In this chapter, I draw conclusions and formulate the empirical and theoretical contributions of this study. I first summarize my main findings by answering the central question presented at the outset. In the second and third sections, I respectively elaborate on the implications of these findings for debates on the context of Cambodia and Southeast Asia, and suggest ideas for further research pertaining to both debates. In section four I reiterate the theoretical contributions of this study to an embeddedness perspective on (ethnic) entrepreneurship. In the fifth and last section, I go beyond entrepreneurship studies to position the adopted anthropological-institutional approach within organization studies at large.

6.1 The revitalization of entrepreneurship in Phnom Penh

In the aftermath of the destructive Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodians reconnected with family members that had survived the labor camps. Some fled Cambodia through refugee camps in Thailand while others went back to their villages. Still others walked to Phnom Penh, the city that had once been described as the “pearl of Asia”, but which had turned into a ghost town overnight on April 12, 1975, and that – apart from banana trees planted by the Khmer Rouge to give the city a more agrarian outlook – had remained virtually uninhabited for almost four years. This study focuses on those who settled in Phnom Penh and ventured into business in an attempt to rebuild their lives. My exploration of their business ventures is guided by the following central question: How do entrepreneurs in Phnom Penh establish business ventures, and in what ways are these ventures embedded in practices and meanings of Chinese business organization on the one hand, and in the Cambodian social, economic, political and historical context on the other?
In line with the historical dominance of the ethnic Chinese in the Cambodian economy and, indeed, the Chinese background of research participants, entrepreneurs in Phnom Penh establish business ventures by enacting three distinct yet overlapping socio-cultural arrangements; “Chineseness”, kinship and patronage. These three socio-cultural arrangements explain how entrepreneurs in Phnom Penh have been establishing business ventures since the Khmer Rouge. Having surfaced both explicitly and implicitly throughout this thesis, a number of dimensions that cut across these three socio-cultural arrangements need further elaboration.

First, although they have mainly been discussed separately, “Chineseness”, kinship and patronage are highly interrelated in daily business practices and experiences. A number of the businesses discussed in the chapter on kinship are in fact business groups run by oknha while, conversely, the oknha businesses groups elaborated on in the previous chapter are largely family-run and often entertain strong connections to the regional ethnic Chinese. In most cases, depending on their business activities and position within Phnom Penh’s social economy, entrepreneurs employ a combination of these arrangements to develop opportunities, obtain investments and supply, manage and secure their firms, and expand and diversify their activities. These three arrangements, then, must be seen as the main building blocks of a broad template that has emerged over the course of Cambodian Chinese history, and is at the disposal (or neglect) of entrepreneurs in present-day Phnom Penh.

Second, and with regard to the “Competing Hegemonies” research program of which this study is part, the emergence of “Chineseness”, kinship and patronage reveals foreign domination as much as local accommodation. These socio-cultural arrangements neither point towards a Cambodian route to economic development that is independent of foreign stakeholders, nor do they merely imply foreign domination of development processes. Rather, the entrepreneurs of this study are embedded in the local political economy as well as trans-local social-business networks. They are simultaneously “Cambodians” that foster local economic development and “ethnic Chinese” catalysts of foreign interests and capital. Ultimately, they surface as important carriers of economic development exactly because they exploit this dual position to the benefit of their businesses.
Third, and in line with Giddens’ (1979, 1984) agency-structure duality, these three socio-cultural arrangements simultaneously array entrepreneurial behavior and are manipulated by purposeful individual agency. The entrepreneurs in this study make instrumental use of “Chineseness”, patronage and kinship relations when they consider these beneficial to their business endeavors. Nonetheless, these relations and their meanings are, to an extent, also taken for granted among the Cambodian Chinese, and, as such, are enacted by entrepreneurs irrespective of instrumentality. Focusing on the interpersonal and institutional levels of sociality, the combined anthropological-institutional approach enables a balance between agency and structure. The anthropological focus on social interactions and personal experiences “on the ground”, and the ethnographic methods that facilitate this focus, uncover the ways in which entrepreneurs articulate, negotiate and manipulate practices and meanings of Chinese ethnicity. The institutional focus shows how practices and meanings of Chinese ethnicity, kinship and patronage become cast in patterns on a collective level (that is, in Phnom Penh’s social economy, the elite organizational field, and regional ethnic Chinese business networks).

