

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: UNDERSTANDING CHINESE PUBLIC  
RELATIONS EDUCATION: A CRITICAL  
AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Public relations entered China in the 1980s. Formal education in public relations started in the 1980s. The field has experienced evolutionary changes over the past 2 decades. However, not much scholarly attention has been paid to this area of research. The most notable article that examines Chinese public relations education was published in 1994. After more than 10 years, it is disheartening to note that no published works have updated the status quo of Chinese public relations education. Within this context, the present study undertakes the initiative to offer a rich account of and a critical and cultural analysis of Chinese public relations education. Specially, the purpose of this dissertation was to understand how Chinese public relations educators, students, and practitioners make meaning of Chinese public relations education through the theoretical lens of the circuit of culture model and within the context of Confucianism.

The present study adopts qualitative methodology as the means to explore the study's research questions. It employs two concrete qualitative methods—in-depth interview and focus groups. Participants were selected from three major cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, and Hang Zhou, which host the major of universities and colleges that offer public relations programs, majors, or concentrations. Forty-nine people took part in the present study, including 34 in-depth interviews—20 interviews with public relations educators, 7 with practitioners, and 7 with students—and two focus groups with 7 students and 8 students in each group.

Specifically, the study aims to answer two research questions: 1) How does the circuit of culture model help explore and understand the tensions, complexities, and contradictions implicit in Chinese public relations educators', practitioners', and students' meaning making of Chinese public relations education? How does the model help understand the interplay of culture, power, and identity, within which context participants negotiate and construct meanings and identities for Chinese public relations education? 2) What is the role of Confucianism in Chinese public relations education? To what extent and in what aspects have Confucian values influenced participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education?

Research findings offer insights into the above research questions. Most interestingly, the findings help identify a hybrid identity for Chinese public relations education, which is neither purely Chinese nor American but a combination of values from both countries. This finding calls for a changed mindset to approach the relationship between Chinese and U.S. public relations scholarly communities from a dichotomous *either-or* to an embracing *both-and* mindset. The findings also help

update and enrich the existing literature on Chinese public relations education, respond to the timely call for diversifying public relations scholarship in the U.S., and complicate and modify the existing circuit of culture model. The culmination of the study also helps identify possible avenues in which Confucianism can serve as a potential philosophy guiding public relations education and practice.

UNDERSTANDING CHINESE PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION:  
A CRITICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved parents who brought me to this world and gave me such a precious opportunity to explore and enjoy all of the wonders in life. I thank them for their unfailing love and support.

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Laozi stated in *Dao De Jing* that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Since the Fall semester of 2007, I embarked on a journey of dissertation writing. Every single step that I took in this journey reinforces how fortunate I am to have all of these wonderful people surrounding me with their unconditional love and unfailing support. I want to thank every one of them for making the completion of this dissertation possible, and for making the dissertation writing a memorable, enjoyable, and fruitful journey. Pursuing this doctoral degree in the field of communication is one of the most challenging and rewarding endeavors that I have ever undertaken. As I am arriving at the final stage of my doctoral study, my heart is filled with nothing but gratitude and thankfulness.

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more manageable, meaningful, and publishable. I could not recall how many times I sat in her office discussing my dissertation with her. Every time when I felt lost, Dr. Toth was there by my side, helping me through the tough time. Dr. Toth could always enlighten me with her insightful and constructive comments. Her mentorship as a scholar and her warm-heartedness as a friend made the dissertation journey so much more fulfilling, rewarding, and enjoyable.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Scope of the Study

The present study examines public relations education in China, a fast growing yet inadequately examined field of study. Public relations entered China in 1980s. Within a time span of 3 decades, the field has experienced evolutionary changes (Chen, 2003). By 2005, there were 20 to 30 thousand trained public relations professionals and thousands of public relations firms in China (CIPRA, 2006). In the year 2000, when the first national accreditation exam was implemented, there were 6,713 people who took the exam and 4,957 people successfully passed it (CIPRA, 2006).

Along with the rapid growth in the industry, Chinese public relations education has also undergone remarkable changes. The field has grown from an early experimental program in 1994 at Sun Yat-Sen University to today's numerous universities and colleges offering public relations programs, courses, and majors. At the same time, several organizations and institutes have been established to promote the professional and academic status of Chinese public relations. These organizations hold annual or bi-annual conferences, case-study competitions, seminars, and workshops to help people understand what public relations is and does. With these changes, students are becoming more and more interested in public relations education and choosing it as a career path.

Unfortunately, in spite of these encouraging changes, not much scholarly attention has been paid to this area of research. The most notable article that examines

Chinese public relations education was published in 1994 (Chen). After more than 10 years, it is disheartening to note that no published works have updated the status quo of public relations education in China. Much of the information provided and the claims made by Chen could no longer accurately depict contemporary Chinese public relations education.

On the other hand, while Chinese public relations educators are experimenting with public relations curricula, Western public relations theories, models, and concepts are finding their way into such courses. Many universities in Asia have adopted U.S. public relations textbooks and translated them “verbatim without any attempt to align the contents with the environmental contexts of the native country” (Sriramesh, 2004, p. 322). Scholars (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Sriramesh, 2004, 2007) interested in international public relations issues and several commission reports on public relations education (i.e., 1999, 2006) have also pointed out a strong Western bias in Asian public relations education and warned of the danger of adopting U.S.-based textbooks without making necessary modifications.

Within this context, the present study examines how Chinese public relations educators, students, and practitioners make meaning of Chinese public relations education through the theoretical lens of circuit of culture model and within the context of Confucianism. This examination aims to illustrate the tensions, complexities, and contradictions involved in participants’ meaning making while of Chinese public relations education shedding light on the interplay of power, culture, and identity, and how such interplay affects participants’ understanding, particularly the influence of the Western body of knowledge in public relations in China. The

study also aims to examine the ways in which Confucianism has affected participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education.

The circuit model is adopted because it helps in understanding complex communication happenings by offering avenues to examine the tensions, complexities, and controversies involved in multiple sociological forces' construction and negotiation of meaning. The model consists of five moments—regulation, representation, production, consumption, and identity. Although power is not listed as an element, it plays an intrinsic role in shaping and constructing the ultimate meaning or identity for a given communication phenomenon. Power intertwines with culture and identity, and the three serve as underlying mechanisms shaping the meaning-making process.

Focusing on the interplay of power, identity, and culture, the circuit model is particularly relevant to the present study because of the contested nature that contemporary Chinese public relations education exemplifies at both national and international levels. At the international level, the tension is exemplified by the dominance of the well-developed body of knowledge concerning U.S. public relations and the recent history of Chinese public relations education. With a history of less than 3 decades, public relations remains a foreign concept in China. The majority of people are still trying to understand what public relations is and does, and there is still resistance against professional public relations practice.

Confucianism is adopted because it provides the context in which to interpret participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Confucius is identified as a great educator in Chinese history, and Confucianism is one of the most

deeply rooted Chinese philosophies. Confucian values penetrate almost every aspect of Chinese people's life, from everyday communication and interaction to national economy and politics. With thousands of years of history and impact on the Chinese people and society, Confucianism offers an ideal channel to contextualize participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education, as well as their understanding of the widespread U.S. body of knowledge in public relations in China. At the same time, the identification of concrete Confucian values that have affected Chinese public relations education help build the groundwork for a possible education philosophy to guide public education and practice.

In short, within the frameworks of Confucianism and the circuit of culture model, the present study offers a rich, detailed account of participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education; the interplay of culture, power, and identity, and how that affects participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education, and the roles and effects of Confucianism in Chinese public relations education.

Additionally, the present study brings together educators, practitioners, and students aiming to offer a triangulated understanding of Chinese public relations education. Students' perspectives are included because they serve as a bridge between education and practice. Their voices offer insights into the expectations and outcomes of public relations education and help triangulate educators' and practitioners' interpretations of public relations education. By bringing together the three perspectives, the study also highlights the necessity of an important step that is too often neglected—meaningful interactions between academia and practice.



## Purpose of the Study

The critical issues and challenges identified in the U.S. public relations literature, including issues pertaining to Chinese public relations education, help inform the purpose of the present study. Particularly, issues such as intellectual hegemony, lack of international perspective in U.S. public relations education, and the widespread U.S. theories, models, and concepts in Asia informed the purpose of the present study. These issues and challenges sparked my interest in exploring the specific conditions and meanings of Chinese public relations education and examining (adopting an inside-out approach) the ways in which Chinese participants perceive the presence of Western theories, models, and concepts in China.

The present study is also motivated by Western scholars' criticism of a lack of philosophical foundation underpinning public relations education and their recommendations for adopting Eastern philosophies such as Confucianism as alternative means to complement the Western philosophy and to solve contemporary management and business problems.

As a result, the present study has two purposes. The first purpose is to explore the tensions, complexities, and contradictions involved in participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Adopting the circuit of culture model as a major theoretical lens, the study aims to examine the interplay of culture, power, and identity, and how they affect participants' meaning making. An important aspect intrinsic to this purpose is to investigate the influence of widespread Western public relations theories, models, and concepts in Chinese public relations education and how Chinese participants perceive their presence and influence. To that end, the study

intends to examine to what extent and in what aspects this imported body of knowledge has affected participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education. Gaining an understanding of these facets integral to Chinese public relations education is a prerequisite to responding to the urgent need of diversifying public relations scholarship in the U.S. and strengthening the theoretical foundation of Chinese public relations in ways that are sensitive to the country's unique cultural context.

The second purpose concerns the lack of philosophical foundation underpinning in public relations education. As early as 2 decades ago, Grunig (1992) called for a philosophical base to elevate public relations into a respected and legitimate profession and discipline. Unfortunately, the field has not been successful at harvesting the fruits of philosophical frameworks in the most beneficial ways. Although more scholars have begun to pay attention to public relations professional ethics (e.g., Bowen, 2000, 2005), their efforts remain marginal compared to mainstream research topics such as relationship building, communication management, and crisis communication.

Given the thousands of years of history and impact of Confucianism on Chinese culture along with Confucius's identity as a great educator, the present study explores the possibility of Confucianism as an education philosophy for public relations education. Specifically, this purpose concerns how Confucianism appears in Chinese public relations education and to what extent and in what aspects Confucianism has influenced participants' understanding of Chinese public relations

education. Answers to these questions will help identify areas that Confucianism can be of value to public relations education and practice at home and abroad.

Although I am well aware of the various philosophical approaches in Chinese society, Confucianism is adopted for several reasons. The first reason relates to the thousand year history of Confucianism (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). Penetrating almost every corner of Chinese society, Confucianism has deeply influenced Chinese people's values and beliefs for thousands of years. The second reason concerns Confucius's identity as the greatest educator in Chinese history. Many Confucian values and teachings are relevant to public relations education. The third reason pertains to the Confucian emphasis on cultivating moral character through education and its internal cultivation of personhood, which are necessary for initiating external transformation of society. This Confucian emphasis on moral cultivation through education and cultivation of personhood connects to the nature of public relations as the ethical conscience of organizations (Ryan & Martinson, 1983) and the public rhetors of society (Heath, 2000, 2006, 2007).

The last reason concerns the heuristic values of Confucianism in complementing the existing U.S.-dominated discourse. Scholars (Roper & Weymes, 2007) have pointed out that the dominant Western models, with emphases on profit-driven and individual competition, are losing their legitimacy and trust in this contemporary market. They have called for incorporating Confucianism into the mainstream intellectual dialogue, and argued that the Confucian emphases on collaboration, relationship, harmony, and benevolence could offer avenues to complement the existing dominant U.S. discourse. Along these lines, my endeavor of

placing public relations education into a Confucian context also serves as an impetus for Chinese scholars to begin to appreciate the wisdom of conventional Chinese philosophy and acknowledge its contemporary relevance in resolving educational problems. Such a process could parallel and counter the flow of widespread Western public relations theories in Chinese higher educational settings.

### Significance of the Study

The present study contributes to public relations literature by shedding light on the critical issues and problems that Western public relations scholars have raised concerning international public relations scholarship, such as the hegemonic influence of a dominant U.S. discourse; the widespread U.S. public relations models, theories, and concepts in Asian higher educational settings; and the lack of philosophical foundation in public relations education. Research findings of the present study offer a detailed account of how Chinese public relations educators, students, and practitioners make meaning of Chinese public relations education. This Chinese perspective helps update and enrich the existing literature on Chinese public relations education. It also responds to the timely call for diversifying public relations scholarship in the U.S. The culmination of the study helps identify possible means to strengthen the theoretical foundation of Chinese public relations education and avenues for cultural convergence and intellectual collaboration between public relations communities in China and the U.S.

Another contribution of the present study is that it brings together educators', practitioners', and students' perspectives regarding the meaning of Chinese public relations education. Although the present study did not bring together the three sides

in a direct dialogue with one another, research findings of the study highlight the necessity of doing so. The study, therefore, confirms the call of scholars (e.g., Wright et al., 2007) and various commission reports (1990, 1999, 2006) for such a dialogue. In fact, as early as 1990, the *IPRA Gold Paper No. 7* (1990) noted that the future of public relations depends on how well the dialogue between educators and practitioners progresses. However, little research has attempted to bring together the three sides to triangulate an understanding of public relations education. My study, therefore, is a first attempt to respond to this timely call by bringing educators', practitioners', and students' perspectives together to shed light on the meaning of Chinese public relations education.

#### Delimitations

Due to the broad nature of my research as well as time constraints, delimitations enabled this study to be more focused and manageable. First, the critical issues and problems, such as intellectual hegemony and the widespread U.S. models, theories, and concepts in Asia, only serve to inform the purpose of the present study. They help open doorways to *explore* and *understand* the specific meanings and conditions of public relations education in China. In no way did they prescribe the exploration of the state-of-the-art of Chinese public relations education.

Second, with the myriad of definitions for *public relations* suggested in the literature, I delimit my study to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) conceptualization of public relations, that is, "management of communication between an organization and its publics" (p. 4). An important reason for the adoption of Grunig and Hunt's definition is that it identifies four levels on which public relations can be studied: public

relations programs, public relations function, public relations' contribution to organizational effectiveness, and the societal level. The last two levels are of particular relevance to the present study. To link public relations to organizational and societal levels highlights the ethical conscience that public relations practitioners play in organizations (Bowen, 2007) and public rhetors (Heath, 1992) play in society.

Third, I am narrowing my focus in the broad discipline of education to undergraduate public relations education. Even so, the present study, exploratory in nature, does not attempt to cover every single aspect related to Chinese public relations education. Time constraints made such an ambition almost impossible to accomplish. The priority concern of the present study is to explore how Chinese participants make meaning of Chinese public relations education; understand the interplay of culture, power, and identity; and examine the role and effects of Confucianism in Chinese public relations education.

As a qualitative researcher, I agree with Potter's (1996) garden metaphor for understanding the nature of qualitative research. Potter suggested that a qualitative scholar is like a gardener whose task is to "describe the different plants as a means for illustrating the main features of the garden" (p. 11). As gardeners, qualitative scholars do not intend to dictate how one should interpret a given communication phenomenon, but serve as a guide by pointing out what to look for so as to facilitate the reader to construct his or her own interpretations. I, myself, as a qualitative scholar, understand my role as a gardener guiding the reader to develop an understanding of Chinese public relations education on his or her own. Just like the beauty of the garden lies in the eyes of the beholder, my task as a qualitative

researcher is to render an interpretation of Chinese public relations education through the lens of my research participants: Chinese public relations educators, practitioners, and students. This interpretation is also influenced by my 24 years' enculturation in China and almost 6 years' education in the U.S. My rendering of the meaning of Chinese public relations education is, thus, by no means intended to be exclusive. I sought to offer alternative interpretations and perspectives on the meaning of Chinese public relations education.

### Summary of Relevant Literature

The second chapter, *Literature Review*, departs somewhat from the traditional structure of doing a literature review. I include a section on background literature, which provides the context for the present study. To provide a context to understand Chinese public relations education, it includes a review of public relations education in China, Confucianism, and critical issues and challenges identified in the U.S. literature pertaining to international public relations scholarship. This section on the background literature is separated from the theory. In the theory section, I review the theoretical frameworks informing the present study. Particularly, I offer a review of the circuit of culture model within the body of knowledge of cultural studies (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). The circuit model serves as the major theoretical framework for the current study. It helps, first, to aid in understanding the tensions between global and local which exemplifies the situation of contemporary public relations education in China and, second, to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of how multiple sociological forces interact, contest, and construct a meaning for Chinese public relations education. Such an understanding is particularly

helpful for examining how participants perceive the presence of a Western body of knowledge in China and how Chinese public relations education has become a cultural site that demonstrates and intensifies the interplay of culture, power, and identity in constructing meaning and identity for Chinese public relations education.

#### Summary of Proposed Methods

The present study adopts qualitative methodology as the means to explore the study's research questions. Qualitative methodology is employed primarily because it is a most appropriate approach to explore how reality is socially constructed and how experience gains meaning through social construction (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Further, the ambiguous state of public relations education in China warrants a qualitative approach because the approach is most suitable for understanding a communication phenomenon characterized by contradictions, complexities, controversies, and uncertainties (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Also, I adopt the qualitative methodology to follow the methodological recommendations suggested by the circuit of culture model (Curtin & Gaither, 2007), which suggests that researchers use more ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observations to understand the complexity of public relations in diverse cultural settings and in a more holistic manner. Based on these recommendations, the present study employs two concrete qualitative methods: in-depth interview and focus group. These methods helped me render a detailed and thick description of how participants understand Chinese public relations education and perceive the influence of Western public relations knowledge in China, as well as the roles and effects of Confucianism in Chinese public relations education.



Specifically, the methodology chapter includes three sections. In the first section, I offer an explanation of the rationale for adopting qualitative methodology for the present study, including a detailed review of the advantages and disadvantages of the two concrete methods that I used in the study: in-depth interviews and focus group. Forty-nine people took part in the present study, including 34 in-depth interviews—20 interviews with public relations educators, 7 with practitioners, and 7 with students—and two focus groups with 7 students and 8 students in each group.

In the second section, I describe my research participants, participant recruitment, procedures that I used for the in-depth interviews and focus groups, and the interview guide that I used during the study. Specifically, my interviews took place in three major cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, and Hang Zhou. These cities were selected because they have the major universities that offer undergraduate public relations degrees. I recruited my research participants through my professional networks with public relations higher educational institutions and personal networks with many Chinese public relations educators. These networks laid a solid groundwork for my data collection. Particularly, my previous research on Chinese public relations helped me develop an ongoing relationship with the China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA), which is the largest and most prestigious public relations organization in China. The director working there at the Education and Research Department helped me recruit all of my practitioner participants. My personal networks with public relations educators helped me recruit most educator participants as well as student participants. I conclude the methodology

chapter with a discussion of validity, including the issues of reflexivity and my interest in and philosophy of public relations education.

### Organization of Dissertation

The second chapter of this dissertation reviews the major theoretical concepts framing the study. It includes two sections: background literature and theory. In the background literature section, the major subsections are public relations education in China, including a review of its history and a review of issues and challenges facing the field; Confucianism and its link to public relations education; and critical issues and challenges identified in the U.S. public relations literature concerning international public relations scholarship. In the theory section, the major section is a review of the circuit of culture model, including its five moments.

The third chapter delineates rationales for choosing qualitative methodology and details strengths and weaknesses of the two concrete methods—in-depth interview and focus group—that I adopt for the present study. In that chapter, I describe participant recruitment, sampling strategies, procedures, and how I dealt with ethical issues during the process. The fourth chapter offers a thick description of research findings in response to the two research questions. In regards to the first research question, findings are organized in accordance to the five moments of the circuit of culture model—regulation, representation, production, consumption, and identity. Also, I included an additional section on the relationship between academia and industry or production and consumption to further enrich an understanding of Chinese public relations education. With respect to the second research question, I include themes that highlight the influence of Confucianism in Chinese public

relations education. In the last chapter of the dissertation, I synthesize the research findings in a more cohesive manner, discuss the data within the extant literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and highlight the linkage among Confucianism, circuit of culture model, and Chinese public relations education. Here, I also address the limitations of the present study, identify directions for future research, and discuss theoretical implications. Appendix A provides a draft of how I recruited my research participants; Appendices B (interview protocol), C (interview protocol), and D (interview and focus group protocol) are protocols that were used to guide my conversations with educators, practitioners, and students respectively. Appendix E offers a review of U.S. public relations education including major commission reports on undergraduate public relations education, and the relationship between education and practice. Appendices F and G are specific recommendations for undergraduate public relations education suggested by the 1999 and 2006 Commissions on Public Relations Education.

## CHAPTER II

### CONCEPTUALIZATION

#### Overview and Framework

This study aims to answer the research questions that examine the tensions involved in Chinese public relations educators', students', and practitioners' meaning making of Chinese public relations education; and how the interplay of culture, power, and identity intensifies that tension and plays out in the meaning making process. The study also explores the role of Confucianism in public relations, and in what aspects and to what extent Confucianism has affected participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education. Following the goals of the present study, the literature review chapter is divided into two major sections.

The first section includes a review of background literature aiming to provide a context in which to understand and interpret research findings. Particularly, in this section, I begin with a historical review of Chinese public relations education, listing its three phases of development. I then discuss a few critical issues and challenges facing Chinese public relations education including a strong Western influence in Chinese public relations education, assumptions and ambiguities underlying the existing conceptualizations of public relations, and the young stage of Chinese public relations itself.

Next, I transition to describing Confucianism and its relevance to public relations education. Approaching the end of the background literature, I discuss several critical issues and challenges facing international public relations scholarship identified in the U.S. public relations literature, including a lack of international

perspective in public relations curricular content, intellectual hegemony—dominant discourse—, and a lack of philosophical foundation.

The second section of the literature review chapter includes a review of the major theoretical framework guiding the present study—the circuit of culture model (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). Composed of five moments (i.e., regulation, production, representation, consumption, and identity), the circuit of culture model helps in understanding the tensions between global and local, which exemplifies the situation of public relations education in China. The model also sheds light on the interplay of culture, power, and identity and how they affect negotiating and constructing a meaning for Chinese public relations education. Through these theoretical constructs, the present study is able to offer a detailed explanation and analysis of how Chinese participants understand the widespread Western (predominantly U.S.) public relations theories, models, and concepts in China.

Confucianism is adopted as a context to explore and understand participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Confucian philosophy is adopted because of its centuries of influence on the Chinese people, Confucius's identity as the greatest educator in Chinese history, and Confucian emphases on moral cultivation, and internal cultivation of personhood to transform society, all of which speak to the nature of the public relations profession to serve as the ethical conscience of organizations and society. Confucianism is also adopted because its emphases on holism, humanity, relationality can complement the existing dominant Western discourse emphases on competition, procedure, scientism, and linearity.

Altogether, the background literature along with the major theoretical framework provides an analytical lens and context to explore and understand the meaning of Chinese public relations education. They also provide a means to examine the interplay of culture, power, identity and how they affect participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education as well as the influence of Western public relations theories and models in China. This examination reveals the ways in which Confucianism could be of value to public relations education in China as well as overseas. Against the backdrop of these frameworks, I also reveal the assumptions, values, beliefs, and worldview that I have as a researcher to help orient the reader in putting the present study in perspective. In the final section, I synthesize the aforementioned theoretical frameworks and philosophies, refine my propositions, and make clear my research questions.

