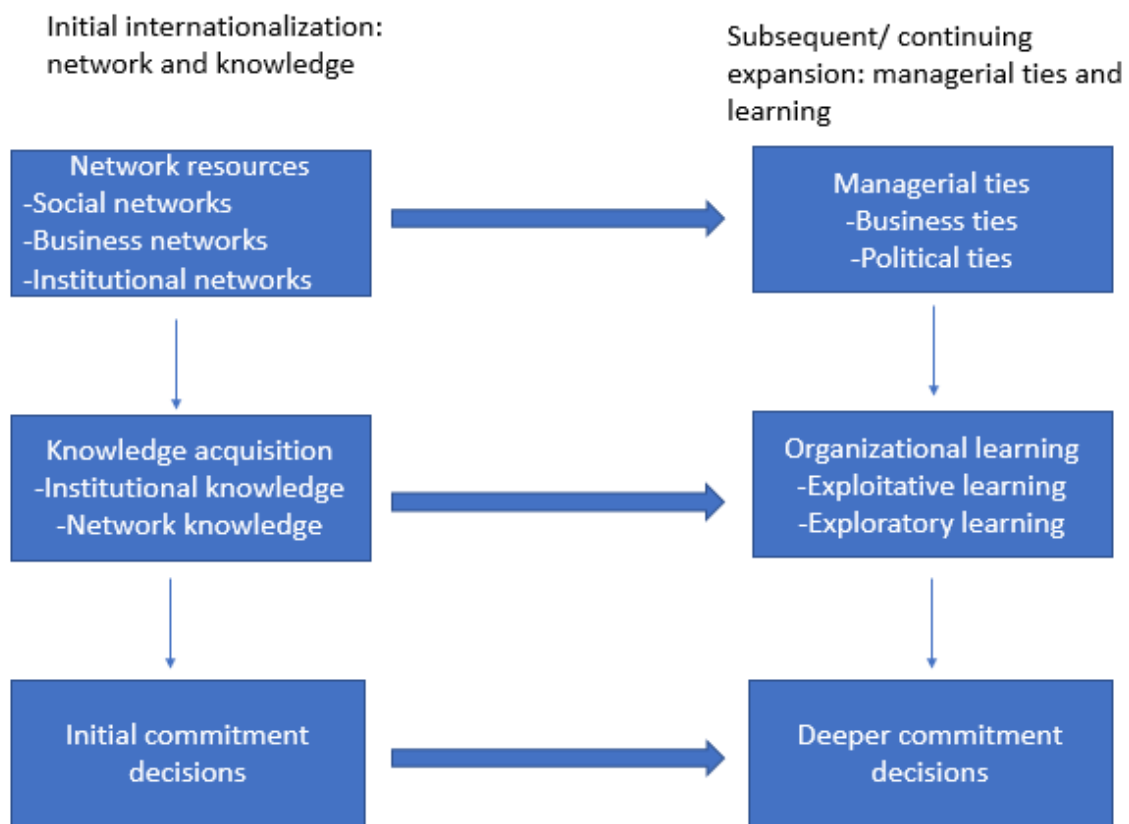
needs and opportunities (Kim & Atuahene-Gima, 2010). I configure an interplay between knowledge acquisition and organizational learning. Paper 2 identified institutional knowledge and network knowledge developed through the engagement with TAs. A substantial body of literature has indicated that prior knowledge is crucial for foreign market entry, but it alone is not sufficient to accelerate internationalization (Zheng et al., 2012). Firms could adapt learning skills necessary for new markets by virtue of knowledge creation (De Clercq et al., 2012; Kim & Aguilera, 2015). A strong knowledge base assists a rapid internationalization (Autio et al., 2011; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). The progress of internationalization without enough foreign market knowledge is slow. Member firms gain foreign market knowledge through TAs-organized events. Some member firms lack knowledge of markets and business acumen to compete effectively. This in fact represents the *raison d'être* for networked TAs, who provide a platform for firms to join events in which they can acquire knowledge rapidly and repeatedly to quickly conquer its weak knowledge base. Institutional knowledge of about host/home country gains prominence in offering foreign market intelligence. TAs delivered a series of training and member firms are approachable to host/home government policy, allowing them to leapfrog to foreign countries supported by national funding. For example, some M&A cases are evident that Chinese firms engage in exploratory learning through developing partnership in developed market with support of home/host country government, acquiring country-specific knowledge and leapfrogging to higher value activities.

The network knowledge revealed in Paper 2 is valuable for both exploitative and exploratory learning. Opportunities to acquire established knowledge increase exponentially with the provision of readily accessible networks (Hansen et al., 2000; Kambil et al., 2000). Pursuing such knowledge is an activity known as exploitative learning (March, 1991). Network knowledge is also found to boost exploratory learning. Li et al., (2014) manifest exploratory learning concerns external resources acquisition (e.g. knowledge and technologies), products and skills development. The business leads and matches inspired by network knowledge whet firms' appetite. International opportunities are developed along with “the interaction of partners who build knowledge together and come to trust each other as they commit themselves further to the relationship” (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; p. 1419). Based on stronger exploratory learning, firms can capture opportunities for creating new products and services, targeting new niches.

The firms either acquire new knowledge to develop explorative learning or apply the knowledge acquired to develop exploitative learning. Long-term pre-existing domestic knowledge leads to greater learning in international markets. I posit that firms start to transform the accumulated knowledge into organizational learning. During the first years of activities, founders approached markets with trial-and-error and “learn by doing” methods. As they reach post-entry stage, the organizational learning stimulates OFDI strategy. Networking activities within TAs allow the firms to be close enough to access both visible and deeper tacit knowledge. It is not uncommon to obtain timely information and referrals from the other members. Taking advantage of diverse information, TA members can exchange novel ideas and create unexpected opportunities. Figure 6-1 is a roadmap of the relationship between evolved concepts. Network resources and managerial ties are mutually enhanced. Knowledge and learning are reciprocal; when knowledge is acquired, organizational learning is gained. Ultimately, firms shift from initial internationalization to deeper commitments such like OFDI as they develop enhanced managerial ties and grow their organizational learning.

Figure 6-1

Evolved concepts leading to Paper 3 as a result of Paper 1 and 2



Exploitative OFDI uses existing knowledge to develop incremental improvements through exploitative learning. On the other hand, explorative OFDI leverages new knowledge to break new ground and pursue a path of explorative learning (Li, 2010). Managerial ties could be effective complementary conduits for acquiring external resources and knowledge to gain organizational learning. Building on the above discussion, the following conceptual paper develops a conceptual model that both types of managerial ties (business ties and political ties) contribute to the aggregation of organizational learning, paving the way for internationalization. This paper also conceptualizes that a firm enhances its business ties through interlocking connections with other TAs' member firms and acquires indirect experiential learning from the experienced member firms with which it interacts. Member firms can use TAs to avoid the uncertainty of overseas ventures by accruing international knowledge. It is also believed that political ties are enhanced by engaging with TAs. Such political ties enable the member firms to learn OFDI policy earlier and access valuable

sources quicker. By explicitly linking managerial ties, organizational learning and OFDI, we strive to achieve several objectives. The primary objective is to examine how managerial ties affect an organization's ability to acquire exploitative and exploratory learning. The second objective is to advance the study of OFDI and create a new avenue with the potential for understanding TA's roles. Becoming TA member, a firm is reachable by another firm (Boehe, 2013). Such reachability increases the members' potency to discover and spread knowledge. They can exchange information and will be able to access novel information and exploit information to increase their competitiveness (Zaheer & Bell, 2005).

6.3 What Drives OFDI? The Joint Effects of Trade Associations Networks and Organizational Learning (Paper 3)

6.3.1 Introduction

Emerging market firms (EMFs) are found to be able to survive in an international setting by integrating proprietary resources and capabilities (Luo & Bu, 2018). Although they may lack distinctive resources, they adopt a radical approach rather than an incremental approach alongside the internationalization process (Luo & Bu, 2018). By using a series of mixed strategies such as contractual alliances, joint ventures, or greenfield wholly owned, they can vie with global competitors (Luo & Bu, 2018). Carney et al., (2016) find that the firm-specific capabilities of some small-to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can shift across borders to similar markets. Even for culturally remote developed countries, the presence of state-of-the-art technology empowers companies with unprecedented opportunities.

Advanced technology empowers companies to scale internationally, going beyond countries borders and undertaking multi-markets. Trade associations (TAs) are found to play a part in member firms' internationalization (Boehe, 2013; Costa et al., 2017). There is a wide array and diversity of TAs in all countries (Costa et al., 2017). In China, according to statistics in 2016, there were 16,000 national TAs, whose assets collectively amounted to 253.9 RMB billion and annual income reached 112.1 RMB billion (CCPIT, 2018). We are keen to learn if there is any impact of TAs on the international strategy of member firms.

The burgeoning internationalization of the emerging market is being paid growing attention, particularly in China. It is surprising that despite the extensive discussions on internationalization from China (Buckley et al., 2007; Cozza et al., 2015; Ramamurti & Hillemann, 2018), the impact of TAs on internationalization has received limited attention. The findings of the impact of TAs in the process of internationalization in the developing world remain underexplored. This situation is a result of the relatively neglected attention to such institutions because they are normally studied from political and sociological perspectives. A majority of the existing studies have focused on social capital or policy development.

TAs have been considered a crucial force for social and economic progress (Bennett & Robson, 2011; Shah & Rivera, 2013). Participation in TA networks can improve innovation by Chinese SMEs (Qiao et al., 2014). In an effort to serve their respective industries, TAs can influence government policy and regulation or public opinion, representing the objectives and collective needs of their members (Rajwani et al., 2015). A key to fostering a strong working relationship with the government is effectively advocating a policy. Effective advocacy is critical for TAs in mediating between governments and member firms. Greater engagement in supporting government policies facilitates the relationship between government and member firms and generates reciprocal benefits.

While there is no scarcity of discussion regarding the role of TAs in the political science and sociology fields, research into the activities of TAs in international business (IB) is limited (Boehe, 2013; Costa et al., 2017). Few scholars have investigated how firms speed the process of internationalization through TA networks. Although the existing research has emphasized the importance of TAs for collective representation, insights into the dynamics of this relationship within TA networks are lacking. How exactly managerial ties developed through TAs influence organizational learning remains poorly understood and under-theorized. The focus of this paper is on how TAs, acting as networking nodes to link together member firms, affect their members' organizational learning.

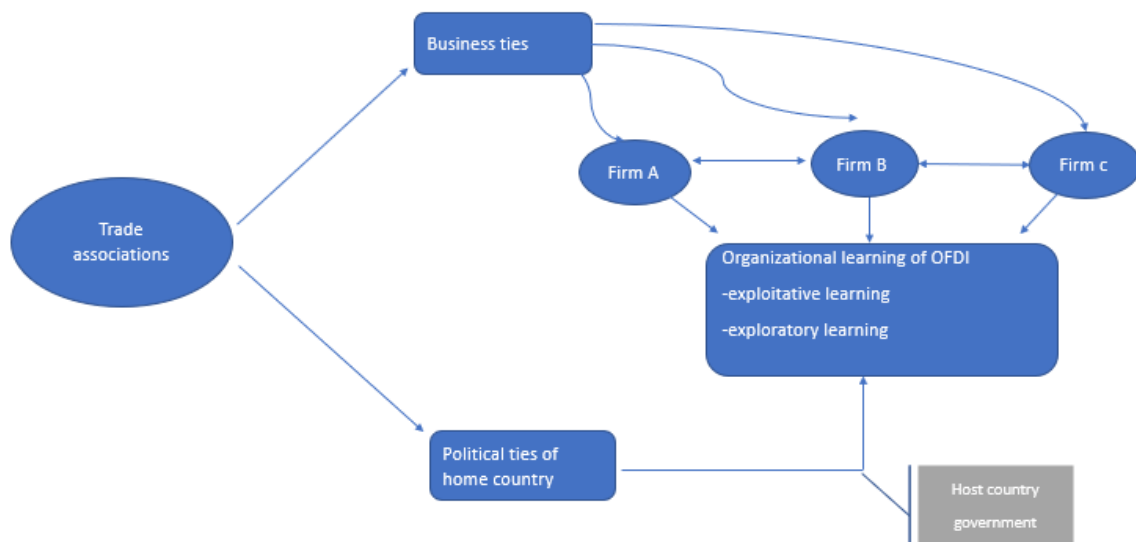
This paper postulates that Chinese firms' relationship with TAs is important in shining a light on the learning process of member firms. Government support has been given to TAs in support of the internationalization of their member firms. The roles of TAs which encourage clusters of players working together to going global need to be further exploited. By offering comprehensive services in brand display and project docking, TAs contribute to international cooperation and global collaboration. For example, the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) is a special organization. Each province in China has chapter organizations of CCPIT. CCPIT enables member companies to foster business networks by organizing events, launching conferences and promoting information-sharing.

Figure 6-2 presents the broad theoretical framework of our study. Managerial ties developed through TAs comprise business ties and political ties. Business ties enhance ambidextrous organizational learning through interaction among member firms. Home country political ties

facilitate exploitative learning and expedite exploratory learning. Particularly, exploratory learning will be acquired jointly by political ties of both home and host country governments. Following this logic, the remainder of the paper is organized as follows: two types of managerial ties will be delved into the discussion. Following this, organizational learning is expounded and analysed from two dimensions (exploitative and exploratory learning) and a set of propositions are developed, proposing a potential interlaced relationship between managerial ties and organizational learning. Finally, conclusion and empirical implication are summarized.

Figure 6-2

Conceptual model of Paper 3



6.3.2 Theoretical development

Managerial ties developed through TAs

In emerging economies, the pattern of OFDI is influenced by institutional voids (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2008). Home institutions shape the type of resource, such as business networks of a foreign market. It is desirable to access these networks through managerial ties. Managerial ties may facilitate international expansion at the early phase of internationalization and continue to play a part in the international operations at the later phase.

TAs received scant attention regarding their contribution to Chinese firms' internationalization, not even to mention OFDI. Managerial ties can be defined as “an individual's attempt to mobilize personal contacts to profit from entrepreneurial opportunities or a firm's efforts to cooperate with others to obtain and sustain a competitive advantage” (Luo, 2001, p. 85). Zhang and Li (2008) pinpointed that business ties comprise ties with senior managers in other firms, such as buyers, suppliers, and competitors. Business ties can provide firms with timely and comprehensive information on current market conditions (Peng and Luo, 2000). Business ties can also provide a repository of complementary resources (Sheng et al., 2011).

The tacit information about trustworthy and untrustworthy partners orchestrated through TAs may facilitate business partner's identification, promote transactions, and offer economic benefits (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Political ties are defined as senior managers' connection with government officials at various levels of government and regulatory organizations (Kotabe et al., 2011). Chinese firms' ties with government officials enable firms to assess essential information about governments' policies on export and FDI to ameliorate uncertainty (Yiu et al., 2007). This type of ties also helps them avoid potential government intervention. Political ties help firms to secure valuable resources (e.g., financial assets) from governments for innovation activities (Hillman & Hitt, 1999).

Assuming an intermediary role between firms and governments, TAs empower member firms to bargain with the government and offer insight to the government in developing and implementing industrial policy (Qiao et al., 2014). TAs circulate government regulations and policies to member firms but also pass on business opinions of TAs to governments, allowing a chance for members to gain access to the government (Zhang, 2007). Government agencies and officials find associations useful as an instrument to regulate and control the market economy. It is reasonable to believe that member firms engaging with TA have a high level of political ties. TAs networks are of great importance for SMEs in China to stay close with the government to raise their status in society and gain financial resources (Qiao et al., 2014). Chinese firms are believed to actively engage with TAs if their top management members are councilpersons in central or local government bureaus, as this increases their chances of

contacting the government (Qiao et al., 2014). Such connections may also facilitate the process of external resource acquisition.

(1) Business ties developed through TAs

Business ties are “a firm’s informal social connections with business organizations, such as buyers, suppliers, competitors, and other market collaborators” (Sheng et al., 2011, p. 2). Senior managers’ personal connections with customers, competitors and supplier firms are most often studied; business ties developed through TAs are less studied but no less important. TAs receive scant attention as the intermediary providing a network for member firms. A wide array of literature suggests that horizontally related firms in many industries access similar information due to common nodes through TAs (Vives, 1990). TAs nowadays are distinct from the putative assumption that member firms are only horizontally connected as competitors. In fact, many TAs consist of diverse memberships which are vertically connected. Businesspeople have a chance to meet competitors, suppliers, and customers within TAs in the downstream and upstream supply chains. The importance of membership affiliated within TAs, both vertically and horizontally, has been emphasized as a key ingredient to success.