In terms of the agency-structure duality, my approach diverts from John Ter Horst’s (2008) previously mentioned study – one of the few existing studies on ethnic Chinese business in Cambodia – in which he closely examines the silk trade. Ter Horst (2008) highlights the manner in which actors within the silk trade – silk weavers, middlemen, wholesalers and retailers – manipulate Khmer and Chinese ethnic identities to uphold the image of authentically Khmer silk products and Chinese commercial dominance. For example, he describes how middlemen, irrespective of their ethnic background, wear a traditional Khmer sarong when they are among the silk weavers in the provinces, but switch to “Chinese” trousers when dealing with wholesalers in Phnom Penh. Ter Horst adopts a Marxian – not to be confused with Marxist (see Wolf, 1982, p. xi) – view of ethnicity as the ideological and purely symbolic “cultural superstructure” that is manipulated to legitimize and mask the “true, class-based exploitative nature of society” (Ter Horst, 2008, p. 51). In doing so, Ter Horst emphasizes agency while downplaying structure; “the Cambodian subject is used to adapt to different codes of conduct and deploys multi-layered identities for strategic use” (p. 246). He comes to the conclusion that, rather than primordial affiliations,
“Khmer and Chinese self-presentations” must be seen “as lifestyles, cultural repertoires and codes of conduct rooted in a territorial division of labor and local community networks” (p. 245).

I think this is an apt conclusion, but I do not agree, as Ter Horst (2008) suggests, that these lifestyles, cultural repertoires and codes of conduct are entirely manipulable. I think there is also something more substantive to ethnicity that escapes the Marxian argument. Having actual Chinese roots is conducive to business venturing, and the absence of Chinese roots cannot be fully compensated for by simply “acting Chinese”. It matters whether or not one has attended a Chinese school, speaks Chinese, has learned the tacit rules of Chinese kinship affinity and has actual Chinese family and ethnic ties to rely on, whether one has grown up in an ethnic Chinese (business) family and, in extension, whether one is familiar with commercial transactions. To an extent, the cultural repertoires and codes of conduct tied to Chinese ethnicity are strategically employed, but they are also historically embedded in Chinese descent. Whereas Ter Horst (2008) suggests that the articulation of Chinese identity has been decoupled from Chinese descent, I argue that the articulation of “Chineseness” and Chinese descent are instead loosely coupled.

Fourth, the socio-cultural arrangements that organize entrepreneurial activity among the Cambodian Chinese are highly dynamic, revealing processes of “thickening” and “thinning” and of adapting to prevailing circumstances. In the wake of the Khmer Rouge, practices and meanings of Chinese business organization were arguably a legacy of the past. As illustrated in the case of Cambodia, however, such legacies of previously dominant institutional orders do not disappear altogether, but rather endure through their material, social and symbolic remnants (Raynard, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2013). Neither, then, have the “losers” disappeared, but rather adapted to the prevailing order, “biding their time until conditions shift” (Thelen, 1999, p. 385), until an environment emerges for them to re-employ the legacies at their disposal. As the revitalization of Cambodian Chinese enterprise demonstrates, “the past casts a long shadow on the present” (Crawford & Lijphart, 1997, p. 2). The revitalization of “Chineseness”, kinship and patronage in business life indicates that the Cambodian Chinese in Phnom Penh have turned legacies of Chinese enterprise into the building blocks for entrepreneurship after the Khmer Rouge.
In economic and political terms, contemporary Cambodia is different from the post-conflict 1980s and 1990s. Post-conflict Cambodia was marked by resource scarcity and politically instability, representing an environment that proved highly conducive to the revitalization of informal, personalized and trust-based arrangements. Kinship and patronage ties allowed entrepreneurs to acquire entrepreneurial resources and secure their business interests. Since the commencement of the 21st century, however, Cambodia is experiencing an ongoing process of political stabilization, economic expansion and diversification, and regional and global integration.

