

Understanding public relation Practices in Chinese Organisations: Multiple Logics and Identities

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Abstract

In response to growing awareness of the inherent Western assumptions and biases in the dominant normative theories, we introduce key concepts of institutional logics and identities to the realm of PR study. Specifically, we highlight the primacy of logics and identities in discursive practice by exploring how a wide range of stakeholders conceptualise and understand PR in Chinese cultural contexts. We employed forty semi-structured interviews with PR agency consultants, in-house PR practitioners, media journalists and industry regulators. We have found that each group of stakeholders tend to interpret Chinese PR in relation to their identities. The established cultural contexts also serve as a “repertoire” for stakeholders to draw institutional logics and legitimise their interpretation of PR practice in China.

Key words: Public relations; institutional logics; identity; Chinese culture

Introduction

Compared to the “well-established” public relations (PR) in the West (Kirat 2005), PR is introduced as a relatively new concept and practice in China in the wake of reform and opening-up in the late 1970s (Chen 1992). The past three decades has witnessed the booming industry of PR which spawned increasing research interests. However, due to the short history and weak theoretical foundation, nascent Chinese PR studies tend to borrow mainstream western concepts, theories and models, such as four PR models (Grunig and Hunt 1984) and excellence theory (Grunig and Grunig 1992). For one thing, the West-centred scholarship has been criticised as outdated due to inherent assumptions, biases and ambiguities (Hltzhausen and Voto 2002); for another, the dominant managerial-functionalist paradigm of PR study has downplayed the primacy of other key issues in discursive practices, such as logic, identity and power (Curtin and Gaither 2005). As such, there is a call for an “inside-out” approach to contextualise PR studies in specific cultural settings (Botan 1992; Huang 1997; Sriramesh and Vercic 2001). Alternative theoretical lens is needed that enables the investigation of the process through which identities are constructed and contested based on shared or competing logics of PR practices (Curtin and Gaither 2007).

In response to this call, we refocus PR studies in the Chinese context by bringing the key issues of logics and identities back to the spotlight. Building on the literature of institutional logics, identity and Chinese cultural values, we attempt to address a constitutive problem of PR: How do different stakeholders, ranging across PR professional consultants, in-house PR practitioners, media journalists, and industry regulators, perceive, interpret and make sense of PR in the Chinese cultural contexts? In so doing, we aim to contribute to staying away from the managerial-functionalist approach to studying PR practice, but rather opening up an embrative arena to explore how multiple stakeholders construct, negotiate or contest over the logics and identities of Chinese PR.

Specifically, this paper proceeds by firstly defining the key concepts of PR, logic and identity, paralleled with an overview of the Chinese cultural contexts. Then, we introduce the methodology consisting of interpretive epistemology, multi-method of data collection and

thematic analysis of the empirical data. Next, we present the research findings in order to answer the research question. We conclude with a discussion and implications to grasp a holistic understanding of Chinese PR.

Literature review

Defining public relations in the western literature

Public relations was born in the U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century in a progressive economic, political and social context (Hill 1993). Until today, PR has been well established in the U.S. and Europe (Kirat 2005). Western scholars tend to define PR as a “managerial” function (Hutton 1999). For example, the US scholars Wilcox et al. (1998) find that the essential elements of the American conceptions of PR are: “deliberate... planned... performance... public interest... two-way communication... management function” (p. 6). In essence, the American definition assumes PR as a democratic structure in which competing groups seek legitimacy and power through public opinion and elections, which is not always the norm in many parts of the world (Vercic 2000).

European scholars Vercic et al. (2001) adopt a “reflective paradigm” to define PR as a strategic tool to help organisations build acceptance and gain legitimacy for their existence and practices (p. 381). The European conception of PR is concerned with analysing and adjusting the organisational standards and values in accordance with the social responsibility in order to strive for legitimacy. Although the European scholars’ definition of PR as a reflective function differs from their US counterparts’ definition of PR as a managerial function, it still implies the norms of “publics” and “public sphere” arising from the Western contexts. It is only from an “inside-out” and emic approach that can we flesh out extant understanding of how the western-born PR is incorporated in a specific cultural setting (Bardhan 2003).

Institutional logics and identity

In order to detour away from the dominant managerial-functionalist paradigm of PR study, scholars (Lammers and Barbour 2006; Sandhu 2009) have recently called for an institutional approach as an alternative theoretical basis to expand the knowledge base of PR.

They introduced some key concepts to PR research, such as logic and identity, which are central to institutional thought (Suddaby 2010).