TAs represent the context in which businesspeople establish repeated interactions. This interactive activity with other member firms includes exchanging experiential knowledge. Therefore, business knowledge about a foreign market can be orchestrated within business networks (Holmlund & Kock, 1998), leading to evolutionary learning. Member firms are able to observe others regardless of success or failure. A CEO of a large Chinese firm subsidiary confirmed the importance of associations, where he was often invited by associations to share experiential firm-specific knowledge in events they organized. Sharing failure experiences is also worth noting. Perhaps surprisingly, some learning theories imply that others’ failures may be even more valuable to learn than others’ successes (Sitkin, 1992). Business ties garner informational benefits which equip firms with updated and exhaustive information pertaining to current market circumstances (Peng & Luo, 2000). Moreover, business ties provide intellectual benefits, mobilizing firms with new or supplementary knowledge that broadens the width and depth of firm-level knowledge (Li & Sheng, 2011) and enhances product innovation ideas (Carlo et al., 2011).

(2) Political ties developed through TAs

Political ties are “a firm’s informal social connections with government officials in various levels of administration, including central and local governments, and officials in regulatory agencies, such as tax or stock market administrative bureaus” (Sheng et al., 2011, p. 2).

Political ties aid firms in securing valuable resources for innovation (Hillman & Hitt, 1999) and buffering them from risks, such as technological turmoil (Sheng et al., 2011), volatile government regulations (Hillman & Hitt, 1999), fragile markets, and lack of alternatives in the pursuit of innovation (Zheng et al., 2015). Political ties also improve firms’ lobbying influence and yield positive benefits. When firms suffer from financial constraints, politically connected firms have a higher likelihood of receiving tax exceptions, research funds and government subsidies (Faccio et al., 2006). Yiu et al., (2007) found that Chinese firms endowed with close political ties with government officials were able to acquire important information about government policy on exports and FDI. Furthermore, close ties with government officials allowed them to alleviate latent administrative interference (Zhang et al., 2012).

As per a PricewaterhouseCoopers (2015) report, 27 percent of CEOs expressed their interest in collaborating with the government to create a more competitive and efficient tax system. Many as them intended to collaborate to develop an ecosystem that drives innovation. TAs can be configured as a good intermediary to approaching governments. Government officials consider TAs useful as a tool to control and oversee the market economy (Zhang, 2007). TA networks allow enterprises to engage in negotiations with the government. TAs also act as consultants to provide intelligence to the government in drafting and executing industrial regulations. TAs not only disseminate government regulations to members, but also consolidate member firms’ opinions and inform the government. These iterative activities assist the government in regulating firms and in helping members to approach government agencies and government officials (Zhang, 2007). It is believed that member firms actively engaging with TAs have a high level of political ties. In particular, SMEs are urged to maintain a good relationship with government agencies in order to raise social status and get financial subsidies. TA networks are vital for SMEs to be acquainted with government officials. This is particularly true if they participate in TAs transferred from previous government agencies. It is more likely that executives who maintain networks with this kind of TA will increase their chances of gaining access to governments. Such connections may

also mobilize the process of external resource acquisition such as financial subsidies or policy approval.

Organizational learning enhanced by managerial ties

The established literature supported the importance of organizational learning as a key for new ventures (Hsu & Pereira, 2008; Li et al., 2012; Sirmon et al., 2011). Learning is a crucial precondition for the success of any internationalizing firm (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

Learning is crucial in emerging markets, especially in uncertain environments like China where new ventures require significant resources and social capital to succeed (Wright et al., 2005). New ventures need to take leverage of their learning to grasp the opportunity and improve performance (Sirmon et al., 2011). Exploitative and exploratory learning are considered the most important types of organizational learning. March (1991) proposed that exploitative learning and exploratory learning are the most important types of organizational learning. Exploratory learning and developmental learning reflect different knowledge production capabilities and affect the nature of generated knowledge and the necessary behaviour to create knowledge (Özsomer & Gençtürk, 2003).

Exploitative learning encompasses gaining and utilizing market information and knowledge within the boundaries of current competitors and customers (Chung et al., 2015). Exploitative learning discloses “refinement, efficiency and execution” (Hughes & Morgan, 2006, p. 3). The main focus of exploitative learning is on control, effectiveness and reliability (Auh & Menguc, 2005). Based on the knowledge to take full advantage of what exists, exploitative learning gradually produces knowledge with moderate but certain and immediate returns (Hughes et al., 2007). Organizations seek knowledge closely connected to their prior knowledge bases (Stuart & Podolny, 1996). This learning is apparently executed by using present rather than new organizational routines (Kim & Atuahene-Gima, 2010).

In contrast, exploratory learning involves acquiring and using market information and knowledge outside the boundaries of current competitors and customers and often contains experimentation and risk-inclined projects (Kim & Atuahene-Gima, 2010; March, 1991). Exploration activities include “search, variation, risk-taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, and innovation” (March, 1991, p. 71). The knowledge produced in this way is often a departure from the current knowledge base (Katila, 2002). New knowledge

with possibly high but uncertain returns is created. This type of learning requires trying new alternatives and rewards are far from being guaranteed (Tuomisalo & Leppäaho, 2019). Firms are exposed to novel and diverse information about competitors and customers beyond the firms' present experiences and knowledge. The key strengths are improved heterogeneity of a firm's market knowledge and potential opportunities for further innovation.

6.3.3 Development of propositions

While the literature on learning is extensive, learning acquisition derived from managerial ties through TAs has received relatively little attention. Although previous studies from the social network lens have studied the benefits of external entities to organizational learning, such as university and research institutes (Liefner et al., 2006), understanding learning through TA has been neglected. This neglect stresses an unresolved issue in explicating organizational learning of overseas investment, that interactive effects are derived from the pool of member firms' ties. Managerial ties with managers of other firms operating within the same industry ensure strategic conformity and lead to efficiency, while managerial ties with managers of firms outside the actor's industry are valuable for accessing novel information (Geletkanycz & Hambrick, 1997). TAs are a nexus of intraindustry and extraindustry actors. Managerial ties help Chinese SMEs to obtain complementary resources owned by network partners and accelerate the speed of OFDI (Zhang et al., 2016). Grounded on the ostensibly different implications of exploitative and exploratory learning, extending on the notion of managerial ties, and linking to these different magnitudes of learning will add new knowledge of internationalization and increase the level of understanding of TAs.

Hollingsworth et al., (1994) have summarized a broad scope of functions and roles of TAs, which include disseminating information, transferring technology, introducing and integrating joint research programmes, organizing career training, and influencing government agencies. TAs encourage their members to share experiences, resources and best practice, so that members can foster their strategies. Information acquisition supports member firms' decisions and helps them to avoid investing in high-risk and conflict-affected countries. Engagement with TAs can provide firms with the latest information about regional development, heterogeneous sourcing motivations, and regulatory programs.

Business ties increase the breadth and depth of interfirm communication of consumer/product information (Atuahene-Gima & Murray, 2007). TA networks allow member firms to create and nurture business ties. When external business ties are denser, managers of the focal company can gain access to diverse resources and use these resources to produce new products and capture a new market. The benefits of networking strategy also include minimizing innovation uncertainty, increasing information communication, and expediting the transference of specialized technologies (Xu & Lu, 2010). Business ties foster member firms to collect information relevant to product technologies and markets and facilitate them to solve problems they confront. This leads to hypothesis 1.

H1 Active engagement with TAs enhances business ties of member firms.

Alongside communicating with network members, exploitative learning is germinated. Executives are prone to gather information pertinent to their current business scope, market and technologies. Meanwhile, they prefer to collect existing methods that have been tested as effective in addressing product and market problems (Xu & Lu et al., 2010). Exploitative learning enriches the firm's knowledge base with less uncertainty or cost and thus is desirable (Hughes et al., 2007). However, firms possessing exploitative learning might risk acquiring merely established knowledge without uniqueness (Hughes et al., 2007).

Exploitative learning will be deployed to discover market information. Firms actively search for new information about the heterogeneity of foreign markets, such as local competition, distribution channels and customer preferences, in order to fully exploit the current potential capability. TAs conduct market research and can provide prior entry knowledge which the membership can access. Rindfleisch and Moorman (2001) found that TAs could provide recent market information to SMEs and thus improve the capability of SMEs to adjust to a dynamic market environment. Some important market information which may not be obtained in the open market may be offered by business ties for product information (Heide & John, 1992).

The market information gained from TA networks could stimulate R&D activities for SMEs by exploiting and improving the existing technologies. Interaction among the member firms of TA stimulates business ties. Lee and Lee (1992) believed that most R&D activities were carried out in an informal manner and are generated through activities such as informal technology transfer between engineers and active membership in TAs. TAs can offer a range

of business training, including workshops, webinars and short courses. Dense interactions among members enable the validation of information and enhance its reliability. Strong business ties with similar partners lead to exploitative learning (Levinthal & March, 1993). Therefore, TAs help member firms obtain exploitative learning that increases efficiency and productivity. TA network configuration has been recognized as valuable for SMEs to facilitate product commercialization in foreign markets (Chetty & Wilson, 2003). Business ties enhanced by TA allow a higher likelihood of product commercialization by offering the member firms opportunities to showcase their business blueprint in key industry events.

Apart from SMEs, studies of young firms also reveal that emerging firms acquire exploitative knowledge by insistently exploiting current networks of relationships (Koza & Lewin, 1998; Hite & Hesterly, 2001). Participation in TAs networks will accelerate the speed of acquiring knowledge that entails less uncertainty. Exploitative knowledge can be readily applied and repeatedly accessed. Emerging firms may possess a poor knowledge repertoire and can look to the experiences of experienced firms within TAs' network. Interorganizational knowledge flow and exchange are likely to happen when engaging in TAs and interacting with peers. Member firms can acquire existing knowledge through engagement with TAs, and the resulting learning tends to be of an 'exploitative' nature rather than 'exploratory'. In other words, they leverage their existing knowledge and capabilities to maximize incremental gains rather than seeking out completely new knowledge and opportunities.

In responding to the national policy "Going Global", TAs in China provide market forecasts and analysis, organize training and project evaluation, elicit information exchanges, promote media publicity, and give full play to the role of a bridge between government and member firms. We argue that exploitative learning which allows the member firms to exploit their existing assets further is reinforced by the business ties developed through TAs. For example, a TA in an economically developed province in China once held a series of thematic training entailing four modules of financing, management services, experience exchanges, and consulting services. The training lasted for three days, with the theme of "Going Global Investment Environment and Practice". Renowned speakers and thinkers were brought together to discuss cross-border mergers and acquisitions, financial support for overseas investments, and tax planning for overseas investments. The member firms were informed about international trade agreements and bilateral agreements. Chinese firms are encouraged

to go global by utilizing existing knowledge and resources and investing in new markets. If they accumulate knowledge of the foreign market environment, the knowledge might be translated into new entries. Exploitative learning involves searching information “within a well-defined and limited product/market solution closely related to the firm’s previous experience” (Atuahene-Gima & Murray, 2007, p. 3). As a result, additional entry does not incur more learning and higher adaptation costs for firms who have already entered the foreign market and established subsidiaries. Supposedly information could be gained from TAs to address enquires like what resources are valuable, where to find them, and how to obtain them. In that case, member firms are more likely to commence new entering because of their useful pre-existing local knowledge and less perceived risk. TAs’ member firms will interact with peers within the same industry on these occasions. Firms offering similar products and services, using similar inputs, serving similar customers, utilizing similar technologies, organizing similar operations, and entailing cognitive frameworks may increase the chances of exchanging knowledge more efficiently. The more relevant the information to an industry, the more we assume incremental learning to be built and refined on current knowledge (Atuahene-Gima & Murray, 2007).

Taken together, a good relationship with TAs might assist firms in obtaining information, knowledge and resources that can be used to form their exploitative learning development aimed at overseas investment (Chung et al., 2015). TAs facilitate OFDI knowledge by generating consciousness of the information needs of member firms. Therefore, the following proposition is formed to further examine the role of TAs in enhancing business ties.

H2a Business ties developed through TAs are positively associated with exploitative learning in OFDI

The learning style of Chinese firms is unorthodoxy (Lyles, Li, & Yan, 2014). Their finding suggests that half of the Chinese MNEs follow experimental learning. This riskier exploratory approach shows a clear divergence from the conventional pattern of internationalization, with the feature of incremental learning. Many Chinese MNEs are not impeded by the liability of foreignness derived from a cultural or geographical distance. They facilitate the internationalization process by virtue of exploratory learning. Exploratory learning is related to actively pursuing market and technical information which is unexplored, and such learning is acquired to satisfy the market by actively pursuing novel and unique

knowledge. The abovementioned argument supports the importance of TAs in helping member firms access general market knowledge. A pool of prior knowledge, however, is not sufficient to support rapid internationalization (Zheng et al., 2012). It is crucial for executives to be prepared to obtain and implement new information once they enter global markets (Prashantham & Floyd, 2012). Executives may leverage TA networks and activities to prepare themselves for exploratory learning. Sheng et al.(2011) suggest that firms can access product information with the assistance of business ties and acquire details of relevant changes or events in the industry which are related to a firm's exploratory learning development.

Industry events can serve as a proxy for social networks. When participating in these events, member firms identify or evaluate the internationalization opportunity (Vasilchenko & Morrish, 2011). They have the chance to meet new customers or partners and expand into new international markets. Trade shows and sponsored events offer valuable networking opportunities with innovative and high-value companies. Such events play a significant role in helping executives explore internationalization opportunities and establish serendipitous contacts. Trade shows and industry competitions enable firms to gain a presence in the international arena and develop potential international possibilities. TAs actively hold trade shows as organizers or circulate trade fair information to encourage member firms to participate. Trade shows are effective in increasing exploratory learning. Organizations learn from customers, suppliers, dealers, and other partners at trade shows and acquire new information and knowledge (Rademakers, 2000). Equipped with exploratory learning, firms can design a product or service that is welcomed by customers of new markets. In addition, participating in industry activities in specific countries shapes the image of a company and can lead to future business opportunities. It is especially important for SMEs, since they are often significantly resource-limited and inadequately supported to capture new opportunities in the marketplace. Conferences jointly organized by TAs and international organizations and partners are platforms to increase the presence of member companies in international trade and economy.

Unlike trade exhibitions, trade missions are an alternative approach to learning the foreign market and are considered effective for a company to explore business opportunities in another country. Trade missions might be undertaken by a programme with week-long

business trips. Such programmes allow companies to reach potential clients and partners in another country. Each trade mission starts with market briefings to familiarize the delegation with the social-cultural context in the destination country. The remainder of the trade mission includes networking meals, meetings with government officials, representative company visits, and business-to-business matchmaking with selected companies.

TAs are also conducive to fostering business ties to enhance experimental practice. Experimentation with new alternatives is the cornerstone of exploratory learning (March, 1991). Exploratory learning arises in a completely different way, through deliberate experimentation (Benner & Tushman, 2002), resulting in the desired outcome of novel innovation (Auh & Menguc, 2005). Peng and Luo (2000) and Acquaah (2007) both assert that market and industry knowledge produced by business ties with networking members is associated with experimentation. Engaging in TAs with other managers in the same industry assists firms in obtaining innovative information to advance the experimentation process. There is evidence that TAs help members go overseas and strengthen their overseas anti-risk capabilities, build a new platform for companies' overseas investment and project information, and exchange achievements and experience. Learning from others is effective for firms in the pursuit of knowledge acquisition and accumulation. A firm can glean knowledge by observing the practice of international venture antecedents. The knowledge gained will impact the decision-making and performance outcomes of the organization itself (Myers, 2018). This approach is more effective and reliable for firms with less experience to accrue knowledge than a lengthy process of self-experiential learning (Nathan & Kovoormisra, 2002).