The business activities that proved successful in post-conflict Cambodia – small-scale ventures in trade, production or tourism, natural resource exploitation, and monopolies in public services – still form the backbone of the domestic private sector, but leave little room for entrepreneurship. In order to grow, entrepreneurs need to seek out novel opportunities, expand from small-scale to large-scale manufacturing, upgrade value chains through technological advancement, diversify into more advanced economic sectors, open multiple branches to build a company brand, move from the domestic market to export, and partner with foreign firms to attract investments or expertise. One may expect the informal kinship and patronage-based arrangements characteristic of ethnic Chinese enterprise to impede business growth. After all, in order to develop the aforementioned opportunities, entrepreneurs are increasingly urged to hire non-family managers or experts, formalize contracting and accounting, foster business ties outside of ethnic circles, and restrain from secretive deals with CPP top officials. The next section discusses whether, after the re-emergence of Cambodian Chinese enterprise, these developments spell the decline of Chinese ethnicity, kinship and patronage in business life.

6.2 Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurship and Cambodia’s political economy

The unfolding expansion, diversification and globalization of the Cambodian economy has spurred debate among Cambodia scholars on whether or not the country is undergoing an economic transformation (Hughes & Un, 2011a) or, conversely, whether kinship and patronage remain the foundations of the economy (Slocomb, 2010). Underlying this debate is
the question of whether or not informal, personalized arrangements are making way for more formal, bureaucratic exchanges among businesspeople in Phnom Penh, and whether or not the political elite is distancing itself from crony capitalism by implementing broad-based developmentalist policy. Moreover, whether or not current changes in the Cambodian economy will cause an economic transformation is highly dependent on the diverse foreign actors involved in Cambodia’s economic development; actors with divergent stakes in shaping the contours of the political economy. From the vantage point of Phnom Penh’s private sector, this debate draws particular attention to issues of generational change.

Although older-generation entrepreneurs are often aware of the need to formalize business procedures in order to develop novel opportunities, the younger generation of Cambodian Chinese usually ends up instigating the professionalization. Within family firms, children push their parents to hire an accountant (even if this means that non-family members will gain insight into company finances), to digitize operations (even when this requires investment in hardware), or to open more branches (even when there are not enough family members to manage them). Also, because the younger generation generally speaks better English and is more acquainted with formal contracting procedures, parents often let their children deal with (non-Chinese) foreign business partners such as buyers, investors or the ADB and WB. Moreover, younger-generation entrepreneurs that set up businesses of their own – although dependent on their parents’ money – aim to professionalize from the outset. They seem more inclined to hire non-family members, formalize management structures, implement HR policies, and loan money from the bank.

An important issue thus, and one that will certainly leave its mark on Cambodia’s political economy in the decades to come, concerns the manner in which the younger generation will build on the legacy of their parents. Businesses, as well as the state apparatus, are still largely in the hands of the older generation that rebuilt Cambodian society after the Khmer Rouge. Their children’s generation, however – the baby-boom generation of the post-Khmer Rouge period – is currently in the process of taking over. Children are gradually assuming control over family businesses, and younger-generation politicians increasingly occupy top-level government positions. This ongoing process is particularly interesting in light of the two generations’ differing life experiences. Marked by the harsh Khmer Rouge
period, the older generation grew up in an impoverished, insecure environment, enjoyed little education, and struggled to set up businesses or forge political ties. In contrast, the younger generation has grown up in a relatively wealthy and secure environment, attended universities in Cambodia or abroad, and are often provided the financial and social means to further their careers.

Whether or not generational differences will bring about a substantive change, from personalized to professionalized business practices and from crony capitalism to developmentalism among business and state actors, remains to be seen. The findings presented in this thesis primarily point toward another dynamic. In an attempt to expand and diversify their business activities, entrepreneurs seem to operate through kinship and patronage systems rather than against them. Entrepreneurs rely on family and ethnic kinship ties to acquire the expertise, investment and material resources needed for diversification; they rely on the family-firm model to expand to multiple locations; and they rely on political patrons to branch into export or attract foreign companies for joint ventures. In cases where professionalization and formalization are prerequisites for expansion and diversification, both business and state actors are even more likely to build on, as opposed to refrain from, kinship and patronage relations. After all, the professionalization of family firms largely occurs by virtue of the younger generation that studies abroad and returns to assist their parents in, for example, retaining oversight of expanding operations or contacting Western business partners. Similarly, the professionalization of promising economic domains, such as SEZs or rice export, occurs through the establishment of business associations and policy frameworks that reinforce rather than challenge patronage arrangements among the oknha-CPP elite. To date, entrepreneurs that entertain particularly strong kinship and patronage ties seem to be best positioned to professionalize their business activities.