## BACKGROUND LITERATURE

### Public Relations Education in China

#### *A Historical Overview*

Public relations and even the discipline of communication in general remained largely unknown in China until the 1980s (Chen & Culbertson, 2003). In a time span of 3 decades, public relations as an academic discipline and profession has experienced revolutionary changes. Starting as an experimental project (a specialized area of study under journalism) in 1994 at Sun Yat-Sen University, nowadays public relations courses, majors, and concentrations are being offered at numerous universities, and such institutions have even begun to have independent public relations departments (CIPRA, 2006). As a young field, Chinese public relations education is experiencing progress while facing problems and challenges. In the following, I offer a historical overview of the three phases that Chinese public relations education has gone through (Wei, 2002), followed by a review of the challenges and critical issues facing the field.

#### *First Phase: 1980s*

During the first phase, the Institute of Journalism under the Chinese Academy of Social Science started the first task force on public relations education, aiming to introduce Western public relations concepts and theories—particularly those of the U.S.—into China. A few years after this initiative, Chinese scholars began to develop an understanding of public relations. In 1986, the first textbook on public relations written by mainland Chinese scholars was published. The book, entitled *Introduction to Public Relations*, was well received. Within the following three years (by the end

of 1989), 54 public relations books had been published, including 49 written by mainland Chinese people and 5 translated works of Western publications (Wei, 2002). Among these translated works, the most influential one was the translation of Cutlip, Center, and Broom's *Effective Public Relations* (1985). Also, during the first phase, informal public relations training had begun to emerge. Shen Zhen University was the first university that offered a non-degree-based educational program for students interested in public relations.

*Second Phase: 1990s – 1999*

During the second phase, formal public relations associations and organizations began to emerge. Two major public relations organizations were established during this period. The Public Relations Society of China (PRSC) was established in 1987; the China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA) was established in 1991. Both organizations shared the mission of professionalizing Chinese public relations by promoting more cultural and intellectual exchange and collaborations with the West. Also, around the same time, the Chinese Higher Education Society launched a public relations committee dedicated to the improvement of public relations education in China.

With these efforts, public relations education gained more support from the Chinese government and became more formalized. In 1994, the Chinese education administration approved Sun Yat-Sen University as the first university to offer an undergraduate public relations major as an experimental project. Two years later in 1996, Ji Nan University's Journalism Department started to offer a concentration in



public relations. Since then, more universities have begun to provide public relations courses, majors, and concentrations.

However, academically, Chinese public relations education is still at an experimental stage and still has not developed its body of knowledge. The theoretical foundation was rather weak. Although more Western models and theories had begun to appear in Chinese educational settings, most scholars' understanding of these theories remained at a superficial level, with little understanding of their theoretical assumptions and implications. Moreover, during this phase, little empirical research was conducted to truly investigate the causes and factors perpetuating the status quo of public relations, and hardly any scholarly effort was dedicated to the theoretical development and innovation of Chinese public relations education (Wei, 2002).

#### *Third Phase: 1999 –Present*

With more universities continuing to offer public relations programs and more scholarly and professional activities to professionalize the field, Chinese public relations has entered a stable developmental stage since 1999. Several major events have taken place during this phase. A most praise-worthy achievement was the CIPRA's establishment of public relations as an official occupation listed on China's occupational classification record. One year later in 2000, the CIPRA helped implement the first national accreditation exam for public relations practitioners. In that year, 6,713 people took the accreditation exam and 4,957 people successfully passed the exam (CIPRA, 2006).

With a growing interest in public relations, more universities have begun to offer public relations majors. According to the 2006 conference proceedings of

CIPRA, by 2006, China had more than 320 higher education institutions offering public relations education. Many institutions have independent public relations departments dedicated to students majoring in public relations. Recently, a few institutions have begun to offer graduate and post-graduate public relations programs such as Communication University of China (CUC), University of International Relations (UIR), and Shanghai International Studies University (SHISU). Meanwhile, the China Public Relations Education Committee under CIPRA has also successfully introduced public relations education to government organizations at a state level.

To further the development of Chinese public relations, CIPRA in particular offers a wide variety of programs at both the national and international levels (Zheng, personal communication, July 13, 2006). To name a few, at the national level, the CIPRA has provided training, seminars, case-study competition, and year-round and ongoing research projects for both public relations practitioners and educators. Such initiatives aim to equip participants with a solid knowledge base for their public relations practice, teaching, and learning. They also help elevate public relations practice and education to a new level. Internationally, CIPRA has been holding bi-annual national conferences to bring leading international and national public relations scholars (e.g., James Grunig and Larissa Grunig) and practitioners to exchange their perspectives on public relations and discuss the ways in which they can improve Chinese public relations. Additionally, CIPRA published its first internationally-distributed magazine entitled *International PR Magazine* in 2004.

Since 1999, the professional domain of public relations has also been undergoing remarkable changes—both in terms of respect for the profession and the

number of practitioners involved in the industry. More business communities in China have begun to realize the strategic importance of public relations “in economic activities and people’s daily lives” (Strenski & Yue, 1998, p. 25). By the late 1990s, China had about “1,200 public relations firms employing between 30,000 and 40,000 people, including 5,000-6,000 professionals” (p. 25). A 2000 annual survey conducted by the China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA) demonstrated a similar pattern. As the survey showed:

Earnings from public relations services grew from 200 million RMB (\$24 million) to over 2 billion RMB (\$242 million) within about 3 years. PRC-owned PR firms grew by 30% per annum in the last several years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whereas foreign-owned agencies in the PRC had a growth rate of 15%. The CIPRA survey suggested that the number of practitioners in the country had surpassed 100, 000 by the end of the century. (cited in Chen & Culbertson, 2003, p. 31)

### *Challenges and Critical Issues*

#### *Western Influence in Chinese Public Relations Education*

As a subfield of a young discipline, international public relations is developing rapidly. From research predominantly based in the U.S., scholars have begun to expand their research horizons to regions outside the U.S. This diversified research landscape has enriched the developing body of knowledge in international public relations. However, the spectrum of research on international public relations is still narrow. One critical issue facing international public relations scholarship is a strong Western—particularly American—bias in public relations curricula in Asia

(Sriramesh, 2004, 2007), evident in a managerial and rationalist orientation (Cheney & Christensen, 2001) and its linear communication management model (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). For example, Sriramesh (2004) particularly commented on the danger of this Western influence:

In Asia, public relations programs exclusively use books published in the United States even though these books are primarily intended for American students. When these books are translated for use in other regions of the world, they are translated verbatim without any attempt to align the contents with the environmental contexts of the native country, thereby decreasing the value of this information to the reader. (p. 322)

This Western influence is evident in two types of studies predominant in international public relations scholarship: etic-oriented and comparative studies. In the following, I review these two types of studies respectively.

Etic studies can also be conceived of as studies adopting an “outside-in” or “top-down” approach (Bardhan, 2003). This type of study primarily applies existing Western public relations theories or models to diverse cultural settings either to test their applicability or to modify them by adding a few relevant variables (Bardahn, 2003; Lau, 2006). Since the completion of the Excellence study (see Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995; J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), scholars have effectively tested the global application of the Excellence study’s generic principles (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2001) along with many other theories and models in various parts of the world, such as in South Korea (e.g., Kim, 1996; Rhee, 1999); Singapore (e.g., Tan, 2000); China (e.g., Culbertson &

Chen, 1996; Chen, 2005; Lee, 2004; Huang, 2000, 2001, 2004; Hung, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2007; Hung & Y. Chen, 2007; Ni, 2006; Qiu & Cameron, 2005; Zhang & Cameron, 2003; Zhang, Qiu, & Cameron, 2004); Thailand (Ekachai, 1995); Costa Rico (González & Akel, 1996), Romania (Turk, 1996); India, Greece, and Taiwan (J. E. Grunig, L. A. Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995); Japan (Sriramesh & Takasaaki, 1999); Australia, Italy, Mauritius, and Uganda (Grammer, 2005); Greece (Lyra, 1991); and India (e.g., Sriramesh, 2000; Sriramesh & J. E. Grunig, 1988) to mention a few.

In addition to these individual efforts, scholars have applied the existing Western frameworks to engage in a systematic description and examination of public relations all over the world. For example, the publication of *The Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Practice, and Research* (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003) offers an excellent example to illustrate how Western frameworks are used to describe how public relations is understood and practiced in various parts of the world through the lens of six contextual factors (i.e., media, political system, culture, economic development, level of development, and the extent of activism) as identified by the Excellence study. These studies helped provide insights into how public relations varies from country to country and culture to culture. However, as the field of international public relations matures, etic-oriented studies are insufficient in taking into account each country's specific cultural context.

The main problem with etic-oriented studies is that they are still rooted in the capitalistic and democratic social, political, economic, and cultural systems in the West (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2001). These conditions may not be applicable in

indigenous cultural settings in which these theories are tested. Therefore, still being constrained by the theories' underlying assumptions, scholars are unlikely to notice specific cultural variations in public relations practices in various cultural settings. Accordingly, research results from these etic-based studies are unfortunately reinforcing the existing ethnocentric biases in public relations education (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). For example, in China, it still remains unclear to what extent and in what specific aspects of Chinese cultural values have affected national public relations practice. Studies about Chinese public relations (e.g., Lee, 2004) that merely acknowledge the influence of Chinese cultural values such as *guanxi* and *mianzi* on public relations practice are not helpful in theory-building (Sriramesh, 2007).

In a parallel manner, comparative studies are similar to etic studies in that they both reinforce the existing Western influence on public relations curricula in, for example, Asian countries. These studies predominantly compare public relations in countries other than the U.S. with that of the U.S. theories, models, and practices (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, pp. xi-xii). Still "rooted in Western models," studies are limited by the assumptions underlying these models (p. 256).

Unfortunately, oftentimes, when scholars examine the applicability of these models in diverse cultural settings, they do not make sufficient effort to examine the underlying assumptions in the diverse cultural settings where the theories are tested (Huang, 2007). Without sufficient cultural sensitivity, comparative studies might wrongly yet unintentionally create the impression that the U.S. model offers the prototype for how public relations should be taught and practiced in the rest of the world. This belief impedes the healthy development of international public relations

scholarship, especially considering the nascent stage of public relations in many developing countries such as China.

In short, both etic-oriented and comparative studies extend the existing Western influence in public relations education in countries that are still at an early developmental stage. Limited by the assumptions underlying the Western theoretical frameworks, etic and comparative studies cannot fully incorporate significant local meanings into a conceptualization of public relations in diverse cultures.

Nevertheless, these nuances are crucial to foreground the existing biases and, thus, are helpful for exploring new territories for theoretical innovation and advancement.

In short, as Western public relations theories and models continue to become popularized by etic and comparative studies, indigenous cultural settings such as China have encountered tremendous difficulties in developing a local body of knowledge in public relations.

#### *Assumptions and Ambiguities Underlying the Conceptualization of PR Theories and Concepts*

*Assumptions.* American conceptualization of public relations is grounded in a democratic and capitalistic system (L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 2003; Pearson, 1990). One of the most important theories in public relations is the two-way symmetrical communication model. This model is based on such premises as equality, negotiation, conflict resolution, responsibility, and collaboration (J. E. Grunig, 1992, 2001), as well as the American people's belief in "'common people,' in reverence to political power" (L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 2003, p. 328). Practicing two-way symmetrical communication ensures a most ethical and satisfactory communication outcome

between an organization and its publics (J. E. Grunig, 1992, 2001). However, many of the fundamental principles cannot be held accountable in countries that do not have a similar democratic system to begin with (e.g., Holtzhausen, Petersen, & Tindall, 2003; Kent & Taylor, 1999; M. Wu, 2005). As a result, linking public reactions “to democracy” merely “privileges a Western notion of what public relations is and isn’t” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 205).

China is a case in point that does not have a similar sociopolitical and economic system to that of the U.S. The absence of a democratic political system in particular explains the strategic importance of the Chinese government. For example, Sriramesh and Enxi’s (2004) study of public relations practice in different types of organizations in Shanghai found that “the [Chinese] government is often the ‘sole public’ for most public relations initiatives” (p. 16). Although their study was based in Shanghai, they concluded that their research finding “can be generalized beyond Shanghai to the *entire country* [emphasis added]” (p. 16). In fact, besides China, in many developing nations, rather than citizen groups, governments are often considered the most important “strategic” public (Kent & Taylor, 1999). In such countries, governments can directly influence effective public relations outcomes.

In addition to this debate on what constitutes a public, some scholars have questioned the existence of publics in China. For example, Wu (2002) argued that the centuries’ “elite-authoritarian governing political and social system” does not make Chinese people understand publics in the same way as their American counterparts (p. 17). In fact, “[I]t is nearly impossible to require Chinese people to differentiate clearly the ‘public’ part and the ‘private’ part of their societal behavior” (p. 17). The



centralized political system had long excluded ordinary Chinese citizens from participating in political decision-making processes (p. 17). The authoritarian government system made people lose their interest in talking about public issues. As a result, compared to Europe and America, Wu (2002) asserted:

The motivation of urban citizens to take part in political affairs has been *much lower* [emphasis added] in China. .... [I]n China, there is neither an absolute “individual”—the personally, socially independent subject—nor a theoretically qualified “public”—the well-informed, socially responsible community. (p. 17)

Besides this variation in political systems, a country’s level of economic development can also affect its consideration of a priority research agenda, as well as its understandings of the role of public relations. For example, Synnott and McKie’s (1997) study showed that countries that were less economically developed considered globalization and multiculturalism their priority issues, whereas they were not top concerns for developed countries. Also, whereas community and social responsibility were considered important for developing countries, they were not top obligations for developed countries (Synnott & McKie, 1997, p. 276).

*Ambiguities.* Many concepts in public relations have ambiguities embedded in them. Key concepts such as public relations and relationships are often treated as “primitive terms understood by all” (Broom, 2006, p. 145). However, more often than not, these terms have distinctive meanings in accordance with the specific cultural contexts that they are applied to. Global evidence has shown what *public relations* means varies in Arab countries (Al-Enad, 1990), European countries (Vercic, van

Ruler, Butshi, & Flodin, 2001), South Africa (e.g., Holtzhausen, Petersen, & Tindall, 2003), Asia (e.g., Sriramesh, 2000) more than that in the U.S. Similarly for *relationship*, which is another key component of public relations, its meaning also varies from culture to culture, country to country, and ethnicity to ethnicity (Aldoory, 2005). Without first clarifying these ambiguities, any attempt at theory-building at an international level would be premature. As Broom (2006) contended, the embedded ambiguities along with an assumed agreed-upon understanding of key concepts “makes building a coherent theory impossible and renders the findings meaningless when taken as a ‘body of evidence’” (p. 145).

Unfortunately, most studies about international public relations tend to adopt an etic or comparative approach. These studies apply existing theories or concepts to diverse cultural settings to test their applicability or modify them by adding a few relevant variables (Bardahn, 2003; Lau, 2006). Research outcomes from such studies provide and fortify “an inherently ethnocentric perspective” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. xi-xii). Etic-oriented and comparative studies by nature reinforce the dominant position of the U.S. discourse and theoretical frameworks. These studies also indicate that other countries’ public relations practices still “have a long way to go until they catch up to the United States” (p. 256). Such a belief “diminishes what we [Western public relations scholars] can learn from other cultures and what they deem as public relations” (p. 256). With the large number of Asian public relations curricula copying Western models and theories (*Public Relations Education in the 21st Century—The Professional Bond*, 2006), the biases and indications inherent to the Western

conceptualization would cause significant barriers to the theoretical development of public relations in diverse cultural settings.

As a result, any attempt at theory-building on an international scale should take into consideration the aforementioned factors. Scholars have to make deliberate efforts to explicate the variations, assumptions, and ambiguities underlying their theoretical frameworks to make theory-building at an international level more fruitful. In fact, in their conceptualization of public relations, Vercic and J. E. Grunig (1995) pointed out a possible American ethnocentric bias because of their background in economics and management. They specified three concepts core to their American conceptualization of public relations: effectiveness (strategic planning), efficiency (productivity), and social responsibility. They urged future scholars to investigate the accountability of these underlying values in their examination of public relations practice in diverse cultural settings. It is time that public relations scholars took full consideration of their call.

Aware of these assumptions and ambiguities, researchers have to be open to cultural specifics with respect to indigenous cultural settings' sociopolitical, cultural, and economic contexts and let these specifics dictate their research agenda and theory-building. A valid question that public relations educators should engage in is "Why do we need or employ public relations when none of the conditions which led to and dictated the use of public relations in the first place exists in third world countries?" (Al-Enad, 1990, p. 25). Although there is no easy answer to this question, scholars at least have to consider the biases that the body of knowledge carries with it. Otherwise, international public relations theories cannot claim to be valid until they

give considerable attention to all the possible cultural variances during the theorizing process.

*The Young Stage of Chinese Public Relations Education*

Public relations and even communication in general remained largely unknown in China until the late 1980s. Although the field has experienced evolutionary changes, Chinese public relations education is still struggling with many issues and challenges. With a much shorter history and weaker theoretical foundation, the nascency of Chinese public relations education has fostered a strong tendency to borrow public relations theories and models from the West—particularly the U.S., identified as the leader in public relations in the world (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2001). The Commission on Public Relations Education specifically commented on this tendency to borrow theories and models from the West in its 2006 *The Professional Bond*:

Importing or significantly adopting North American and Western European models of public relations has become a *standard* [emphasis added] practice for many countries in Latin America and Asia. Many programs are built closely on the Western prototypes and offer traditional classes in public relations tactics, such as media relations, as well as comprehensive public relations campaigns. (p. 37)

This heavy reliance on Western theories and models, to a great extent, contributes to the slow development of a local body of knowledge of public relations in Asian countries. Although empirical studies have slowly begun to emerge, most were conducted by Asian students pursuing higher education in the U.S. (Sriramesh,

2004). These graduate students, after their graduation, continue to “analyze public relations in Asia using concepts and theories developed in the United States” (p. 323). Their low level of cultural sensitivity to indigenous settings only reinforces Western influence in Asian public relations education.

### Confucianism

Confucianism is adopted as a context in which to interpret participants’ meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Confucianism is also adopted given its potential in serving as a possible educational philosophy to guide public relations education and practice. Education philosophies are helpful for offering insights into understanding and resolving educational problems (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). In light of Chinese public relations education, unfortunately, few scholars have made any effort to identify a philosophical base on which to ground public relations education and practice. Few scholars have attempted to harvest the fruits of Confucianism as a possible educational philosophy. Confucianism, with its thousands of years of history and impact on the Chinese people’s values and beliefs as well as his identity as the greatest educator in Chinese history, can be a proper context in which to understand public relations education and theorize it in reference to Confucian values.

In my attempt to ground public relations in a philosophical base, I followed L. Grunig’s (1992) contention, “it [is] more appropriate for a public relations scholar to develop the philosophy of public relations than for a philosopher to write about public relations” (p. 69). My endeavor of grounding public relations in a philosophical base aims to underscore the utility of Confucianism in understanding

contemporary Chinese public relations education. This adoption of Confucianism as a context and possible philosophical foundation is also based on several rationales: thousands of years of Confucian influence on the Chinese people; Confucius' identity as the greatest educator in Chinese history; Confucian emphases on moral cultivation through education and personhood cultivation to transform society (which speak to the inherent ethical dimension of public relations); and Confucian emphases on holism, benevolence, relationality, and humanity to complement the Western discourse emphases on scientism, competition, and linearity. Meanwhile, my effort of incorporating Confucianism into Chinese public relations education also serves as impetus for Chinese scholars to begin to appreciate the wisdom of conventional philosophies and acknowledge their contemporary relevance in understanding and resolving educational problems. Such a process could parallel and counter the flow of Western public relations theories into China's higher educational setting.

#### *An Overview of Confucius*

Confucius (551-479 B.C.) is considered to be one of the most influential thinkers, educators, and philosophers in Chinese history. Confucian values have influenced Chinese culture for more than 2500 years. Penetrating almost every aspect of Chinese society, Confucianism is "the most important force in Chinese life, affecting education, government, and personal behavior" (Ozmon & Craver, 2003, p. 103). Among all of his identities, Confucius is foremost identified as "The Ultimate Sage-Teacher." His wise sayings continue to serve as guidance on Chinese education.

Confucius traveled all over China to teach people about government, music, philosophy, and how to become and behave like a complete person<sup>1</sup> (君子) (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). Among his teaching subjects, called the “Six Arts” (ritual, music, archery, chariot-riding, calligraphy, and computation), morality was the most important. During the peak time of his career, Confucius had 3000 students learning from him. After his death, Confucius’ disciples collected and organized all of his teachings into a book called *Analects*. The book reflects the gist of Confucius’ wisdom and is a must-read for students in China.

Confucius believed that people cannot be born to become complete. Instead, they have to be trained. Personal cultivation, by looking within, brings out the best of humanity and thus trains people to become complete people. Becoming a whole person is a life-long journey. It depends on a person’s character and conduct as the person lives his or her life. Good character lives through the test of hardship, such as poverty and adversity (*The Analects*, 6.17). “Rightness, virtue, and propriety” (Ozmon & Craver, 2003, p. 103) have to be the yardsticks according to which one lives his or her life. Furthermore, Confucius listed Five Constant Virtues that superior individuals should live up to:

[1.] Right Attitude.

[2.] Right Procedure.

[3.] Right Knowledge.

[4.] Right Moral Courage.

[5.] Right Persistence. (Ozmon & Craver, p. 104)

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<sup>1</sup> Some translate it as gentlemen 君子, *jun zi*.

“These virtues, if practiced, would lead to a new society based on the principles of justice and wisdom” (Ozmon & Craver, p. 104).

Confucius was open to who could become his students. He never rejected instructing anyone, regardless of his or her socioeconomic status. As the Master contended, “I only instruct the eager and enlighten the fervent.” (*The Analects*, 7.8). As long as one demonstrated an earnest interest in learning, one could become Confucius’ student. Confucius had students covering a wide spectrum of economic status, from the poor to the rich.

Confucius believed that people need standards and rules to govern their social activities (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). One rule of thumb is that “the self should not come before society because people have overriding obligations to parents, ancestors, and society as a whole” (p. 103). Confucius believed that all human beings are capable of growth. It is through education that one is trained to fulfill one’s obligation to parents, ancestors, and society as a whole. However, these rules and standards should not be confused with dictatorship. Instead, Confucian emphasis on obeying rules is governed by humanity and reciprocal love. Giving preference to others, being kind to others, and loving and trusting people are all the building blocks guiding social interactions in everyday life. One has to always demonstrate appropriate behaviors in alignment with the societal role that one plays and position that one occupies.

Confucius believed an ideal society is one in which an individual’s well-being depends on the well-being of all (Ozmon & Craver, 2003). All members in society are responsible for contributing their shares for the Common Good (Lin, 2007a) in order



to create a harmonious society in which people are not only kind to their own family members but also to other people, including the children, the elderly, the weak, and the poor. Within such a harmonious coexistence of all species, Confucius believed that there is no need for law enforcement or a prison system because everyone is disciplined internally and externally.