Institutional logics

The term institutional logics was firstly introduced by Alford and Friedland (1985) to delineate the contending practices and beliefs residing in the institutions (e.g. capitalism, state bureaucracy, political democracy) of modern western societies. Similarly, Jackall (1988) defines institutional logics as embodied in practices, underpinned and reproduced by cultural assumptions and political struggles. Thornton and Ocasio (2008) view institutional logics as a bridge between “individual agency and cognition and socially constructed institutional practices and rule structures” (p. 101). By lining these ideas, we adopt Scott’s (2001) definition of logics, which refers to “sets of cultural beliefs and related practices that constitute a field’s organising principles, and are available to actors to elaborate” (p. 139). From this definition, we can see firstly, institutional logics, by defining means and ends, are cognitive maps and belief systems carried by field participants to view and interpret the world, guide and give meaning to their practices. Secondly, multiple field constituents may compete over the “definition of issues” (Hoffman, 1999, p. 352). As a whole, institutional logics derive from the interaction with the broader established cultural contexts, however, they also have a perceptual component that operates at the individual level (Suddaby, 2010). Thus, it provides a valuable perspective to probe into how Chinese stakeholders incorporate the cultural elements in their perception and sense-making of PR in China.

Identity

Being a rather young and nascent practice, PR still struggles for its identity (Vercic 2000). Identity, as a key issue in PR study, need to draw more scholarly attention (Curtin and Gaither 2005). In this research, we place the concept of identity within the context of institutional thought and organisation studies. According to Albert and Whetten (1985), an identity should satisfy three criteria: the essence, features that distinguish it from others, and features that exhibit continuity over time. Czarniawska’s (1997) argues that identity includes materials drawn from available “cultural resources”, or in other names, such as “cultural

toolkits” (Swidler 1986) and “cultural frames” (Callero 2003). As a field may contain multiple logics, Meyerson and Scully (1995) further maintained that researchers should view identity as an ongoing accomplishment. It is neither fixed nor given, but rather negotiated and contested. As such, Creed, DeJordy et al. (2010) come up with a concept called “identity reconciliation”, which means actors attempt to re-establish coherence and the experience of authenticity of the self through which “institutional contradictions and marginalisation can be resolved” (p. 1337). More clearly, Gilroy (1997) argues that identity, then, involves a question of power and authority, since he insists that “identities depend on the marking of difference...calculating the relationship between identity and difference, sameness and otherness, is an intrinsically political operation” (p. 302).

Established Chinese cultural values

China has a rich institutional landscape made up of numerous cultural elements that have evolved over a long history and still play important roles in contemporary society (Chen 2001). As documented in the existing PR literature (Chen 1996; Huang 2000; Wu 2001), there are several Chinese cultural values in close relation to people’s perception and practice of PR.

Guanxi

Due to China’s long history of agricultural culture, *guanxi* is originally from pre-existing relationship of kinship, classmates, people from the same native place, relatives, superior and subordinate in the same workplace and so forth (Fei 1985; Yang 1988; Zhu 2009; Zhu et al., 2006). Although it has been extensively discussed in the previous literature as personal “relationships”, “ties”, or “contacts” (Hackley and Dong 2001), in essence, *guanxi* is a rich and sophisticated concept consisting of multi-dimensions. Specifically, *guanxi* is built on *ganqing* (love and benevolence), which implies people tend to build *ganqing* before making business (Fei 1985; Zhu 2009). *Guanxi* is also characterised by *renqing* (favour exchange), which means two people in *guanxi* whoever owes a favour to who is expected to return a *renqing* (favour) to the other. Additionally, behind *guanxi* there exists trust which can be created through repeated exchange of favours. Trust in *guanxi* acknowledges the legitimacy both of seeking the accomplishment of instrumental aims through friends, and of building

relationships through mutual support, as long as the instrumental use is subordinated to the cultivation of the relationship (Yang 1994). Thus, it justifies the use of guanxi for personal or organisational benefits.

Elite-authoritarianism

As Chen (2004) states, “The most salient difference of institutional settings between China and the West lies in its elite-authoritarian culture and polity” (p. 395). Over thousands of years, the Chinese emperor as well as contemporary government has continuously controlled not only valuable tangible resources but also intangible resources, such as approval mechanisms and preferential policies, on which organisations in China depend for their survival and development. This critical aspect of Chinese culture has been identified as an undergirding of Chinese PR practices (Wu, 2001).