TAs create the opportunity for members to learn and network with other leaders and members within the industry. Qiao et al. (2014) infer that top management of SMEs can develop external networking by participating in TA networks. In addition, such SMEs searching for external resources through diverse relationships and networks through the top management are more effective (Hite & Hesterly, 2001). The member firms within TAs are engaged in different levels of OFDI. Those which have been involved in OFDI practice can offer moral or instrumental help. TAs motivate member firms to jointly seek overseas business opportunities, carry out overseas investment, and promote the common goodness of the industry. The OFDI antecedents are encouraged to work with other member firms which are

the upstream or downstream enterprises of the industrial chain. “Interfirm complementarity and shared understandings, which are enhanced by relational experience, trust and reciprocity” (Schøtt & Jensen, 2016, p. 1234) can reduce barriers to new venture abroad. The trust enhanced by the close ties among member firms provides emotional support and crucial information. A member firm which has established a subsidiary in a foreign market may help another member firm engage in exploratory learning and consequently these partnership member firms acquire country-specific knowledge and leapfrog to expand in that market. It is believed that business ties providing information on reliable trading partners help member firms to be familiar with the foreign market and reduce transactional hazards. Trust reduces evaluation activities and increases the inclination of people to propose novel alternatives. This process facilitates the attainment and sharing of new information (Dooley & Fryxell, 1999). OFDI decisions are likely to be made and strategic actions are initiated when people “feel secure and psychologically safe to make mistake” (Atuahene-Gima & Murray, 2007, p. 7), leading to an exploration expedition.

Networked TAs enable member firms to reach a large number of potential partners which can be repeatedly tapped to acquire knowledge. Such continuous exposure to learning opportunities can spur rapid growth. Closer business ties among members can accelerate intangible resources and information sharing (Zhao & Aram, 1995). Firms can garner essential technologies and information to promote exploratory learning and utilize these resources to develop new products and services and enter new markets. Therefore, it is foreseen that close bonding with a number of executives in both intraindustry and extraindustry contexts can enable member firms to obtain new exploratory knowledge. The exploratory learning may assist firms in overcoming the impact of the novelty of their venture activities and commerce OFDI strategy. Then we propose hypothesis 2b:

H2b. Business ties are positively associated with exploratory learning in OFDI

It is interesting to note that, in promoting OFDI, many governments play a pivotal role in rolling out policies, programmes, and government funding for supporting OFDI. These public policies, to some extent, fall under the category of ‘national policy’, because this policy refers to government interventions that aim to promote overseas investments. It turns out that this top-down approach provides positive results in terms of OFDI outputs. Government at various levels promulgates going global policy and the firms are cognizant of the grand

national policy. TA networks assist enterprises in negotiating and cooperating with the government. TAs are considered ‘industry voice’ in support of the collaborative needs and goals of the members (Rajwani et al., 2015). As the industry voice, TAs representing their members’ interests seek to influence government or other regulatory agencies (Irwin, 2014; Rajwani et al., 2015). In a similar vein, political ties of members are more likely to be developed through TAs.

Owing to the origin and evolution of TAs in China, their ties with different levels of government are close. Those transferred from government agencies are inextricably linked with government officials. The government has empowered some associations with a monopoly of representation in the industries considered essential to the country’s economy and they have near monopolies of representation and the memberships are compulsory instead of voluntary (Doner & Schneider, 2000). The government can award associations a major selective benefit of exclusive access to economic policymakers.

H3 TAs enhance political ties of firm members in the home country

Exploitative learning avails established experience and transfers to a new market. In accordance with the process, knowing a business context and improving their organizational capabilities to adapt to local environment harnesses the acquisition of exploitative learning. Firms are prone to be confident in association with the acquaintance of the foreign market. A firm’s ties with government officials may stimulate firms to obtain the necessary license and financial resources to facilitate a firm’s exploitative learning process (Sheng et al., 2011). The acquired permit and financial subsidies will be applied in updating the existing knowledge base and providing refined products to adapt to the foreign markets. This is particularly true for the firms which already have resources and networks in a host country. Exploitation arises out of a necessity for overseas investment to take full advantage of their constrained resources in the current market and technology domains. To help firms to replicate the firms’ prior technological and product knowledge and experience, the government might offer financial incentives to the firms. Governments can help firms to conquer ownership-specific weaknesses by accommodating resources such as tax exemption, low-loan capital and fast-lane access to raw materials (Buckley et al., 2007). Given that, governments mitigate institutional voids that hinder firms from forming ownership-specific advantages in domestic markets (Buckley et al., 2007).

Some associations are originated and strongly governed by the state. Close ties with these associations will allow firms a fast lane to acquire political ties. Executives could leverage TA networks to develop political ties so as to acquire financial resources and regulatory approvals and licenses, allowing firms to commercialize their exploitative learning practice. It assumes that top managers who have established stronger ties with government officials are more likely to obtain exploitative learning. Once member firms have refined the established resource and enter foreign markets, the exploitative learning based on the currently refined resource helps them to enact subsequent entries into the same host country. Communication and exchange between the member firms and government departments allow enterprises to attain more business support, resulting in less risks and uncertainties, and business growth. Accordingly, we develop a theoretical argument by integrating political ties into the exploitative learning of OFDI. The alignment of both exploitative learning and political ties leads to the following proposition:

H4a. Home country political ties developed through TAs are positively associated with exploitative learning of OFDI

Despite the fact that political ties are cultivated in all countries, this type of managerial ties is relatively unique in an emerging economy (Peng & Luo, 2000). Even undergoing processes of institutional transition from a centrally-planned economy to a market system, Chinese officials are still in a stronger position to give projects permits and distribute resources. By firming up exploratory learning, firms can utilise political ties to obtain government support to capture more market opportunities. Through support from a home country privileged policy such as tax subsidies will incur an impact on exploratory learning and drive OFDI. The exploration entails searching for novel market and technology information. Such information search does not have a well-defined solution and the firm is exposed to “a heterogeneous domain and knowledge far beyond its current experience” (Atuahene-Gima & Murray, 2007, p. 3).

‘Going Global’ starting from 2000 is a clear direction where the Chinese government encourages outward FDI and pushes firm to engage in this landscape. Various levels of government solicit firms’ interest by offering preferential access to capital, tax concessions, and other incentives. Some associations as quasi-government are eligible to allocate resources

and incentives on behalf of government agencies. They serve the government to filter the subsidy application and evaluate the credentials of the firms. Firms which build up stronger ties with the government through TAs are more likely to enjoy the privileges. In particular, OFDI projects stressing exploratory learning are government's priorities because the Chinese government places an emphasis on innovation derived from exploratory learning. In line with government preference, OFDI activities are given more attention and importance. TA networks are effective for SMEs in China to keep in contact with government agencies and officials. At the same time, close relationships with government officials may help companies gain more institutional support, such as enforcing contracts, resolving negotiations, and addressing barriers to entry (Peng & Luo, 2000).

TAs serve as an intermediary between a home country and host country governments. It is evident that TAs hold activities in which the foreign government bureaus and foreign TAs are involved. Such activities unpack the policy of foreign markets and release overseas investment opportunities and multilateral information. Organizing high-level economic and investment forums, which high-ranking government officials from home and host countries participate in to link domestic firms with foreign firms, are essential occasions for participants to develop multilateral investment cooperation. By launching special events and inviting governments from targeted countries, TAs orchestrate the policy and information. Many countries introduce FDI policies about national trade and overseas investments that offer multiple benefits to firms obeying these regulations (Aharoni & Ramamurti, 2008). Being aware of the prerequisites expanding in a foreign market facilitates domestic firms' internationalization. Close political ties increase the chance of acting as first-mover in the belief that the firms will quickly access the knowledge of a specific country gathered through diplomatic channels and thorough research implemented by government agencies and TAs.

The Chinese government aggressively promotes going global by establishing industrial parks in foreign countries. Overseas industrial parks perform a key role in widening the economic landscape and governance regime of the home country and the host country, emphasizing equal participation and sharing of opportunities for the protection of cultural diversity by stakeholders (Kim & Atuahene-Gima, 2010). In most of the emerging countries where the industrial parks are located, given the complex and fragmented routes to market, a flexible strategy relies more on familiarity with the host country government. TAs promote overseas

industrial parks in multiple ways. Policy assembly with respect to taxation and land use are outlined in the industry events. In addition, TAs organize trade missions to have field observations, and the mission leader is very often a senior government official. Since there is high-ranking official involved, the host country will welcome them in a high-profile manner. Given the sufficient attention to the delegation, the mission delegates have a greater chance to get to know a suitable local partner and the venture in the industrial park will be spurred with less interference.

The leapfrogging of OFDI evidenced in the internationalization of the process of Chinese firms lends support to the argument that political ties enhance exploratory learning. Furthermore, if government policies are perceived as advantageous to OFDI activities, firms are more likely will make the necessary OFDI steps, including mediating with government officials to pursue support for internationalization initiatives. The construction of industrial parks in foreign countries is a key component of going global and an anticipated experimental approach for promoting comprehensive globalization by creating new forms of cooperation between China and host countries. The privileged policy in terms of financial resources, taxes, technical capabilities and policy regimes facilitates Chinese firms to leap into that country to start an exploratory venture. In light of the above analysis, it is hypothesized that a relationship of explorative learning and political ties is possible.

H4b. Home country and host country political ties are positively associated with exploratory learning in OFDI

Table 6-1 provides a summary matrix of a two-dimensional scheme for organizational learning with two types of managerial ties. This matrix shows what activities are embedded within business and political ties to enhance exploitative and exploratory learning respectively.

Table 6-1*A summary matrix of a two-dimensional scheme*

	Exploitative learning	Exploratory learning
Business ties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Market information: fully exploiting the current potential capability -R&D activities: informal way and occurs through activities such as informal know-how transfer among engineers, and active membership in TAs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Trade fairs, industry competitions: novel knowledge and serendipitous contacts -Trade missions -Learning from peers This approach is more effective and reliable for firms with less experience to attain knowledge than a lengthy process of self-experiential learning -Endorsement by other member firms
Political ties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acquired permits and financial subsidies will be applied in updating the existing knowledge base and provide refined products to adapt to the foreign markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Bridge home country government to host country government -Industrial parks jointly established by home and host country

6.3.4 Conclusion

The conclusions of this paper are assessed in consideration of the conceptual framework guiding our acknowledgment of the emerging phenomenon of TAs in making OFDI decisions. The emerging research questions are: Are managerial ties produced through engagement with TAs? How are managerial ties that are developed through TAs contributing to organizational learning? Specifically, how are exploitative and exploratory learning enhanced? Is the acquired learning a driver of OFDI as a result of mitigated liability of outsidership? Why are firms motivated to engage with TAs in the pursuit of capturing international opportunities? By suggesting some clues for future studies, we hope that more empirical studies may be done to anchor this research and increase the generalization of the finding.

One of the major contributions of this study is an emphasis on a fine-grained analysis of the Chinese context. A deeper examination of OFDI through a context-specific study of the evolving role of TAs at the macro-level is necessary to understand how managerial ties are derived from a third party to shape internationalization strategy. I chose China for several reasons. First, China has deployed a dual-track approach which has liberalized the centralized economy but retained government controls (Luo & Tung, 2007); therefore, firms are motivated to foster ties with businesses and government authorities. This study conceptualized a framework of the influence of TAs for enhancing managerial ties, which are expected to build through those associations' activities. This is a major force behind the bundling of association services into a package designed to appeal to and maintain members. Managerial ties could be a self-evident purpose sought by the members; if so, this attempt can be understood as a revelatory source of managerial ties. Future theory, testing and practice are worth noting for when and how firms engage with TAs as part of how they incur managerial ties.

Second, this study significantly advances our theoretical understanding of both managerial ties and organizational learning paving the way for OFDI. I conceptualize a theoretical insight that TAs can help firms improve learning from either business ties or political ties. It is important to be cautious about the conclusions based on this assumption. Not every single association is able to harness business ties and political ties. They are criticized by some studies that firms' performance is hindered because they over-rely on close relationships with a government official and the firm will encounter uncertainty when this official is deployed to another region. Research on outcomes would benefit from more attention to the potential negative effects of political ties.

This study also advances knowledge with respect to understanding how TAs are influencing learning towards OFDI. In this article, I have suggested that TAs are a much-neglected factor in the process of OFDI. The derived propositions will provide a deeper understanding of how TAs help in the international process. It has great theory value and praxis function with managerial implications. This novel perspective on TAs allows us to understand outcomes relate to OFDI. Thus, my study augments the literature in both managerial ties and organizational learning by introducing TAs and providing a new approach to understanding OFDI drivers. Therefore, IB scholars were invited to a debate on the internationalization

process, adding the line of study of TAs. The relationship of TAs and member firms is non-monotonic and subject to contextual variation. Future research is expected to use empirical data to validate the arguments.

Implications of this study are of indicative. Rather than overgeneralizing the roles of TAs, association managers should skew their attention to specific services. Not all associations will embrace exhaustive services, and there is very little obvious pattern as to the types of associations that provide services. TAs can incur more instrumental benefits apart from influencing policy or setting industry standards. Firm managers aiming to spawn their companies' OFDI potential should advance their endeavours to engage in TAs' activities. Nowadays instruments like physical and online activities are regular. The usage of these tools to fuel the interaction with TAs in foreign markets is convenient. For instance, a firm could join the event jointly held by Chinese and overseas TAs. Efforts like these could deliver a proprietary advantage to the firm in entering foreign markets. Moreover, this study proposed an intertwined relationship between two types of managerial ties and ambidexterity of organizational learning. Based on the results of this study, firms should be aware that organizational learning can accelerate the process of OFDI. Furthermore, when embarking on new overseas investments, firms should choose an appropriate learning type that is suitable for the specific type of managerial ties.

6.3.5 Limitation

Our analysis is not based on actual data but on the perceived role of TAs. Future research should delve deeper into the OFDI process and its evolution over time, particularly through the use of longitudinal case studies. Building on this, when examining the role of TAs, it is crucial to include trust and the level of density among members as independent variables. Instrumental incentives alone are less likely to explain joining and participating behaviours, the underlying factors entailing bridging and bonding dynamics might expand our knowledge of associations.

In line with some scholars, TAs varied in an organizational structure. As Lawton, Rajwani, & Minto (2018) note, TAs are distinctive entities because they align organizations with collective goals. However, due to variations in organizational size and capacity, drawing a

general conclusion may be arbitrary. Therefore, I suggest conducting more future studies on the variations in the organizational form of associations.

7 Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1 Chapter overview

Research sub-questions developed in Chapter 2 were addressed by three stand-alone papers from Chapters 4 to 6. The findings of one paper laid the ground for the next one. This chapter summarizes these findings and highlights the contributions. Overall, this thesis contributes to the IB field through the lens of TAs. In terms of the volume of literature produced focusing on TA in the IB domain and the number of empirical research studies conducted, the study of the roles of TAs has a good claim to being regarded as a distinct branch of internationalization theory. The study of TAs has established itself as an area which should be given more attention. The findings can be seen as an attempt to explain the growing competitiveness of Chinese firms using an unconventional perspective.

7.2 The roles of TA

7.2.1 Three roles as networks facilitator

The overarching research question of Chapter 4 is to identify the presence and roles of TAs within networks whose current findings were disjointed and not well addressed in a summative manner: What are the roles of TA that facilitate network acquisition?

Surprisingly, there are few studies of TAs in the IB field to allow for investigating the roles of TA. Most accounts focus on either service (Bratton et al., 2003; Bennett, 1995; Bennett & Robson, 2001) or policy advocacy role in NGO literature (Li et al., 2017; Zhang, 2018). With the purpose of answering research sub-question 1, Chapter 4 contributes to research into the roles of TA by systematically reflecting on the previous study and developing three categories of roles. My findings illustrated that the member firms highly recognized the three roles of TA in accordance with a stream of scholars (e.g. Balassiano & Chandler, 2010; Esparza et al., 2014; Bennett, 1995).

TAs assume a critical industry voice role and are united in their effort to serve their industry by influencing regulation and government policy (Rajwani et al., 2015). TAs are considered an important bridge between member firms and governments, since member firms pursue

political actions collectively with other firms (Jia, 2014). Contrary to the argument that TAs yield influence in their lobbying effort (Lawton et al., 2013; Surdu & Mellahi, 2016), the findings reveal that TAs are mostly followers and rarely challenge government authority (Zhang & Zhu, 2018; Unger & Chan, 1995). Lobbying is “about specific issues that are explicitly identified and entails direct contact between government (elected or unelected) and constituents or their agents” (Drope & Hansen, 2009, p. 305). Members of TAs have access to policymakers because of political assets and particular political capabilities developed by TAs through lobbying and other political maneuvers (Minto, 2016). Although TAs’ efforts to lobby governments were not as much as their counterparts in western countries, TAs lobbied on behalf of their members to pressure governments to advance the interest of member firms during the pandemic. For example, the software outsourcing TA in Beijing has pooled a comprehensive stock of opinions through various channels to learn the ongoing situation of virus-hit domestic and foreign enterprises, to reflect on their bottlenecks and problems and give suggestions to the government. During the pandemic, the firm’s staff had to work from home but this policy induced a problem for business owners. Some business owners expressed their worry that they pay the same salary to their employees but the productivity is not same. This is particularly the case when a couple is working in the same company.