### *Cardinal Principles<sup>2</sup> of Confucianism*

#### *Ren*

*Ren* is one the most important cardinal principle of Confucianism. *Ren* means ‘benevolence’<sup>3</sup> (e.g., Chen, 1987; Chen & Chung, 1994; Lin, 2007a; Warner & Zhu, 2003). Confucius believed in the goodness of human nature. *Ren*, with an emphasis on love and humanity, is the overarching principle that governs others. As Leung (1992) defined, *Ren* is “the ontological ground of communication and understanding” (p. 407). To be an ideal human being is to live a *Ren*-based life. Benevolence or *Ren*, thus, is the ground from which all virtuous acts spring. However, *Ren* is not an autonomous entity. It is always in relationship to others. Confucius believed that individuals do not exist unless they are in relationships with others. It is through relationship with others that one demonstrates his or her benevolence and virtuous character. A self-driven orientation is against Confucian emphasis on *Ren* (Wang, 2007).

A *Ren*-based communication environment is infused with love and reciprocity. It is selfless love, profound and illuminating. The Confucian notion of *Ren* extends to all human relationships, between husband and wife, parents and

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<sup>2</sup> Confucianism has five principles: *Ren*, *Yi*, *Li*, intellect, and *Xin*. *Ren* and *Li* are two of the cardinal principles most relevant to the present study.

<sup>3</sup> *Ren* is also translated as kindness, goodness, or humanity.

children, rulers and subordinates, and so on. Confucius believed that individuals occupy certain societal positions and have to fulfill their corresponding responsibilities based on the roles they play and positions they occupy.

Reciprocity is another important concept related to *Ren*. Reciprocity refers to mutual expectations in regard to people's social responsibilities (Chen & Chung, 1994, p. 97). *Ren* and reciprocity are inseparable. When favors are given, they should be returned in a reciprocal and loving manner. One common saying in Chinese helps illustrate the essence of a *Ren*-based reciprocity. That is, a drop of water received, returns in pour (滴水之恩涌泉相报).

Many Confucian teachings are based on *Ren* and are still relevant today, such as loving kindness is the central virtue (仁者爱人); establishing others first before you establish yourself (己欲立先立人, 己欲达先达人); harmony is most precious (和为贵); forgiveness—kindness towards those who hurt us (以德报怨); doing no harm to others as we would not do it to ourselves (己所不欲, 勿施于人) (Lin, 2007a). These core values of Chinese culture focus on interrelational love and interdependence among human beings and between humans and the universe. They also emphasize a mid-way approach to resolve conflicts; governing by virtue, compassion, and humility; and dwelling on the common good that connects people rather than the differences that pull them apart.

### *Li*

*Li* is another most important cardinal principle underlying Confucianism. *Li* means propriety, referring to the ritual activities that have passed down from generation to generation. Tu (2008) also defined *Li* as civility. *Li* dictates that people

abide by proper rituals in social interactions. Rituals are established based on social norms and rules. Individuals engaging in ritualistic behaviors have to respect these rules and norms. Yum (1988) conceived of *Li* as “the rule of the universe and the fundamental regulatory etiquette of human behavior” (p. 378). Within the context of *Ren* (benevolence or love), Confucius cautioned that social rules and norms should not be imposed in a manner deprived of *Ren*. In other words, propriety and benevolence have to go hand-in-hand.

In short, the interplay of these cardinal concepts created a solid social structure grounded in five hierarchical human relationships called *Wu Lun*. *Wu Lun* describes the five basic interpersonal relationships among human beings: between ruler and subject, between father and son, between husband and wife, between older brother and younger brother, and between friends (Chen & Chung, 1994). *Wu Lun* explicates that people at a lower hierarchical position should respect and obey those in higher positions, and similarly, those in higher positions should love and protect people at lower positions. Specifically, the Confucian Five Code of Ethics commands:

The ruler has to show justice, and the subject shows loyalty; father shows love, and son shows filial piety; husband shows initiation, and wife shows obedience; the older brother shows brotherly love, and younger brother shows reverence in return; and friends show mutual faith to each other. (Chen & Chung, p. 95)

As it is noted above, this hierarchical relationship is grounded in the *Ren*-context. In other words, although it seems asymmetrical at a structural level, the

hierarchical relationship is based on virtuous acts, love, and humanity. Without putting the *Wu Lun* into the larger context of the goodness of human nature, an understanding of the hierarchical relationships misses the essence of Confucian wisdom. Intertwined, the two cardinal concepts of *Ren* and *Li* serve as frames of reference for one another and have to be understood in relation to one another. They work as a whole to construct and sustain harmonious relationships among people, governments, and the universe.

The centuries of learning of Confucian teaching have crystallized the essence of Confucianism and made Confucian values an integral part of the Chinese people's lives. As Chen and Culbertson (1992) illustrated, "The Confucian emphasis on personal relationships, honesty, high moral standards, and loyalty to one's group affects every aspect of individual and organizational life in China" (p. 38). Many virtues have become essential to Chinese people's lives. Virtues, such as "skill acquisition, hard work, moderation, patience, and perseverance," have also contributed to the economic growth of the Asian Five Dragons (Chen & Chung, 1994, p. 98). In the following, I review two unique cultural concepts (i.e., harmony and relationship) integral to Confucian teaching.

### *Important Confucian Cultural Concepts*

#### *Harmony*

Confucian emphasis on harmony extends to both human relationships and relationships between human and the universe, including the Heaven and the Earth. Confucius illustrated his cosmological thinking in the *Doctrine of the Mean*:

Only those who are the most sincere [authentic, true, and real] can fully realize their own nature. If they can fully realize their own nature, they can fully realize human nature. If they can fully realize human nature, they can fully realize the nature of things. If they can fully realize the nature of things, they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can form a trinity with Heaven and Earth. (Tu, 2001, p. 77)

In other words, Confucian emphasis on harmony is based on a peaceful co-existence of all human and non-human species. One important point worth noting is that harmony does not indicate a lack of disagreement or resistance. In fact, without difference there would be no harmony. Confucius, as an advocate of active involvement in politics, argued that “the purpose of criticizing rulers is to urge them to follow the Way of harmony” (Wang, 2004, p. 61). Unfortunately, many critics confused Confucian notion of harmony with conformity. Conformity is a far cry from what Confucius meant by “harmony.” As noted in *The Analects*, “A *junzi* [gentleman] seeks harmony but not conformity. An inferior man seeks conformity but not harmony” (13.23). Harmony, thus, is not achieved through naïve agreement but constructive criticism (Wang, 2004). Therefore, rather than projecting a homogenous image, Confucian harmony is inclusive harmony, embracing differences and similarities. It is harmony within and in reference to difference. As the Chinese saying goes, harmony is a coexistence of differences (和而不同，和而不流).

### *Relationship/Guanxi in the Context of Confucian Culture*

*Guanxi* is a cultural and behavioral manifestation of Confucian teaching on relationship. Many other concepts appeared in the public relations literature, such as *xinyong* (personal trust) (Leung, Lai, Chan, & Wong, 2005), *Renqing* (favours) (Huang, 2000, 2001; Hung, 2004; Hwang, 1987; Langenberg, 2007; Su et al., 2007; C. Wang, 2007; Zuo, 1997), *face* or *mianzi* (Hwang, 1987), *bao* (Hung, 2004), and *ganqing* (feelings) (C. Wang, 2007), can be related to *guanxi* in one way or another. In its simplest manner, *guanxi* refers to the process of developing and maintaining long-term interpersonal relationships. Scholars have suggested various ways to interpret *guanxi*, such as connection, network, friendship, exchange, and so on (see Fan, 2002).

Research on *guanxi* has centered primarily on its ethical implications in organizational settings. Most research is done by management scholars (e.g., Chan, Cheng, & Szeto, 2002; Leung, et al., 2005; Lovett, Simmons, & Kali, 1999; Su, Mitchell, & Sirgy, 2007; Tan & Snell, 2002; Whitcomb, Erdener, & Li, 1998; Wong & Tam, 2000) and a few by public relations scholars (e.g., Hackley & Dong, 2001; Huang, 2000, 2004; Hung, 2004).

For example, Hackley and Dong (2001) pointed out that the Chinese cultural practice of *guanxi* differs from that of social networking in Western societies. One primary reason contributing to this difference is that *guanxi* is based on Confucian emphasis on *Ren* (Hackley & Dong, 2001). As mentioned earlier, *Ren* means benevolence. *Ren*-based *guanxi* is more than a favor-exchange. People help each

other with genuine and reciprocal love. Those returning a received favor consider it an honorary act to do so (Hackley & Dong, 2001).

*Guanxi* is a process, delicate and reciprocal. It is more meaningful than an apparent gift-giving. As Hackley and Dong (2001) illustrated, whereas in China “[a]ny behavior against the hierarchical order is considered abnormal,” in Western society, “social interaction is based on equality, freedom and personal interests, and respect and reputation are earned by individuals, not given by the social structure” (pp. 17-18). In other words, whereas Western people tend to rely on principles such as a code of ethics to determine ethical behaviors, their Chinese counterparts seemed to do so by relying on shared cultural norms and rules rooted in Confucianism.

These different mindsets in determining what is ethical and unethical help explain why some scholars (e.g., Bond & Hwang, 1986; Huang, 2000, 2001; Koo & Obst, 1995; Li & Wright, 1999; Luo, 2007; Smeltzer & Jennings, 1998; Snell, 1999; So & Walker, 2006; Standifird & Marshall, 2000; Xin & Pearce, 1996; Yao, 1999) perceived *guanxi* as unethical, while others (e.g., Lovett, et al., 1999; Luo, 1997, 2007; Su et al., 2007; S. L. Tan, 2000; Wong & Chan, 1999; X. Wu, 2002) believed *guanxi* to be an ethical and effective means to do business in the Chinese context. From the Chinese perspective, a *guanxi*-oriented business format without following Western ethics does not mean the Chinese way is unethical (Lovett, et al., 1999). Chan et al. (2002) found that Chinese business practitioners considered *guanxi* an effective and *necessary* [emphasis added] means to cultivate mutual trust and develop long-term relationships.

Unfortunately, public relations scholars have not yet taken the initiative to build a theoretical connection between the cultural practice of *guanxi* and Confucianism and public relations at a deeper level. Such a deeper exploration of *guanxi* requires a researcher to go beyond merely acknowledging that Confucianism has an impact on Chinese public relations practice or suggesting it as a fruitful avenue for future research to examining the root in which *guanxi* is grounded and manifested. *Guanxi* is only a behavioral ramification of Confucian emphasis on relationship grounded in benevolence (*Ren*) and propriety (*li*). In other words, *gaunxi* is the outcome resulting from the interplay of the Confucian five cardinal principles. Merely exploring *guanxi* at a behavioral level as gift-giving or banqueting ignores the cultural root in which these behaviors acquire their meanings.

*Confucianism as a Context: The Linkage Between Confucianism  
and Public Relations Education*

*Confucian Emphasis on Self-Cultivation*

The foremost connection between Confucianism and public relations education is the Confucian emphasis on personal cultivation and morality and public relations' role of being the ethical conscience of organizations (Ryan & Martinson, 1983) and public rhetors of society (Heath, 1992). *Self-cultivation* refers to the ongoing process of looking within to transform the world without. It is a means of actualizing humanity. With a focus on morality, personal cultivation helps develop the best quality within humans and bring them forward to transform the society without.



Confucius approached personhood cultivation as a way of life. He believed that a well-cultivated individual brings well-being to the internal self and is able to transmit it to the external family, state, nation, and world. As Tu (1985) elaborated:

The heuristic value of learning for the sake of the self can perhaps be understood as an injunction for self-cultivation . . . [which] enacts the Confucian concern that to know oneself internally is the precondition for doing things right in the external world. (p. 56)

Confucius was a firm believer in the goodness of human nature; that is, human beings are bound to be kind, loving, caring, and giving; and they are educable and malleable through proper and sufficient self-cultivation. Personal cultivation through education has the power to rekindle the kindness and love within and distribute them to the world without.

From a Confucian viewpoint, the self is an entity. Its existence is always in relation to others. The self does not exist unless it is in relationship with others. However, the self-other is not a dichotomy but a unity, which “makes personal cultivation possible” (Wang, 2007, p. 276). The self and the other are interdependent. In alignment with this relational viewpoint on life, personal cultivation has become a process that “involves an extension from the self to the other, from the internal to the external, and from the near to the far” (p. 276). In other words, the self is the bridge that connects what is internal with what is external. It is the center of a series of concentric circles surrounded by family, society, nation, world, and universe (Wang). Sufficient self-cultivation connects the inner self with the external society and thus contributes to social well-being.

Equally important, public relations education stresses the role of self or individual in professionalizing public relations. Serving as the ethical conscience of organizations and shouldering the responsibility of contributing to society, public relations practitioners need to rekindle their power and ethical consciousness within so as to do right things and do things right in the external world. As Wright and Turk (2007) eloquently explicated, all organizational decisions, ethical or unethical, are made by practitioners at an individual level not by the profession as a whole. Likewise, in its 2006 *Public Relations Education for the 21st Century—The Professional Bond*, the Commission posited, “Research suggests that professional success requires that the right knowledge and skills be accompanied by appropriate personal traits, and certain attributes have been identified as developmental necessities” (p. 43). Such recommended traits as responsibility, flexibility, creativity, sensitivity, respect, and empathy can be actualized through consistent self-cultivation.

Unfortunately, public relations education in the U.S. has not yet given sufficient attention to self-cultivation and training desirable traits within individuals. In fact, even scholarly interest in ethics did not appear in the public relations literature until the late 20th century. In 1995, Seib and Fitzpatrick published, arguably, the first textbook “exclusively devoted to ethics” (p. v). Since then, research on ethics and moral character development has gradually begun to emerge. More scholars (e.g., Bowen, 2000, 2004, 2005; Edgett, 2002; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1996; Kruckeberg, 1996; Pearson, 1989b) have begun to examine ethics and its implications in public relations practice. For example, Bowen developed a theory of ethical issues

management based on Kantian deontological philosophy characterized by rationality and autonomy.

Such examination on professional ethics are helpful but not sufficient. In addition to stressing rationality and autonomy in reasoning, Chinese educators may coach students to engage in internal cultivation of characters in terms of righteousness, forgiveness, interrelationship, humanity, compassion, sympathy, and so on, so as to train students to develop the courage to make right decisions in the face of ethical dilemmas. Confucian personhood cultivation, with an emphasis on morality and inter-relational well-being, can contribute to training students to internalize the desirable traits, such as the Confucian Five Constant Virtues: right attitude, right procedure, right knowledge, right moral courage, and right persistence (Ozmon & Craver, 2003, p. 104).

Moreover, beyond the professional level, engaging in self-reflection is also necessary for public relations as an academic discipline. It helps academics to contemplate the biases and legacies that the body of knowledge of public relations has carried along. For example, Karlberg (1996) posited a series of questions worthwhile for public relations scholars to ponder:

The time for self-reflection in public relations research is long overdue. What are the premises shaping public relations research? Who has benefited from this research? And how can the public relations research agenda be reconciled with participatory, representative, and inclusive theories of public discourse? (p. 264)

Engaging in these questions can help contribute to the developing body of knowledge in international public relations.

### *Thriving on Confucian Values*

Confucian emphases on moral character and such virtues as righteousness, humanity, compassion, and love are all relevant to public relations practice and education. In fact, in the field of business, many scholars have begun to consider Confucian values in their teaching about public relations. For example, Lam (2003) helped demonstrate the utility of Confucian value in solving environmental issues caused by multinational corporations (MNCs). He argued that, if more MNCs could see “the unity among Heaven, Earth and everything,” instead of merely focusing on their shortsighted vision of short-term benefits for organizations, MNCs would not have caused the many environmental issues that they have caused.

Others scholars (Cheung & King, 2004) have taken the lead to examine contemporary Confucian entrepreneurs who “harbor Confucian moral values” and set these values as priority concerns above that of profit (p. 245). Cheung and King’s (2004) examination of Confucian entrepreneurs found that “there are individuals who do not necessarily seek to maximize material gains even in the business world but act in ways that contradict the image of man portrayed by the neo-classical paradigm in economics” (p. 258). In other words, Confucian entrepreneurs pursue moral values “not for the sake of generating more profits but as an end in itself” (p. 258). They aimed to live a *Ren*-based (benevolence-based) life by making a conscious effort to “distinguish between moral and immoral or meaningful and nonmeaningful practices and [trying] to encapsulate their profit-making activities within the boundaries of

their moral beliefs” (p. 258). However, Cheung and King showed that these Confucian entrepreneurs were not without moral struggles. When there were opportunities for material gains, Confucian entrepreneurs were challenged to abide by their moral values when taking advantage of such opportunities would run counter to their values. In such circumstances, personhood cultivating, with a focus on morality, would reaffirm these entrepreneurs’ belief in acting in accordance with their core moral principles rather than economic benefits.

Some business scholars have also begun to incorporate Confucianism into their research on management (Jacobs, Gao, & Herbig, 1995; Lin & Chi, 2007) and business ethics (e.g., Lam, 2003; Su & Littlefield, 2001). Kahn (1979) suggested that the shared cultural heritage of Confucianism was what led to the economic success of such East Asian countries as South Korea, Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan.

Unfortunately, in public relations literature, no comparable endeavor has been undertaken. Scholars in general seemed to use Confucianism to explain Chinese public relations in reference to Western public relations models, rather than relying on Confucianism as a foundation to theorize about Chinese public relations.

One exception is Roper and Weymes’s (2007) work. These authors argued that Western business practices are gradually losing their legitimacy in this contemporary market-economy, as evidenced in cases such as Shell, Nike, Enron, and Andersen. They proposed an alternative model that integrated traditional Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism and Taoism. Their alternative model, based on Confucian *Ren* (benevolence or love) and *Li* (civility or propriety) principles, proposed that business management should rely on human capital rather than merely

on economic gains. They called for a reorientation towards love, compassion, and humanity to ground business practices and argued that such a reorientation could help redevelop and rebuild social capital in today's market-driven society. This proposition concurs with Wang's (2007) argument that Western management tradition with an emphasis on regulation, science, systems, structures, and procedures can benefit from Confucianism by "wedding them [these Western traditions] with Confucian leadership traditions which advocate reciprocity between empathetic loving and sympathetic responding to weave a web of relationality and inter-connectedness" (p. 289).

Another insight from Roper and Weymes's (2007) alternative model is that it extended Confucian emphasis on relationship to the organizational context, "between employers, employees and communities" (p. 137), while arguing that Confucian principles of relationship could help contribute to social well-being and help replace the dominant mode of individual competition with a more collective-based corporate social responsibility. To that end, Roper and Weymes recommended having Confucian principles become a natural entity in organizational culture. They also called for organizations to provide a supportive or *Ren*-based environment conducive to employees' advancement and development in the organizations. Such considerations should be reflected at organizational-policy level demonstrating a sincere care for employees' well-being. Policies should intend to bring a "family-friendly" environment rather than merely change at a superficial level (Varuhas, Fursman, & Jacobsen, 2003).

In fact, a feminist scholar (L. A. Grunig, 2006) made similar arguments. She stated that organizations should consider the multifaceted roles that public relations practitioners, especially, female practitioners, are simultaneously playing, inside as well as outside organizations. Such considerations should be reflected at organizational culture, environment, and policy. L. A. Grunig further contended that a genuinely employee-supportive organizational environment contributes to the overall excellence and effectiveness of the organization. Treating employees as real human beings means creating an organizational environment that legitimizes the holistic nature of employees' lives. Working within such an environment, practitioners can make the greatest contributions to their organizations without sacrificing their personal, community, and family lives (L. A. Grunig). In this conceptualization, L. A. Grunig's contention aligns with Confucian emphases on humanity, reciprocal love, and interrelationship.

In summary, Confucian values have influenced contemporary Chinese society in profound ways. Identified foremost as the greatest educator in Chinese history, Confucius' philosophy is of value to Chinese public relations education in many important ways. In fact, if Confucian philosophy is evident in management (Roper & Weymes, 2007), why not in public relations that has an inherent management function to it? As Roper and Weymes cautioned, "[D]o Chinese businesses need to forgo their Confucian cultural and ethical roots" to compete in a "Western-dominated market?" (p. 141). They challenged the legitimacy of relying on Western development models to succeed, as some scholars have recommended (Cheung & King, 2004; Ding et al., 2000; Warner & Zhu, 2002; Zapalska & Edwards, 2001).

Roper and Weymes (2007) warned scholars that it was the Western organizational practices with emphases on profit-driven and individual competition that were losing their legitimacy and trust in the contemporary market. Confucianism, in contrast, with a more holistic approach, can complement the Western emphases on profit-driven and individual competition. As Wang (2007) stated:

Confucian emphases on the role of *Ren*, on persuasion rather than law, on relationality rather than regulation, and on feelings rather than rationality can be used in a contemporary way to attune educational visions and long-term transformation with what the collective desires. (p. 289)

It might be that this conjunction of Western scientism—with emphases on standardization, accountability, and assessment—and Chinese holism—with emphases on reciprocity and inter-relational harmony between human and universe (Wang, 2007)—could be integrated in Chinese public relations education.

In fact, scholars have already demonstrated the utility of such a possible cultural and intellectual integration. For example, Pinar's (2003a, 2003b, 2004) experimentation with internationalizing curriculum helps “counteract the ethnocentric, narcissistic tendency of educational field in the United States through re-formulating the notion of identity to understand the self as relational, historical, and political” (cited in Wang, 2007, p. 290). Though few, public relations scholars such as Roper and Weymes (2007) have asked, “Could Eastern and Western business practices and values *converge* [italics original] to become more ethical and more acceptable globally?” (p. 141).



## Challenges and Critical Issues Identified in the U.S. Public Relations Literature Concerning International Public Relations Scholarship

More than half a century has passed since universities have begun their formal public relations education in the U.S. However, the “unsatisfactory and disparate state of public relations education” (p. 1) that Cutlip and Bateman (1973) pinpointed 3 decades ago has continued to mirror the status quo of contemporary public relations education in the U.S. colleges and universities (Wright et al., 2007). Many problems (Bernays, 1978; Chase, 1961; Mader, 1958, 1969; Mortimer, 1963; Walker, 1982; Westland, 1974) troubling the field in the past still persist today (Wright, Hinson, Flaherty, & Ford, 2007). In the following, I review a series of issues and challenges identified in the U.S. public relations literature concerning international public relations scholarship, including a lack of international perspectives, intellectual hegemony, a lack of philosophical foundation, and a low level of ethnic diversity among public relations educators.

### *Lack of International Perspective: Striving for Multiculturalism*

As a sub-area of public relations practice, international public relations is developing rapidly. However, compared to the availability of traditional courses such as “writing, strategic management, and campaign execution” (Taylor, 2001, p. 74), international public relations courses remain peripheral. Further, the heavy reliance of Asian public relations curricula on the U.S. models, concepts, and theories (*Professional Bond*, 2006; Sriramsesh, 2004) continues to slow the development of a body of knowledge in international public relations. This heavy reliance has also brought another compelling issue into question; that is, “[W]hether the United States,

as the pioneer and current leader of public relations education, delivers *multicultural public relations education*” (Sriramesh, p. 325). Unfortunately, the extant curricular content suggests a lack of multiculturalism in U.S. public relations education. As Sriramesh contended, “[T]here is a scarcity of refereed articles on public relations practice from regions other than the United States and some Western European countries” (p. 325).