Harmony

Harmony is another cardinal value of Chinese culture (Chen 2008). In contrast to some Western misperceptions of harmony as conformity or an end with consensus, harmony in Chinese culture is characterised by co-existence of similarities and differences (Zhang 2010). That means harmony opens up room for debate, disagreement and resistance, without which there would be no harmony. Even when involved in active engagement with politics, Confucius argued that “the purpose of criticising rulers is to urge them to follow the way of harmony” (Wang 2004). Harmony, thus, is not achieved through naive conformity, but through constructive criticism (Wang 2004). As such, instead of projecting a homogenous image, Confucian harmony is inclusive harmony, embracing both commonalities and conflicts.

The above Chinese cultural values have proven to be relevant to Chinese PR practice, however, more research is needed to explore in-depth how these cultural values influence the logic and identity construction of Chinese PR. Based on this literature review, we attempt to address the following specific research questions:

1. How do different stakeholders in China conceptualise and understand public relations?
2. Are there any shared or competing logics and identities embedded in their understanding of PR?

Methodology

This research adopts an interpretive epistemology, which aims at understanding phenomenon by discovering the meanings human beings attribute to their behaviours, practices and the external world (Porta and Keating 2008). As such, we understand Chinese PR not as an objective reality, but as a series of interpretations given by participants out of their positions or in relation to their identities. A primary source of data was in-depth interviews with 40 participants in Beijing (the capital city of China), each averaging 90 minutes in duration. The interview participants were “snowball” sampled (Strauss and Corbin 1990) from 4 types of organisations. They are PR consultants from professional agencies, in-house PR practitioners from both business and public organisations, journalists from both state and commercial-orientated media, and industry regulators from China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA) (See Table 1). Our interview guide had three foci: 1) their conceptualisation of Chinese PR; 2) their interpretation of Chinese culture in relation to PR practice; 3) their subjective sense of their own identities.

Insert Table 1 around here.

The entire data set was analysed through an inductive thematic approach. We identified recurring categories and themes through a cyclic reading and coding of the transcripts of interview data. The fundamental unit of analysis is the group of PR stakeholders, including the agency consultants, in-house PRs, journalists, and industry regulators. By comparing and contrasting each group, we identified the shared and competing themes concerning the relevant issues in order to find the patterns of their interaction. As a whole, the interview data provide a “thick” description (Geertz 1973) of the stakeholders’ understanding of Chinese PR practices as well as in relation to the Chinese culture.

Analysis of Findings

In-group shared conceptualisation of PR

Our first research question asks: How do different stakeholders conceptualise and

understand public relations in China? Accordingly, we categorised participants' interpretations to each of the four groups: agency consultants, in-house PRs, media journalists and industry regulators. We found that each group's understanding is closely related to their identities, following shared conceptualisation and positioning of PR within the group.

Agency consultants: PR is about perception change based on media relations

In analysing participants' interpretations of PR, we refer to the poststructuralist literature which holds that identity should be viewed as an ongoing reflexive accomplishment to addresses the questions "Who am I?" and – by implication – "How should I act?" (Alvesson, Ashcraft et al. 2008). It has been found that PR consultants tend to position themselves as professionals equipped with expertise in PR. As one senior PR consultant clarified, "PR people should not be misperceived as 'Miss PR' or 'Mr PR' who only engage in dinning and wining, searching for new contacts or networking. Rather, we are PR professionals possessing a body of expertise in communication strategies and management." In order to label themselves as "professionals", the agency consultants conceptualise PR as changing perceptions via media deployment and integration. As one consultant commented, "PR is different from advertising, marketing or branding in terms of involving in multiple media application. The core purpose of PR is to change people's perception." This view somehow echoes the Western description of PR people as "spin doctors" (Ewen 1996).

In-house PRs: PR is an instrument assisting organisational marketing and reputation

As PR has been very recently practised in Chinese organisations, it is primarily conceived of as a function subordinate to other matured organisational functions such as marketing and sales. Majority of the in-house PR practitioners reflected that the department of PR is usually marginalised in institutional arrangement. They have limited access to the top-level decision-making. Some organisations even nest the department of PR under the umbrella of corporate culture or secretary office. As one in-house PR manager stated, "the major function of PR is to pave the way for promoting the sales of our products. The effect of PR is evaluated in relation to the sales amount". Therefore, in our interviews, most of participants highlighted the instrumentality of PR to organisational marketing and profit pursuit. In one department

manager's word, "PR in Chinese commercial organisations is mostly positioned as a tool of marketing, because we are mostly concerned with selling out our products and making profits. Maybe only matured multinational corporations deem PR as a broad practice and strategic management, attaching important to relations with different publics. But for most local organisations, we are still looking for maximising economic return."