Olson’s theory of collective action pinpointed the problem of free-riding. The higher chance is that member firms with smaller size businesses pursue free-riding whilst this study found no evidence of free-riding behavior of member firms. Member firms voluntarily pay membership without concern there are firms within the industry taking advantage of collective benefits.

Studies of TAs lie at the forefront of our understanding of the mechanisms by which intermediaries in emerging markets develop institutions. Also, using the software outsourcing TA in Beijing as another example, the business owners called for an adapted payroll mechanism during COVID-19. They were keenly aware of the challenge that employees faced in balancing work and family responsibilities, but they also had concerns about the potential lack of productivity when working from home. Even with less productivity, they still had to proceed with payroll checks as usual. They were struggling with maintaining organizational efficiency without jeopardizing employment. They pushed this issue up, suggesting drawing a line for the discipline of work from home. Finally, the policy came out to devise a mechanism for revised payroll for employees who work from home.

TAs serve as network brokers by coordinating information through various activities or events. They offer a range of information services, from basic foreign market knowledge to partner matching and specific advice. Member firms can leverage these services to identify potential clients and partners within or outside the country through the TAs' referrals. The broker mechanism fosters collaboration within the network to support members' search for and pursuit of business opportunities. With a broadening and deepening network, they may embrace ambitious visions and are more courageous to take bolder strategies. High-quality networks are associated with deeper connections and enduring partnerships so that member firms have access to knowledge recourses, markets or techniques. The member firms can share resources through formal and informal collaboration and cooperation within such a network. I illustrate the example that TAs organize study missions to visit star firms. It is an excellent opportunity that star firms can offer various benefits ranging from information on international opportunities to resource provision and capability enhancement. The involvement of an entrepreneur in a circle of network partners has been found to lead to a higher degree of future partnership.

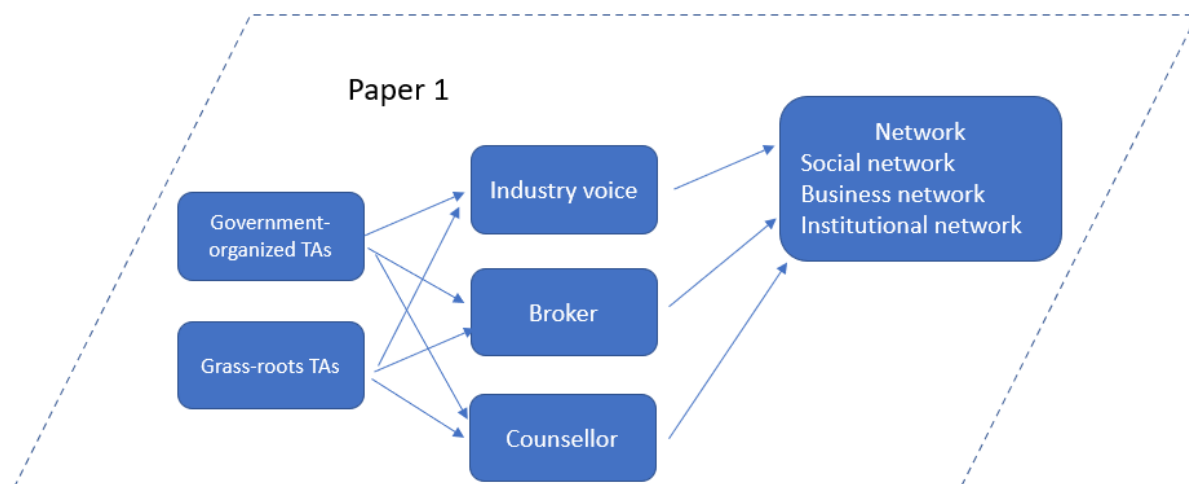
A counsellor role is also found that TAs are sources of deep expertise. Consultancy-oriented service is appreciated that TAs supply advice to their members. They generate and provide local/foreign market intelligence and knowledge. They offer suggestions on tackling the problems with industrial fatigue, employee selection etc. The member firms are motivated for internationalization by initiatives, counselling and training provided by TAs. Future trends, future requirements, potential partnerships, prospective markets and competencies are outlined through these activities (Costa et al., 2020). In responding to regulatory changes to the pandemic which creates economic disequilibrium, more tailor-made services of TAs enable and enhance some entrepreneurial activities and outcomes. In line with the close connection to governments, it is possible that TAs enable the construction of mutually beneficial public-private partnerships in which the government enters into contractual arrangements with the private sector. TAs are found to be involved in activities of dispute resolution, mediation and arbitration services and international trade negotiations among others.

Joining TAs facilitate the development of hybrid networks. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that TAs are actors of institutional networks, this thesis is suggestive of the social

and business networks facilitating roles of TAs. This perspective has not gained attention but it is worthy and notable. Social networks normally exhibit high levels of interpersonal bonding between individual members. Entrepreneurs become well-connected with each other and develop trust and personal bonding with partners because of participating TAs-organized activities. Trust nurtured through social network help move the process of collaboration forward. The underlying idea is that TAs can facilitate the generation of trust between their members and are agents of social networks by performing particular functions. Other than informal and interpersonal relationships, TAs can also develop formal business relationships, enabling member firms to meet their potential partners and develop partnerships through events offered. The interview revealed that TAs used institutional network resources to support and facilitate the internationalization processes of member firms. TAs are not only a part of institutional networks but they also serve member firms to gain network growth with other institutional originations including governments, incubators and research institutes as well as agencies for international development. Figure 7-1 lays out the important concepts and logic underlining the findings of Paper 1.

Figure 7-1

Important concepts and logic within Paper 1



Additionally, Chapter 4 locates a central assumption of this thesis; member firms of TA enable member firms to acquire knowledge through network building. A statistical examination of three roles and knowledge acquisition was further elaborated in Chapter 5. Generic and fragmented discussions of TAs' services do not fully explain how member firms

can deploy their competitive advantages through engaging with TAs. It is commonly agreed that TAs can configure resources and provide resources to member firms. Member firms can communicate effectively within TAs network with personal or firm-level link. TAs which are embedded within political and social networks help member firms overcome resource constraints. The most salient cognitive attribute of joining TAs is the opportunity to increase the breadth and width of networks within industry players and institutional actors, like third-part financial service providers or research institutes.

Chapter 4 also contributes to IB theory by identifying the types of TA initiated from different accounts. The emphasis given to government-organized TAs as a facilitator of networks in extant IB research into Chinese firms is lent support. More precisely, government-organized TAs performed a greater level of industry voice due to their history. Conversely, TAs classified as grass-rooted were perceived close to the government as their counterparts. My study diverges from more commonly found literature that discusses the historical origin of TAs. This is the first study contrasting these two types of TAs and signalling potential differences. Together, these findings contribute to an effort to reintroduce contextual characteristics of TAs in IB field. The summative discussion, elaborated in the following section, can provide suggested direction for future research in a Chinese context.

7.2.2 Commonality and differences between two types of TAs

My motivation to distinguish the government-organized TAs from grass-roots TAs is stimulated by recent trends in which the number of TAs skyrocketed. The growing number of TAs puzzled firms since they are not sure which kinds of TAs are worth joining. As we find in Chapter 2, TAs are undergoing transformation because of the seminal policy of disaffiliating TAs with governments. It is gradually recognized that the autonomy of TAs is restricted by the dual registration with regard to their manpower, finances and decision-making (Yang et al., 2014). Even though the Chinese government stays as the most major influence in the growth of TAs, it is steadily phasing out responsibilities and introducing policies empowering civil society to develop (Yang et al., 2014). Since the late 1990s, the call for greater autonomy and independence of TAs is growing. They are challenged without full representation of the interests of their member firms and are required to work on behalf of their sector with greater independence.

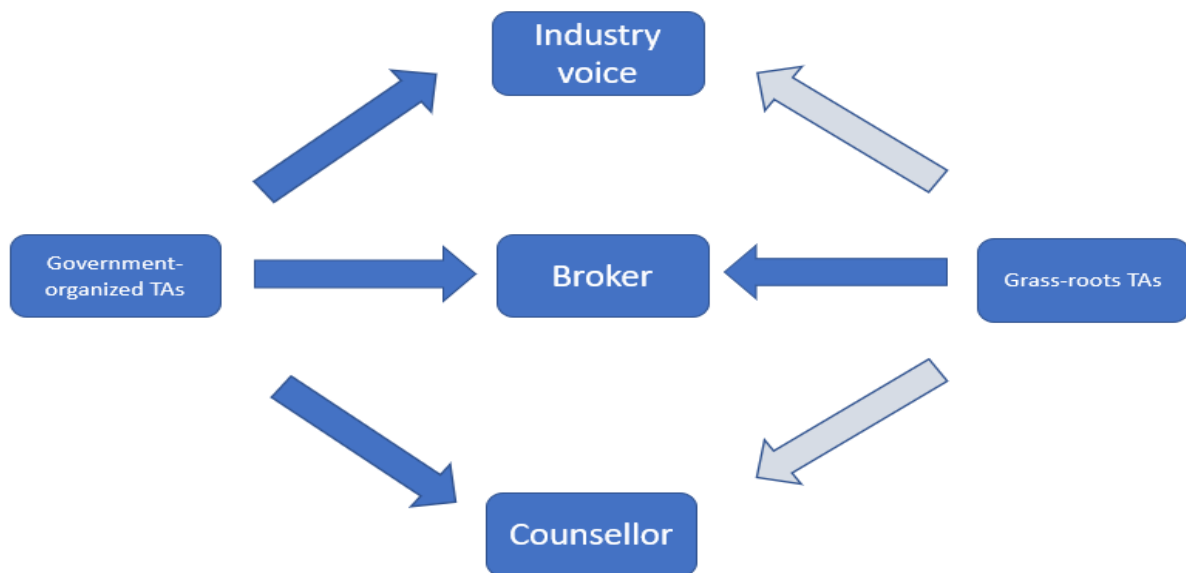
One apparent difference between the situations confronted by Chinese TAs established before 2013 and those started afterward was the abolition of dual registration. Moving into 2013, instead of registering with dual administration, was the abolition of the double registration mechanism (State Council, 2013) that allows TAs more autonomy. This policy allows for a greater level of independence for TAs as they are no longer required to affiliate with a supervisor before registering with MOCA. This marks significant progress in allowing TAs to have a relatively higher level of autonomy in making autonomous decisions (Yang et al., 2016). Another regulation published in 2015 featured “the separation of government and society”, encourages TA decoupling from the government agencies. The independence of TAs is to be encouraged, and governmental intervention is to be reduced. Decoupling means that the relationship of operation or purported affiliation between administrative agencies and TAs should be detached. Governments at all levels have gradually cut official ties between governments and TAs.

I highlight the nuances between government-organized TAs and grass-roots TAs to demonstrate how firms deploy their associational power to advance their own interests. This study touched the base and captured an implicit phenomenon that a grass-roots TA without any connection to the government might register successfully but would still find it hard to survive. The general secretary of a tea Chamber of Commerce expressed willingness to be affiliated with a government agency. Even for TAs which are more independent of the government, research shows that TAs pursue cooperative relationships with the local government and maintain close relationships with local political elites. The membership of big government-organized TAs, considered umbrella associations that are powerful and have branches in different regions, shifted from being mandatory in the early stages to non-mandatory after the national policy encouraged TAs to be independent. The membership of umbrella associations is more appealing as such TAs have strong ties with the government and representativeness. However, it is argued that grass-roots TAs can also represent the established interest of businesses. This is also the case for the counsellor role. Grass-roots TAs exhibit a lower level of counsellor roles compared to government-organized TAs. A short history and lack of resources may be indicative of the weak counsellor role of grass-roots TAs which are not resourceful and potent like their counterparts. This study expresses a keen focus on broker roles irrespective of government-organized or grass-roots TAs, generating opportunities for its members to leverage shared resources, knowledge, and

contacts. TAs organizes events to promote products or service of member firms in order to create a competitive advantage in the global marketplace. It is notwithstanding that some large firms enrolled with memberships of over dozens of TAs. Although large firms can afford to pay for their own think tanks, they join TAs in order to gain wider legitimacy for individual objectives, enabling specific benefits for different projects. As illustrated in Figure 7-2, while both of two types of TAs exhibit the same level of broker role, grass-roots TAs show lower level of the other roles.

Figure 7-2

The difference of two types of TAs in terms of role performing.



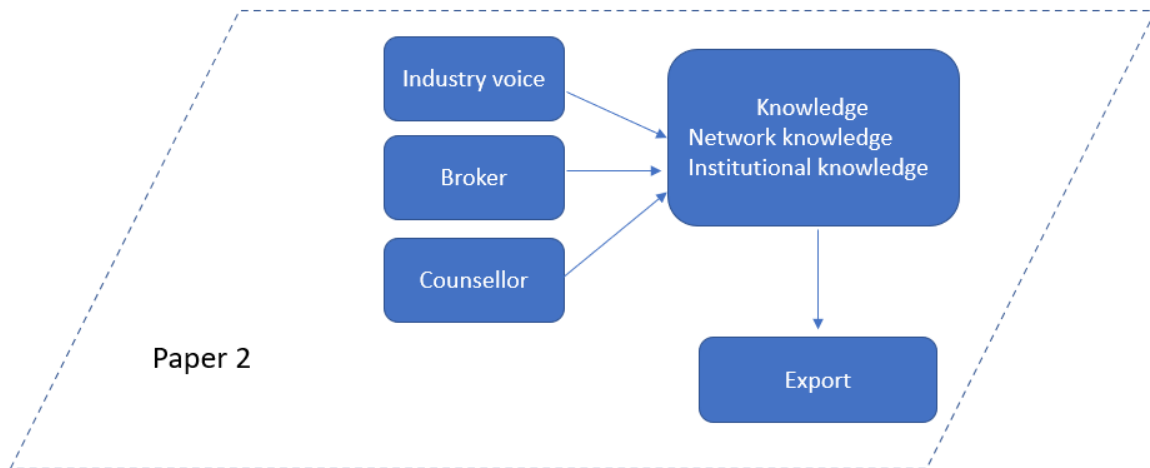
7.3 Knowledge acquisition

With an explicit role canvas surfacing from the findings of Chapter 4, my attention is directed to an emerging question: since we know TAs perform three roles in support of member firms, do these roles contribute to a far-reaching effect? I am interested in the profound impact of TAs on knowledge acquisition. Chapter 5 addresses research sub-question 3 and 4, not only resolving the question of to what extent the roles of TAs influence knowledge acquisition but also how the knowledge acquisition affects internationalization performance. Chapter 5

builds on Chapter 4 which lays the grounds for roles propositions to develop a conceptual framework about the roles of TAs and their contribution to acquiring knowledge and enhancing the internationalization commitment (Figure 7-3).

Figure 7-3

Important concepts and logics within Paper 2



The higher an industry voice role is perceived by member firms, the higher will be the knowledge they acquire from engaging with TAs. Collective action actors can alleviate service cost because of economies of scale. Thus, they are strongly stimulated to join TAs for the collective benefit (Bennett, 2000). SMEs heavily rely on intermediary organisations for collective actions in that paying for consultancy on their own is expensive unlike large firms can afford to hire consultant firms or specialists (Salisbury 1984, as cited in Bennett, 2000). Similarly, the higher the counsellor role is perceived by member firms, the higher the knowledge acquisition of member firms through TAs. Many studies adopt export ratio as the main indicator of a firms’ international performance. This study revealed that the level of exports is related to the counselling activities of TAs where more advisory services would be needed to achieve international sales. However, turning knowledge acquisition into internationalization opportunities is not captured as a result of this study. No explicit statistical evidence supports the proposition that knowledge acquired through TAs contributes to the internationalization of member firms. All results of hypotheses testing are summarized in Table 7-1.