When it comes to ongoing daily business, then, practices and meanings of Chinese business organization do not necessarily preclude professionalization (notwithstanding the fact that attempts at professionalization on the part of the younger generation sometimes lead to tensions within family firms). Although Western and Asian models of development may ideologically conflict, they do co-exist in actual business life. While nurturing the kinship and patronage ties that have enabled their ventures since the fall of the Khmer Rouge,
businesspeople in Phnom Penh increasingly search for ways to expand and diversify their business activities. These businesspeople ambiguously position themselves “in between” the competing hegemonies outlined in the introduction. The question is not whether current developments in Phnom Penh indeed herald an economic transformation from a kinship and patronage-based economy to an economy based on professionalism, bureaucratic procedures and transparency. The question is how businesspeople maneuver through Cambodia’s complex and conflicted political economy in the creation of new enterprise. Further research – especially by adopting a generational lens – will need to discern the future positions and roles of businesspeople in the partial yet ongoing expansion, diversification and globalization of the Cambodian economy.

6.3 Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurship and Chinese capitalism in Southeast Asia

Moving from the Cambodian to the regional context, it can be concluded that the situation in Cambodia rearticulates more conventional arguments on ethnic Chinese enterprise in Southeast Asia in a number of respects. Notwithstanding the observation that Cambodian Chinese enterprise reveals distinct features – most notably the title of oknha and the prominence of the Teochiu dialect group – the socio-cultural arrangements that underpin business activities in Phnom Penh have also been identified in other countries in the region. In Cambodia as much as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, kinship networks, the family business model, and business-state relations are the cornerstones of ethnic Chinese business organization. This thesis also rearticulates the notion that, by enacting these socio-cultural arrangements, ethnic Chinese enterprise is characterized by flexibility and adaptiveness (Kuhn, 2008; Ong & Nonini, 1997). Cambodia is an extreme case when it comes to the repression, discrimination and destruction of ethnic Chinese business communities in post-colonial Southeast Asia. In light of this context, the revitalization of Cambodian Chinese enterprise also underscores the resilience of Chinese legacies of entrepreneurship, family loyalties, ethnic networks, and patronage ties.

With regard to the current processes of expansion, diversification and globalization that were elaborated on in the previous section, a tentative conclusion is that Phnom Penh’s
private sector is going through a similar process as that which has been identified among the more advanced economies of Southeast Asia. In his examination of countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, Yeung (2004) describes how Chinese capitalism has evolved into a “hybrid capitalism” that is “defined by its incomplete, partial and contingent transformations” (p. 9). More than a transformation per se, the hybridization of Chinese capitalism in Southeast Asia reveals the “co-existence of some elements of the past and new entities” (Yeung, 2004, p. 42) that are brought about through globalization and the introduction of professional management (cf. Yeung & Olds, 2000). If the professionalization of Phnom Penh’s business sphere takes root in parallel with generational succession, a similar process of hybridization may unfold.

Although the parallels between Cambodian Chinese enterprise and ethnic Chinese enterprise elsewhere in Southeast Asia are legion, the case of Cambodia also raises issues that have largely been neglected in the Chinese capitalism debate to date. The most central of these is the observation that the dominance and salience of the ethnic Chinese in the economic sphere is neither accompanied by ethnic tensions between “native” Khmer and the ethnic Chinese, nor by clear ethnic identities and communal boundaries. Although older-generation Cambodian Chinese who experienced discrimination and persecution sometimes downplay their Chinese descent, the Cambodian Chinese in Phnom Penh portray themselves, and are portrayed by societal “others”, as economically successful and socially and politically integrated. In terms of the scholarly debate on Chinese capitalism in Southeast Asia, this observation has both conceptual and empirical implications.

The Cambodian case raises a complicated question: how should one conceptualize Chinese capitalism in a context where a Chinese community is largely absent and ethnic boundaries are blurred, but where manifestations of “Chineseness” are simultaneously omnipresent in the business sphere? As I understand it, Chinese ethnicity is a dynamic resource that is enacted in the social organization and cultural representation of business life, arrays behavior and is strategically employed, enables and constrains entrepreneurial endeavors, and is loosely coupled to Chinese background. In the multi-ethnic, globalizing context of Southeast Asia, this definition is more accurate than definitions based on identity or community culture. In line with this definition, I propose that it is most fruitful to explore
entrepreneurship before considering the role of Chinese ethnicity in this activity. Although – as I did in Phnom Penh – researchers are still likely to witness the dominant role of Chinese ethnicity in the private sector, such a starting point renders the impossible task of defining “the Chinese” obsolete, and thus avoids preconceived understandings of Chinese identity. Moreover, this starting point allows researchers to operationalize entrepreneurship more thoroughly than in the past, and invites entrepreneurship and business organization scholars to engage in the Chinese capitalism debate, which currently remains dominated by anthropologists, sociologists, geographers and historians.