However, future public relations education cannot escape global influence. The emergence of multinational corporations has spurred multiculturalism (Sriramesh, 2004), which has furthered the convergence of diverse cultures. Globalization has made it a prerequisite for public relations scholars and practitioners “to be familiar with the socio-cultural variability in different regions of the world” (Sriramesh, 2004, p. 321). In its 1999 report titled *Public Relations Education for the 21st Century—A Port Entry*, the Commission on Public Relations Education identified a pressing need for curricular multiculturalization in the “age of global interdependence.” In its latest 2006 report entitled *Public Relations Education for the 21st Century—The Professional Bond*, the Commission again underscored the need for multiculturalism in public relations education, noting, “Incorporating elements of inclusion and diversity throughout the undergraduate curriculum is . . . essential to adequately prepare future practitioners for the roles they will play in such relationship-building” (p. 41). To that end, “[i]t is not enough to offer a course with a global focus. Global concepts must be integrated throughout the curriculum because many students will be addressing issues related to globalization, diversity and multiculturalism as they enter the practice of public relations” (p. 44).

Nevertheless, neither educators nor students should be fully responsible for this lack of international perspective in the existing U.S. public relations curricula. In fact, both sides have demonstrated a paramount eagerness to orient themselves to the multicultural organizational environment. For example, Bardhan (2003) examined students' perspectives on multiculturalism and public relations education. He found that it was not so much that students were not interested in multicultural issues than the external factors that have prevented them from taking courses related to multiculturalism. External factors such as the "university general education requirements" were too ethnocentric in focus for one thing and, for another, required large number of courses that left students little time to select courses that "would widen their international/multicultural horizons" (Bardhan, 2003, p. 170).

In a parallel manner, educators (e.g., Bardhan, 2003; Taylor, 2001; Tsui, 2004; Wu, 2004) have increasingly voiced their concerns about bridging the gap between public relations curricula and the multicultural communication environment in which contemporary organizations reside. For example, J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (2002) contended that, among the Excellence study's recommendations for the future of public relations, a most important research need is to

[d]evelop a global body of knowledge in PR. . . . [P]ublic relations education must become more global at the undergraduate, postgraduate, MBA and continuing education levels. Students must learn to think of the international implications of all PR problems, learn to work with colleagues and clients from other countries, and learn how: cultures; political, and economic and media systems; differences in the level of development of other countries; and

the nature of activist organizations in these different settings affect organizational behavior and PR practice. (p. 41)

However, irrespective of their enthusiasm, the inherent difficulty in designing an international public relations course has significantly hindered the emergence of multiculturalism in curricular design (Taylor, 2001). Bardhan (2003) suggested that one way to help internationalize public relations curricula would be to have public relations educators become more “self-reflexive about their own backgrounds, sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of their students and open to constantly enabling their own multicultural competencies” (p. 171). Other avenues to internationalizing public relations curricula, according to Taylor (2001), are through culture, international practice, and culturally sensitive theory development. Taylor also proposed a template for an international public relations curriculum that integrates five basic components: cultural variation in interpersonal and organizational communication, the impact of societal factors on public relations, ethics in international contexts, professional development of international practitioners, and geography and current events (p. 75).

In short, by becoming more sensitive to the internal bias and the external cultural diversity of public relations, alternative perspectives could begin to enter and diversify mainstream public relations education. These alternative perspectives are also helpful for challenging the ethnocentric values embedded in the existing literature. As Pompper (2004) commented, as long as Whiteness remains as the unspoken norm in understanding and practicing public relations, other races will continue to be labeled as different, distanced, marginalized. An enhanced level of

diversity helps render multiculturalism and interconnectedness to become a “natural” part in public relations education (Bardhan, 2003). Such a broadened perspective is beneficial to both professionals and educators (Taylor, 2001), as well as Chinese-based and non-Chinese-based public relations curricula. International perspectives could contribute to mainstream theory-building by offering alternatives to management styles and philosophies other than the dominant Western ones (Lau, 2002, 2006).

### *Intellectual Hegemony: Dominant Discourse*

Hegemony concerns the dominance of certain discourses over a discipline (Roper, 2005). Hegemony is a critical issue facing public relations education because it prevents alternative perspectives and marginalized groups from entering the mainstream intellectual dialogue. A cursory review of public relations literature would reveal that the entire literature represents more of organizations’ perspectives than those of the public (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000). This unequal representation reflects the hegemonic position that organizations have over publics. However, if public relations is defined as the management of communication between an organization and its publics (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984), *publics*, by definition, are an inherent part of public relations. After all, the existence of publics is what gives rise to public opinions and thus public relations (J. E. Grunig, 1994). Given the centrality of the public in public relations, it is disheartening to admit that only a few public relations theories have been conceptualized to understand publics, such as a situational theory of publics (J. E. Grunig, 1994).

Furthermore, within the extant studies that have discussed publics, not all publics' voices are represented in the literature. Only certain segments have been selected while others remain largely unknown (Karlberg, 1996; Leeper, 2001). Karlberg (1996) conceived of this unequal representation of publics as an asymmetrical research agenda. He particularly criticized the discrepancy between this asymmetrical research agenda and two-way symmetrical communication model (J. E. Grunig, 2001). The asymmetrical research agenda means that the research agenda following the Excellence study has been almost exclusively focusing on the communicative needs of corporations and governmental agencies. Little attention has been paid to the communicative needs of publics, communities, and resource-poor groups. As a result, Karlberg argued that the research agenda implicit in the Excellence study is empowering the powerful and disempowering the powerless. However, J. E. Grunig (2001) argued that researchers should study the powerful to make them more responsible. Nevertheless, with an asymmetrical research agenda and an unequal representation of publics' voices underpinning public relations curricula, what is eventually delivered by educators cannot fully prepare students to cope with the diverse and conflicting needs of various publics that they will eventually encounter in organizations in a global environment.

Moreover, hegemony prevents alternative perspectives from entering mainstream intellectual dialogue (Botan & Hazelton, 2006). The dominant discourse governing public relations is two-way symmetrical communication, along with related concepts such as dominant coalition and the understanding of public relations as a management function (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). Regarding this dominant

discourse, Curtin and Gaither argued that tying public relations effectiveness solely to economic contributions discards other possible channels in which public relations can be effective. Dozier and Broom (2006) criticized the emphasis on managerial roles. They argued that the existing literature's emphasis on managerial roles indicates a lack of importance of technician roles, which are often undertaken by female practitioners. Thus, according to them, the literature's stress on management function devalues women's work. This belief, in fact, contradicts the fact that many practitioners choose to become technicians because they prefer the creative and artistic aspects of technicians to those of managers, as the Excellence study has suggested.

Moreover, having an intellectual hegemony blocks the free flow of knowledge at a cross-disciplinary level. Broom (2006) argued that the current research agenda of public relations is operating as a closed-system. That is, scholars outside public relations rarely cite our work. In a similar vein, McKie (2001) pinpointed that public relations has become a relatively more isolated field compared to other areas in the communication discipline. These authors agreed that one reason for this isolation is the hegemonic influence of dominance models such as the Excellence theory. Perhaps this relatively isolated position can also help explain public relations' failure in fully actualizing an interdisciplinary knowledge-base, integrating business, communication, sociology, psychology, and so forth, as suggested by the various commission reports on public relations education.

Moreover, intellectual hegemony ignores the dynamic and fluid nature of power (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Holtzhausen, 2000, 2002). Because meanings are

constructed by various sociological and cultural forces competing with one another, power is not static. It shifts from one group to another in the process of meaning making. What is considered dominant during a particular historical context may become marginal in another; likewise, what is marginal at present may become dominant in the future. Establishing a dominant perspective indicates assuming a perpetual state of what is considered marginal and dominant, ignoring dynamic and powerful forces able to envision social changes, thus, further excluding marginalized groups from entering the mainstream dialogue.

In sum, as Curtin and Gaither (2007) put it, the “U.S. dominant discourse” influences how we think, practice, and understand public relations, for example, what is considered acceptable and unacceptable (p. 36). In the formation of a dominant discourse, certain voices have become “culturally sanctioned” (p. 36) while others’ have been delegitimized (Bardhan, 2003). However, the culture that is to sanction other cultures is not a culture representing everyone’s voice but selectively only a few dominant ones. These dominant discourses have created difficulties for international scholars in “getting their work published in U.S. journals unless they adopt this [U.S.] viewpoint, even though it doesn’t necessarily represent public relations as studied and practiced in other countries” (p. 36). Should the trend persist, the dominant perspectives will continue hampering the theoretical development of public relations in indigenous cultural settings.

#### *Lack of Philosophical Foundation*

The Excellence study helped “provide a benchmark for what should be taught in PR education” (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2002, p. 35). One of the foremost



implications relevant to public relations education is “the need to provide students, PR professionals and senior managers with an overarching philosophy and understanding of the role of PR that differs from conventional views of the discipline” (p. 37). Such a philosophical base is a “much needed” area for public relations, both as an academic discipline and profession (L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 66). Elaborating on what a philosophy means for public relations, L. A. Grunig stated that the “philosophy of public relations . . . is a vision of the field and its purpose—a vision encompassing the field’s core values and its realities that comes from a speculative rather than observational basis” (p. 69). Such a vision can serve as an overarching framework guiding public relations education and practice.

Though rooted in journalism, public relations needs its own philosophy because journalism is more concerned with “journalistic rights and responsibilities and . . . censorship” (Bivins , 1989, p. 66). Public relations, instead, needs a philosophy “based on the responsible and responsive exchange of information” (p. 66). Unfortunately, as Bivins noted, most authors of public relations textbooks did not write about “any philosophical underpinnings” helpful for understanding how certain professional codes of conduct were developed, for example (p. 67).

A philosophy is relevant for public relations for at least two reasons. The first is because of public relations’ root in rhetoric (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 15). Rhetorical scholars have considered public relations practitioners to be public rhetors, stressing their ethical responsibilities in facilitating ethical decision-making and improving society. Practitioners are responsible for advocating public interest rather than a narrow self-interest of their employer organizations (Heath, 1992).

The second reason that philosophy is relevant for public relations is because of the field's emphasis on ethics and ethical decision-making. The Excellence Theory (Dozier, et al., 1995; L. A. Grunig, et al., 2002) demonstrates that the value of public relations is evident at four levels: the level of a specific public relations program, the level of public relations function, the level of contributing to organizational effectiveness, and the societal level. Bowen (2007) contended that ethical considerations can extend to all of the four levels especially to the organizational and societal. As a result of this inherent ethical dimension to public relations, ethics and philosophy deserve an important place in public relations education.

Moreover, integrating public relations education with a solid philosophical base can further remove many of the negative connotations troubling the field. For years, public relations has been associated with spinning and manipulation of truth (Heath, 1992). The field of public relations is criticized for a lack of ethics. For example, critical scholars (e.g., Karlberg, 1996) argued that public relations practitioners have polluted the rhetorical environment of everyday practice. Rhetorical scholar Heath (1992) posited that public relations practitioners, by practicing "irresponsible and empty communication," contribute little to facilitate the "dialectical process in society" (p. 33). Likewise, practitioners are often caught making unethical decisions in such cases as Shell, Nike, Enron, and Andersen.

To be indicated as an unethical profession harms not only practitioners but also "the practice as well" (Heath, 2000, p. 78). Therefore, one urgent challenge facing public relations is "to define the values by which it operates: the ethical perspectives that it affirms by the manner in which it operates; the ethical

perspectives that it adopts and creates that influence society, and the value it adds to the efficient operation of the marketplace and the public policy arena” (p. 69). In short, a philosophical base, with an understanding of ethics, seems to be an important preparation for students.

*Public Relations Educators Personnel: A Low Level of Ethnic Diversity*

The Excellence study confirmed the importance of ethnic diversity in ensuring the overall excellence of an organization. Weick (1979) coined the term *requisite variety* and used it to stress the connection between the level of diversity inside an organization and the overall excellence of the organization. The same logic can be applied to the academia of public relations. Compared to the diverse groups of students, educators, and practitioners learning, teaching, and practicing public relations, the extant level of diversity reflected in the public relations literature is far from reaching the external diversity level.

Little effort has been taken to diversify the field. Most scholarly work focuses on criticizing the lack of ethnic diversity. For example, Aldoory (2005) stated that it was dangerous to rely on Whiteness as the only norm to conceptualize public relations. Pompper (2004, 2005) commented on the problem of a lack of ethnic diversity at a methodological level. She (2005) urged scholars to address differences based on race and ethnicity, and to incorporate these differences into their research. She argued that such considerations of racial and ethnic differences should reflect on both the content and the method of a study, such as focus group and in-depth interviews. Data that reveal little ethnic information should not be used just for the sake of collecting data.

Other scholars criticized this lack of diversity by stressing an urgent need to bring non-Western perspectives and non-Western management philosophies into the literature. Such a perspective would benefit both U.S.-based and non-U.S.-based public relations practitioners and scholars (Vercic et al., 2003). In this respect, Cheney and Christensen (2001) posed a valid question facing both public relations educators and practitioners: “What would a non-western, nonmanagerial, and non-rationalist public relations look like?” (p. 182).

Another relevant diversity issue is the lack of representation of marginalized voices in public relations scholarship. Voices that had been historically excluded continue to remain absent in the mainstream intellectual discourse (Hallahan, 2000). However, marginalized voices could offer enlightening contributions to the theory-building of international public relations research. For example, Pompper’s (2004) study of minority practitioners found an interesting yet paradoxical worldview. On the one hand, minority practitioners felt proud of their race and ethnicity because of the unique contributions that they could bring to an organization; on the other hand, minority members were afraid of speaking up in certain situations, such as those involving equal rights, because of their race. Sha’s (1996) study revealed that women practitioners, because of their knowledge of and experience in both gendered worlds, were able to bring enlightening perspectives to organizational decision-making. Such studies help show that minority members’ voices are as legitimate as majority members’ voices.

### *Summary*

This section reviewed the background literature that helps contextualize the present study. The review of the three phases that Chinese public relations has gone through, of the Confucianism philosophy that has deeply influenced the Chinese people and society for thousands of years, and of the critical issues and challenges facing Chinese public relations and international public relations scholarship all helped to provide a contextual lens to interpret participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Such a detailed and comprehensive review exposes the void in the existing literature on Chinese public relations education and lays the groundwork for understanding the ramifications of the circuit of culture model in the context of Chinese public relations education and within the larger regulatory context of Chinese culture and Confucianism in particular.

## THEORY

This section describes the theoretical framework (i.e., circuit of culture model) that guides the present study. In the following, I offer a detailed explanation constituting the five moments of the circuit of culture mode; and then I review the relevance between the circuit model and Chinese public relations education.

### Circuit of Culture Model

The circuit of culture model originated from cultural studies (du Gay et al., 1997; see figure 1) but also has a postmodern tradition (Grossberg, 1986, 1996).

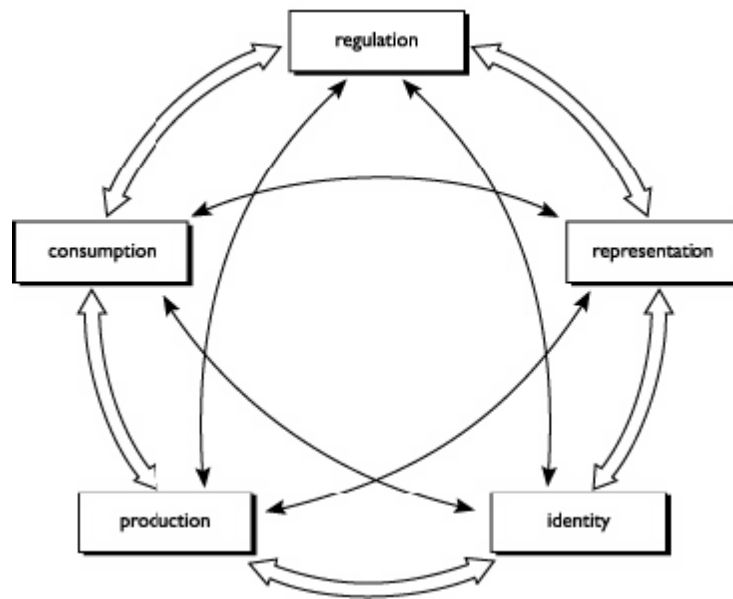


Figure 1. Circuit of culture, de Gay et al., 1997, p. 3

The model consists of five discursive moments: production, regulation, representation, consumption, and identity. The interplay of these moments illustrates the dynamics and complexities of meaning making within a given culture (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; Champ, 2007; du Gay et al., 1997; Johnson, 1986; Levine, 2001; Soar, 2000; Taylor, Demont-Herinrich, Broadfoot, Dodge, & Jian, 2002). Although it is not listed, power is an inherent element embedded in the five moments. It intertwines

with culture and identity, affecting the meaning-making process of a given communication phenomenon. The circuit demonstrates infinite points at which power, culture, and identity interact with the various moments of the circuit model (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). Every negotiation of meaning involves the interplay of the three underlying mechanisms of culture, power, and identity.

In the field of public relations, Curtin and Gaither (2005, 2006, 2007) helped elaborate on the model's application to (international) public relations practice. The model stresses situational particularities in constructing an existing meaning; it also recognizes the constraints of larger sociological context in shaping the interaction of local factors. The five moments "work in concert to provide a shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified, and recreated" (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, pp. 37-38).

Although the five moments are listed separately, they are all interconnected. "There's no beginning or end on the circuit; the moments work synergistically to create meaning" (p. 38). None of the five moments outweighs the importance of others. They are all manifestations of various aspects of public relations. All are equally crucial in the process of meaning making. As a whole, the interplay of the five moments facilitates an understanding of the ways in which multiple sociological forces interact, contest, and construct meaning within a given culture.

### *Regulation*

Regulation refers to "controls on cultural activity, ranging from formal and legal controls, such as regulations, laws, and institutionalized systems, to the informal and local controls of cultural norms and expectations that form culture in the more

commonly used sense of the term” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 38). These controls establish a boundary within which cultural activities are regulated. These regulations provide a sense of right and wrong and what is acceptable and unacceptable. “In simplistic terms, it [regulation] helps form the context in which public relations takes place” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 38).

### *Production*

Production refers to the process of producing a communication message, product, or campaign. In the context of education, *production* refers to the production of knowledge. During this production process, producers of a particular cultural product imbue it with meaning (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 39). This imbuing process is also called encoding (Hall, 1993). Various factors influence the producing process, such as cultural norms, specific circumstances, technological availability, and economic factors.

During the producing process, only certain limited perspectives become encoded based on how the product is intentionally created (e.g., Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; Cantor, 1971; du Gay et al., 1997; Levine, 2001; Soar, 2000; Taylor et al., 2002). The producer responds to an imagined identity of a given product’s target audiences (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). Arising from an imagined identity constructed by the producer, the resulting meaning may or may not be the same as the audiences’ meaning-making of the product. It is the role of public relations practitioners to negotiate a shared identity between producers and consumers to create a shared meaning of the product. Doing so demands practitioners to engage in constant environmental scanning and research. Environmental scanning, in the context of the



circuit model, refers to “a necessary, ongoing process of identifying fluid meanings as they emerge, of continuously monitoring the public opinion environment in which the organization is operating” (p. 141).

In public relations education, models and theories based in a U.S. context and intended for U.S. audiences will not be able to convey the same sense in the Chinese context and for Chinese audiences. Scholars need to engage in the aforementioned constant environmental scanning to discern the feasibilities of applying Western public relations models and theories to the Chinese cultural context. They also need to give sufficient attention to the cultural variations implicit in the producing process and the discrepancies to which the models and theories are subject.

### *Representation*

*Representation* refers to “the form an object takes and the meanings encoded in that form” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 40). Representation can take place in many forms, but it ultimately refers to how meanings are inscribed to an object through symbols and communication (e.g., Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; du Gay et al., 1997; Taylor et al., 2002; Vardeman, 2007a, 2007b).

### *Consumption*

*Consumption* refers to the process of decoding the meanings encoded by producers (e.g., Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; Curtin & Gaither, 2007; du Gay et al., 1997; Taylor et al., 2002; Vardeman, 2006). Production is always done in reference to consumption. Regardless of its form, a product’s meaning is never fully actualized until it is consumed. Consumers are active creators of meaning. They decode the meaning of a certain product based on the social context of their everyday lives.

Consumption, thus, reveals the ways in which consumers make sense of a product in alignment with their own cultural patterns.

Consumption is both appropriation and misuse (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 139). Consumers take in what resonates with them and reject what does not. By the act of consuming, consumers are actively negotiating the meaning of these products (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). Consumption engenders new meaning, which furthers production. As Mackay (1997) noted, “Consumption is not the end of a process, but the beginning of another, and thus itself a form of production” (p. 7). Thus, consumers are neither passive nor powerless. They do not simply consume the message prepackaged by producers. Rather, they hold power to shape the ultimate meaning of a production. Consumers and producers are co-creators in the meaning-making process, and the co-created meaning will still be regulated by the larger social context.

In terms of public relations education, the circuit of culture model is adopted in a broad sense. It can suggest that consumers of public relations knowledge are not passive but are active co-creators of the ultimate meaning. Consumers in the context of education can be conceived of as students, educators, or practitioners, or all students, practitioners, and educators can be considered as an entity in response to the transmission of knowledge from the West to China. Based on the circuit model, this group of Chinese “consumers” of the Western public relations theories and models are not passive, but will engage in an active meaning-making of these imported models and theories in reference to their sociopolitical and cultural contexts. The present study, by bringing together students’, educators’, and practitioners’

perspectives, aims to understand how this group of “consumers” makes meaning of Chinese public relations education and how the interplay of culture, power, and identity affects their meaning making.

In short, understanding consumption through the lens of production and production through the lens of consumption engenders an empowerment model. That is, meanings are co-created by both consumers and producers. Neither side alone has the right to determine the ultimate meaning of a product. From production to consumption, meanings change through use. This perspective empowers Chinese public relations scholarship to engage in an active meaning negotiation with the Western scholarship in order to co-create a meaning of Chinese public relations tailored to the Chinese context. Moreover, conceiving of consumption and production as overlapping moments on the circuit suggests that producers and consumers are equal contributors to the meaning-making of a product. This perspective projects the likelihood of converging Western and Chinese cultural values and public relations theories in that both sides can be perceived as active co-creators of meaning for public relations education.

### *Identity*

*Identity* refers to “meanings that accrue to all social networks, from national to organizations to publics” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 41). Intertwined with power and culture, the identity for a given product or message is influenced by the dynamic nature of power operating at individual, group, organizational, and national levels. They work in concert to negotiate and construct an identity for a particular communication phenomenon within a given culture. Public relations educators, as the

environmental scanners, play a crucial role in negotiating and creating a shared identity between producers and consumers. In this respect, public relations practitioners or educators, as those in my study, serve as cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1979) to facilitate the meaning-making between the two sides. Bourdieu defined cultural intermediaries as “mediators between producers and consumers who actively create meanings by establishing an identification between products or issues and publics” (cited in Curtin & Gaither, 2007).