Media journalists: PR is purposive communication targeted specific audiences based on guanxi

It was very interesting to find that when we interviewed journalists, many participants questioned the nature of "third party" of PR agencies. Quite a few of them could not understand why organisations need such a "third party" between them and media, which made their communication difficult. One chief editor even criticised that, "PR in China is still in the prehistoric period, because it still largely rely on interpersonal guanxi for problem-solving. There seems to be dearth of nuclear technologies and expertise in Chinese PR." As most of journalists tend to position themselves as an "objective" communicator of the truth-based news, one senior journalist conceptualised PR in contrast to journalism: "Although PR involves media coverage, PR and journalism are different practices. While journalism aims to disseminate truths and facts in news coverage which enable audience to choose from and make judgement, PR is purposive communication targeted specific groups of people to massage their perceptions. Thus, PR people tend to feed in us with selective and always positive information, which is actually in contrast to our pursuit of news value."

Industry regulators: PR is about information management to maintain the state interest

Industry regulator participants were recruited from China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA) which is supposed to be the regulatory body of PR industry in China. However, this group of people are struggling for their identities. For one thing, it is deemed as "the spokesman of the government body in the name of a NGO" (quotation from a senior PR leader in CIPRA) so that it needs to embody and maintain the government will. For another, it needs to cater to its membership organisations' interests, including both PR agencies and organisational in-house PRs. Nonetheless, it was a tendency that most of the industry regulators tend to conceptualise PR on a macro level and on behalf of the state interest. For example, a

senior leader in CIPRA explained that, “PR is about information control and management which is an important source of state power. PR in China should develop within the framework of Chinese laws and regulations. It ought to be ideologically right and fit in with the Party-state line.”

Therefore, it can be seen that different group of stakeholders conceptualises and comprehends PR in relation to their own identities as well as to others’, consciously or unconsciously.

Shard and competing logics between different groups of PR stakeholders

Our second research question concerns the shared or competing logics embedded in different stakeholders’ conceptualisation and understanding of PR. By comparing and contrasting each group, we found that there were several widely shared logics as well as competing logics between different groups of PR stakeholders.

Shared logics

In examining participants’ interpretations of PR in relation to Chinese culture, we found that some deeply rooted Chinese cultural values emerged as bases for developing shared logics among different stakeholders. One of them is guanxi. As a highly formalised institution in Chinese society (Aufrecht and Bun 1995), guanxi was deemed to be pervasive in every single unit of PR practices. By defining means and ends, Chinese PR stakeholders regard it orthodox and justifiable to make guanxi before making business transaction. As one PR consultant argued, “China is a guanxi-rooted society. It entails acquaintance with one another by means of banquets, giving gifts or networking. Only two parties in a qing-based guanxi are likely to exchange favours.” The other cultural value that greatly influences Chinese PR is elite-authoritarianism. This can explain why more than many of the organisations being interviewed have achieved a consensus: Government is the most important and sometimes the sole public for organisational PR. In addition, various PR stakeholders agreed that keeping in line with the government policy and framework is always the priority and bottom line of organisational PR initiatives. As an in-house PR manager analysed, “since we compete with journalists’ in terms of defining news values, following the state guideline can always be a platform, or an

opportunity for negotiating the cooperation between different PR stakeholders.” This elite-authoritarianism based value constitutes a principal logic of Chinese PR.

Competing logics

Our data also revealed that there are several conflicts in institutional logics between different groups of PR stakeholders. We argue that these conflicts arise from different interests they pursue and different degrees of power they possess. For example, in-house PRs compete with agency consultants in terms of the criteria of evaluating PR effect. As one PR consultant complained, “PR is a long-term effort of communication rather than an on-go-off tool for promotion. Chinese organisations tend to pursue result-driven and effect-guaranteed PR, which has led Chinese PR to positioning itself as a function of tactical implementation rather than strategic consulting.” We infer this is because the market economy in China is still immature and in transition in which most Chinese organisations are concerned with gaining economic profits for their survival. Thus, it entails the competing logics of positioning PR between in-house PRs and agency consultants.

Another prominent conflict existed between agency consultants and media journalists. As PR agencies have commitments to maintain their contracted clients in a favoured position, they share the logic of selecting different aspects of truth for dissemination in order to optimise the effect of media exposure. However, many journalists showed that journalism pursues the news value of truth and objectivity, rather than “spun” stories. As one journalist expressed, “we hope PR agencies can be a real ‘third party’ or ‘bridge’ between us and enterprises by providing more truth-based facts and sources of information.” The third competing logics exist between in-house PRs and industry regulators in terms of the way of practising PR. In-house PRs emphasised that creative PR initiatives are vital to their successful PR whereas industry regulators insisted that all of the commercially-oriented PR must not go beyond the government framework and guideline. As a CIPRA official stated, “Chinese business organisations can only do PR within the permissive government policy rather than transcend the bottom line. The state interest is above all.” Therefore, we can note the conflicts are inevitable due to the power imbalance between commercial force and authority government.