Table 7-1*A summary of hypotheses testing*

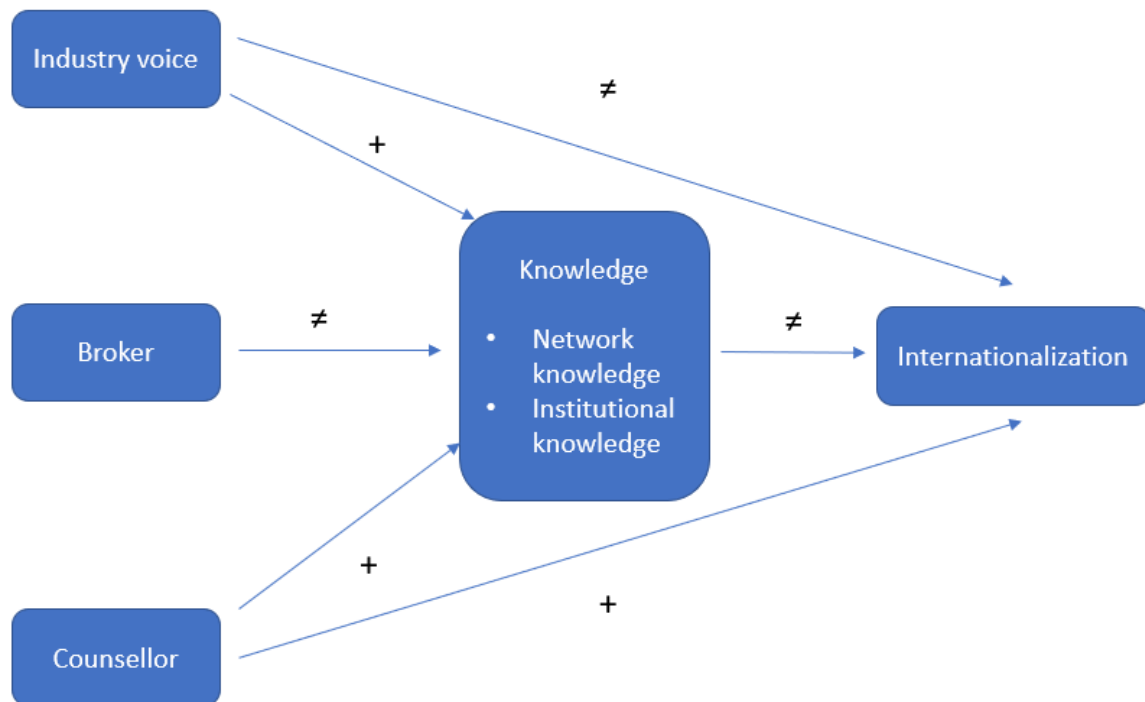
<i>H1 The industry voice role of TAs is positively related to knowledge acquisition of member firms.</i>	Y
<i>H2 The broker voice role of TAs is positively related to knowledge acquisition of member firms.</i>	N
<i>H3 The counsellor role of TAs is positively related to knowledge acquisition of member firms.</i>	Y
<i>H4a. The industry voice role of TAs is positively associated with the internationalization of member firms.</i>	N
<i>H4b Knowledge acquisition positively moderates the influence of the industry voice role on internationalization such that the higher the level of knowledge acquisition, the stronger the influence of the industry voice role on the internationalization of member firms.</i>	N
<i>H5a The broker role of TAs is positively associated with the internationalization of member firms.</i>	N
<i>H5b. Knowledge acquisition positively moderates the influence of the broker role on internationalization such that the higher the level of knowledge acquisition, the stronger the influence of the broker role on the internationalization of member firms.</i>	N
<i>H6a The counsellor role of TAs is positively associated with internationalization of member firms.</i>	Y
<i>H6b. Knowledge acquisition positively moderates the influence of the counsellor role on internationalization such that the higher the level of knowledge acquisition, the stronger the influence of the counsellor role on the internationalization of member firms.</i>	N

Although the findings are indicative of the roles of industry voice and counsellor, the hypothesis that the broker role of TAs contributes to member firms' knowledge acquisition is not supported. The taken-for-granted assumption of broker roles needs be revisited. I argued the relationship between the broker role of TAs and knowledge acquisition as well as internationalization is not in a linear manner, but it needs re-investigation to offer more

grounds of why such a surprising finding exists. A more likely explanation is that a broker role is not necessary for acquiring knowledge and taking the initiative in internationalization. It is hinted from the interview findings that they can acquire knowledge in multiple channels in the information of technology (IoT) age. Attending TAs' trade fair is not the only option for information acquisition. The information which can be gathered and disseminated in the TA-organized events can be spread quickly but not a prerequisite to actualizing internationalization because such information is unverified and even exaggerated. Some companies initiate internationalization as if the information was accurate and verified by other sources. The relationships between core elements are shown in Figure 7-4.

Figure 7-4

Relationship between core elements



7.4 Conceptual model

The findings in Paper 1 confirm that TAs developed networks and the underlying idea is that managerial ties are strengthened because of the developed network. Knowledge acquisition is found to be enhanced by TAs in Paper 2. Along with the acquired knowledge, organizational

learning is developed through knowledge creation. I conjecture OFDI decisions are driven by enhanced organizational learning through managerial ties created by TAs.

Paper 3 introduces a conceptual model which links managerial ties with ambidextrous organizational learning. In this article, I propose a conceptualization of managerial ties that encompasses both business and political ties generated through engagement with TAs. This conceptualization sheds light on the nature of TAs and their potential for enhancing ambidextrous learning, including both exploitative and exploratory learning. Managerial ties are strengthened by a broad spectrum of relationships, and understanding this relationship is important as it suggests that TAs have far-reaching economic benefits. Additionally, this contributes to the literature on organizational learning by specifying the role of TAs as facilitators in obtaining both exploitative and exploratory learning.

Exploitative learning occurs when leveraging current resources. Unlike exploitative learning drawing on existing knowledge to make full use of what is ready known (Hughes et al., 2007), exploratory learning may lead firms to search for new knowledge through experimentation, variation, and innovation (Lin et al., 2009). In another different vein, exploratory learning occurs through the processes of planned experiments (Benner & Tushman, 2002) and results in innovation (Auh & Menguc, 2005). Such learning promotes the development of new capabilities and improves the firm's competitive strength (Barnett & King, 2008). I assume that firms venturing overseas are motivated by organizational learning in the model of this thesis.

Obtaining political ties enables firms to be more effective when the institutional environment is complex. A stream of scholars have stressed the importance of political capital which facilitates permits acquisition and financial subsidies (Gaur et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2012). The government is found to encourage firms to apply exploitative learning to adapt to foreign markets. Political ties are also characterized by a closeness to the information symmetry. Strong ties involve more exposure to information and have a higher chance of approaching resources than weak ties. Since governments often provide selective benefits, it is important to use the collaborative role of TAs for the venturing activities of member firms and to overcome the liability of foreignness with the equipment of exploratory learning.

Business ties with other member firms share not only operational resources (e.g., raw materials, production facilities, technologies, financial capital, and distribution channels), but also strategic resources (e.g., information, experience, and knowledge). Member firms in a certain industry offer similar products and services for similar customers. By sharing similar information and using similar technologies, operating similarly, member firms may increase exploitative learning (Li et al., 2014). On the other hand, new ventures leverage ties with other firms to create new services and products, create new niches, and strengthen exploratory learning (Lumpkin & Dess, 2001). This study suggests a possible roadmap for OFDI behavior by introducing a new mechanism that explains why some entrepreneurs are braver than others in pursuing opportunities. Connection and bonding between member firms facilitate learning from the forerunners. By incorporating managerial ties into our investigation of the relationship between ambidexterity and OFDI, my study provides an alternative explanation of how engagement with TAs will increase organizational learning. They can convert tacitly held information into actionable strategies. This is important for understanding how TAs are useful and thus how market ties are produced. I proposed that, with a higher level of managerial ties, a higher level of organizational learning of OFDI is achieved. By gaining an understanding of the different mechanisms underlying TA's effectiveness, this distinction paves the way to a more realistic assessment of the appropriateness of their use in an international process. The conceptualized role of managerial ties in exploratory and exploitative learning of new ventures could be further examined with empirical data.

7.5 Final Integrative Framework

The following figure (Figure 7-5) integrates conceptual figures from all the chapters into one comprehensive framework of Chapter 4 to 6. The findings drawn from Paper 1 allow us to have a granular understanding of TAs' roles from the network approach in IB domain. Recognizing TAs as facilitators of hybrid networks, this thesis adds to our knowledge of how member firms can access hybrid networks of social, business and institutional networks by leveraging TAs' activities and strategies. By having a close look at two types of TAs with a dynamic perspective, I explored and explained how different these two types of TAs are in terms of performing different roles. This understanding could further impact the member firm making choices to join TAs. The three roles of TAs confirmed in Paper 1 are converted into

testable hypotheses and are tested in Paper 2 to learn if TAs enhance knowledge acquisition through undertaking these roles. Paper 3 was formed based on the findings of Paper 1 and 2, which motivated the line of inquiry on what drives the OFDI strategy of Chinese firms as a result of the joint effects of managerial ties and organizational learning. The managerial ties have an intricate relationship with networks developed in Paper 1; the verified functions of TAs in Paper 2 offer us a rationale subject to a hypothesized relationship between organizational and engaging with TAs on the round that TAs can also enhance the learning processes of member firms. At the bottom of the resultant framework, I indicate the continuum of internationalization progress. It is worth noting that TAs' activities are present through the different phases of internalization, early-stage export to mature investment in overseas countries.

Figure 7-5

A synthesized relationships between different papers

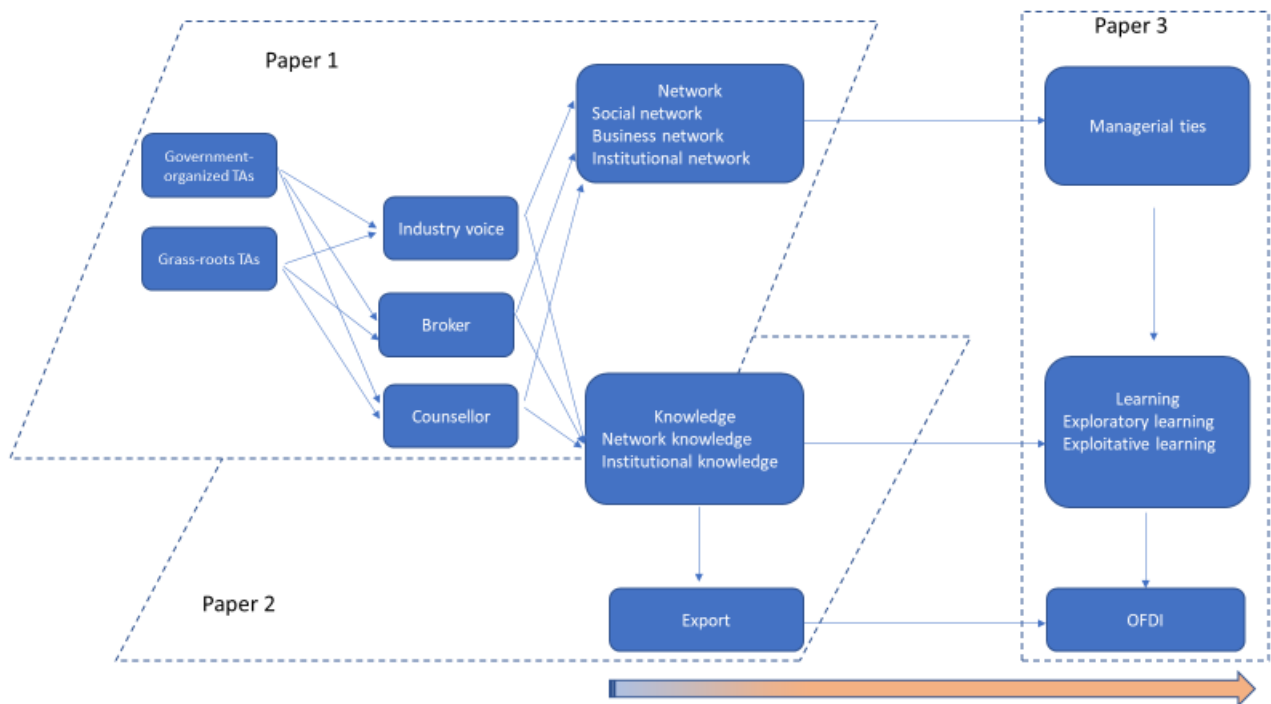


Figure 7-5 integrates the findings from all chapters about the roles and contributions of TAs. Specifically, it shows that (1) TAs perform three roles and two types of TAs have a nuanced difference in performing the roles (Chapter 4); (2) Two types of knowledge are acquired with the provision of three roles (Chapter 5); (3) organizational learning developed through TAs network motivates the OFDI decision (Chapter 6).

TAs are considered representational role in support of the collective needs and goals of the members (Rajwani et al., 2015). By using information, influence and solidarity, TAs play an essential and positive role in creating social capital and generating exchange benefits. TAs are engaged in collective action for the benefit of membership (Esparza et al., 2014). The important role of TAs is particularly prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were found to pool firms' feedback and report to governments, wielding considerable effect on adjusting policy. As discussed by Bennet (1997a), TAs can perform a critical role as information providers. They can represent a major conduit with government officials to obtain specialized and updated information that they need to work out policy responses to societal and economic issues (Bennett & Ramsden, 2007). For example, the possibility of capital chain rupture is a major concern of businesses when resuming production. In response to this problem, TAs lobbied the government agencies for subsidy support. Some distinguishing findings are outlined in the following discussion.

Proxy of government

A good relationship with the government can be a critical node between firms and connections with potential foreign partners (Li et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2016). Having well-established relationships with governments enables member firms to access the privileged policy and sometimes, the host country may literally may refer potential foreign partners to them. With the express lane of cooperation, the companies might be the first movers entering foreign markets. Having these relationships adds organizational value to member firms in the form of relational capital and helps them gain legitimacy in foreign markets. In China, these rules and regulations are often convoluted and intricate. TAs play a crucial role in explaining the policies. Member firms' relationship with the government enables them to gain external legitimacy. I found that the collaborative and submissive relationship stages enabled member firms to gain external legitimacy. Establishing collaborative and respectful relationships with governments can help member firms build a strong reputation as reliable partners, since reputation plays a key role in shaping an organization's image. Closeness to government is reinforced by interviewees of both government-organized TAs and grass-root TAs. Government-organized TAs are well connected to governments, enabling member firms to gain access to financial and human capital. Grass-roots TAs make efforts to bond with the

government and gain access to favorable privileges. Taken together, when institutional complexity is relatively low, formal and informal institutions complement one another.

Network ties

Previous research reveals that network ties are strengthened with longer engagement and then easier access to knowledge resources. This is not confirmed in this study. The duration of membership is not positively related to knowledge acquisition. Paik and Navarre-Jackson (2001) argue that business owners would receive unique information through ties of multiple memberships because it comes from sources that are not connected to each other. This finding departs from such studies which contend engaging with multiple TAs would be beneficial for resource access, this study doesn't support this argument whereas a counter-effect was confirmed that multiple memberships influence knowledge acquisition in a negative way. I captured positive and significant effects of TA engagement which can be suggestive of the importance of frequent involvement with TAs to better acquire knowledge.

Coopetition

Coopetition—a blend of cooperation and competition. They are rivals when targeting the same customers but they are friends when targeting different customers. Recalling the experience of a logistics member firm whose dominant markets of shipment are Australia and New Zealand. The other firms running shipments to the Oceania area are rivals. However, the company received inquiries from current customers for shipping to Europe. The firm, which does not own the shipment route to Europe, will collaborate with its rival specializing in Europe. Coopetition is a salient feature of relationships between member firms. Cooperation is based on a collaborative relationship that aims to achieve common goals. TAs not only link firms and make them reciprocally approachable but perform as vital orchestrating hubs (Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006). They connect members to orchestrate both tangible and intangible resources. TAs play an emphasis on enhancing members' collaboration (Wang & Gooderham, 2014). Provan and Kenis (2008) assert that TAs are the conduits of the information flow. There is a mobilization of information diffusion among member firms through bonding and bundling activities organized by TAs. This leads member firms to be exposed to growing knowledge and new business opportunities, which motivates them to reach out to other business networks for the sake of realizing internationalization. TAs

perform a broker role by offering connections to internationalizing firms, enabling the creation of knowledge, information, and resources. As a result, internationalizing firms enhance their network positions in the late maturity phase and develop a cooperative internationalization strategy.

Vicarious learning

Firms learn not only from their own experience but also from the knowledge of others (Helfat and Lieberman, 2002, Levitt and March 1988). Vicarious learning occurs as a result of observation and analysis of other organizations, with new firms learning from the success, failure and near-failure of salient competitors (Kim & Miner, 2007). This finding suggests that member firms are inspired by observing their peers and gain the confidence to initiate their own internationalization efforts. We are inspired to direct attention away from experiential learning to vicarious learning, as firms imitate their competitors' markets. Senior managers' memberships in TAs facilitate explicit information exchange between firms and the information gathered from interactions through versatile formal and informal occasions. By observing other's behaviors, firms learn from other member firms, even though deep learning is not possible for these conditions.