#### *A Synthesis of the Five Moments*

Although the moments have been discussed separately, the model has to be understood as a whole. There is neither a beginning nor an ending point on the circuit. Each point can serve as a beginning or an ending point. The meaning of a given product has to be understood by applying the circuit as a whole. For all the overlapping points on the circuit, each one can be called an *articulation* (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 42). *Articulation* means “to express and to join together” (p. 42). By *expressing* is meant that the moment when one articulates something, one is consuming, negotiating the given meaning of a given product. By *joining together* is meant that, while one is articulating, one is also joining together the five moments. In other words, every articulation integrates all of the five moments of regulation, production, consumption, representation, and identity. Referring to the infinite overlapping points on the circuit, articulation represents the outcome of the dynamic interactions of the five moments. Articulation does not just come by itself; it requires agents to do the articulating, and it is in the process of this articulation that the five moments become interconnected and gives rise to meaning. Therefore, to understand

the meaning of a given product, one has to explore the five moments as a whole to understand how they interact, construct, and shape a given articulation. At the same time, one has to take into account the underlying mechanisms of culture, power, and identity shaping the meaning-making process.

Understanding communication happening through the lens of these five moments demonstrates the infinite complexities and opportunities when global interacts with local (Curtin & Gaither, 2007), which exemplifies the situation of public relations education in China. Rather than adopting a monologic perspective to interpreting meaning-making, the circuit model, by engaging in meaning-making and meaning-negotiating through the lens of the five moments as well as the underlying mechanisms of culture, power, and identity, reveals the tensions and complexities behind the meaning-making process. Recognizing the fluid nature of publics, the model gives credit to the power inherent in consumers' construction of a meaning for a given product within a given context. Particularly, the interplay of culture, power, and identity is helpful for understanding participants' interpretation of the influence of the Western body of knowledge in public relations in China. Such an understanding offers insight into the tensions, complexities, and contradictions involved in the meaning-making process.

Another point of relevance between the circuit model and Chinese public relations education is that the model "embraces a degree of cultural relativism . . . within a structured framework provided by the five moments" (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 42). In other words, the model gives sufficient flexibility and freedom to local agents in terms of their meaning making, yet, at the same time, it recognizes that

local agents' meaning-making is also constrained by the interactive outcomes of the five moments and the regulatory rules of a given cultural context, along with "past meanings and formations" defined as historicity (p. 42). In this regard, Confucianism seems to serve as an ultimate cultural force regulating participants' meaning making. In other words, this exploration of culture, power, and identity between macro-level and micro-level factors in constituting a meaning vividly illustrates the situation of public relations education in China, a contested terrain between local and global while still being influenced by the larger regulatory context of Chinese culture and Confucianism in particular.

#### *Summary*

This section of the literature review chapter addresses the major theoretical framework (i.e., circuit of culture model) guiding the present study. Through the lens of the five moments constituting the model and the three underlying mechanisms of culture, power, and identity, the present study is able to highlight the tensions, complexities, and contradictions involved in multiple sociological forces' construction of an identity and meaning for Chinese public relations education. Juxtaposing the circuit of culture model with the background literature on Confucianism, the present study is able to offer a detailed account on Chinese participants' meaning-making for Chinese public relations education and the interplay of culture, power, and identity, and how they affect participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education as well as the influence of the Western body of knowledge in China. Against the backdrop of Confucianism, the study examines the roles and effects of Confucianism in Chinese public relations education and fills in

the void in the existing literature on educational philosophy by identifying the possible avenues in which Confucianism could serve as a potential philosophical foundation guiding public relations education and practice.

### Research Questions

The purpose of this present study is to explore the tensions, complexities, and contradictions involved in Chinese public relations educators', students', and practitioners' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Within the context of Confucianism and the theoretical framework of the circuit of culture model, the present study sheds light on how the interplay of culture, power, and identity shapes that meaning-making process, affects participants' understanding of the influence of Western public relations theories and models in China, and explains the role of Confucianism in Chinese public relations education. Based on these conceptualizations, I posited the following Research Questions (RQ) to guide data collection and analysis for the present study.

RQ1: How does the circuit of culture model help explore and understand the tensions, complexities, and contradictions implicit in Chinese public relations educators', practitioners', and students' meaning making of Chinese public relations education? How does the model help understand the interplay of culture, power, and identity, within which context participants negotiate and construct meanings and identities for Chinese public relations education?

RQ2: What is the role of Confucianism in Chinese public relations? To what extent and in what aspects have Confucian values influenced participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted qualitative methodology as the means to gather information to answer the study's research questions. Addressing this goal, this chapter is divided into five sections. In the first section, I offer an explanation of the rationale for adopting qualitative methodology for the present study. Then I offer a detailed review of the advantages and disadvantages of the two concrete methods that I used for the study: in-depth interviews and focus groups. In the third section, I describe my research participants, participants' recruitment and sampling strategies, procedures that I used in in-depth interviews and focus groups, and the interview guide that I used during the study. The fourth section covers data analysis and interpretation. In this section, I review Wolcott's three steps of how to transform raw data for the final report. The three step formula, D-A-I (description-analysis-interpretation), was used as the primary yardstick guiding my data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I conclude the methodology chapter with a discussion of validity, including validity as craftsmanship and issues of reflexivity relating to my identity as a public relations student, and my interest in and philosophy of public relations education.

#### Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

Scholars (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000) have noted that the research purpose and questions should guide a researcher's choice of method. The purpose of the present study is to explore Chinese public relations students', practitioners', and educators' meaning making of public relations education in China, understand how



the interplay of culture, power, and identity shapes their meaning making process and affects their understanding of the presence of Western public relations theories and models in China, and explains the role of Confucianism in Chinese public relations education. Addressing these goals, the present study adopted qualitative methodology because of the following reasons.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) stated that qualitative methodology is best suited for studies that are “exploratory or descriptive [and] that stress the importance of context, setting, and the participants’ frame of reference” (p. 58). Qualitative methodology is also appropriate for studies that investigate the subjective nature of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994), emphasizing how reality is socially constructed and how experiences derive meaning through such social construction. Thus, the exploratory nature of the present study and the uncertain nature of Chinese public relations education warrant a qualitative approach.

Furthermore, the qualitative methodological choice took into account the developmental stage of Chinese public relations education. H. J. Rubin and I. S. Rubin (1995) suggested that qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate for examining research territories characterized by ambiguities, contradictions, and controversies. These conditions vividly mirror the situation of public relations education in China. Although it is developing rapidly, Chinese public relations education is largely a neglected research territory in the field of communication. The sparse published works on Chinese public relations education offered little help in developing a systematic understanding of the field. Thus, adopting a qualitative methodology helped clarify some of the ambiguities by allowing deeper exploration

of the “how” beneath the social construction of reality. Qualitative methodology, with its strength at offering thick descriptions of the depth, detail, and richness of a communication phenomenon (Geertz, 1973; Stake, 1995), emerged as an appropriate method. It is used to examine the processes and meaning making underpinning an apparent understanding of a given communication phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1980; Potter, 1996).

Additionally, I adopted qualitative methodology to follow the circuit of culture model’s methodological recommendations. The circuit of culture model positions consumption and production as overlapping points in the process of meaning making. Such a positioning suggests that consumers are not passive but active co-creators of meaning. That is, the ultimate meaning of a given product cannot be determined by producers alone. Both consumers and producers contribute equally to the meaning-making process. Meaning can only emerge in the process of consumption. Following this conceptualization, the circuit model offers three methods for public relations research (Curtin & Gaither, 2007) and, specifically, ethnographic methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and so forth (p. 140), because of their strength at exploring deeply into the complexities and dynamics of social interactions where multiple sociological factors intersect and interact.

Furthermore, qualitative methodology provided an ideal approach to examining the processes of Chinese educators’, practitioners’, and students’ meaning making in a more holistic manner (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). Following this guidance on qualitative methodology, I grounded my study solely in the data that I

collected. I let the data speak to me, dictating my research agenda, and guide the analysis of and theorizing about my research findings.

### Data Collection Methodology

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; p. 3). It offers a variety of methods to explore the meaning of a given communication phenomenon from different aspects and in different manners. In this dissertation, I employed two concrete methods (i.e., using in-depth interview and focus groups) to explore Chinese students', educators', and practitioners' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. In the following, I review these two methods respectively, detailing their strengths and weaknesses.

#### *Qualitative Interviewing*

Qualitative interviewing is one of the most commonly used qualitative research methods (McCracken, 1988; Potter, 1996). It helps researchers explore the depth, details, and rich meanings beneath what is apparent (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The task of qualitative interviewers is to explore and explicate the ways in which multiple sociopolitical, cultural, and economic forces interact and shape people's understanding of everyday life. The goal of qualitative interviewing is to explore the layers of meanings embedded in a phenomenon of interest. Because meanings of everyday events are grounded in specific contexts, it is only by exploring the context more deeply could researchers engage in a thorough examination of how reality is socially constructed and why reality is the way it is. Gaining such a deeper understanding helps reveal the nuances, complexities, and controversies of everyday life.

Similar to everyday conversations, qualitative interviewing involves continuous and mutual information exchange between two or more people (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). However, qualitative interviewing differs from everyday conversations because of the rigor and intensity involved in qualitative interviewing (Potter, 1996). Procedurally, qualitative interviewing is iterative. It involves a continuous process of collecting, winnowing, analyzing, and interpreting data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Depending on what is emerging, a researcher has to modify his or her research questions or research design or possibly even select new participants. My interview experience confirmed Rubin and Rubin's proposition. As interviews developed, I modified my research questions and considered areas that I had not thought about before. As a result of the multidimensionality involved in qualitative interviewing, Rubin and Rubin (1995) conceived of qualitative interviewing as a philosophy.

Several factors contribute to a quality in-depth interview (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). For example, during the interviewing process, a researcher has to be mentally alert to contradiction, ambiguity, or surprise that occurs during the conversation. Based on what is emerging, he or she has to probe with appropriate questions at the proper times. In addition, a researcher has to be aware of subtle nonverbal cues, such as a change in participants' tone or emotional state, a sudden rise in their nervousness or discomfort, their intentionally avoiding eye contact, or other such behaviors. Depending on how well a researcher tunes in to these cues, the quality of an in-depth interview may fluctuate.

Other factors affecting qualitative interviews are researchers' asking leading questions during the interviewing process and avoiding probing into areas that research participants have indicated an unwillingness to comment about. Researchers must treat their participants as participants rather than objects to be controlled or manipulated. Research participants are conversational partners who hold an equal power relationship with the researcher (Potter, 1996). However, this equality does not naturally come to the research setting. A researcher has to make a conscious effort to "work the hyphen" in order to break the dichotomy of the researcher-researched relationship (Fine, 1994). In my interviews, I paid close attention to these aforementioned factors and made sure that the participants felt at ease and safe in terms of sharing information with me.

Another important factor is the ethical integrity of researchers (Potter, 1996). In no way should a researcher distort the collected data by dismissing or modifying contradictions, controversies, or unexpected data. Researchers should do all that they can to build and maintain an ethical relationship with research participants, always giving priority to protecting participants' identities by keeping the collected information confidential. By all means, researchers should respect their participants as equals, respecting their sharing and disclosing of important (private) information. I followed these ethical considerations strictly. I did not disclose any of the participants' identities, except one professor who indicated a willingness to be known to the reader.

Ellis (1995) stressed that participants are real human beings who have ongoing lives outside the research zone of a particular study. The completion of a

project does not mean the termination of research participants' everyday lives (Ellis, 1995). Instead, in many cases, participants can easily identify themselves in the published work. Should researchers not consider the practical consequences of their published works beforehand, their work could harm the research participants in unintended yet negative ways. I read the quotes included in the results section several times to make sure that any disclosed information would do no harm to my participants.

### *Types and Structures of Qualitative Interviewing*

Qualitative interviews differ in type and structure (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggested four types of interviews: cultural interviews, life histories, oral histories, and topical interviews. Considering the purpose of the present study, the topical interview was most suitable. Topical interviews refer to interviews that are narrower in scope and short in span. Researchers can have only a one-time opportunity to conduct the interview. It may also be limited by the participants' time.

In terms of structure, Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggested unstructured and semistructured interviews. The unstructured format means that the researcher suggests certain topics for discussion but has few pre-prepared questions in mind. The semistructured format means that the researcher not only suggests topics for discussion but also asks specific questions. The present study adopted a semistructured format.

### *Weaknesses of Qualitative Interviewing*

Marshall and Rossman (1999) pointed out some limitations of qualitative interviewing. First, cooperation receives priority. When interviewees are not

comfortable in sharing information, the researcher should cooperate rather than coerce participants to engage in further self-disclosure. Second, participant lying or deception is possible. Interviewees may purposefully lie to protect themselves or exaggerate information for some particular reason. Third, the researcher has to demonstrate a superb command of communication skills such as active listening and probing at the right time in the right manner. Fourth, the large amount of data collected might be hard to manage. The last limitation concerns the quality of collected data.

I sought to overcome these weaknesses through the following strategies. Before I started doing each interview, I made an effort to build rapport with my participants. I told them in an honest and sincere manner why they were selected for the study, what the purpose of the study was, and how they could benefit from participating in the study. Most of the participants demonstrated an eagerness to participate in the study because they were equally interested in learning more about American public relations just as I wanted to know more about Chinese public relations.

Also, I reassured my participants that their participation remained completely voluntary, their information would be kept confidential, and they could withdraw from the study at any point they felt a need to do so, without any penalty. Given their unwillingness to sign the consent form, all the participants agreed verbally to take part in the study. One professor said that she preferred to make her identity known to the reader. Therefore, I used her real name in the results and discussion sections.

In addition, to encourage self-disclosure from my participants, I reciprocally disclosed information about myself, my academic and professional background, or anything that they were curious to know about me or American public relations education. I tried to answer all of their questions, although several times, I had to stop to bring back the focus of the interview. Most of the interviews had an equal amount of self-disclosure on both sides. Sometimes, if the interviewee happened to have too many questions, I would ask him or her to finish my interview first, and then I would designate an amount of time to answer his or her questions until the participant had no more questions. In alignment with this, I had to constantly remind participants of the purpose of conducting these in-depth interviews. I told them that the interview was to understand how *they* interpret the meaning of Chinese public relations rather than having my perspectives imposed on the conversation. Most of the interviews turned out to be successful experiences with participants' disclosing rich and detailed information and insights into Chinese public relations education.

### *Focus Groups*

Focus groups examine the social or group context in which meanings are created, negotiated, and constructed (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). The strength of focus groups is that they foster a group environment. This group environment additionally fosters social interactions "akin to those . . . in everyday life but with greater focus" (p. 903). Also, the group context foregrounds the tensions among various sociological forces in the process of meaning making. It demonstrates how people of distinctive sociocultural backgrounds articulate their perspectives, and negotiate and construct meanings. Unlike in-depth interviews that are limited to two



people, focus groups exemplify the dynamics of interaction and meaning making among a group of people within a particular social environment. This group context itself is “significant to the theoretical framework of the research” (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 85).

In focus groups, researchers are identified as moderators. Normally, with the presence of a moderator, a focus group involves a group of people with similar interests joining together to discuss an issue under investigation. The responsibilities of a moderator are to facilitate the flow of communication, ensure that the discussion focuses on the targeted topics, and solicit a diverse range of opinions regarding the issue under discussion (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

An advantage of focus groups is that they create a power-sharing space (Kamberelis, & Dimitriadis, 2005). Unlike in-depth interviews in which the interviewer might be perceived as holding more power, in focus groups, the power naturally shifts away from the researcher to participants. This power shift helps participants express opinions. Feminist scholars have particularly considered this power shift in focus groups an effective device to raise consciousness of ideas and concerns and enact social change (Kamberelis, & Dimitriadis, 2005). In the present study, I conducted two focus groups with students. The group context offered significant help in terms of facilitating a disclosure of a rich amount of information about Chinese public relations education. Students in focus groups were more expressive compared to those in the in-depth interviews that I conducted with students.

### *Weaknesses of Focus Groups*

Focus groups also have drawbacks. Logistically, it might be difficult to recruit a group of people and schedule a common time and mutual place to meet. Because I only conducted two focus groups with students, I did not encounter a serious problem in this regard. One focus group happened unexpectedly. I was invited by one educator to give a talk at his university about American public relations education. After the talk, I had an opportunity to engage in a follow-up focus-group discussion with students regarding the status quo of Chinese public relations. For this particular focus group, I encountered no logistical difficulty. However, for the other one, I did find it difficult to schedule a common time and mutual place to meet. Fortunately, after some coordination, all of the problems were solved, and everyone was able to participate.

Another weakness of focus groups involves transcribing audiotapes. Given that there were about 10 participants in each group, it was hard to differentiate participants' voices during the transcribing. I had to listen to the tapes several times until I was certain of which voice belonged to which participant.

### Data Collection Procedures

#### *Recruitment and Sampling Strategies*

Sampling refers to the ways in which data are collected (Potter, 1996). It directly affects the outcome of a study, especially when generalization is considered a purpose of the study. Potter suggested two components key to sampling. One is access, and the other is relevancy. Access is more of a practical concern, whereas relevancy is more of a theoretical one. *Access* refers to the process of gaining

permission to enter a particular research setting or to obtain certain documentation. Snowball techniques are usually applied to obtain a convenience sampling. However, Lindlof (1995) suggested that, although convenience sampling is the most commonly used, it is the least preferred in that it does not reflect a maximum level of variations within the cases selected (Lindlof).

Relevancy, which is the second component of sampling, concerns the degree to which a selected sample matches the purpose of a study. Given the exploratory nature of qualitative research, scholars normally use purposive sampling rather than a random selection of participants (Kuzel, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse, 1989). In my study, I applied both of these two concerns in recruiting my participants. Particularly, I employed a combination of maximum variation and snowball sampling techniques to purposefully recruit my participants.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) listed several concrete criteria for participant recruitment. The first criterion is that an interviewee has to be knowledgeable about the area of study under investigation. Without a certain degree of familiarity with the subject matter, an interviewee is unlikely to offer insightful comments on the research topic. Second, an interviewee has to be willing to talk about his or her opinions on the subject matter. Third, the selection of interviewees has to represent a wide range of the qualities of the study under investigation. In my participant recruitment, I took into account all of these suggestions. All of the participants that I interviewed are either public relations educators or students or are working in the field of public relations. Most of the educators are at senior levels, including a few first-generation educators who helped introduce public relations from the West to mainland China.

However, given the limited number of universities that have public relations majors, I was unable to students who were public relations undergraduate majors exclusively. Some students had merely taken one or two courses related to public relations.

Also, I followed Lindlof's (1995) recommendation of using triangulation to diversify data collection. Triangulation refers to the process of using multiple channels to understand a phenomenon of interest. Triangulation can take place at several levels (Lindlof). A researcher can increase his or her exposure to different theories, types of methods used, and types and numbers of investigator, and so on. For my study, I used a combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups to engage in conversations with three segments of the population: public relations educators, students, and practitioners. These three perspectives together helped triangulate an understanding of participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education.

### *Participants*

Three groups of people participated in the study: (a) 20 public relations educators (from three major cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, and Hang Zhou), with whom I conducted in-depth interviews; (b) 7 public relations practitioners (working at the top domestic and international public relations agencies), with whom I conducted in-depth interviews; and (c) 22 public relations students from various universities (e.g., China Communication University, Zhe Jiang University, Sun Yat-Sen University) in China that offer public relations degrees, concentrations, or electives. Apart from seven in-depth interviews, I conducted two focus groups with 7 and 8 students in each group.

### *Recruitment*

*Public relations educators.* I selected all of the universities that offer undergraduate public relations degrees. S. J. Wu's (2007) dissertation identified 22 universities in China that have public relations courses. Of these, four offered undergraduate public relations majors under either journalism or communication. These four universities are China Communication University, Zhe Jiang University, Sun Yat-Sen University, and Dong Hua University. They are located in four major and quite vibrant cities in China: Beijing, Zhe Jiang, Guang Zhou, and Shanghai. Because of time constraints, I was unable to visit Sun Yat-Sen University located in Guang Zhou. However, I did manage to interview one student who had graduated from the university. For the other three universities, I interviewed at least one professor from each school.

I primarily used my personal and professional networks to solicit research participants. Through my past almost 6 years of education in the U.S., I have been active at networking with Chinese scholars while attending various national and international conferences attended by visiting Chinese scholars, as well as local conferences at the University of Maryland. These networks laid a solid groundwork for my data collection. Among the visiting scholars with whom I met, one of them invited me to give a talk on American public relations at his university. In exchange, he introduced me to the chair of the Public Relations Education Committee in his particular region. The chair helped me connect with more than 15 public relations educators, 7 of whom took part in my study.

Another visiting scholar gave me a comprehensive list of all of the Chinese professors teaching public relations. This list was crucial in my beginning to find

professors in the field of public relations. I contacted all of the people on the list. Most of them readily agreed to take part in my study,<sup>4</sup> except for those who were traveling. With these channels, I successfully recruit 20 public relations professors, at senior and junior levels, to participate in the study. A saturation point was reached during these interviews.

In general, every time I received informal acceptance participate in my study, I contacted the person via phone or e-mail to further explain the purpose of my study, why he or she was selected, and how he or she could benefit from participating in the study. I made sure that they understood that their identity would be kept confidential and they could withdraw from the study at any time they felt a need to do so without any penalty. I also sent them copies of the consent forms approved by the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board. However, because of the sensitive nature of signing names, participants offered only their verbal agreement to participate in the study. After I received their permission, I scheduled a time and place to talk with them in person. Most of the meeting places and time were suggested by the participants based on their preferences. I sought to accommodate their schedules.

*Public relations students.* I conducted seven in-depth interviews and two focus groups with 7 and 8 students in each group. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) and Morgan (1997) suggested that three to five groups with each group composed of 6 to 10 people would be sufficient to reach a saturation point with no more than two hours' discussion in each group.

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<sup>4</sup> To a great extent, I attributed my success at recruiting participants to the reputation of the University of Maryland's PR program. Most of the participants, upon learning that I am a graduate student from Maryland showed great eagerness to take part in my study. A few of them even said that they felt honored to be part of the study. I am grateful for their help.

I recruited 22 students to participate in the study. The educators whom I interviewed helped a great deal in terms of soliciting student participants. I also interviewed a few students doing internships at the public relations agencies where I interviewed practitioners. I recruited my student participants largely through these two channels. Because it was during summer break when I conducted these interviews, I was unable to recruit the number of students that I had planned to do. Nevertheless, I still achieved maximum variation by inviting students from different levels, ranging from freshmen to seniors, and students who had chosen public relations as their majors or concentrations or were taking only a few courses in public relations.

Once I had the students' informal agreements to participate, I communicated with them either via phone or e-mail and explained the nature and purpose of my study and the reason that they were selected. I made sure that they understood that their identities would be kept confidential and they could withdraw from the study at any time they felt a need to do so, without any penalty. I also sent them copies of the consent forms approved by the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board. Similar to the educators, students offered only their verbal agreement to participate in the study. After they agreed to participate, I scheduled a time and place for us to meet in person. Most of the time, students suggested the time and place that they wanted to meet. I did all that I could to accommodate their time schedules and preferences for meeting.