By starting with entrepreneurship rather than ethnicity, this thesis yields various empirical insights that open up avenues for further research. Most notably, the concepts of kinship and patronage are well suited to explore business and entrepreneurship in other Southeast Asian countries. Roles and meanings of kinship in entrepreneurship undoubtedly differ across Southeast Asia; for example between emerging economies like Cambodia and more established ones, and between various Chinese dialect groups. Similarly, it is worthwhile to investigate the dynamics of patronage in other countries in the region, especially in light of the tension between business-state arrangements and nominally modern practices of business organization.

Another empirical theme featured more implicitly in this thesis concerns the concept of “legacies”, which has only recently been introduced in entrepreneurship studies (Jaskiewicz, Combs, & Rau, 2015) as well as institutional theory (Morgan & Quack, 2005; Raynard et al., 2013). While “entrepreneurial legacies” surface through the “rhetorical construction of past entrepreneurial achievements or resilience” (Jaskiewicz et al., 2015, p. 1) within the context of transgenerational strategies of entrepreneurship, “institutional legacies” have been defined as “the residual cultural and material manifestations” (Raynard et al., 2013, p. 248) of previously dominant institutional configurations. In other words, the notion of legacies is apt to explore “the past in the present” both on the interpersonal level (how legacies of entrepreneurship are “imprinted” in children through their active involvement in the family firm) and on the institutional level (how legacies of institutional orders, such as kinship or patronage, may be reassembled and redeployed), and thus seamlessly corresponds with the embeddedness approach adopted in this thesis. The legacy concept is especially
applicable in the context of Cambodia. By declaring “Year Zero” when coming to power in 1975, the Khmer Rouge destroyed much of what was representative of the past and, in doing so, left businesspeople with little more than legacies to build on in the 1980s. Nevertheless, considering the historical economic dominance of the ethnic Chinese in the region, the concept of legacies seems promising to investigate and explain the persistence of practices and meanings of Chinese business organization in other Southeast Asian countries, as well.

In my view, the use of concepts like kinship, patronage and legacies pushes the Chinese capitalism debate forward as these notions allow researchers to recognize the persistent relevance of Chinese ethnicity in entrepreneurship yet avoid discussions on the essence versus absence of Chinese identity or culture. In this vein, lastly, this thesis highlights the need for more research in settings where “being Chinese” is relatively unproblematic. Studies on Chinese capitalism are often concerned with countries where relations between “native” Southeast Asians and ethnic Chinese are problematic, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. In light of societal ethnic tensions, it is hardly surprising that discussions of Chinese business often end up revolving around the subject of Chinese identity, and that critical scholars feel impelled to deconstruct stereotypes of a fixed, secretive and exclusive business culture among the ethnic Chinese. In contrast, it has been argued that the ethnic Chinese blended in more easily in mainland Southeast Asia than in insular Southeast Asia (Kuhn, 2008). Studies on contemporary Cambodia (Dahles & Ter Horst, 2012) and Thailand (Bun & Kiong, 1993; Koning & Verver, 2013) indeed point in this direction. In the relative absence of ethnic strife, research on mainland Southeast Asia may prove a promising avenue to explore entrepreneurship in Southeast Asia by taking into account, rather than departing from, a discussion on Chinese ethnicity.

6.4 The embeddedness of (ethnic) entrepreneurship

This study contributes to the embeddedness perspective on entrepreneurship, which in my view represents the most viable stream of research emerging from the broader social sciences view (Swedberg, 2000) that has been burgeoning within entrepreneurship studies since the turn of the century. By investigating how entrepreneurship is broadly interlinked with the
sphere of ethnicity, as well as with kinship and patronage relations more specifically, this thesis enriches existing literature on embedded entrepreneurship. My contribution pertains to both the embeddedness perspective on ethnic entrepreneurship specifically and to entrepreneurship in a broad sense.