7.6 Overall contribution

As studies of TAs typically focus on the non-profit field (e.g., Bingham & Eisenhardt, 2011; Maitland & Sammartino, 2015), the first contribution of this article is thus to extend our understanding of the roles of TAs for broader sets of NGO actors. I also developed the typology of the three roles of TAs. The second contribution of this thesis is to draw a parallel between two types of TAs which are not noticed in the extant literature in IB field. The third contribution of this article rests on a clearer relationship of the impact of TAs on internationalization. Figure 6-2 presents a model conjecturing a relationship between engagement with TAs and OFDI strategy as a fourth contribution. I believe this conceptualization has important implications for researchers interested in the rationality of driving the decision-making of OFDI strategy. In addition to explaining the inclusive roles of TAs, this research finds empirical evidence that the roles contribute to knowledge-acquisition capabilities of member firms and conjecture motives for FDI through managerial ties

developed through TAs. The findings do not support the hypothesis that member firms are more likely to internationalize when TAs act as brokers. Additionally, the knowledge gained through TAs does not necessarily lead to the initiation of internationalization.

7.6.1 Theoretical contribution

Network theory

The main theoretical contribution of the thesis centres on the development of the network perspective by focusing on TAs. I extend a network perspective which is largely missing the attention of TAs. The TAs perspective developed from the extensions taken allows us to shift our attention to the industry level to think of TA as an inter-organizational network of relationships, I conceptualise the engagement with TA as an evolving network phenomenon. Beyond the conventional wisdom that TAs develop intuitional networks, this study supports the presence of hybrid networks in which TAs are embedded. The omission of TAs in the current network debate is surprising and worth noting. Our fueling interest in this entity enables a novel perspective by considering TAs a triple network (social, business and institution) facilitator.

Knowledge theory

This study made major contributions to the exciting new line of research in the inquiry of internationalization. Member firms can gain high tacit knowledge skills and significant information advantage from TAs which provide high-quality advice or other services. We foster greater awareness of the different kinds of knowledge developed through TAs' engagement, lending legislation of the existence and growth of TAs. The findings are revelatory that joining TAs are positively related to knowledge acquisition, increasing the general level of understanding and appreciation of TAs. The findings are inconsistent with the other scholars asserting the necessity of knowledge-driven internationalization. This could be explained that the knowledge acquired through TAs per se are not sufficient to initiate internationalization. I argue that the de facto interest of joining TA is a growth of knowledge as a competitive advantage. In particular, the institutional knowledge enveloped through engagement with TAs is impeccable. Knowledge is produced by close social

interactions and communications between business partners and knowledge transfer is facilitated as a result of information exchange (Saxenian, 1996). Institutional knowledge is essential to overcome international complexity. Member firms accumulate institutional knowledge by bonding with the central and regional governments through TAs, thus allowing them to receive information about upcoming institutional changes. Lacking information about upcoming subsidy policy was a major hindrance to their operations. Having this information thus helps member adjust their operations when the government introduces unexpected changes to existing regulations. This, in turn, helps them manage a highly complex institutional environment.

Organizational learning theory

While managerial ties have been widely explored in a Chinese context, the study of managerial ties developed through TAs is scarce. Our conceptual finding illuminates a future roadmap where firms can strengthen managerial ties through the activities of TAs. Based on our proposition, organizational learning is enhanced through the process of strengthening managerial ties. Ambidextrous learning, which a handful of studies have proven to be highly relevant to OFDI behavior, can be enhanced by the managerial ties developed through TAs.

7.6.2 Methodology contribution

I also offer a methodological contribution that a mixed method is adopted which integrated both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. I used such strategies to capture the essence of an exploratory study. While it is sometimes argued (for example by Lincoln & Guba, 1985), that qualitative and quantitative research are incompatible, I concur with Patton (2005) or Creswell (2009) that qualitative and quantitative research simply represent different perspectives and have the potential to strengthen the findings of each other.

Another central contribution of the current article is its comparative approach, which contrasts the perception of TAs senior administrators versus the member firms' representatives. Using this comparative approach, we sought to complement and provide new directions on the roles of TAs. The dyadic relationship between TAs and member firms is crucial to understand the actual impact of TA engagement. Self-reported findings from TAs alone may not provide a complete picture of the effectiveness of their services. Discrepancies

between the perceptions of TAs and member firms can reveal areas for improvement and inform refined strategy choices for TA practitioners. To capture a more comprehensive view, data collection should include representatives from both TAs and member firms. During data collection, representatives of both TAs and member firms were included. Initially, I had no intention to interview representatives of TAs. This initial decision failed to find the difference between government-organized TAs and grass-rooted TAs because I found member firms per se do not have sufficient knowledge about the history and account of the establishment of TAs.

7.7 Managerial implication

These findings and their implications for theory lead to a reconsideration of NGO strategy and usage of TAs. The implication for practice enables us to further understand the dynamism and flexibility in the NGO strategy implementation. Findings from this research allow managerial implications and recommendations on the engagement with TA. This thesis has several implications for managers, businesspeople, and policymakers engaged in international innovation. Businesspeople around the world can benefit from a deeper understanding of the motives of becoming memberships in China. As some firms from the same TA kick off the investment journey overseas, other firms start to imitate these antecedents. Understanding such imitation drivers of the investments facilitates knowing the phenomenon of the confluence of investment clusters from Chinese firms through the influence of member firm camaraderie. Especially, small-and medium enterprises (SMEs) without a resource repository should consider joining TA. TAs cast the main feature of offering a wide array of resources. Member firms are beneficiaries of learning updated information on government policy, meeting potential clients through events held by TAs. The membership fee is affordable and the benefit is multiple.

SMEs are not likely to shout out their opinion. TAs represent a collective voice and are hard to be ignored. Our findings revealed that TAs originating from governments are more likely to have a naturally rooted closeness to governments and help the government implement the accreditation work. Joining such TAs allows a greater chance to learn the front information and apply the subsidy. Nonetheless, it is possible for TAs that have not originated from governments to have proximity to governments. This study offers a new avenue for firms to

define what quality of TAs they should look for. Connection to government should be one critical factor to be considered.

This study is also informative for foreign firms which intend to enter the Chinese market. TAs are worthwhile to join because of their orchestrating information feature. The events held by TAs are great opportunities to study good examples through company visits. Our finding shows there is a negative relationship between multiple memberships and internationalization performance. Registering as many members as possible is unnecessary since having more memberships does not result in a greater level of knowledge acquisition. Our suggestion is not limited to the starter of foreign firms but also the foreign firms that already run business in China. The foreign firms operating in China may strike a balance and weigh up which TAs are worthwhile to join.

A business must provide better quality service to survive. Service quality is crucial for fulfilling and retaining customers; TA is not an exception. This study has implications for TAs, who play a prominent role in coordinating, mediating and communicating among member firms. They are responsible for promoting trade by offering the necessary service to help explore benefits for the member firms. It is challenging nowadays for TAs to attract member firms to attend events, as they might belong to multiple associations and are appealed to by other events (Tanford et al., 2012). To provide more tailor-made services, TAs should reflect on what specific needs must be addressed for member firms. This study finds that member firms prefer the smaller scale event with more preparation in advance rather than the large event with superficial communication. TAs should slice and dice the needs of member firms to offer more accurate service. TAs also need to delineate a strategic canvas that makes their service value-adding and recognized. The conventional service organizing seminars without a targeted audience is not desired.

Government can take leverage of TAs and make full use of them to promote government policy as soon as possible. A broader scope of firms could be approached. This was obvious during the pandemic when an immediate approach to the firms is efficient. The collective role undertaken by TAs speeded up the process of communicating messages. Building on the consolidated work of TAs, the government is aware of the hardship of firms and has rolled out measures to help them. However, the government should empower TAs with a greater level of administrative role. Although the final aim is the marketization of TAs towards a

non-dependence on government, some member firms have an ambiguous impression that TAs are still government bureaus nowadays. This is a double-edged sword impression: on one hand, firms may join TAs because of the misunderstanding and believe TAs as government bureau would offer more benefits. On the other hand, firms are not keen to become TAs' members if they know this TA is not affiliated with the government. The latter will mitigate the effort of governments to phase out the dominance of ruling TAs.

The COVID-19 crisis has fundamentally changed the way businesses operate and the service is rendered. This paper is timely, the pandemic created an unprecedented challenge but also opportunities for TAs. I envision a special interest of IB scholars in understanding how member firms of TAs respond and survive as a collective action. It is particularly interesting to investigate questions that are related to the services offered by TAs, for example, how they transform their services given the increasing complexity and dynamism of the environment where organizations operate.

7.8 Limitation

In this thesis, sample selection has been driven by theoretical considerations, as opposed to randomly chosen samples. While I believe this mixed-method technique increases the credibility of the research, a potential issue is the generalizability of quantitative findings. While this represents an issue for the generalisability of the findings, I selected two events to collect survey data. Robust operationalisation is needed for more testing. Since TAs are organizers of many events, member firms visiting trade fairs might be active ones. In other occasions, less active member firms may hold different perspectives. This research represents a starting point for future quantitative studies with multiple approaches, direct email to member firms or other events.

Second, scholars should take a sophisticated look at how TAs exert a dyadic influence on society more broadly, through their influence on industry, competition and public policy (Lawton et al., 2018). With the aim of identifying heterogeneity, the author approached the two types of TAs. I could have collected more interview data of national government-organized TAs, particularly the top management of such organizations. National government-organized TAs, as implied from the name, are TAs in a national level and are controlled by

the state. Unlike other government-organized TAs, they went through a slow transformation. Learning about the revolution of these types of TAs would enhance our understanding of the on-going changes in NGO-government relations. However, my invitation to interview them was turned down because they were firmly ruled by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and they were cautious about my research aim. When the author made initial contact with the government-organized TAs before COVID-19, most of them were supportive and wanted the author to get in touch with the member firms. At the data collection stage following the COVID-19 outbreak, the author's point of contact changed their tone. Due to the increasing tensions between China and the US, government-organized TAs were instructed not to accept interviews from overseas research institutions. The contact suggested the author to work with a university located in China to collect data using the name of Chinese institutions. Additionally, the contact explicitly stated CCP had singled out the Five Eyes alliance countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States), and that academics from these countries were not allowed to conduct research within the organization.

Third, another important limitation is that the current informants of member firms are mostly top or senior management but lack the presence of business founders. A realistic assessment of entrepreneurial decision-making would offer other robust evidence pro or anti the role of TAs with the support of anecdotal stories. A case study would be more appropriate for investigating the impact of TAs on the internationalization of member firms. In addition, the framework can be refined using case findings to detect multiplexity from multiple informants.

Finally, TAs studied in this thesis were confined to indigenous TAs. International NGOs (INGOs) were not included in the research targets. INGOs have emerged as informal institutions operating globally to significantly change the context within which governments and MNEs interact. This study does not include the Chamber of Commerce of foreign countries like the American Chamber of Commerce or the Spanish Chamber of Commerce in China. Such foreign Chambers of Commerce play active roles. How MNCs leverage such TAs to tap into the Chinese market or penetrate business would also be valuable to discover. In what ways such TAs are different from the indigenous ones is a worthy and notable potential research topic.

7.9 Future research

The focus on TAs is timely. This dissertation identifies two types of TAs in a Chinese context, which is commendable and opens up opportunities for future research. The difference between government-organized TAs and grass-roots TAs is worth researching further in relation to their role as the facilitators of networks. Differences exist between government-organized TAs and grass-roots TAs. Similarly, research sub-question 4 arises from an assumption that heterogeneity will also affect the ability to gain knowledge. Because of the proximity to the government, TAs are provided with more essential resources which spur

the willingness to initiate internationalization. As I stated earlier, ‘One Belt One Road’ (BRI) initiative motivates more firms to take bolder steps to land in the countries included in the blueprint. The curiosity deriving from BRI ground vision calls for all TAs to focus on the countries in the zone. The need for academia to acknowledge and probe more driving forces of Chinese firms’ internationalization through a TA’s perspective has never been greater. This initial interest serves to explore more into the structure of governance of TAs in the future. By looking into the internal structure of TAs and decision-making processes, a better understanding of how TAs create institutional environments for their member firms is formed.

The four propositions developed in Chapter 6 suggest multiple avenues for future research. In the future, it is worthwhile to perform a similar study and testing the conceptual model.

Table 7-2 *Propositions developed in Chapter 6*

H1 Active engagement with TAs enhances business ties of member firms	H3 TAs enhance political ties of firm members in the home country
H2a Business ties developed through TAs are positively associated with exploitative learning in OFDI	H4a. Home country political ties developed through TAs are positively associated with exploitative learning of OFDI
H2b. Business ties are positively associated	H4b. Home country and host country

with exploratory learning in OFDI	political ties are positively associated with exploratory learning in OFDI
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A key service of TA is that they offer member firms a wide range of events. Trade fairs gain prominent significance and are emphasized by a rich array of studies (Bennett and Robson, 2011; Doner and Schneider, 2000; Lawton et al., 2018). Trade fairs, one of the most important kinds of business events, can be defined as business event where individuals, enterprises, and organizations show their products with a focus on commercial operations (Getz, 2012; Palumbo et al., 1998). The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the cancellation or postponement of a traditional face-to-face event, necessitating a rapid growth of virtual events. To mitigate the negative impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, TAs in various industries have adopted novel virtual settings to deliver services. Cross-city and cross-region trade fairs aimed at enabling companies to showcase products and sign contracts online were inaugurated, in line with the emergence of advanced technologies such as the Internet, big data, and cloud platforms. The unpredictable technological changes created opportunities in a rapidly changing environment disrupted by COVID-19. The emerging research on ever-changing business modes is not scarce after the pandemic hit. There remains a research gap and a significant set of open questions about how TAs adapt services in line with a digital world. The need for us to uncover the phenomenon, theorize about and explain what is happening in the event field keeps getting replenished. Scholars are invited to explore the services of TAs as an important event actor in future research.

Appendix A: Interview informant constituent for Chapter 3

		Industry	Primary members		Number of TA interviewees	Number of firm interviewees
Government-organized	1	Trademark	Trademark agencies, enterprises with registered trademarks	Government-organized	1	1
Government-organized	2	Apparel	Most of original apparel brands in China	Government-organized	2	1
Government-organized	3	Tea	Tea wholesalers and retailers, tea garden bases and processing plants	Government-organized	1	
Government-organized	4	Software outsourcing	Outsourcing software firms	Government-organized	1	4
Government-organized	5	High tech	High tech firms	Government-organized	1	
Government-organized	6	Electronic Commerce	Electronic Commerce	Government-organized	1	
Government-organized	7	Logistic	freight forwarding enterprises	Government-organized	1	2
Government-organized	8	Medicine	Pharmaceutical and international top biological innovation enterprises.	Government-organized	1	
Grass-roots	9	Digital	Digital economy and e-commerce	Grass-roots	1	
Grass-roots	10	General	General	Grass-roots	1	
Grass-roots	11	Business incubator	Incubation centers, university science and technology parks, science and technology enterprise incubators	Grass-roots	1	4
Grass-roots	12	Exhibitions	Exhibitions	Grass-roots	1	3
Grass-roots	13	Service Outsourcing	Service outsourcing firms	Grass-roots	1	

Grass-roots	14	AI	Technology enterprises and related enterprises and institutions in the field of artificial intelligence	Grass-roots	1	
		Total: 30				15
						15

Appendix B: Profiles of participant TAs for Chapter 3

	Industry	Year Established	Level (Nation/Province/City)	Title of interviewee	Number of members	Main mission
1	Digital	2016	Province	General secretary	>100	-Specialize in digital economy and e-commerce -Conduct research of cross-border e-commerce
2	Tea	2008	Province	General secretary	>700	-Take member companies to go out Establish partnership -Assist local governments and tea-producing area governments to serve tea industry
3	Software outsourcing	2007	Province	General secretary	>100	-Bridge between the government and Chinese firm offering offshore service, -Helping members build Chinese outsourcing firms' brand in the international market
4	General	2017	Province	Senior manager of Exhibition Department	>100	Promote the development of export-oriented economy
5	Business incubator	2017	Province	General secretary	>100	Cooperate with innovative incubators, angel investment, early project incubation centers, university science and technology parks, science and technology enterprise incubators, overseas students entrepreneurship parks, research institutions and other organizations
6	High tech	2003	Province	General secretary	>160	It has also absorbed innovative intermediary services in the transformation of scientific and technological achievements, intellectual property protection, talent introduction, science and technology and finance.
7	Exhibitions	2015	Province	General secretary	>2000	Enhance the level of exhibition and service of science and technology
8	Electronic Commerce	2003	Province	Deputy general secretary	>3000	-Organize large events -Held trainings