*Public relations practitioners.* I interviewed 7 public relations practitioners from various top domestic and international public relations agencies. My personal

experience of recruiting practitioners confirmed Hung's (2002) assertion that it is almost impossible to gain access to large organizations without acquaintances. I encountered difficulties in finding practitioners to take part in my study.

My professional network with CIPRA offered substantial help in terms of recruiting practitioners. Right after I arrived in Beijing, I paid a visit to CIPRA, one of the most influential public relations associations in China, to visit and inform the officials of my study. The director in charge of the Education and Research Department at CIPRA helped connected me with a number of top managers and CEOs working at various top international and domestic public relations agencies. He also asked his secretary to call these managers and CEOs ahead of time to tell them about my research and background and inform them of my upcoming visit. His personal network with these people was a great contribution to my successful recruitment of public relations practitioners. However, I was unable to recruit the number of participants that I had planned for. Nevertheless, the senior positions of these managers and CEOs allowed them to offer me information and insights that might otherwise not have been feasible.

Once I had their informal agreement to participate, I contacted them again either via email or on the phone to explain as clearly as possible the purpose of my study, why they were selected, and how they could benefit from participating in the study. I made sure that they understood that their identities were kept confidential and they could withdraw from the study at any time when they felt a need to do so without any penalty. Once they agreed to participate, I sent them copies of the consent forms approved by the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board.



Again, as with the educators and students, the participating practitioners offered only their verbal agreement to take part in the study. I also informed them in advance that the interview would take about 60 minutes so that they could plan their schedules. Finally, I asked participants to suggest a time and place to meet. I did all that I could to accommodate their schedules and preferences for meeting.

### *Procedures*

#### *Protocol Design*

Given the exploratory nature of qualitative research, scholars (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; H. J. Rubin & I. S. Rubin, 1995; Wolcott, 2001) have recommended using open-ended questions to investigate the meaning of a communication phenomenon. This open structure is suggested for two reasons. First, it helps the researcher in understanding the meaning of the subject matter from the participants' viewpoints, and second, it allows a researcher the flexibility to amend interview questions based on information that is emerging (van Zoonen, 1994).

The present study explored Chinese public relations educators', practitioners', and students' meaning making of Chinese public relations education through the lens of the circuit of culture model and within the context of Confucianism. The protocol design, composed of open-ended questions, was organized based on this research purpose and the study's specific research questions. Each set of protocol questions begins with grand tour questions aimed at building rapport and trust with participants and among the participants themselves in focus groups (H. J. Rubin & I. S. Rubin, 1995; Spradley, 1979). All protocol questions were designed in a way so that they

gradually increased in difficulty and intensity level and then decreased when approaching the end of an interview or focus group.

Specifically, the protocol design consisted of three sets of questions for three different groups of participants: educators (Appendix B), practitioners (Appendix C), and students (Appendix D). All of the questions were open-ended, allowing participants the flexibility to engage in their own meaning making of Chinese public relations education. The interview protocols for educators and practitioners were similar in content and structure. They both contained four sections. In the first section (Questions 1-3), I asked participants general questions, addressing, for example, their professional and academic background. In the second section (Questions 4-5), I asked educators and practitioners to reflect on the nature of Chinese public relations education, including its status and the major milestones that the field has survived. This set of questions aimed to explore the identity of Chinese public relations education and identify the regulatory context in which Chinese public relations education takes place. I also included a set of questions that probed participants' understanding of the relationship between academy and industry (Questions 6-7), as well as their perception of the presence of Western (predominantly U.S.) public relations theories, concepts, and models in China (Question 7). These sets of questions were designed to provide insights into the relationship between production and consumption, two moments of the circuit model. Additionally, Questions 8-10 asked participants to identify strengths, weaknesses, problems, and opportunities facing Chinese public relations education, as well as their expectation for quality public relations education. These questions were intended to elicit more details to

further probe the meaning of Chinese public relations education, and tensions, complexities, and contradictions involved in participants' meaning making. The final set of questions (Question 11-12) asked participants to discuss the roles and effects of Confucianism in public relations education—to what extent and in what aspects Confucian values have affected participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education.

Students' interviews and focus groups used the same protocol, which is composed of four sections. In the first section (Questions 1-2), I asked grand tour questions to build rapport and trust with participants. I asked them to describe their academic and professional (if any) backgrounds in the field of or related to public relations. These orienting questions prepared students to think about their experiences in public relations education. In the second section (Questions 3-4), I asked students to discuss the nature of public relations and public relations education, aiming to probe their understanding of the identity of public relations education and the regulatory context in which public relations education takes place. In the third section (Question 5-7), I asked students to reflect on the problems, strengths, opportunities, and challenges facing Chinese public relations education, as well as their expectation for quality public relations education. They were also asked to comment on the presence of Western public relations theories, models, and concepts in China (Question 8). Meanwhile, I also asked students to comment on the relationship between education and practice when they had experience in both worlds. These sets of questions provided avenues to probe further into the meaning of Chinese public relations education. Students' accounts could also help triangulate educators' and

practitioners' interpretations. In the last set of questions (Question 10-11), I asked students to discuss Confucianism and identify concrete Confucian values that have affected their meaning-making of Chinese public relations education.

#### *Procedures for In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups*

In-depth interviews and focus groups followed the same procedures. Before I began each interview and focus group, I presented my participants with consent forms, explaining each part as carefully as possible. I stopped periodically to check whether participants understood the statements on the consent form. Meanwhile, while explaining these statements, I got their permission to audio tape the interviews and focus group discussions for the purpose of accuracy. All of the participants agreed to have the conversations audio taped. Most importantly, I made sure that the participants understood that their participation was completely voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any point they wanted without any penalty. I also reminded them of the nature of qualitative interviews, letting them know that there were no definite answers for the questions posited and that they could interrupt and ask questions at any point they wanted. For the focus groups, I reminded participants of my role as a moderator instead of an active participant, and their roles as discussants. Foremost, I reassured my participants that their identities would be kept confidential. I finished each interview and focus group by giving sincere thanks to my participants for their invaluable time and cooperation. By the end, I also asked whether they had additional comments or questions.

*Length and location of interviews.* Interviews with educators lasted an average of 60-90 minutes. I also did two long interviews with two different professors. Each

long interview lasted about 6 hours total, and they were conducted on different days. In general, the first meeting was around 3 hours, followed by another 3-hour meeting on a different day. For the second meeting, the participants brought course materials and syllabi for me to review. Interviews with educators were usually conducted in their offices, coffee shops, or teahouses based on their preferences. If we met at a coffee shop or teahouse, educators always ended up treating me for the tea, coffee, or fruit buffet. I expressed my sincere gratitude for their generosity and time.

The interviews with practitioners lasted about 45-60 minutes on average. All the interviews were conducted at participants' offices at times that they had suggested. The participants were very cooperative in that they did not allow any phone calls to interrupt our conversation. One particular interviewee, a CEO at a local public relations agency, treated me to lunch at a fancy Chinese restaurant. However, we did not talk about public relations education during the lunch time. He was largely interested in American public relations education and pursuing a doctoral degree in public relations in the U.S. He also introduced me to his family. He invited me join them for dinner on a different day at another fancy Chinese restaurant. The purpose of this meeting was mainly to introduce his two children to me. Both of them were interested in studying abroad in the U.S. I helped answer their questions about American education.

The interviews and focus groups with students were conducted in coffee shops or offices. If we met in coffee shops, I ended up treating student participants for coffee or tea, based on their preferences. Participants suggested the time and location

to meet. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes, and focus groups lasted about 90 minutes.

### *Pretest*

Prior to data collection, I planned to pretest the three sets of protocol questions with the following three groups: one educator, one practitioner, and four students. The purpose of this pretest was to examine the flow of my protocol questions and clarify the meaning and wording of interview questions, to reword inappropriate questions if necessary, and to discover additional areas worth probing. Unfortunately, because of the limited access to practitioners and students, I was able to conduct only one pretest with one public relations educator. Nevertheless, this pretest was extremely helpful in clarifying embedded connotations and underlying assumptions before I began the actual data collection. It helped improve the quality of my protocol questions.

Additionally, the pretest helped foreground some deeply ingrained cultural values that I took for granted in cross-cultural contexts. Given that I conducted the pretest in Chinese, it helped me realize that people in different cultures use different words to describe the same thing or use the same word to refer to utterly differently meanings. Also, throughout the data collection, I encountered this language challenge several times. I had to engage in constant probing to dig further into what my participants meant by many concepts that I was not familiar with.

To that end, many scholars (e.g., Potter, 1996; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996) have pointed out the difficulty of interviewing people about their home cultures because most would take such values for granted. In my study, several participants

demonstrated this difficulty when they were trying to explain some deeply rooted cultural values. They tended to use words such as “you know” to avoid deeper exploration of these cultural concepts. In this respect, conducting the pretest helped flesh out quality questions and find easier ways to probe more deeply into the rooted cultural values.

### *Language Consideration*

All of the interviews were conducted in Chinese, even though many participants knew how to speak English. I transcribed all of the interviews first into Chinese and then translated them into English. When I was not sure about the original meaning of some part of the captured data, I contacted the corresponding interviewees to double-check their original interpretations. I also did back-translation (Campbell & Werner, 1970; Usunier, 1998) to further ensure the accuracy of my translation. However, I did not do back-translation for all of the complete transcripts. Instead, I only back-translated those that appeared in the final report. To accomplish back-translation, I asked a third person to translate my English back into Chinese and then compared the result with the interviewee’s original Chinese wording. Meanwhile, because all the original protocols and consent form were written in English, I also did a back-translation of them to ensure the accuracy of the wording and to double-check whether the documents conveyed the meaning that I had intended. This back-translation helped ensure the quality of data collection, given the bilingual nature of the present study.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

### *Transforming Data: Description-Analysis-Interpretation*

The present study followed Wolcott's (1994) D-A-I approach to analyze qualitative data. The D-A-I formula consists of description, analysis, and interpretation. These three elements, according to Wolcott, capture the essential ingredients of qualitative research. Depending on the purpose of a particular study, these elements can be variously combined. Although the three components are listed separately, they should not be understood as a linear progression. Instead, all the components simultaneously exist during data analysis. The D-A-I formula merely represents the relative weight of each component in the final report. For example, a large amount of description does not mean an exclusion of analysis and interpretation. Instead, it means more emphasis is placed on description than the other two. Description, analysis, and interpretation are all equally important contributors to transforming raw data into what appears in the final report. Wolcott's D-A-I formula was used to guide the study's data collection and analysis. In the following, I offer an explanation of each element.

#### *Description*

Description concerns what is happening at a particular research setting (Wolcott, 1994). It refers to data collected through the researcher's direct observation "and/or reported to the researcher by others" (p.12). Wolcott identified several ways to organize and present description such as chronological order, researcher or narrator order, progressive focusing, following an analytical framework, day-in-the life, plot and characters, writing a mystery, and so on. For the present study, I presented my



description by following an analytical framework. Based on what my participants shared with me, I arranged their meaning-making into themes to illustrate the meaning and identity of Chinese public relations education, the interplay of culture, power, and identity, and the effects and roles of Confucianism in Chinese public relations education.

Description is the most fundamental part of the D-A-I formula (Wolcott, 1994). It builds the groundwork for later analysis and interpretation. Description demands researchers have a high degree of theoretical sensitivity in terms of deciding what to observe and report and what not to report. By no means, however, does description suggest an inclusion of all meticulous details. Instead, researchers have to carefully weigh the amount of details to be reported. Wolcott suggested that, for every detail to be included, researcher should ask himself or herself, “Is this relevant to the account?” (p. 14). This question has been serving as a major framework guiding my description of data. Every time I felt unsure about whether I should include particular information, I would ask myself whether adding the details was relevant to my study. Doing so helped me focus on answering the RQs.

### *Analysis*

Analysis involves identifying essential features and a “systematic description of interrelationships among” these features (Wolcott, 1994, p.12). Analysis essentially addresses “how things work” (p. 12). Usually, analysis is based on the earlier descriptive accounts but goes beyond them. In particular, I placed participants’ accounts of Chinese public education into the context of the extant public relations literature to shed light on some theoretical connections and implications, such as the

presence of Western public relations theories and models in China and the lack of philosophical foundation underpinning Chinese public relations education.

Meanwhile, placing the data against the backdrop of Confucianism, I applied the circuit of culture model to offer a critical and cultural analysis of participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. This analysis also helped explicate the tensions and complexities of how multiple sociological forces interacted, contested, and constructed a meaning for Chinese public relations education.

Wolcott suggested several ways to approach data analysis, some of which were helpful for my study: highlighting research findings, displaying research findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994), fleshing out the analytical framework guiding data collection, and identifying patterned regularities in the data. I followed these suggestions step-by-step in my data analysis. I transcribed all of the interview audiotapes word-by-word and made detailed comments on each interview. Then, I carefully examined these transcripts over and over: highlighting important findings, fleshing out relevant theoretical frameworks, and identifying patterned regularities in the data. To provide a vivid visual representation, I highlighted different themes with different colors to illustrate the connections among them. Further, I created three separate tables to display my research findings for the three groups of participants: public relations educators, students, and practitioners. Such a visual display helped organize the vast amount of information in a more compressed manner that was helpful to the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data reduction is an indispensable step throughout this process. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined data reduction as “the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data” (p.10). Because of the large amount of qualitative data, data reduction helps researchers effectively manage data. As a part of analysis, data reduction helps synthesize themes and expose conclusions because successful reduction “sharpen, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data” (p.11). Miles and Huberman suggested several ways to reduce data: through selection and through summary or paraphrase, for example (p. 11). I used their suggestions, particularly writing summaries and paraphrases to compress the data into a more manageable format.

### *Interpretation*

Interpretation is the last component of the D-A-I formula. Compared to analysis, interpretation moves one step further from the original description. Interpretation refers to the procedural question of what the body of data means in reference to an existing or emerging theory (Wolcott, 1994). In other words, interpretation puts data back into the original context in which they derive meaning. Interpretation helps a researcher make sense of data. Unlike analysis that emphasizes systematic procedures, interpretation involves more “sensemaking, a human activity that includes intuition, past experience, emotion—personal attributes of human researchers” (Wolcott, 2001, p. 33). In terms of the proportion of interpretation in the final report, similar to description, Wolcott cautioned that scholars need to balance offering too much interpretation by injecting unwanted personal opinions with too little insightful commentary (p. 259).

## Validity

In qualitative research, validity concerns the accuracy of data (Creswell, 2003), that is, whether the researcher examines what he or she is supposed to examine. Qualitative scholars have developed distinctive perspectives on validity. Earlier research tended to apply quantitative yardsticks to evaluate the validity of qualitative research. For example, Krik and Miller (1986) discussed validity in relationship to reliability. They argued that validity and reliability worked together to ensure the objectivity of qualitative research. In addition, Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed validity in terms of internal validity and external validity. *Internal validity* means that changes in dependent variables are solely a result of changes in independent variables. *External validity* refers to the extent to which a study's findings can be generalized to other populations, measurements, and settings that are not part of the original study.

More recently, scholars have begun to challenge the traditional viewpoint on validity. For example, Guba and Lincoln (2000) changed their perspective to perceiving validity as encompassing five criteria: (a) fairness, (b) ontological authenticity, (c) educative authenticity, (d) catalytic authenticity, and (e) tactical authenticity (pp. 245-251). They argued that fulfilling these five criteria would render "valid" construction of qualitative inquiries. However, some scholars (e.g., Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Kvale, 1995) have taken a more radical stance. They have begun to challenge the validity of the validity question. For example, some (e.g., Lather, 1993; Richardson, 1997) have defined *validity* as resistance. These scholars use writings in deliberate "transgressive forms" to "problematize reliability,

validity and truth” (Richardson, 1997, p. 165). Others (e.g., Lincoln, 1995) pursued validity in terms of ethical relationships.

In particular, Kvale (1995) argued that the trinity of reliability-generalizability-validity is no longer accountable in this contemporary postmodern context. He argued that the trinity of reliability-generalizability-validity is merely a modernistic construction to evaluate qualitative research. Such a construction is based on a dichotomous relationship between what is valid or “true” and what is not. In his recommendation to abandon these fixed criteria of validity, reliability, and generalizability, Kvale believed that validity for qualitative research should be pursued as craftsmanship. In this dissertation, I adopted Kvale’s conceptualization of validity as craftsmanship to ensure the quality of my data collection and analysis. In the following, I review two specific features constituting craftsmanship.

#### *Validity as Craftsmanship*

Conceiving of validity as quality of craftsmanship, Kvale (1995) explicated two essential features. The first feature concerns the credibility of the researcher. *Credibility* refers to whether a researcher is experienced in a particular area of study. Kvale suggested that experience makes the researcher more credible so that others can rely on the researcher’s findings. The second feature defines *validity* as ongoing quality control, involving a continuous process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data. This understanding of validity as ongoing quality control extends the issue of validity not only to the final outcomes of a study but also to the process during which the data are collected.

As I conducted my research, I applied these two features to evaluate the quality of my data. In terms of the first feature, I consider myself an experienced qualitative interviewer and a young scholar who is familiar with the body of knowledge in public relations. However, I am aware of my lack of professional experience in public relations industry in China. To compensate for this, I spent a good deal of time doing research and collecting all the information available to familiarize myself with the Chinese public relations industry before I started conducting interviews. With respect to the second feature, I ensured the quality of my collected data throughout the research process from data collection, to analysis, to interpretation. I was careful to engage in constant reflections on my biases; paid attention to nuances and details; interpreted the meanings from my research participants' perspectives; engaged in simultaneous data description, analysis, and interpretation; and maintained an ethical relationship with my research participants.

### *Reflexivity*

*Reflexivity* refers to the critical process of reflecting on the role of the researcher. Identified as a research instrument (Brannen, 1992; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; McCracken, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Potter, 1996), qualitative researchers aim to build intimate relationships with research participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). To do so, researchers make deliberate efforts to immerse themselves into research settings; build rapport with their participants; and empathize with their concerns, worries, and dissatisfactions. These demands make it imperative for qualitative researchers to beware of and reflect on the biases, assumptions, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds that they have brought forward to research settings. Self-

reflection helps researchers avoid imposing their value judgments on the study. Also, sufficient reflexivity helps contextualize research findings by displaying how a researcher's background has influenced his or her research outcomes. In this way, the reader is able to interpret the research outcomes from a particular perspective.

Furthermore, self-reflexivity speaks to the dual role that a qualitative researcher experiences (Lindlof, 1995): that of inquirer on the one hand and respondent on the other, teacher on the one hand and student on the other. With self-reflexivity, a researcher can beware of his or her dual role and recognize the multiple identities embodied in them, as well as his or her transition between participant and researcher.

Specifically, Potter (1996) suggested three ways to exhibit self-reflexivity: highlighting the detailed procedures of the researching process, reflecting on the nature of research methods, and making a conscious effort to exhibit biases. I followed these suggestions by engaging in constant self-reflection. Given that I have already explicated research procedures and processes in the earlier sections, herein, I elaborate on the biases that I have brought to the research setting. This introspection dwells on two levels: my identity as a public relations student and my interest in and philosophy of public relations education.

*My identity as a public relations student.* Upon obtaining my B.A. degree in Communication from the University of Colorado at Denver's overseas campus at China Agricultural University in Beijing, China, in summer 2003, I successfully became a first-year MA student in Communication at Syracuse University in the U.S. Two years later in 2005, I obtained my MA degree and then continued to further my

study at a doctoral level with a concentration in public relations at the University of Maryland. Prior to my coming to the U.S., I had no working experience and little exposure to public relations.

The past 4 years' education in the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland has proved to be invaluable. I have grown from knowing little about public relations to equipping myself with a body of knowledge in the field. These years' learning from and socializing with public relations faculty at the University of Maryland and in the U.S. have educated and prepared me for my future career path; however, they have also influenced me in terms of what public relations is and how public relations should be practiced. It was not until my last visit to China and CIPRA in 2006 that I realized how much I was influenced by American education. I engaged in a series of discussions with Chinese public relations educators in China about what public relations was, why public relations should be conceived of as a management function, and why practitioners should have membership in dominant coalitions. I was always surprised by how our opinions diverged on certain issues.

Nevertheless, what surprised me the most was my inability to articulate many concepts in Chinese in such a way that they could still accurately reflect the meanings of the original English words. Concepts such as identity, ethnocentrism, discourse, hegemony, two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical communication, situational theory of publics, and even the word *publics* itself are hard to put into the Chinese context without bringing corresponding connotations. These difficulties arose again and again during my data collection. I had to be meticulously careful about my



assumptions and special vocabulary, as well as in communicating my well-established understandings of public relations. I had to engage in constant self-reflection on these biases while remaining open to my participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education.

Such a deconstruction of a well-established body of knowledge was difficult and also caused difficulties in rendering a pure inside-out interpretation of Chinese public relations education. To that end, I engaged in a constant self-questioning of what I believed and what I had been holding as the “norm” in interpreting public relations. Meanwhile, I exerted great effort to remind myself of not comparing Chinese public relations with the U.S. models, theories, and frameworks. To ensure this self reflection, I wrote detailed notes in my journal every time I finished an interview, noting the areas that I had done well in and those that I had not done well in as an interviewer so as to improve for the next interview.

Apart from this intellectual influence, at a personal level, I experienced a shift in my identity. I came to realize that some American values have gradually become part of me, while some Chinese cultural traditions have faded away. I no longer see myself as a Chinese nor an American, but somewhere in between. I took this changed identity into account while I was interviewing my participants. To my surprise, this changed identity benefited my study. Having both Chinese and American cultural values embedded in me has given me a third perspective for looking at the world. This “third eye” empowered me to notice the “invisible” and question the “unquestionable” within both cultures.

In short, as H. J. Rubin and I. S. Rubin (1995) explicated, reflexivity does not require researchers to abandon their values and beliefs; instead, it requires reflections on how personal values have affected data collection, analysis, and interpretation. My reflection on the aforementioned biases helped contextualize my research findings by locating them in a particular perspective.

*My interest in public relations education.* In the fall semester of 2007, I took a course called *Educational Philosophy* with Dr. Jing Lin from the Education Department at the University of Maryland. That course sparked my interest in philosophy and education. Through the course readings, I came to realize that in spite of the remarkable innovations taking place, human beings are still facing many life-threatening challenges in life, such as environmental issues, wars, and global conflicts.

Today, human beings have the ease and luxury to travel all over the world; but we have a hard time communicating with our neighbors (Lin, 2007b). New communication technology has virtually connected people almost all over the world, yet we feel less secure, intimate, and trustworthy at an interpersonal level. Globalization, an equally double-edged sword, has enhanced cultural diversity on the one hand and divided human beings more than ever “by wealth, power, influence, and accessibility to economic, social, and cultural goods” (Tu, 2005, p. 1) on the other hand. The tragedy of September 11, 2001 further intensified global conflicts (Lin, 2007b). People of various cultures and beliefs have become ever more segregated and separated. Military force, which is supposed to save the world, has brought more deaths than peace. “More people died in the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than at any other

time in history” (Smith & Carson, 1998, p. ix). We have been conditioned to hate more and love less, to blame more and forgive less. Materialistically, we are prosperous; yet, spiritually, we are deprived by a lack of authenticity and genuine love.

