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**Accounting as Symbolic Power:  
A Case Study of CPAs in South Korean Government**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the symbolic power of accounting in the public sector through a study of Certified Public Accountants (CPAs) employed in South Korean central government to work on accrual accounting adoption. While much of the literature on the accounting profession has focused on the functional role of accounting knowledge, there is a stream of work which has highlighted the symbolic power of accounting in Western contexts. This study investigates how professional accountants de-emphasised symbolic aspects of accounting in their attempts to increase their power and status in the Korean public sector. Theorising concepts of Pierre Bourdieu, such as field, habitus and capital, are used to investigate the choices and strategies of CPAs employed in the government. We show that the symbolic aspects of accounting did not help South Korean CPAs with the promotion to the higher ranks in the government field. But rather we found that the symbolic value of the accounting designation was subordinate to bureaucratic designations and CPAs de-emphasised their accounting qualifications. These findings challenge the expectation that accounting professionals will become increasingly dominant because of their knowledge of accrual accounting. This study illustrates that the symbolic power of accounting is institutionally and culturally constructed.

**Keywords:** Symbolic power, the accounting profession, public sector accounting reform, Bourdieu, South Korean government