It should be mentioned that there are clear parallels between the debate on Chinese capitalism in Southeast Asia and debates on ethnic entrepreneurship in the West. Not unlike culturalist approaches to Chinese capitalism, conventional accounts of ethnic entrepreneurship tend to take ethnic community culture and identity for granted. Proponents of the mixed embeddedness perspective (Jones & Ram, 2007, 2010; Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman et al., 1999; Rath, 2000b) have criticized this tendency. This critique, which Rath (2000) clearly articulates in his considerations of the work of Waldinger, Aldrich and Ward (1990), is twofold. First, Rath (2000b) criticizes Waldinger et al. (1990) for paying too little attention to economic developments within the economy and politico-institutional frameworks. Rath (2000b) asserts that processes such as globalization and the role of government therefore remain understudied, while ethnic groups’ socio-cultural features are accorded disproportionate prominence in explaining entrepreneurship. In the words of Jones and Ram (2007), “ethnic minority business activity emerges from the interaction of social, economic and institutional processes rather than an innate cultural proclivity for entrepreneurship” (pp. 452-453). The mixed embeddedness perspective recognizes that ethnic businesses are embedded in ethnic networks and culture, as well as within the wider society and its opportunity structure, and throughout this thesis is embodied by my claim that entrepreneurship in Phnom Penh is embedded in Chinese ethnicity as well as Cambodian society.

Second, and overlapping, Rath (2000b) argues that Waldinger et al. (1990) “too easily make the assertion that immigrants constitute ethnic groups and as entrepreneurs act accordingly – on the premise that immigrants can be equated with ethnic groups” (p. 5). Rath (2000b) debunks the reduction of “immigrant entrepreneurship to an ethnic phenomenon within an economic and institutional vacuum”, and rightly points out that treating “the ‘ethnic nature’ of their activities as a fact and to regard it as point of departure for research is going too far” (p. 5). Such reduction reinforces cultural determinism and the “conventional practice
of studying these groups in isolation” (Jones & Ram, 2007, pp. 440-441). While ethnicity is a questionable point of departure, entrepreneurial activity seems more appropriate. In this vein, Jones and Ram (2007) make a case for “re-embedding the ethnic business agenda” (p. 439) in mainstream entrepreneurship literature. They rail against the “rather irritating practice of inventing ethnic entrepreneurialism as an unprecedented novelty subject to its own laws” (Jones & Ram, 2010, p. 170), and instead urge researchers to lay down “the rules and parameters applying to all small firms irrespective of their owners’ ethnic identity” (p. 170).

In this thesis, I take these arguments to heart and start with an embeddedness perspective on (general) entrepreneurship rather than on ethnic entrepreneurship in particular. Accordingly, as is reflected in my research question, this study is first and foremost about “entrepreneurs”, not about “Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurs”. Although I of course anticipated the relevance of these entrepreneurs’ ethnic Chinese background, using Chinese ethnicity as point of departure is epistemologically dubious and practically impossible within the context of Cambodia. This approach yields the insight that the historical interplay between Chinese ethnicity and Cambodian society has brought about a plethora of relations, practices and meanings that organize entrepreneurship in contemporary Phnom Penh. Apart from ethnic relations, this historical interplay has brought about kinship and patronage relations, the latter of which reveal distinct socio-cultural dynamics that cannot be explained by a mere reference to ethnicity. This thesis pushes an embeddedness perspective to ethnic entrepreneurship forward by illuminating the ways in which entrepreneurship is embedded in ethnic, kinship and patronage relations.

Possibly explaining the empirical focus on ethnic community culture and networks and the relative neglect of entrepreneurial activity, the scholarly field of ethnic and immigrant entrepreneurship emerged within the study of economic sociology. In contrast, the field of entrepreneurship studies has a long tradition of studying entrepreneurs and their endeavors, with the inclusion of social and cultural dimensions being a more recent trend. The embeddedness perspective is, in my view, the most promising and inclusive among the burgeoning social sciences perspectives to entrepreneurship. Although concentrating on the intersection of entrepreneurship and other spheres of life, Granovetter’s (1985) treatise on
embeddedness enables inclusiveness in terms of social and cultural dimensions, agency and structure, and the recursive relationship between individual activity and context.