Education does not help much in eroding these problems (Lin, 2007b). It has trained students with high IQs who, nevertheless, commit terrible crimes without any guilt. Instead of learning for the joy of learning and self-fulfillment, education has become a tool to “find a well-paid job, failing to enlighten them [students] to see that our life is a precious gift with which we can expand our ability to love and care, to bring light to this world and kindle hope in others” (p. xi). In other words, rather than cultivating internal enlightenment, education has motivated students to seek “external criteria for success” and material gains (p. xi).

What is wrong with education? What is the role of educators? Aren't educators supposed to prepare students for a better future? As I constantly grappled with these questions, I questioned my role in the entire picture. This introspection stimulated my interest in education and education philosophy. As a public relations student myself, I will eventually become an educator nurturing students for the next generation. How could I contribute, with my knowledge in public relations and compassion and love for the world, to the professionalism of public relations and also the formation of a more ethical society? Public relations, with an inherent ethical dimension to it, is inevitably part of the global movement in bringing peace and love, and strengthening our moral foundations. As I continue reading books by various great sages and heroes such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Confucius, and others on

the transformative power of education to facilitate world harmony, I have ingrained a strong sense of compassion, love, peace, and hope. Echoing Lin (2007b), I believe that the purpose of education is to nurture students' hearts and souls at a holistic level instead of merely their minds at an intellectual level. I aim to bring this understanding into my conceptualization of a public relations philosophy.

I am also biased towards my deep love and appreciation for traditional Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism. I resonate with Gandhi's (1997) observation about the relationship between home culture and other cultures. As Gandhi put it, "I do respectfully contend that an appreciation of other cultures can fitly follow, never precede, an appreciation and assimilation of our own" (p. 143). I believe that loving the world begins with loving the self; and fulfilling our social responsibility as a civic citizen begins with fulfilling our duties at home. Confucian emphasis on personhood cultivation, with a moral dimension to it, is crucial to transforming the self, the family, the state, the nation, and the world. I firmly believe that such Confucian values can benefit public relations education.

Another factor that has come into play in my contemplation of a public relations philosophy is my differentiation of knowledge from wisdom. Knowledge is an accumulation of facts and information, whereas wisdom is an internalization of the information and facts (Lin, 2007b). Knowledge per se is not a means to an end. I took Gandhi's contention with all my heart, "By education, I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man—body, mind and spirit. Literacy is not the end of education nor even the beginning. It is only one of the means whereby man and woman can be educated. Literacy itself is not education" (1997, p. 138). Quality

education should be grounded in a holistic manner of nurturing students, the mind, body, soul, and spirit. A holistic approach to education is crucial to prepare public relations students to face the challenges and demands of the 21st century.

All these values and biases came into play at various points in my dissertation writing. I believe public relations education has profound implications and impact on everyday practice. Education and practice are inseparable. They go hand-in-hand. The improvement of one ensures the other, and vice versa. As King noted:

Education without social action is a one-sided value because it has no true power potential. Social action without education is a weak expression of pure energy. Deeds uninformed by educated thought can take false directions.

When we go into action and confront our adversaries, we must be as armed with knowledge as they. (pp. 70-71)

As an applied field, public relations practice should be armed with a solid knowledge base to ensure the professionalism of the field. To conclude this chapter, I concur with Lin's (2007b) call for a paradigm shift in education:

In face of the realities we are living in, a paradigm shift in education is urgently called for. We need education that facilitates the formation of a compassionate and loving global community, and one that teaches the younger generation to form a harmonious, respectful relationship with nature. Goals of education need to be shifted from a rationalistic, functionalist perspective that primarily emphasizes tests and efficiency to a constructive, transformative paradigm that stresses love-based, care-based education that helps nurture understanding and respect for all human beings and nature. . . . In

all, constructing a loving world should be the central purpose of education in the 21st century. (pp. x-xi)

I believe that public relations education is also waiting for a similar change in its educational philosophy. Only after such a change occurs can public relations truly fulfill its duty as an ethical conscience in organizations and public rhetors in society in the 21st century.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

This section reports the major themes and patterns that emerged during the data analysis. I developed the labels for the codes and categories, but the meanings and definitions behind them were from the participants—public relations educators, students, and practitioners. Research findings shed light on the tensions, complexities, and contradictions involved in the three groups of participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Research findings also shed light on the interplay of culture, power, and identity and how it affected the participants' meaning making, particularly their understanding of the presence of Western public relations theories, models, and concepts in China. Confucianism offers the context in which to interpret participants' meaning making, highlighting how Confucianism serves as a major force shaping the cultural and intellectual negotiation between the global and the local, as well as within Chinese culture itself. The resulting meaning of Chinese public relations reveals a hybrid identity that consolidates both Western and Chinese values. The hybrid identity is also a manifestation of the interplay of culture, power, and identity. In the following, I offer a detailed description of significant findings based on each RQ.

*RQ1: How does the circuit of culture model help explore and understand the tensions, complexities, and contradictions implicit in Chinese public relations educators', practitioners', and students' meaning making of Chinese public relations education?*

*How does the circuit model help understand the interplay of culture, power, and*

*identity, within which context participants negotiate and construct meanings and identities for Chinese public relations education?*

### *Regulation*

Regulation describes the context in which public relations takes place. It refers to the controls that help establish a boundary in which cultural activities are regulated. It provides a sense of right and wrong and of what is considered acceptable and unacceptable within a given context. In the following, I include themes that describe the context within which participants make meaning of Chinese public relations education.

### *The Status Quo of Chinese Public Relations Education*

Participants identified three phases that Chinese public relations education has gone through. The first phase was in the 1980s when public relations first entered China, particularly in Shen Zhen and Guang Zhou. It was around the time of China's economic reform. The first university permitted by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE) to offer an undergraduate major in public relations was Sun Yat-Sen University. Although the courses offered at the beginning were simple and basic, Sun Yat-Sen University became a landmark in the history of Chinese public relations education. In 1989, the university held the first academic conference on public relations education. The organizer of this conference took part in my study. He suggested that the conference made an impact on Chinese public relations education. As he noted, "As the first conference in public relations, it was very successful. Scholars engaged in meaningful discussions about the definition, function, and nature of public relations."



During the same period, two important public relations associations were established and a few additional academic conferences were held. One association was called the China Public Relations Association (CPRA), which was established in 1987. In 1988, it held its first conference in Hang Zhou and a second one in 1989 in Xi'an. At the end of 1989, Shen Zhen University held another conference on Chinese public relations education. The other association established during that time was called the China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA) created in 1991. CIPRA has become more influential over the past few years. It organized lots of national and international activities, such as the national public relations case competition, annual research on the status quo of public relations industry, and the biannual public relations conference.

The second phase in the development of public relations education in China was from the beginning to the first half of the 1990s, which was a down time in the history of Chinese public relations education, largely because the sudden popularity of public relations approaching the end of the first phase had sparked such unprofessional public relations practices as gift-giving, banqueting, nepotism, and PR ladies. As one senior professor shared:

Because public relations developed very fast, all of a sudden, it seemed that every university was teaching public relations and offering public relations training. For my university's correspondence educational program, there were 150,000 students. It was way beyond what the market could accommodate. Due to this influx, by the middle of the 90s, particularly around 1996 and 1997, public relations was in a chaotic state. Nobody knew exactly what

public relations was and did. Students could not find good jobs and we didn't have enough quality teachers. Public relations started to go downward. A number of companies, as a result, shut down their public relations departments.

From the end of the 1990s to the present, public relations entered its third phase, a rational and steady development stage. During this phase, people have developed a much more correct understanding of public relations. Meanwhile, since 1995, many universities had begun to offer public relations programs at the master's level. More teachers started to teach public relations, and more students became interested in choosing public relations as a career. As a result, public relations has gradually become a profession. More universities have begun to teach public relations as a general knowledge course in order to improve the overall quality of students.

With this improved overall situation in Chinese public relations education, students have been able to secure much better jobs in public relations or related fields after graduation. As one professor indicated, "Students graduated from our school have all found great jobs. Most of them are working in public relations and many are working at the top 10 domestic or international public relations agencies. Quite a few earlier graduates have already reached top-management levels."

*Levels of public relations education.* Public relations courses are offered at both undergraduate and graduate levels (including both master's and doctoral degrees). Participants gave different responses concerning the exact number of universities that offer public relations majors. However, one participant,<sup>5</sup> who served on China's Higher Education Committee, stated that he has the most credible source

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<sup>5</sup> He is also the first doctoral student in public relations.

in this regard. According to him, there were 10 universities offering undergraduate public relations majors, including four universities in Shanghai—Dong Hua University (东华大学), Shanghai Normal University (上海师范大学), Shanghai International Studies University (上海外国语大学), and Shanghai Second Polytechnic University (上海第二工业大学)—and six in various other parts of China.

At the master's level, the participant mentioned that there are three universities that offer public relations major. They are Sun Yat-Sen University (中山大学) in Guang Zhou, Communication University of China (中国传媒大学) in Beijing, and Fu Dan University (复旦大学) in Shanghai. Additionally, he mentioned that there are countless schools that have public relations concentrations.

At the doctoral level, there are no public relations majors, only concentration. There are three universities that offer public relations concentrations, including Shanghai International Studies University (上海外国语大学) in Shanghai, Fu Dan University (复旦大学) in Shanghai, and the People's University of China (中国人民大学) in Beijing. Shanghai International Studies University and Fu Dan University are the first two schools that offered doctoral concentrations in public relations in 2006. Among all of the universities listed here, Shanghai International Studies University is the only one that has undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees in public relations.

Additionally, the participant suggested that, besides the universities that offer public relations majors and concentrations, every single university in China offers

public relations as a general-knowledge course open to students across all disciplines. He called this a “unique Chinese phenomenon.” Offering public relations as a general knowledge course is done to fulfill the requirement of quality education (素质教育) required by the MOE. The purpose of quality education is to train students to develop holistically rather than just academically. Students are encouraged to participate in activities outside their academic interest, such as physical education and moral education. As one professor noted, “At my university, public relations is offered as an elective for arts and humanities, public administration, sociology, and education management and basically for students across all disciplines. Lots of students sign up for the class.”

*Curricular design.* Public relations educators interviewed suggested two approaches to designing public relations curricula. One approach is called “a small core and a broad outreach.” This approach is based on the belief that public relations itself does not have a broad knowledge base and, thus, has to “borrow” courses from other fields. With this approach, schools offer one or two courses related to public relations per se, such as public relations theory and practice, and then let students take courses from other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, marketing, philosophy, economics, graphic design, broadcasting, and so on. Explaining the rationale behind this approach, one professor said, “We notice that public relations psychology is not different from psychology, public relations writing not different from writing, public relations speaking is not different from public speaking, et cetera.” In contrast, the other approach is based on the belief that public relations should be as specialized as possible. Schools adopting this approach offer courses designated exclusively to

public relations, such as public relations theory, public relations practice, public relations cases, public relations writing, public relations psychology, public relations etiquette, and public relations management.

Nevertheless, regardless of the approach that a particular school takes, educators interviewed stated that most of the universities that offer public relations degrees or concentrations have done a good job at curricular design. They particularly compared Chinese public relations courses with those of the U.S. Many concluded that most of the public relations courses offered in the U.S. are available in China as well. As one senior professor indicated:

I think we did an excellent job at curricular design. We have most of the courses that you could find overseas. We have a team to design public relations courses, and our team has been in public relations academia and industry for more than 20 years. We offer courses that are most demanded by society, along with the fundamental ones that students need to know such as writing, speaking, and communicating. We train students at both technical and strategic levels. We also teach them advanced knowledge from other fields such as sociology and management, as well as research methods such as how to do surveys and how to use SPSS software.

*Not Recognized by the MOE<sup>6</sup> as an Official Major*

In China, schools cannot just launch a major unless it is in the Educational Catalogue approved by the MOE. If a particular field is not in the catalogue, its corresponding majors cannot be accredited because official and schools cannot issue diplomas to students on graduation. Unfortunately, public relations has not yet

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China as mentioned earlier.

entered this Educational Catalogue. Sun Yan-Sen University is the first university in China to receive permission from the MOE to offer an official major in public relations in 1994. Since then, only a few universities have received such permission. Disapproved by the MOE, public relations, “as a science, hasn’t entered the mainstream intellectual community in the same way as math, physics, and Chinese,” as one senior professor noted.

Participants suggested a few reasons leading to the MOE’s disapproval of public relations as an official major. One reason is that many governmental officials working at the MOE still have not developed a correct understanding of what public relations is and does. Some of them still equate public relations with propaganda. For example, one professor who has been doing public relations to help manage government reputation for a long time indicated that she still felt reluctant to call her practice *public relations* because of the negative connotations embedded in the practice; instead she calls her practice *government communication*, which she believed is a more neutral term.

A second reason leading to the disapproval is the MOE’s tendency to merge relevant majors as opposed to having many specialized stand-alone fields. By the end of the 1990s, the MOE reexamined the content of its course catalogue and identified a major problem facing Chinese education at the time; that is, the divisions among majors were too specialized. They believed that such a specialization is not in the best interest of students. Instead, they recommended a broad knowledge base to ground undergraduate public relations education. As a result, the MOE called for merging and combining relevant majors to reduce the total number of academic majors from

700 at the time to around 350. As a result of that call, half of the majors were eliminated. As one professor said:

The MOE thinks that majors such as advertising, journalism, and public relations are similar fields of study. They don't see the need of establishing public relations as an additional stand-alone major. Doing so seems to be against the underpinning philosophy of the MOE.

Since the reexamination in the late 1990s, the MOE has not reviewed its catalogue and no school has ever gotten permission from the MOE to start new majors such as public relations except for those that had already been granted the permission. In addition, to have a new major added to the catalogue, an existing major has to be replaced. The educators interviewed indicated that no discipline was willing to be replaced. As one professor indicated, "Nobody wants to have their majors cut even though their students' enrollment is extremely low."

As a result of teaching in a field not being recognized as an official major and mainstream discipline, public relations educators have encountered major difficulties in their bids for tenure and promotion. Scholarly publications at public relations-related journals do not count as fulfillment of educators' tenure requirements. As a result, many public relations educators, however passionate they are, have to keep public relations as a secondary research interest. As one professor shared:

Because publications in PR-related journals do not really count towards tenure and promotion, educators who are really passionate about public relations have to prepare two separate packages for their promotion: one for public relations and the other for a more established academic field such as

advertising, management, journalism, or mass communication. This has become a burden for many teachers.

That publication in public relations related journals does not count toward tenure and promotion is due to the lack of academic focus of these journals. In fact, there are no tier-one academic public relations journals dedicated to research. As the participant continued:

Most of the publications in public relations still focus on the technical level. However, this is quite understandable. Since public relations scholarship is a relatively small community, publishers do not want to publish many theory-based public relations books because there won't be a large enough audience to purchase these books. As a result, there are only two public relations journals left.<sup>7</sup> One is *Public Relations World*, and the other is *International Public Relations*. There is also one internal journal merely for public relations scholars within the community. Nevertheless, these journals generally are not theoretically based.

As a result of this lack of top academic journals, participants expressed their dismay at the difficulty of finding channels to showcase their academic achievements.

As one junior faculty expressed:

I don't know where I should publish my work. One alternative is to publish in some communication journals, but this means that my writing should not be too PR-focused. Otherwise, they won't publish my work. However, my research interest is in public relations. It is ironic that I teach public relations

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<sup>7</sup> There used to be a number of public relations journals but most of them were closed. Only two are left.



but I cannot write about it since there is nowhere to publish pure public relations articles. Moreover, I cannot publish at PR magazines either because they are not considered theoretical and academic enough. Publications there would not count for my tenure and promotion.

To overcome the problem, some professors have tried to publish their works in overseas (i.e., U.S.) public relations journals. However, doing so is not without its problems. As one professor noted:

Since I cannot publish in our own journals in that they are not considered academic enough, I found ways to publish in overseas journals. But how many Chinese organizations are going to read them? Plus, journals from abroad have been increasing their prices. Each year there is a 15% increase in price to the extent that our university cannot afford them anymore. Right now, we have stopped ordering these journals, but I still have articles in them.

Another major problem as a result of not being recognized as an official major concerns the academic placement of public relations. At present, different schools have placed public relations in various departments and colleges. There is little consistency in regard to where public relations belongs. For example, some schools placed public relations under journalism or communication, whereas others put it under management. Still others have placed it under arts and humanities, political science, or public administration. As one participant stated:

These placements resulted in a huge discrepancy in terms of public relations curricular design. It determines whether you are teaching 20% pure public

relations courses and 80% others or the other way around, as well as the focus of these other courses.

Similarly, another participant highlighted the discrepancies in terms of the nature of public relations:

Some schools believe that public relations is *Xing Xiang* [reputation and image] management and, therefore, should belong in the management discipline. Others argue that public relations is journalism and communication and, therefore, should fall into the communication discipline. Still others think that public relations is for building harmonious relationships and, therefore, should belong to sociology.

Indeed, my interview results confirmed this inconsistency among different schools. For example, the Communication University of China placed public relations under advertising, People's University put it under Journalism and Mass Communication, University of International Relations had it under political science, and Beijing Forestry University put it under arts. Such a diverse range of placing public relations creates problems in theorizing about the nature of public relations, as participants suggested.

Nevertheless, the situation has slowly begun to improve. More governmental officials have begun to realize the value of public relations, in part due to the many crises that the Chinese government had run into in the past, such as the SARS epidemic in 2003. The government suffered from a bad reputation as a result of their attempt at covering up the crisis. As more people have begun to realize the

importance of public relations, one participant projected, “Gradually, I think the market demand is going to pressure the MOE to reconsider its decisions.”

### *Public Relations Educators’ Background*

*Lack of public relations teachers.* Facing the huge market demand for public relations graduates, a major challenge for public relations education is that “there are not enough educators to teach the subject,” as one professor pointed out. This lack of teachers has added extra burdens for the current public relations teachers. For example, many professors have ended up shouldering more responsibilities than they could possibly handle. As one senior professor stated:

I am teaching public relations at many different levels, such as vocational school, junior college, self-study group, undergraduate, graduate [master’s level]. At the same time, I am in charge of public relations training for practitioners held at my university and serving as the chair for the examination committee for Beijing’s self-study group for the College Entrance Examination. There are lots of responsibilities.

In a similar vein, another junior professor shared her burden of teaching overload. As she stated:

I teach six courses per semester. I don’t think this number is imaginable elsewhere outside China. Plus, I have to teach at community colleges during weekends as a way to bring extra income to my university. This heavy teaching load has left me little energy and time to conduct research. In addition, because we don’t have enough teachers, many classes are getting bigger and bigger. It used to be 20 students per class. Now it has extended to

40, 60, and 90. This made it extremely difficult to teach classes such as oral communication and public relations practice, in which courses lots of hands-on experience is required. For example, in the oral communication course that I am teaching, students are required to do public speaking. I simply don't have enough time to schedule every student during the semester because I still have to leave some time for lecture. Now, the course is over. Only half of the students did their public speaking. I have to schedule the rest to finish their speeches during the summer time.

As a result of this teacher shortage, oftentimes, courses have to be offered based on the availability of teachers rather than the necessity of courses. When the teacher is available, a corresponding course will be offered, not vice versa. As one professor noted, "We don't think first about what courses should be offered to students; rather, we see who are available and then offer corresponding courses." Likewise, students commented on this lack of logic in terms of the sequence of courses offered at their corresponding universities. As one public relations major student said:

There should be some logic in terms of the sequence of courses offered.

Which one you should take first and at which semester so that it can lay a solid foundation for us to take future courses. However, I don't see such a clear logic in the courses offered at my school.

Another problem is that many of the practical public relations courses are offered too late. Similarly, another public relations major student commented:

Many of the practical courses such as public relations practice are not offered until the senior year. It is too late. By senior year, many of us are busy with doing internships and searching for jobs. We really don't have much energy to concentrate on school work however much we would love to.

Besides these issues of teaching overload and teacher shortage, the available public relations teachers exhibit two more problems: lack of formal academic training in public relations and lack of professional experience in public relations.

*Lack of formal academic training in public relations.* Few of the public relations educators interviewed had received any formal academic training in public relations. No professors held a doctorate in public relations except for one who was in the middle of pursuing a doctoral degree in public relations at the time the interview was conducted. He was also the first doctoral student in public relations in China. This lack of academic training among educators is a significant barrier to the continuous development of public relations as an academic discipline. As one senior professor suggested:

Among all of our current public relations educators, we don't have enough who have received formal degrees in public relations, especially at graduate levels. Most of the teachers are from other fields such as Chinese literature, English literature, history, philosophy, political science, computer science, management, medicine, chemistry, and so on. Although they have been in the field for 10 or 20 years, these experiences are not enough if we want to advance public relations to being an academic discipline.

However, the participants did suggest that the situation is improving. They mentioned that the younger generation of public relations educators has received much more systematic and rigorous academic training in public relations or a related field than the first generation of educators. As one distinguished senior professor mentioned:

The emerging younger generation of public relations educators received a much more systematic training in public relations. Their academic background was mostly in journalism. The even younger generation has received an even better and more rigorous training in journalism and communication. Slowly, the situation is changing for the better, although it may take a while.

*Lack of professional experience in public relations.* As an applied field of communication, public relations encompasses two domains—professional and theoretical. Both are necessary to the development of public relations as a profession. However, participants suggested that a large number of educators do not have sufficient industry experience. As one professor pinpointed, “Public relations educators do not have enough professional experience to substantiate abstract theories. As a result, they won’t be able to educate qualified public relations students.” In a similar vein, another professor commented:

Although China has all of the courses that are offered abroad, such as public relations theory, public relations practice, public relations techniques, public relations cases, and so on, there might be a big difference in terms of how well these courses are taught in China. This is determined by the overall quality of the educators themselves. For example, how often do they interact with the

industry? How much professional experience do they have? How much do they know about the industry? I think many public relations teachers haven't been able to offer a thorough explanation of the course materials because of their lack of professional experience.

On the other hand, those who have frequent interactions with the industry did comment positively on how much their interactions have helped their teaching. For example, one professor shared, "I myself have been serving as a public relations consultant for the top international and national public relations agencies for 10 years. This experience has substantially benefited my teaching. I can always draw on my personal experiences to enrich my teaching."

Nevertheless, participants summarized that the lack of formal academic training and professional experience in public relations has hindered the theoretical and professional development of public relations in China. As one professor concluded:

Teachers' academic background, professional experience, and quality of teaching are all related. For one thing, many public relations educators have had little contact with the industry. They don't have enough practical experience. Nor do they know much about the industry. They, thus, do not have sufficient personal experience to draw upon to thoroughly explain public relations cases and theories to students. For another thing, many educators have not yet developed a thorough understanding of the theory. This, to a large extent, explains the lack of theoretical development and innovation in Chinese public relations education. As a result, these factors have significantly

hindered the professional development of public relations and educators' ability to train qualified public relations students.