						-Launch matchmaking activities to seek investment for members
9	Logistic	1988	City	Head of International Department	>300	-Protect the rights and interests of members -Enhance communication between government and enterprises -Organize activities for member to meet international freight forwarding firms -Regulate the freight forwarding industry in Shenzhen City
10	Service Outsourcing	2009	City	General secretary	>100	Promote the development of service outsourcing industry in the city including industry research and industry analysis
11	Medicine	1988	City	General secretary	>200	Act as a bridge between government and enterprises
12	AI	2019	Province	General secretary	>300	-Build artificial intelligence production with ecological system -Promote the development of artificial intelligence technology and the application in Shanghai
13	Trademark	1994	Nation	Head of International Department	>	-Publicize and implement trademark laws and regulations -Provide legal advisory services to member firms
14	Apparel	1991	Nation	Senior manager of Exhibition Department	>1000	-Promote China's original apparel brands -Enhance the coordination with upstream and downstream industry and governments
15	Apparel	1991	Nation	Project manager of Exhibition Department		

Appendix C: Profiles of participant TA member firms for Chapter 3

	Industry	Description	Year Established	Title of interviewee	Number of employees	Internationalization performance
1	Chic	A large enterprise group integrating textile, clothing, real estate, wharf, warehousing and logistics, food industrial park, second class medical equipment and other businesses	1989	Senior manager of international business	>1500	The company's customers are mainly in Europe and America, and all products are exported
2	Trademark	Offer customers with the application for trademark registration, trademark objection, copyright and intellectual property litigation, etc. A full range of intellectual property services.	2011	General manager	>50	This company has representative offices in more than 10 countries and regions in the world
3	Software	One of the largest providers of bank IT solutions in China, this company is mainly engaged in providing information services to bank-oriented financial enterprises	1999	Director of government affair department	>10000	This company has expanded the markets in East Asia and established branch in Singapore and Malaysia.
4	Software	a leading China-based innovative software and IT services provider	2005	Manager of government affair department	>90000	Around 30 global delivery centers
5	Software	This firm is China's leading enterprise in data intelligence technology	2009	Director of government affair department		Its business covers in more than 20 countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

6	Software	A state-owned firm specialized in security inspection products.	1997	Senior manager of government affair department		this firm provide products and service to customers from 170 countries and areas in the world.
7	Business incubators	Large early stage investor, accelerator and corporate innovation platform.	2006	General manager		Being active in 25 locations globally, including U.S., China, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Singapore, Indonesia, and Mexico.
8	Business incubators	world-class, multinational conglomerate focused on science and technology park construction and development	2003	General manager		This company has operated couple overseas science parks in U.S., Germany, and Canada and provided the professional, personalized, and diversified services.
9	Business incubators	provide innovative technology service, science park construction and operation, and industry investment funds management as the main business	2015	General manager		The company actively taps international market and builds overseas innovation centers in Silicon Valley, Dallas, Berlin, Tel Aviv, and Singapore
10	Business incubators	Operate incubators and integrating global innovation resources.	2014	General manager		This company has strategically partnered with government agencies of countries like Israel, Finland, Russia, Germany and South Korea, etc.
11	Exhibition and event	the planning, creativity, design and general project construction of museums, exhibition halls, Expo venues, theme parks and theme tourism towns	1998	Senior manager		It has pinched projects in more than 30 countries and regions.

12	Exhibition and event	Take consulting and training, technology empowerment and cross-border resource pair as the main internal customers of the business	2018	Founder		
13	Exhibition and event	Organizing various conferences and exhibitions and providing various services related to exhibitions and conferences	2001	Senior manager		
14	Logistics	Equipped with a broad portfolio of air, ocean, and rail transportation services,	1991	General manager		This company provided economical distribution solutions to more than 100 countries worldwide. This firm has established a solid foundation in the Asia-Pacific region and an extensive network spanning the globe.
15	Logistics	International shipping, land transportation between China and Hong Kong, international air transportation, import and export supply chain, overseas imports, customs warehousing, and local logistics in Hong Kong	2004	Senior manager		It is specialized in the regions of Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and other routes.

Appendix D: Interview protocol

In what industry is your company primarily engaged or being a member of? How long has your company been registered in this association? How often do you interact with this trade association?

1. Exploring the type of the trade association:

-Who are the association's top leaders? How are the top leaders selected?

-How does the association fund itself? Is the association government-funded? If yes, what is the proportion of funding from government support? Where else does the association get funding from?

-

-

-

- Does the association have the autonomy of being self-governing? How are decisions taken?

-

-

-

2. Regarding the associations' collective action, could you describe how your association deal with below issues:

- Activities to develop industry standards? Has your association been part of standard-developing? If so, how?

- Government policy-making? Has your association been involved in providing services to the government?

-Has you association been involved in conducting research into the issues related to business environment and give advice to the government. If so, how?

- Does your association represent its members to government, regulators and other opinion formers?

- Can you think of other examples of where the association speaks on behalf of or represents the industry?

3. TAs can engage in broking activities. Could you please describe below any of the activities your company is involved?

- How do member firms interact with each other and does the interaction help member firms acquire knowledge or resources? Do member firms exchange information? What kind of information? Do they do it often?

-

-

-

-How is information distributed within the channel of the trade association in terms of holding different events and activities (trade exhibitions and conferences, trade missions and business matching services provided by the trade associations)?

4. Regarding the advisory services offered by TAs, could you please describe below activities your company is involved in?

- Any strategic advice delivered by the trade association?

- Any consultancy services provided? (arbitration, patent)

5. Has your company exported or been involved in international business? In how many countries is the firm engaged in business activities today? (via, for example, export, research and development, foreign direct investment (FDI), or subsidiaries). How do you think the activities above is beneficial to acquire information and access opportunities for international expansion?

6. *Can you think of any examples of critical knowledge you acquired?*

a) from the TA?

b) From another member?

c)

7. *Do you think trade associations provide other services? If so, what is the other service?*

8. *Following COVID-19, are there any new emergent trends and approaches regarding the services delivered by your trade associations?*

Appendix E: Interviewee code for Chapter 4

TA	Industry	TA representative	Member firm representative
BJTA1	Chic	BJTA1R1 BJTA1R2	BJTA1M1
BJTA2	Trademark	BJTA2R3	BJTA8M2
BJTA3	General	BJTA3R4	
BJTA4	Tea	BJTA4R5	
BJTA5	Outsourcing	BJTA5R6	BJTA4M3 BJTA4M4 BJTA4M5 BJTA4M6
BJTA6	Digital	BJTA6R7	
BJTA7	General	BJTA7R8	
BJTA8	Incubator	BJTA8R9	BJTA8M7 BJTA8M8 BJTA8M9 BJTA8M10
BJTA9	Exhibition	BJTA8R10	BJTA9M11 BJTA9M12 BJTA9M13
GDTA1	Medical	GDTA1R10	
GDTA2	Outsourcing	GDTA2R11	
GDTA3	Freight forwarding	GDTA3R12	GDTA3M14 GDTA3M15
GDTA4	E-commerce	GDTA4R13	
SHTA1	AI	SHTA1R14	
TOTAL(30)		14	16

*BJ Beijing
GD Guangdong
SH Shanghai

Appendix F: Questionnaire

My name is Shuting Yu and I am conducting this research as part of my PhD thesis entitled “**The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**” in the Department of Management and International Business at the University of Auckland.

The purpose of this survey is to learn how member firms perceive their trade associations. Please respond to the following questions according to the instructions for each one.

Section A: Your company’s trade association membership(s)

Thinking about the trade associations your company interacts with, please answer the following questions by providing the requested information and checking the most appropriate answer

1. **How many trade associations does your company belong to?** _____
2. **What is the name of the trade association which you think is the most important?** _____

3. **What year (approximately) did your company join this trade association?** _____
4. **Please rate the level of frequency of your company with this trade association**
(Using a seven-point scale, 1= extremely infrequent, 7=extremely frequent)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section B: The roles of trade associations

5. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about your trade association’ BEHAVIORS (the most one in Question 2)**
(Using a seven-point scale, 1= “very strongly disagree,” and 7= “very strongly agree”)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My association acts as a representative body for the industry	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association brings member firms together	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association conducts research into issues related to the general business environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association conducts market regulation activities for the benefit of industry	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association is involved in government policy-making and giving advice to the government	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association is engaged in developing standards (industry, business integrity, pay rates)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

My association provides certification and/or accreditation services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association is connecting member firms with other firms and with firms outside	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association organizes trade fairs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association organizes conferences/forums	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association organizes trade missions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association is a platform of partnership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association organizes visits to other member companies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Member firms within the TA refer business leads to other member companies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Member firms within the TA exchange information	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association holds training sessions and workshops	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association holds CEO functions/gathering	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association conveys and educates government policy and project information	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association selects and recommends third-party services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association provides legal services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My association helps address disputes among member firms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section C: Knowledge acquisition

Thinking about the knowledge your company acquires through the trade association:

6. Please indicate the type of knowledge the association provided your company and specify your level of agreement or disagreement in relation to that specific knowledge:

(using a seven-point scale, 1= “not at all,” and 7= “very much”)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Government policy and regulation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Government support, grants and loans	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Business leads	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meeting potential clients	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Cooperation opportunity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Image promotion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Technology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The provision of resource	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section D: Company background information

Please answer the following questions by checking the most appropriate box or providing the requested information.

7. Please indicate your company’s size in terms of the number of regular employees:

- 1-50
- 51-100
- 100-500
- 501-2,000
- Over 2,000

8. Please indicate your company’s size in terms of approximate annual revenue:

- <500,000 (RMB)
- 500,00-1,000,000 (RMB)
- 1,000,00-10,000,000 (RMB)
- 10,000,00-30,000,000 (RMB)
- Over 30,000,000 (RMB)

9. Does your company have any foreign subsidiaries? If yes, please indicate all the foreign market your company have entered.

- North America Europe South America Africa Middle East Australia and NZ Middle East Asia
- Other _____

10. Does your company export? Yes/No

- <10% 11 %-20% 21%-50% > 51%

11. If your company’s sales are purely domestic, do you plan to internationalise?

(using a seven-point scale, 1= “not at all,” and 7= “very likely”).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If yes, when and where to, please state: _____

12. Please indicate what vertical/industry describes your company’s activities by checking all that apply.

- Manufacturing industry of communication equipment, computers and other electronic equipment
- Medicine manufacturing industry
- Manufacturing (textile, leather)
- Manufacturing for culture, education and sports goods
- Manufacturing for foodstuff goods
- Professional skill service industry
- Telecom and other information transfer service industry
- E-commerce service industry
- Transportation service industry
- Banking
- Education
- Recreation, Culture and Sports
- Accommodation and food
- Marketing/Exhibition
- Retail/Wholesale trade
- Construction and installation

Other, please state _____

13. Which department do you work in the company?

- Senior management
- Marketing department
- Public fair department
- Sales department
- Product or service department
- R& D department
- Other, please state

14. In which province in China is your company located?_____

.....Thank You For Your Response.....

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 10 July 2020 for three years. Reference Number 024778

Appendix G: Ethic documents



BUSINESS SCHOOL
DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT
AND INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

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12 Grafton Road
Auckland, New Zealand
T + 64 9 373 7599
W business.auckland.ac.nz
The University of Auckland
Business School
Private Bag 92019
Auckland 1142
New Zealand

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Trade association – Senior Administrator)

Project title: **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**

Research team:

Shuting Yu

Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea

Dr Brent Burmester

Researcher introduction

My name is Shuting Yu and I am conducting this research as part of my PhD research in the Department of Management of International Business at the University of Auckland, New Zealand under the supervision of Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea and Dr Brent Burmester. I have over 10 years of experience in a trade association, working as a marketing manager before commencing my PhD research.

Project description and invitation

The study will address the overarching research question: How does the institutional network within the trade association context facilitate the internationalization processes of Chinese firms? We aim to explore the link between internationalization and trade associations. In this study, We conduct semi-structured interviews with companies which are engaged with the trade association. This study will advance our knowledge about the future role of trade associations in supporting internationalization.

As a senior administrator of a trade association, we would like to invite you and your member firms to participate in our study. We would like to interview you and selected

member firms, whom we would ask you or one of your employees to contact on our behalf, and we enclose the text of a suggested email inviting them to participate.

We seek your permission to conduct the interview with your member firms. We see no risks to your member firms of participation as we will only ask questions of a professional nature. I will ask your member firms to avoid mentioning any issues in the interview that may be commercially sensitive. The implications of this research will enable trade association practitioners to improve expertise and skills acquired for better serving purposes. Your organization may benefit from our research findings with participants.

To provide further in-depth information about your trade association's services, we would also be grateful to receive copies of any appropriate internal reports.

Project Procedures

We would like to interview your member firms for 60 to 90 minutes on their experiences in dealing with trade associations, with a particular focus on the knowledge acquisition for internationalization. Interviews will be conducted over WeChat. Interviews will be audio recorded to ensure an accurate record of their comments and translated into English. Each interview transcript will be emailed to the firm to give an opportunity to review the Chinese transcript and note any points that require further clarification or correction. They will have two weeks to complete this review and email it back to the researcher. If they do not return the transcript after two weeks, the researcher will assume the transcript is correct. They have the option of not being recorded, and even if they agree to being recorded, they may choose to have the recorder turned off at any time.

Data storage/retention/destruction/future use

The participants' comments will be considered and summarized within the research findings. Data will be evaluated qualitatively to identify the roles of trade associations influencing Chinese firms' internationalization. Short excerpts from transcripts may be used anonymously to highlight points within the PhD dissertation academic papers and other published work.

A summary of the research findings will be sent to all participants on their request.

The audio recording and transcripts will be stored separately. Pseudonyms will be used in file names to ensure full confidentiality for participants. The data will be stored for six years on a University of Auckland password protected computer after which the computer files will be erased and any paper transcripts shredded.

Right to withdraw from participation

Member firm participants may withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason and can withdraw any data traceable to them for up to two weeks after the interview.

Anonymity and confidentiality

We assure you that your organization's details will not be discussed with anyone else and will not be identified in any reports resulting from this research. We will keep all data confidential.

If you have any questions before deciding whether to participate, please contact us on the email addresses below.

Contact Details

Shuting Yu: email: s.yu@auckland.ac.nz.

Supervisors: Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea: email: m.benson-rea@auckland.ac.nz; phone 09 373 – 7599 extn 87356; Dr Brent Burmester: email: b.burmester@auckland.ac.nz; ; phone 09 373 – 7599 extn 84559

Head of Department: Professor Kenneth Husted, Department of Management and International Business, University of Auckland Business School. Tel: +64 9 373 7599 ext. 87667, email: k.husted@auckland.ac.nz.

UAHPEC Chair contact details: For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of Research Strategy and Integrity, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: humanethics@auckland.ac.nz

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on for three years. Reference Number 024778

CONSENT FORM

(Trade association – Senior Administrator)

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Project title: **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**

Research team:

Shuting Yu

Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea

Dr Brent Burmester

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why my organisation has been selected.

- I agree to my organisation participating in the research.
- I agree/ do not agree to being interviewed.
- I agree to my organization contacting member firms to participate in the research
- I agree/do not agree to provide some internal report to the researchers.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings which can be emailed to me at this address: _____
- I understand that my trade association's information will remain confidential and will not be revealed in any future publication based on the research.
- As the senior administrator, I give an assurance that it is the member firm's decision whether to participate or not and the decision will not affect their relationship with my organization. I understand my member firms may withdraw from the project at any

time without giving a reason, and can withdraw their data for up to two weeks after the interview.

Senior Administrator's Name: _____

Senior Administrator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on for three years. Reference number 024778

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Member Firm Permission)

Project title: **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**

Research team:

Shuting Yu

Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea

Dr Bent Burmester

Researcher introduction

My name is Shuting Yu and I am conducting this research as part of my PhD dissertation in the Department of Management of International Business at the University of Auckland, New Zealand under the supervision of Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea and Dr Brent Burmester. I have over 10 years of experience in a trade association, working as a marketing manager before commencing my PhD research.

Project description and invitation

The study will address the overarching research question: How does the institutional network within the trade association context facilitate the internationalization processes of Chinese firms? We aim to explore the link between internationalization and trade associations. In this study, we conduct semi-structured interviews with companies which are engaged with the trade association. This study will advance our knowledge about the future role of trade associations in supporting internationalization.