Discussion and conclusion

We have made a major contribution to understanding Chinese PR in relation to institutional logics and identities in the Chinese cultural contexts. We now highlight why multiple logics and identities emerge from the field of Chinese PR in light of the theoretical concepts proposed earlier.

Firstly, our data have shown that different group of stakeholders conceptualise and understand PR closely related to their identities, in particular, professional identity. Marquis and Lounsbury (2007) have pointed out that abundant literature of institutional thought has articulated that professional identity is a significant stimulus to action, especially when autonomy is threatened. As illustrated in the research results, when the expertise of agency consultants were questioned by both in-house PRs and journalists, they tend to position themselves as professionals armed with a body of scientific knowledge of doing PR. They conceptualise PR neither as purely marketing instrument nor purely guanxi practice. Rather, PR is deemed to change perceptions of organisational publics based on media relations. In-house PRs, out of their identities, share the logic of using PR in pursuit of economic interests. Journalists also distinguish PR from journalism in terms of purposive communication with biased facts vs. news coverage based on truth. Industry regulators position PR from the state level as information control and management, since they represent the government will and interest to certain extent.

In addition to the in-group shared logics, there are also shared and competing logics between groups. The shared logics derive from the stakeholders' "resonance" with the established Chinese culture which provides a "repertoire" for their co-construction of the particular logics (Williams 2004). For example, multiple participants agreed the logics of making guanxi before making business as well as always following the Party line and government guideline. Nonetheless, different group of stakeholders compete with each other in order to fulfil their own interests. As such, we can see the Chinese PR as a "contested field"

which involves multiple stakeholders' power struggle in order to maintain or strive for a favoured position (Hoffman 1999). Those conflicts can also be interpreted as opportunities to "reposition" themselves in the field (Bourdieu 1977). On the whole, the co-existence of shared and competing logics within the field of Chinese PR can be explained by the Chinese harmony culture, which embraces and sustains the consensus and contestations (Wang 2004). Moreover, it provides a cultural basis for legitimising multiple value-orientations in the field of Chinese PR (Williams 2004).

Secondly, we found that multiple identities are conferred upon Chinese PR in large part due to multiple shared and competing logics constructed by different stakeholders. Or, in Vercic's (2000) argument, as a young and nascent practice, PR is still struggling for its identity. Moreover, the multiple identities of Chinese PR embody material practices drawn from available "cultural resources" (Czarniawska, 1997). As such, Chinese PR is characterised by qing-based, mixing interpersonal *guanxi* with organisational relations, privileging the state and government interest in order to obtain and maintain culture-based legitimacy. Nonetheless, in the face of multiple logics, the identity construction of Chinese PR is an on-going, negotiated and evolving process. In so doing, multiple stakeholders adjust themselves and their relationships in order to create a "reconciled identity" of Chinese PR where a wide range of interests can be embedded (DeJordy et al., 2010).

Our findings relating to multiple logics and identities shed light on the future development of PR in China. As the Chinese cultural values, in particular *guanxi* and elite-authoritarianism, are deeply rooted in the society, Chinese PR is easily misperceived as an extension of interpersonal "guanxi", or narrowly conceived of as government relations. In other words, these misperceptions or misconduct can be attributed to the non-existence of genuine "public" in China (Wu 2001). It is the upwards-orientation of *guanxi* that guides Chinese PR to build relationship with the government authority and power, which, in turn, reflects the key structure of government control in current PR field. However, as the trend of democracy continues we predict this situation may ease. There may be the likelihood of power-sharing by

stakeholders of more equal status. Institutional logics and identities we proposed can be useful parameters for understanding the future PR practice in China.

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Table 1 Demographics of the interview participants in this research

Organisational Attributes		Personal Attributes		
Categories of Organisations	Industry ranking	Gender	Position	PR experience
• PR agencies (n = 11) • In-house PR (n = 10) • Media (n = 9) • PR associations (n = 10)	• Top 10 (n = 16) • Top 50 (n = 14) • Top 100 (n = 10)	• Female (n = 19) • Male (n = 21)	• Practitioners (n = 14) • Divisional managers (n = 14) • Top executives (n = 12)	• 1-5 years (n = 14) • 6-10 years (n = 16) • Above 10 years (n = 10)
Total: N = 40	N = 40	N = 40	N = 40	N = 40

Note: “N” stands for the number of interviewees.