While inclusivity is its strength, there is a risk of embeddedness turning into a container concept. In the field of economic sociology, the contours of which were largely decided by Granovetter’s (1985) treatise on embeddedness, this has allegedly already occurred. Krippner and Alvarez (2007) argue that embeddedness marries concepts such as social capital and identity, of “whose rapid proliferation across fields has outstripped analysts’ abilities to keep track of increasingly polyvalent meanings” (p. 220). Worse, Granovetter himself declared: “I rarely use ‘embeddedness’ anymore, because it has become almost meaningless, stretched to mean almost anything, so that it therefore means nothing” (Krippner et al., 2004, p. 113).

In this thesis, I illustrate that an operationalization of the “systems of social relations” (Granovetter, 1985, p. 487) – which can be viewed as tangible manifestations of embeddedness – avoids “theoretical vagueness” (Krippner & Alvarez, 2007, p. 220). In the form of “Chineseness”, kinship and patronage, I argue that these systems of social relations comprise interpersonal relations and institutional configurations (Johannisson et al., 2002). Moreover, I assert that a combined anthropological-institutional approach, which surfaces in both explicit and implicit ways throughout this thesis, is especially suited to theorize the systems of social relations in which entrepreneurial activity is embedded. By virtue of its ethnographic methodology as much as its conceptual framework, anthropological tradition offers a rich repository for the study of embedded entrepreneurship on the level of interpersonal relations (Stewart, 1991; Watson, 2013a), while institutional theory in particular allows for an analysis that transcends micro-level behavior and considers embeddedness in field-level or societal configurations (Bruton, Ahlstrom, & Li, 2010; Jennings, Greenwood, Lounsbury, & Suddaby, 2013). In a recent study, Spedale and Watson (2014) employ an anthropological-ethnographic lens and institutional theory insights to “to investigate the complex interweaving of individual, organisational and societal levels that comprises entrepreneurial activity” (p. 759). As both their study and the case of entrepreneurship in Phnom Penh demonstrate, entrepreneurial activity emerges as individuals are embedded in societal and historical contexts.
To begin with, the combined anthropological-institutional approach represents an attempt to advance the embeddedness perspective on entrepreneurship by taking calls to “rebalance” entrepreneurship studies seriously and by making more use of the “analytic resources available in social sciences” (Watson, 2013a, p. 16). The merits of integrating anthropological and institutional theory insights, however, extend beyond the field of entrepreneurship studies and into organization studies at large. By outlining the potential of a *liaison amoureuse* between anthropology and institutional theory within organization studies, the ensuing section picks up where the theoretical chapter (chapter 2) left off.

### 6.5 Organizational anthropology, institutionalism, and the social construction of reality

The proposed *liaison amoureuse* between anthropology and institutional theory not only stems from my attempt to explore interpersonal relations as well as institutional configurations, but is also promising with regard to the duality of agency and structure (Giddens, 1979, 1984). In order to illustrate this last point, allow me to revisit Berger and Luckmann (1967).

By elaborating on the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1967) ultimately describe the dialectic between individual existence and social reality. On the one hand, this dialectic gives rise to historical institutions that “confront the individual as an external and coercive fact” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 58), and as such influence individual action and thought. The institutional world, and the history it has brought about, has the “character of objectivity” because it “antedates the individual’s birth and is not accessible to his biographical recollection” (p. 60). On the other hand, the institutional social order “exists only as a product of human activity” (p. 52, emphasis in original); it is a result of past human activity and only continues to exist insofar as people reenact it. Any analysis that refrains from considering how the endeavors of “living individuals, who have concrete social locations and concrete social interests” (p. 128), construct or renegotiate the institutional order, is by definition partial.

Within the field of organization studies, Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) treatise is frequently cited by institutional scholars (e.g. Greenwood et al., 2008a; Powell & DiMaggio,
1991; Scott, 2008b) as well as anthropologists and ethnographers (e.g. Bell, 1999; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Yanow, 2006; Ybema et al., 2009b). Yet, within these two sub-disciplines, the text is disparately employed, emphasizing only one side of the dialectic between historical institutions and human activity as outlined above. Bluntly stated, anthropologists tend to emphasize the role of human activity in constructing social reality, whereas institutionalists chiefly examine the manner in which social reality arrays human activity by means of historical institutions. This predicament is arguably rooted in the two respective sub-fields of organizational anthropology and institutionalism.