As a membership of the trade association, your organization is invited to participate in research investigating how trade associations influence the internationalization process. The implication of this research will enable a better understanding of how to leverage trade associations networks to acquire knowledge. Your organization may benefit from our research findings with participants.

Project Procedures

We would like to interview you or one of your employees (General Managers/ Marketing directors/ Marketing managers).

If you agree to allow your organization to participate, interviews will be conducted over WeChat. If you do agree to being interviewed yourself (rather than your employee), please see the CEO Interview PIS and CF. The interview with you or your employee will take about for 60 to 90 minutes on your experiences in dealing with trade associations, with a particular focus on the knowledge acquisition for internationalization.

Data storage/retention/destruction/future use

Your comments will be considered and summarized within the research findings. Data will be evaluated qualitatively to identify the roles of trade associations influencing Chinese firms' internationalization. Short excerpts from transcripts may be used anonymously to highlight points within the PhD dissertation academic papers and other published work.

A summary of the research findings will be sent to all participants on your request.

The audio recording and transcripts will be stored separately. Pseudonyms will be used in file names to ensure full confidentiality for participants. The data will be stored for six years on a University of Auckland password protected computer after which the computer file will be erased and the paper transcripts shredded.

Right to withdraw from participation

Participants may withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason and can withdraw any data traceable to them for up to two weeks after the interview.

You have the right to withdraw our access to your organization at any time, but do not have the right to withdraw participant data already given to researchers as part of the study. This data can only be withdrawn by the participants.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Your comments will not be attributed to you or your company by name. Your comments will not be shared with people inside your company. Pseudonyms will be used to identify people and companies in research reports to maintain confidentiality.

If you have any questions before deciding whether to participate, please contact us on the email addresses below. If you agree to being interviewed yourself, please email back and we can set up an appointment.

Contact Details

Shuting Yu: email: s.yu@auckland.ac.nz.

Supervisors: Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea: email: m.benson-rea@auckland.ac.nz; phone 09 373 – 7599 extn 87356; Dr Brent Burmester: email: b.burmester@auckland.ac.nz; ; phone 09 373 – 7599 extn 84559

Head of Department: Professor Kenneth Husted, Department of Management and International Business, University of Auckland Business School. Tel: +64 9 373 7599 ext. 87667, email: k.husted@auckland.ac.nz.

UAHPEC Chair contact details: For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of Research Strategy and Integrity, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: humanethics@auckland.ac.nz

Add the UAHPEC Approval Wording

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on for three years. Reference Number 024778



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The University of Auckland
Business School
Private Bag 92019
Auckland 1142
New Zealand

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Member Firm Perspectives – CEO/Owner)

Project title: **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**

Research team:

Shuting Yu

Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea

Dr Bent Burmester

Researcher introduction

My name is Shuting Yu and I am conducting this research as part of my PhD dissertation in the Department of Management of International Business at the University of Auckland, New Zealand under the supervision of Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea and Dr Brent Burmester. I have over 10 years of experience in a trade association, working as a marketing manager before commencing my PhD research.

Project description and invitation

The study will address the overarching research question: How does the institutional network within the trade association context facilitate the internationalization processes of Chinese firms? We aim to explore the link between internationalization and trade associations. In this study, we conduct semi-structured interviews with companies which are engaged with the trade association. This study will advance our knowledge about the future role of trade associations in supporting internationalization.

As the owner or Chief Executive Officer of an organization that is a membership of the trade association. You are invited to participate in research investigating how trade associations influence the internationalization process. You have been identified as someone with expert knowledge who could provide valuable insight for this study.

The implication of this research will enable a better understanding of how to leverage trade associations networks to acquire knowledge. Your organization may benefit from our research findings with participants.

Project Procedures

We would like to interview you. The interview will take about for 60 to 90 minutes on your experiences in dealing with trade associations, with a particular focus on the knowledge acquisition for internationalization. Interviews will be conducted over WeChat. Interviews will be audio recorded to ensure an accurate record of your comments and translated into English. Each interview transcript will be emailed to you to give an opportunity to review the Chinese transcript and note any points that require further clarification or correction. You will have two weeks to complete this review and email it back to the researcher. If you do not return the transcript after two weeks, the researcher will assume the transcript is correct. You have the option of not being recorded, and even if you agree to being recorded, you may choose to have the recorder turned off at any time.

We see no risks to you as we will only ask questions of a professional nature. We will ask you or your staff member to avoid mentioning any issues in the interview that may be commercially sensitive. Also, we do not want you to disclose information you are uncomfortable about.

Data storage/retention/destruction/future use

Your comments will be considered and summarized within the research findings. Data will be evaluated qualitatively to identify the roles of trade associations influencing Chinese firms' internationalization. Short excerpts from transcripts may be used anonymously to highlight points within the PhD dissertation academic papers and other published work.

A summary of the research findings will be sent to all participants on your request.

The audio recording and transcripts will be stored separately. Pseudonyms will be used in file names to ensure full confidentiality for participants. The data will be stored for six years on a University of Auckland password protected computer after which the computer file will be erased and the paper transcripts shredded.

Right to withdraw from participation

Participants may withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason and can withdraw any data traceable to them for up to two weeks after the interview.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Your comments will not be attributed to you or your company by name. Your comments will not be shared with people inside your company. Pseudonyms will be used to identify people and companies in research reports to maintain confidentiality.

If you have any questions before deciding whether to participate, please contact us on the email addresses below. If you agree to being interviewed yourself, please email back and we can set up an appointment.

Contact Details

Shuting Yu: email: s.yu@auckland.ac.nz.

Supervisors: Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea: email: m.benson-rea@auckland.ac.nz; phone 09 373 – 7599 extn 87356; Dr Brent Burmester: email: b.burmester@auckland.ac.nz; ; phone 09 373 – 7599 extn 84559

Head of Department: Professor Kenneth Husted, Department of Management and International Business, University of Auckland Business School. Tel: +64 9 373 7599 ext. 87667, email: k.husted@auckland.ac.nz.

UAHPEC Chair contact details: For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of Research Strategy and Integrity, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: humanethics@auckland.ac.nz

Add the UAHPEC Approval Wording

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on for three years. Reference Number 024778



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CONSENT FORM
(Member Firm Permission)

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Project title: **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**

Research team:
Shuting Yu
Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea
Dr Bent Burmester

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why my organisation has been selected.

- I agree to my organisation participating in the research.
- I agree/ do not agree to being interviewed myself.
- I agree/ do not agree to my employees being interviewed.
- As the Owner/CEO, I give an assurance that it is the employee's decision whether to participate or not and the decision will not affect their employment relationship. I understand my employee may withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason, and can withdraw their data for up to two weeks after the interview.
- I understand I have the right to withdraw access to my employees at any time, but do not have the right to withdraw participant data already given to researchers as part of the study. This data can only be withdrawn by the participants.

Owner/CEO's Name: _____

Owner/CEO's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 16/03/2020 for three years. Reference number 024223.



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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Member Firm Perspectives – Employees)

Project title: **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**

Research team:

Shuting Yu

Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea

Dr Bent Burmester

Researcher introduction

My name is Shuting Yu and I am conducting this research as part of my PhD dissertation in the Department of Management of International Business at the University of Auckland, New Zealand under the supervision of Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea and Dr Brent Burmester. I have over 10 years of experience in a trade association, working as a marketing manager before commencing my PhD research.

Project description and invitation

The study will address the overarching research question: How does the institutional network within the trade association context facilitate the internationalization processes of Chinese firms? We aim to explore the link between internationalization and trade associations. In this study, we conduct semi-structured interviews with companies which are engaged with the trade association. This study will advance our knowledge about the future role of trade associations in supporting internationalization.

You are invited to participate in research investigating how trade associations influence the internationalization process. You have been identified as someone with expert knowledge who could provide valuable insight for this study.

The implication of this research will enable a better understanding of how to leverage trade associations networks to acquire knowledge. Your organization may benefit from our research findings with participants.

Project Procedures

We would like to interview you and have sought and received the permission of your CEO to interview employees, and their assurance that your participation is entirely voluntary. It is your decision whether to participate or not and that your decision will not affect your employment, and that you may decline without giving any reason.

We would like to interview you for 60 to 90 minutes on your experiences in dealing with trade associations, with a particular focus on the knowledge acquisition for internationalization. Interviews will be conducted over WeChat. Interviews will be audio recorded to ensure an accurate record of your comments. Audio recordings will be in Chinese. The transcription will be Chinese and translated into English. Chinese interview transcript will be emailed to you to give an opportunity to review and note any points that require further clarification or correction. You will have two weeks to complete this review and email it back to the researcher. If you do not return the transcript after two weeks, the research will assume the transcript is correct. You have the option of not being recorded, and even if you agree to being recorded, you may choose to have the recorder turned off at any time.

We see no risks to you of participation as we will only ask questions of a professional nature. We will ask you to avoid mentioning any issues in the interview that may be commercially sensitive. Also, we do not want you to disclose information you are uncomfortable.

Data storage/retention/destruction/future use

Your comments will be considered and summarized within the research findings. Data will be evaluated qualitatively to identify the roles of trade associations influencing Chinese firms' internationalization. Short excerpts from transcripts may be used anonymously to highlight points within the PhD dissertation academic papers and other published work.

A summary of the research findings will be sent to all participants on their request.

The audio recording and transcripts will be stored separately. Pseudonyms will be used in file names to ensure full confidentiality for participants. The data will be stored for six years on a University of Auckland password protected computer after which the computer file will be erased and the paper transcripts shredded.

Right to withdraw from participation

Participants may withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason and can withdraw any data traceable to them for up to two weeks after the interview.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Your comments will not be attributed to you or your company by name. Your comments will not be shared with people inside your company. Pseudonyms will be used to identify people and companies in research reports to maintain confidentiality.

If you have any questions before deciding whether to participate, please contact us on the email addresses below. If you agree to being interviewed yourself, please email back and we can set up an appointment.

Contact Details

Shuting Yu: email: s.yu@auckland.ac.nz.

Supervisors: Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea: email: m.benson-rea@auckland.ac.nz; phone 09 373 – 7599 extn 87356; Dr Brent Burmester: email: b.burmester@auckland.ac.nz; ; phone 09 373 – 7599 extn 84559

Head of Department: Professor Kenneth Husted, Department of Management and International Business, University of Auckland Business School. Tel: +64 9 373 7599 ext. 87667, email: k.husted@auckland.ac.nz.

UAHPEC Chair contact details: For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of Research Strategy and Integrity, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: humanethics@auckland.ac.nz

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on for three years. Reference Number 024778

CONSENT FORM

(Member Firm Perspectives – Employees)

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Project title: **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**

Research team:
Shuting Yu
Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea
Dr Bent Burmester

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. The research has given me the opportunity to ask questions and obtain answers and clarifications. I understand that I have the following options:

- I agree to participate in the research.
- I agree/ do not agree to be audio recorded.
- I understand that I may withdraw my participation from the project at any time without giving a reason, and can withdraw any data traceable to me up to two weeks after the interview.
- I wish /do not wish to receive a Chinese transcript of my interview for editing by email at this address: _____
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings which can be emailed to me at this address: _____
- As an employee, I understand that my employer has agreed that my decision whether to participate or not is voluntary and will not affect my employment.
- Information will be treated confidentially; participants will not be identified.

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 16/03/2020 for three years. Reference number 024223.

Text of a Phase 1 member firms permission email to TA

University of Auckland Research project: The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms

Dear [insert name]

I am Shuting Yu and I am a PhD student at the University of Auckland in the Department of Management of International Business. I am conducting a research on the topic of **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**. I am writing this email to seek your approval of allowing your member firms to participate in this research and agree to approach potential participants on behalf of the researcher. Please refer the attached participant information sheet about the research.

If you agree to participate in this project, please return the CF form or directly reject by returning this email.

With kind regards,

Shuting Yu

Researcher

Text of a Phase 1 indirect recruitment email to member firms

University of Auckland Research project: The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms

Dear [insert name]

We are writing this email to seek your approval to participate and be interviewed in a research conducted by Shuting Yu (a PhD student at the University of Auckland in the Department of Management of International Business). She is conducting a research on the topic of **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**. We believe this research will enable us to improve expertise and skills of serving our member firms. Your organization will also benefit from the research findings. Please refer to the attached participant information sheet of member firm permission about the research enclosed in this email and contact the researcher directly.

If you are interested and agree to participate in this project, return the member firm CF form. If you do agree to being interviewed yourself (rather than your employee), please see the CEO Interview PIS and CF. Please email Shuting Yu on s.yu@auckland.ac.nz.

With kind regards,

Name of TA

Text of an email declining a potential participant

University of Auckland Research project: The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms

Dear [insert name]

Thank you very much for your expression of interest to participate in our study on **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**.

Since ... we wonder if you might be able to recommend another colleague

OR

Since ... we wonder if you could possibly find another suitable date

OR

We entirely understand that you do not feel able to participate and thank you very much for taking the time to contact us.

With kind regards,

Shuting Yu

Researcher



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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Member Firm Survey)

Project title: **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**

Research team:

Shuting Yu

Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea

Dr Bent Burmester

Researcher introduction

My name is Shuting Yu and I am conducting this research as part of my PhD dissertation in the Department of Management of International Business at the University of Auckland, New Zealand under the supervision of Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea and Dr Brent Burmester. I have over 10 years of experience in a trade association, working as a marketing manager before commencing my PhD research.

Project description

The study will address the overarching research question: How does the institutional network within the trade association context facilitate the internationalization processes of Chinese firms? We aim to explore the link between internationalization and trade associations. In this study, we conduct a survey with companies which are engaged with the trade association. This study will advance our knowledge about the future role of trade associations in supporting internationalization.

As a membership of the trade association, your organization is invited to participate in research investigating how trade associations influence the internationalization process. The implication of this research will enable a better understanding of how to leverage trade associations networks to acquire knowledge. Your organization may benefit from our research findings with participants.

Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in this study as your firm is affiliated with trade associations. Your age is at least 18 years old. You will be asked how your firm interacts with trade associations in a written questionnaire. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may decline this invitation to participate without giving reason, simply do not submit the completed questionnaire.

If you choose not to participate, all information will be discarded. You can choose to withdraw from participation at any time during the questionnaire completion time. Please be aware that once you fill in the completed questionnaire successfully, you will not be able to withdraw the information as we will not be able to match the questionnaire to a specific individual participant as the questionnaire is anonymous. All data analysis will be in an aggregated form and no respondent name will be recorded. The completion and submission of the questionnaire constitute consent to participate in the study, and to have any data you provide used for future research.

Data storage/retention/destruction/future use

Aggregate data from the questionnaire, and conclusions from its analysis, will provide input to a PhD thesis and academic articles. The data gathered in this research will be stored in encrypted files in the researcher's (Shuting Yu) computer with all coding information removed. The data will be stored for six years after which the computer file will be erased and the written questionnaires shredded.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

The questionnaire is anonymous. The questionnaires do not ask for personal information that can be used to identify the participants. Your responses to the questionnaire are strictly confidential. We assure you that all data and information provided from you will be treated with the utmost care, and only the individuals named above will have access to or use the data and results.

The questionnaire will take 10 minutes. If you choose to participate, you will be given a supermarket voucher valued NZ\$ 10 to thank you for participating. If you opt-out or do not answer all the questions, you will not be able to get this financial reward.

A summary of aggregated results can be made available to you, if you wish. Please email me at s.yu@auckland.ac.nz if you want a copy of the aggregated results. The aggregated results will be ready in Jan 2022. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my PhD supervisors if you have any questions or concerns regarding this research.

Funding

None of the University of Auckland researchers has received funding or any form of financial support from any external source.

Contact Details

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Supervisors: Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea: email: m.benson-rea@auckland.ac.nz; phone 09 373 – 7599 extn 87356; Dr Brent Burmester: email: b.burmester@auckland.ac.nz; ; phone 09 373 – 7599 extn 84559

Head of Department: Professor Kenneth Husted, Department of Management and International Business, University of Auckland Business School. Tel: +64 9 373 7599 ext. 87667, email: k.husted@auckland.ac.nz.

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Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 10 July 2020 for three years. Reference Number 024778



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Third-party CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Project title: **The Interplay between Trade Associations and the Internationalization of Chinese Firms**

Research team:
Shuting Yu
Associate Professor Maureen Benson-Rea
Dr Bent Burmester

Questionnaire distributor:

I agree to circulate the written questionnaire for the above research project on behalf of the researcher. I understand that the information contained within them is confidential and I agree that I will not disclose or discuss it with anyone other than the researcher and her supervisor(s). I will courier all the completed questionnaires to the researcher and shall not make any copies during the process.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

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