



## An inside-out exploration of contemporary Chinese public relations education

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Chinese public relations education  
Curricular development  
Localization of public relations education  
Adoption and adaptation  
Conceptualization of Chinese public relations

### ABSTRACT

This study provides an inside-out examination of contemporary Chinese public relations education. Particularly, it seeks to explore (1) how Chinese public relations educators make meaning of the imported U.S. body of knowledge of public relations; (2) how Chinese educators conceptualize Chinese public relations; and (3) the connection and disconnection between academia and industry. We conducted 49 face-to-face in-depth interviews and performed content analysis of 22 Web sites of Chinese universities with public relations programs. Research findings reflected the movement of Chinese PR from a merely technical function to a more strategic function centering on relationship building, reputation, social responsibility, and organizational identity. The findings also suggested significant influence of the U.S. PR education on the development of Chinese public relations education manifested through textbook adoption and core curricular design. However, the study has also shown that educators have undertaken substantial effort to localize the imported knowledge in accordance with China's unique cultural, economic, and political systems.

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### 1. Introduction

Formal public relations (PR) education in China emerged in the 1980s (Chen, 2003). Chen (1994) examined the early development of PR professional education and training in China. Ritchey (2000) discussed the impact of the Chinese government's regulations on PR and investigated the crucial role that the U.S.-based curricula and pedagogy played in Chinese PR education. Unfortunately, few published studies have specifically focused on Chinese PR education or updated the education system's current status. Such research efforts are crucial to equip students with a global mindset. As Sriramesh (2002) stressed, it is essential to explore the non-U.S. experiences and perspectives and investigate the make-up of their public relations education systems (p. 54). Similarly, the Commission on PR Education (2006) identified a pressing need for multiculturalism in PR education.

Responding to the aforementioned calls, the present study fills the void in scholarship on Chinese PR education by examining the status quo of the contemporary educational environment and identifying its associated challenges, unique features, and perspectives. Findings were based on 49 in-depth face-to-face interviews with PR educators, students, and practitioners in Mainland China and a content analysis of the Web sites of 22 Chinese universities with PR programs.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The evolution of public relations curricula: guidance and adaptation

#### 2.1.1. Curricular development

Many studies have examined the development of PR curricular in the U.S. For example, Fischer (2000) provided a comprehensive review of the evolution of PR curricula between 1975 and 1999. Commission on Public Relations Education's *Professional Bond* (2006) report highlighted the importance of interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism in public relations education. Moreover, Xifra (2007) suggested that the PR concentration include *Introduction to PR, PR Research, Measurement and Evaluation, PR Writing and Production, Supervised Work Experience in PR, Law and Ethics, Planning and Management, and Case Studies* (p. 208). Similarly, in DiStasio, Stacks, and Botan's (2009) study, practitioners and educators recommended a list of core courses in theories, research, writing, planning, ethics and law, and evaluation (pp. 263–264).

#### 2.1.2. Global use and adaptation of the U.S. model of PR education

The U.S. model of PR education has served as a major guideline worldwide, such as in Europe (Goncalves, 2009; Xifra, 2007), Middle East (Badran, 1994; Creedon, Al-Khaja, & Kruckeberg, 1995), and Asia (Chen, 1994; Zhang, 2009). Global PR scholars (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Sriramesh, 2004) and several Commission reports on PR education (i.e., 1999, 2006) noted a strong Western influence in Asian PR education. For example, Dkachai and Komolsevin (1998) found that PR curricula in Thailand followed the ideology and structure of education in the U.S. and used U.S. PR textbooks.

However, U.S. public relations is based on such premises as equality, negotiation, conflict resolution, responsibility, and collaboration (Grunig, 2001). Apart from these values, the *Excellence* theory (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) represents a major theoretical framework in the U.S. Two key conclusions can be drawn from the theory. First, excellent public relations function exhibits certain characteristics at the organizational and program levels. Second, the value of public relations lies in building harmonious relationships with its strategic publics. In addition, the Corporate Identity System (CIS) theory has been applied in PR research (Kim & Hatcher, 2009; Melewar, Saunders, & Balmer, 2001). The basic premise of the theory states that organizations ought to utilize various communication programs to promote their visions, missions, values, and identities and to achieve its organizational goals. These major values and theoretical frameworks may not be prevalent outside the U.S. It is thus necessary to examine how non-U.S. countries have adapted these U.S. guidelines to meet their domestic needs, designed their unique curricula, and developed their own textbooks and teaching materials (Sriramesh, 2004).

### 2.2. The connection and disconnection between academia and industry

Research continues to confirm the necessity of building a solid knowledge-, skill-, and intellect-base to ensure effective PR practice (Sriramesh, 2002; Taylor, 2001). Generally, two opposing views exist about the relationship between education and practice. One school argues for an either-or position, meaning that PR education should be either professionally or theoretically driven. Those who believe in a professional focus advocate that PR education should provide more skill-based training; whereas those who believe in the latter sing high praise for a more intellectually focused PR education (Kent & Taylor, 2005). In contrast to the either-or position, the second school of scholars (e.g., Toth, 2006) favors an integrative educational focus, which concurs with various recommendations from the Commission reports (e.g., 1999, 2006).

In spite of these forceful calls for a necessary integrated educational focus, a number of studies (Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Hon, Fitzpatrick, & Hall, 2004; Wright & Turk, 2007) have confirmed an uncomfortable discrepancy between educational outcomes and practitioners' expectations. For example, Hon et al. (2004) found that PR graduate students felt strongly the inadequacy of the educational programs to prepare them to become competent professionals.

### 2.3. PR education in China

#### 2.3.1. A brief review of Chinese public relations

Public relations in China has been traditionally viewed as "guest-relations" (Chen, 1996, p. 280) to entertain a company's business partners. While gradually transforming from a planned economy to a market economy, Chinese PR was mainly viewed as a promotional means to enhance organizational images, generate publicity for products, and stage campaigns for marketing and social welfare activities (Strenski & Yue, 1998). Recent studies showed that the Chinese government (e.g., Cai, Lee, & Pang, 2009; Chen, 2009) and organizations (e.g., Liu, Chang, & Zhao, 2009) have increasingly used public relations to pursue two goals: (1) to manage how external publics perceive an organization's image and identities during crises, and (2) to strengthen relationships with strategic publics. The strategic use of public relations to build a positive identity aligns with the three core factors that influence corporate or institutional identity, namely, behavior, communication, and symbolism (Melewar & Wooldridge, 2001). The use of public relations to build relationships in China corresponds to a key value that the *Excellence* theory emphasizes: PR as a strategic management function to build long-term trusting relationships with publics (Grunig et al., 2002).

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