Developed within structuralist sociology, organizational institutionalists mostly examine the top-down effect of institutions on organizations by means of quantitative methodology. More often than not, the existence of institutions is inferred from patterns observed among organizations within an organizational field. By inquiring into the crystallizations of human activity (such as organizational structures or proxies of identification in literature), the existence and potency of institutions are indirectly “proven” by these accounts. Moreover, unity and coherence are overstated (Scott, 2008a), resulting in a tendency to reify institutions as empirical realities rather than analytic imaginings (Zilber, 2013). At the same time, a focus on process (institutionalization), as opposed to outcome (the institution), is largely foreclosed (DiMaggio, 1988; Zilber, 2002) because social activity and meaning-making remain a “black box” (Zilber, 2013, p. 83). In its focus on the institution as an outcome, the structuralist approach dominant within organizational institutionalism runs the risk of neglecting the bottom-up enactment of institutions by human agents. To the organizational anthropologist, then, the body of literature on organizational institutionalism is overly functionalist and reductionist.

An anthropological approach is a timely contribution to organizational institutionalism (Baba et al., 2013). Anthropology puts the individual “back into the contexts in which the action takes place” (Bate, 1997, p. 1156) and avoids organization studies’ positivist tendency to reduce complex phenomena to causal connections (Locke, 2011). On a positive note, recent attempts at bringing society (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) and agency (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009) back into the conceptual apparatus of institutional theory seem to have led to an increasing appreciation of ethnography within
organizational institutionalism (e.g. Bjerregaard & Nielsen, 2014; Crawford & Branch, 2015; McPherson & Sauder, 2013).

As much as organizational institutionalists have a hard time capturing human agency, organizational anthropologists often seem hard-pressed to come to grips with the more enduring character of socio-cultural life. This stems from developments within anthropology in and outside organization studies. Since Marcus and Fisher (1986) announced the discipline’s “crisis of representation”, anthropologists have moved away from the “big theories” of their predecessors. Various “turns” have been posited in (organizational) ethnography and anthropology – including the narrative, postmodern and interpretive turns – that rendered truth-claims about the ethnographic “other” problematic (Czarniawska, 2012; Yanow, 2006). In line with this “internal revolution” (Czarniawska, 2012, p. 119), organizational anthropologists have come to perceive culture as “multi-vocal, highly ambiguous, shape shifting, and difficult or impossible to pin down”, and, hence, as a “loose, sensitizing concept” rather than a “strict theoretical one” (Van Maanen, 2011, pp. 220-221; cf. Moore & Sanders, 2006). Ethnographic accounts since the “turn”, especially by means of narrative and discourse approaches, often make it appear as if agents constantly construct social reality “into being”. As Watson (2013a) notes, in doing so, (interpretivist) ethnographers often downplay the “socio-historical a priori” (Luckmann 1983 in Watson, 2013a, p. 19) implied in processes of institutionalization.

While “organizational ethnography” is increasingly appreciated within organization studies (Czarniawska, 2012; Ybema et al., 2009a), a theoretically informed “organizational anthropology” is a far cry. Within the theory-obsessed field of organization studies, this lack of theorization has arguably led to a ghettoization of organizational ethnography (Watson, 2011). As the argumentation in this thesis illustrates, engaging with institutional theory (as well as revitalizing anthropology’s own conceptual repository) may be a vehicle towards a theoretically informed organizational anthropology. In the Companion on Organizational Anthropology (Caulkins & Jordan, 2013) that appeared recently – and which in fact aims to work towards a more cohesive field of organizational anthropology – Baba et al. (2013) propose institutional anthropology. They suggest that anthropology’s role within organization studies “could be strengthened if anthropologists who study organizations acknowledge the
potential of institutions” (p. 93). They especially highlight the potential contribution of anthropology:

“[T]he complexity of institutionalization processes, ranging over time, social groups, and levels of analysis, as well as the mutually constitutive nature of institutions and agents suggests that a holistic rendering of the contexts in which these processes unfold could be the optimal means to explore and explicate the phenomenon in depth” (Baba et al., 2013, p. 79).

As do Baba et al. (2013), I perceive organizational anthropology and institutionalism as complementary. As I have demonstrated in this thesis, an anthropological-institutional approach elucidates the “human world” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 189) of entrepreneurship in Phnom Penh.