### *Rigid Educational Structure*

Undergraduate education in China is composed of three levels: general knowledge courses, core courses for the major, and core elective courses for the major. General knowledge courses respond to the MOE's emphasis on quality education. The goal of general knowledge courses is to lay a solid foundation and build a broad knowledge base for students' further learning, academically and holistically. Such a focus has to go beyond students' immediate academic interests to areas such as morality and ethics, and physical education. However, the problem is that, as participants suggested, the general knowledge courses take up so many credit hours that students do not have enough left for their majors' core courses and core electives. As one professor shared:

One third of students' courses are related to Marxism and Leninism, and China's political party's thoughts. These teachings have taken away lots of credit hours. Therefore, regardless of how well we arrange our curricula, we won't be able to make it as good as the U.S. public relations curricula simply because we don't have enough hours. Students spend a substantial amount of time learning English, Chinese, physical education, history, Marxism and Leninism, Xiaoping Deng's thoughts, and Maoism. They don't have many hours left for their core major courses and electives.

Echoing his sentiment, other participants reiterated the problem of designating too many credit hours to learning English. As one participant shared:



English learning is a huge problem in China. Why don't we require students to spend that much time learning Chinese? We are Chinese after all. We have a population of 1.3 billion. Is it necessary to have every single person learn English?

Furthermore, this rigid educational structure places a tight control over how resources should or should not be shared between departments. As one participant stated:

I am teaching public relations practice in the Journalism Department, and someone else is teaching the *same* course in the Advertising Department. The course that I am teaching is open only to students from my department and the course that professor is teaching is open only to students from his department. We are very isolated and don't have much interaction. Also, I can teach courses only in my own department and am not allowed to teach any other course in other departments, even though they are related to my field. This creates lots of resources waste.

#### *Rigid Curricular Structure*

The MOE did not give a consistent message regarding the requirements for public relations majors. In terms of discipline categorization, public relations is placed under management and, therefore, has to fulfill the course requirements of the management discipline. However, in terms of theoretical development and construction, public relations is placed under journalism and mass communication, under which there are two more branches, one being journalism and the other being communication. Under communication, there are two additional branches: theoretical

communication and applied communication. Public relations falls under applied communication along with advertising and media management. Placing public relations under journalism and mass communication means that public relations has to fulfill this particular discipline's course requirement. However, there are inconsistencies in terms of the course requirements for management and those for journalism and mass communication. As one senior professor explained:

Placing public relations under both management and journalism and mass communication creates a huge problem. It means that we have to use the knowledge in journalism and communication to support the umbrella concept of management. In other words, what we research has to fulfill the requirement of journalism and communication, and what we teach has to fulfill the requirement of management.

However, as the participant explained later, there are distinctive course requirements for the management and communication disciplines. To fulfill the management requirement, students have to pass advanced mathematics. This means that teachers have to teach students advanced mathematics, in addition to other required courses in the management discipline such as English and politics. However, advanced mathematics is a very challenging course for many students. As the participant continued explaining:

Most students could not enter college because of their poor scores on advanced mathematics, which is *very* hard. However, you have to teach them advanced mathematics from level 1 to 5. But, what on earth has public relations to do with advanced mathematics? Teaching such courses is a waste

of time and credits, but that is the policy for any major placed under the management discipline. As teachers, we have no choice but to obey them. The original intent of the MOE might be good but the outcome was not what it had expected.

As a result, this rigid placement of public relations under management has prevented many talented students from majoring in public relations. Participants argued that this curricular structure has become so restricting that it kills a great many talents.

### *Teaching Evaluation*

Teaching evaluation to assess teaching outcomes has recently become a popular trend in China's higher education. Unfortunately, many educators suggested that, in spite of the original good intent, teachers spend much more time addressing the evaluation itself than improving their teaching. As one senior professor shared:

The original intent of doing evaluation was really good, but what has happened so far has strayed far away from its original purpose. Many people are doing evaluation for the sake of evaluating. We spend so much time on it that we don't have enough time to prepare classes and do research. This is contradictory to the original purpose of doing evaluation, which is supposed to improve our teaching.

Additionally, several participants mentioned that teaching evaluation has made their teaching become rigid in that they have to follow everything exactly as it is laid out in the evaluation. As the participant continued:

We have to teach our classes exactly based on the evaluation. Everything is predetermined such as what you should teach and what questions you should ask. This is too rigid. Sometimes, I will find new issues and problems on the spot. I don't know if I should elaborate on them. If I do, I won't finish everything as I had planned. Plus, the school supervisor won't allow me to do that. Additionally, nowadays, we have a test bank that makes the teaching even more restricting. All of the exam questions have to come from the test bank. This is a disservice to the purpose of education. Knowledge should always be updated, but the test bank is not.

### *Tendency to Quantify Everything*

Similar to teaching evaluation, quantification has become another popular trend aiming to standardize education. Educators interviewed highlighted a tendency to quantify everything including how many courses one has to teach, how many research projects that one has to conduct and at which levels, and how many publications that one should produce each semester. As one junior member said:

They quantify everything. I feel *very* restricted. These rules and quantifications feel like shackles. I cannot believe that they even quantify the types of research that we should conduct. They give us numbers about how many research projects we should conduct at university-level, state-level, and national-level within each semester. But for some national-level research, it demands a huge amount of time to get started and then conduct the research. The idea does not just come overnight.

Resonating with her comment, another professor shared:

The MOE now quantifies the number of articles that you need to publish each year. This has really done a disservice to public relations education. It kills creativity at the cost of producing some mediocre works. Sometimes, good research projects take a few years to finish, such as the Excellence study.

#### *Traditional Learning Method and Pedagogy*

Although there have been innovations in pedagogy, participants mentioned that there are still legacies of the traditional teaching methods, such as lecturing and exam-based teaching, that hampered effective teaching in public relations. As one professor indicated:

Chinese education is about lecturing. The teacher will tell you everything, and all you need to do is to accept. Students, as a result, have few opportunities to practice their independent and critical thinking, public speaking, and problem-solving. Students' evaluations are largely exam-focused. Most exams are standardized and have definite answers. Students are not trained or encouraged to be critical, original, or innovative. They mostly learn how to memorize and match their answers to the answer key. That's how they get the points.

Similarly, one practitioner shared:

Not many college students can divert their attention from exams. Only a small proportion of them know how to take full advantage of their 4-year experience. Those who notice this would take part in different activities and

events to improve themselves holistically, not just academically. But the majority are still focusing on preparing for exams.

As a result, students growing up in the traditional exam-focused educational environment, over time, develop a habitually passive learning behavior. They become unwilling to engage in critical and independent thinking. As one professor noted:

Students have developed a habitual way of passive learning dating back to elementary school. We never trained students' independent thinking, critical-thinking, and problem-solving skills. Students have grown used to memorization. They have been doing this for more than 10 years and have become really good at it to the extent that they don't want to try anything different.

As a result, participants mentioned that sometimes, even if the teacher wanted to try innovative teaching methods, the students did not seem to be ready to receive them. As one professor shared:

Sometimes, I want to teach students the way that professors in the U.S. teach classes. I want to give them a reading list and have them complete the reading before the class. Then, when we meet in class, they should be ready to engage in class discussion. However, students do not like this. First, they think that the teacher is not working hard enough. Second, they don't want to spend too much time doing school work outside the class.

However, participants mentioned that the traditional Chinese teaching methods are not without merit. They believed that the traditional methods are effective at teaching students hard science subjects such as mathematics, chemistry,

and physics. However, when it comes to topics in liberal arts such as communication and public relations, participants indicated that they need to learn from American educators. As one professor said:

I think the Chinese teaching methods also have strengths. They are very effective for teaching subjects like mathematics and physics, in which practice, memorization, and repetition will help students excel. However, for subjects such as communication and public relations, we need to adopt America's interactive and student-centered pedagogy.

Nevertheless, many senior professors did point out that, as Chinese education has continued to reform and as Chinese scholars have had more interactions with Western scholars, encouraging changes have begun to emerge. Educators interviewed suggested that they have incorporated presentation, research paper, debate, and group work into their course requirements. Students, as a result, have become better at engaging in critical and independent thinking. For example, as one professor shared, "When the SKII crisis happened, I asked my students to do an investigative report about it. After they finished, we had a mock press-conference in the classroom. Students were really excited about it, and they did a good job." Professor Cheng<sup>8</sup> shared, "Students have become much more creative than before. After they finished doing their research projects [i.e., case analysis], they acted out the entire thing. They were very creative and imaginative. I was very impressed with their performances."

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<sup>8</sup> The participant wished to disclose her identity in the interview process. She is a distinguished professor working at Peking University, one of the most renowned universities in China. Her research area is in government public relations.

*The Support of Chinese Government and the Emergence of Government Public Relations*

Government support plays a critical role in influencing the overall status of public relations in China. As one participant shared, “Government support is very important for the development of Chinese public relations. If we don’t have enough government support, we won’t be able to develop and advance.” Encouragingly, over the past 3 decades, the government has achieved milestones in terms of demonstrating its acknowledgement of the value of public relations education. For example, one professor noted, “In 2007, the government required all of its civil servants to study public relations.” This was “a gigantic step” that “symbolizes the government’s recognition of public relations . . . [and] the requirement itself means a lot to Chinese public relations education. It has created a good environment for public relations as a discipline and profession.” At the same time, the participant mentioned that he himself has been invited by the government to teach public relations at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (PSCCC) of China. Regarding this changed attitude in government officials, the participant stressed, “You have to understand what PSCCC used to teach [Chinese government’s political thought]. It is unbelievable that they are now open to public relations. The government has changed a lot.”

In response to this growing government support, some educators interviewed believed that this change was a natural by-product as China expands its focus from economic reform to political reform. As one distinguished scholar, Manli Cheng, in the field of government public relations, shared:



As China's economy becomes more stable, it is time to shift focus from organizational public relations to government public relations, although organizational public relations is still important. In this way, the government can utilize the power of effective public relations practice to create an environment conducive to its continuous economic development.

Within this changed context, government public relations has emerged as a popular practice. According to one professor:

China is a huge country and has a huge population. If you are developing really fast, others will feel threatened. But China is not like what is projected in the Western media. China's development strategy is to create peace and harmony, and not to pose any threats for any other country. However, you have to communicate that message. It is at this point that government public relations becomes important.

However, this recognition of the importance of government public relations does not come easy. The government has paid a price for it. For example, "the 2003 SARS epidemic served as a turning point for the Chinese government to realize lots of critical issues, such as transparency and the power of media, as well as the importance of government public relations." As more attention has been paid to this area, the Chinese government has become more aware of the value of public relations and has begun to make substantial changes to improve its relationship with the public.

Participants shared several concrete examples to illustrate the changed role of Chinese government. As one professor stated:

Since 2000, the government helped set up a warning system that can inform the public and media right away if something happens. It is required that any major event that has more than 10 deaths should be reported to the central government and then inform the general public. This is a big step. Finally, the government is not hiding the information anymore but beginning to communicate with the public and media. The government has become much more transparent than before. This is extremely beneficial to the development of Chinese public relations.

Similarly, another participant noted, “For the Si Chuan earthquake that happened this year [2008], the government did a good job of disseminating information. Their immediate reactions were very encouraging to the public.” In a similar vein, another shared:

The Chinese government officials have become more approachable than before. They will engage in everyday conversations with ordinary citizens, singing songs, smiling, and so on. They have come to know that positive government reputation is built gradually through these little things.

Along with their changed understanding of public relations, government officials have also begun to value public relations educators’ expertise in this area. Many of the educators interviewed have been serving as long-term public relations consultants for the Chinese government. Most of them have been frequently invited by the local and national governments to give lectures and talks on government public relations and public relations in general. A few of them have even been invited to take part in strategic decision-making for major regional and national plans. As Professor

Cheng stated, “When the government is making important decisions, they want to get our advice and our ability to grasp things at a macro-level.”

In summary, compared to the earlier ways of how the government handled crises and natural disasters, the contemporary government leadership has projected a much more positive image and earned a much more positive reputation. Such events as the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan and the snow disaster earlier in the same year in the southern part of China, as well as the preparation for the Olympic Games, helped reveal the changed role of Chinese government.

#### *Promising Changes in Chinese Public Relations Education*

Although Chinese public relations education has a short history of less than 2 decades and is facing a number of challenges, the field has experienced substantial changes. Universities that offer public relations majors or concentrations have begun to tailor their curricular design to meet students’ special needs. For example, one senior professor from the Hang Zhou Communication City College shared her school’s approach to preparing its undergraduate public relations major students:

We have two curricular designs to meet students’ needs. One is for those who want to further their education to graduate levels and the other is for those who want to enter the job market upon graduation. We train these two groups of students differently. For the first group, the curricula focus more on theory and research, and we offer students courses such as media management, mass media theory, public relations theory; in contrast, for the second group, the curricula emphasize professional development a great deal more, and we offer

students such courses as public relations campaigns, strategy and planning, information distribution, public relations practice, and so on.

In alignment with these two designs, the school has also developed correspondingly different requirements for students to fulfill at different grades. As the participant continued:

For freshmen, our goal is to help them develop a *conceptual* understanding of the major [public relations and international etiquette]. We do not encourage them to jump directly into practice without having any conceptual understanding of the field. Their main tasks are to observe and listen. Through such sensory contact with the field, students gradually develop some intuitive understandings of public relations, which prepare them for further learning.

For sophomores and juniors, we shift our focus to train their professional skills. We require them to take internships to acquire professional experience.

At the same time, students are required to take the core public relations courses. In this way, the knowledge they learn in these core courses and the professional experience can go hand-in-hand to prepare them in a more holistic manner, and the professional experience can also help them better digest the abstract theoretical frameworks.

In a similar vein, another senior professor shared the innovative approach that his school adopted to better train public relations students:

We no longer accept any freshmen or sophomores to become public relations major students. It is not until the junior and senior years that they can declare their major in public relations. Then, we find some good candidates from

different disciplines and train them to become competent public relations major students. In this way, we can have the best students available. The rationale is that public relations is not a career suitable for everyone.

At the same time, practitioners commented on the positive changes taking place among educators. Many of them admitted that they used to hold a wrong impression of public relations educators, that is, that they were very disconnected from the industry. However, recently, through their frequent interactions with academia, they have come to develop a positive image of public relations educators. As one CEO commented:

The educators with whom I interact a lot are not lacking professional experience or interaction with the industry. They are remarkable not only in terms of their theoretical understanding of public relations in China but also in the global intellectual community. Many of them are very active. They take part in lots of industry projects and offer their insights and advice. They have a very deep and sharp understanding of the industry. Professors such as Hui Min Guo and Wei Jian Liao are amazing. They are up-to-date on everything. I could clearly tell that their students are of a much higher quality than others.

Every time I have a conversation with these educators, I feel inspired.

To that end, practitioners interviewed shared that educators had made substantial efforts to bridge the gap between academia and industry. They identified several means that educators undertook to connect the industry with education. As one CEO noted:

The universities that have a longer history in the field of public relations are well aware of the gap between industry and academia. They really make an effort to broaden students' knowledge base to make them become more competitive. They do not teach students merely for the sake of passing exams. They encourage students to take part in activities, programs, and projects to enrich their practical experiences. I think this is certainly heading towards the right direction.

At the same time, practitioners themselves also are making parallel efforts to strengthen the connection between the profession and academia. For example, one CEO identified four types of interactions that his agency frequently engaged in:

One type of the interaction is through the case competition organized by CIPRA. Lots of senior practitioners or CEOs like me served on the judging committee. We had many interactions with both educators and students. A second type of interaction is collaborating on research projects between universities and agencies like us. For example, Peking University is currently following this format. Teachers come up with some research projects and invite practitioners to come to the classroom on a regular basis to discuss and work on these projects with students. A third type of interaction happens more on an irregular basis. Senior practitioners once in a while go to the top universities in China to give talks on public relations. Still another type of interaction is through a job fair held in September each year. Top international and domestic public relations companies will come to universities to compete for qualified graduates. We treat these job fairs as an opportunity to tell

students what public relations is and what we do on a daily basis. This is a great way to interact with students. The results are win-win. Our company is an active participant in all of these events.

In fact, there are many practitioners like the CEO mentioned above who have engaged in frequent interactions with academia. As another practitioner indicated:

There are lots of practitioners like myself who pay frequent visits to universities to give talks on certain topics. I enjoy *very much* going to the classroom and interacting with students. We also engage in conversations with students to tell them about the latest cases and trends and discuss the ways in which they can have more interactions with the industry. The universities are very proactive on this.

Internship emerged as another popular channel to connect industry and academia. As one practitioner expressed:

Each summer, we have lots of student interns. We are really supportive of doing this. Every summer, we open our doors to students. The interns we have this year all have academic backgrounds in public relations. They are doing a good job and have a good understanding of the field.

Practitioners shared that an important reason that motivates them to engage in frequent interaction with educators and students is actually the shortage of qualified public relations graduates. Participants explained that, through interactions with students at an earlier stage, they are helping students make the transition from the school environment to the industry environment. As one CEO commented, “The

earlier we start to train them, the less time it requires from us to train them later. It helps students adapt faster to the industry environment once they graduate.”

With all of these efforts, practitioners interviewed suggested that Chinese public relations education is changing for the better. As one practitioner noted:

Academia has made substantial progress in terms of educating higher quality public relations students. They updated their textbooks and adopted a more interactive teaching method. Meanwhile, education personnel have also experienced positive changes. I can clearly see changes in the quality of students. Compared to the past, when we couldn't differentiate government public relations from organizational public relations, the current situation is much better.

As a result of these changes in the overall quality of students, many practitioners mentioned that they have become more interested in hiring public relations major college graduates compared to several years ago. As one CEO said:

In the past, our focus was to see whether someone had professional experience, not necessarily in public relations but any type of working experience. We didn't pay particular attention to see if they majored in public relations. Rather, we preferred those who had expertise in specialized professions such as automobile, computer, engineering, and so on because their knowledge was really helpful for dealing with clients in these areas. Recently, we have changed our perspectives when we are hiring students. I noticed that college students with public relations majors are unique.



Particularly, the case competition<sup>9</sup> gave me such a strong feeling. Those who received formal public relations training have a more solid theoretical base to ground their practices in. They have a fresh perspective on many issues, different from students who don't have formal training in the field. As a result, we shifted our focus to hiring students with communication or public relations background.

More specifically, another practitioner offered an example:

We have a student who graduated from Sun Yat-Sen University. She has been doing great so far. She has already become a team leader in charge of three or four members. It took her only a year to reach this level. To a great extent, it was because of the professional experiences that she accumulated while she was a college student, as well as the knowledge that she learned at school.

### *Representation*

#### *The Representation of U.S. Scholars in Chinese Public Relations Community*

Having originated in the U.S., public relations was a borrowed concept in China. It has become increasingly popular since its entrance to China's market and higher education. An increasing number of universities have begun to offer public relations majors and concentrations. Every single university has begun to offer public relations as a general knowledge course for students across disciplines to improve their overall quality. Many schools have adopted Western public relations books as textbooks or supplementary readings to improve their teaching. Among all of these imported works, two scholars are most influential and highly regarded in the Chinese

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<sup>9</sup> The participant was the CEO of a top local PR agency. He served as the judging committee for the public relations case competition organized by the CIPRA.

public relations society. Their works are represented as the “authoritative voices” in public relations.

One scholar is Scott M. Cutlip, who is one of the authors of *Effective Public Relations*. His work exerted a great impact on Chinese public relations, especially during the earlier stage of Chinese public relations. *Effective Public Relations* was the first English-written public relations textbook introduced to mainland China by a group of first-generation public relations educators. As one senior educator who helped translate the book shared, “I think we had introduced the *best* available public relations textbook at the time into China’s market.” Similarly, another educator commented, “*Effective Public Relations* is the best translated public relations textbook introduced to China. Even today, some universities are still using it as the textbook to teach public relations.”

The other highly-regarded and influential scholar is James Grunig, who is one of the leading researchers on the Excellence study. Grunig’s works have exerted a great effect on contemporary Chinese public relations. He, along with Larissa A. Grunig, has paid several visits to China to attend the bi-annual public relations conference organized by CIPRA, and they have served as the keynote speakers. Particularly, Chinese scholars have made substantial effort to publicize J. Grunig’s works and make them available to the public. In fact, his edited book *Excellence in Public Relations* (1992) has just been translated into Chinese. Students at various universities are expected to use his book as a major reference book. Participants frequently referred to J. Grunig as “the best and the greatest” scholar in the field of public relations and used very respectful words when they were talking about him.

Gradually, J. Grunig has become a household name in the circle of public relations academy and industry.<sup>10</sup> As one professor commented, “I really admire the Excellence study. I think it has reached the peak of public relations research. No other scholar’s work can really surpass the Excellence study, at least in the near future.”

### *Legacy of the Excellence Study*

Among the various schools of thoughts underpinning U.S. public relations scholarship, the management approach is one that has been heavily and frequently represented by Chinese scholars as cutting-edge theory and the frontier of knowledge. As a result, the management approach, represented by J. E. Grunig’s philosophy and Excellence Study, remains the best known work within China’s public relations academia and industry. Several participants shared that they wholeheartedly believed in J. Grunig’s theory. As one senior professor indicated:

I never thought of public relations as anything else, such as *Xing Xiang*. My thought is very much influenced by Grunig. I think he is right. Public relations is communication management.

Echoing his sentiments, a student shared:

My understanding of public relations has already been polluted. Many people have told me their ideas and opinions. I am very influenced by them to the extent that I cannot clearly see what my ideas are. I don't know how I would interpret public relations without being influenced by their perspectives and without reading these public relations books. If you ask me how I interpret

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<sup>10</sup> While I was doing the interview, everyone asked me about Dr. J. Grunig and how he was doing. Participants showed great eagerness to know more about American public relations education. To a great extent, I think my success in recruiting research participants, particularly public relations educators, was due to the great reputation that the University of Maryland enjoys in China. Participants frequently introduced me as an “excellent” student who studied at the University of Maryland.

public relations now, I would conceptualize it as communication management.

That is what I learned at school.

In terms of their understanding of communication management, one educator offered a detailed explanation of why communication management should be conceived of as the core of public relations:

Everything that we do is for the purpose of communication. Through the means of communication management, public relations helps create a favorable environment conducive to the long-term development of the organization.

Likewise, practitioners interviewed also expressed their preference for the management approach. As one CEO commented:

I interpret public relations as communication management. In fact, public relations is managing communication. It is the process of communication management. We deal with relationships with a diverse public. Our goal is to manage our communication and make it as effective as possible. In my vocabulary, *management* is communication and *communication* is management. They are synonymous.

Along similar lines, participants stressed the importance of mastering communication skills and their contribution to being promoted to managerial positions. As one practitioner shared:

Communication is a most important skill, if not the most important, in public relations. You have to communicate with journalists, clients, vendors, and so on. How would you do it? These people are not your subordinates. How could

you communicate with them in a way that they would collaborate with your work? In the end, both sides can benefit to make it a win-win situation. If you want to have a good future in public relations, you have to be good at communication. Otherwise, you would never be promoted to managerial positions.

### *The Role of International Public Relations Agencies and MNCs in China*

Participants stated that an important factor pushing forward the development of Chinese public relations is the large number of international public relations agencies and multinational corporations (MNCs) that have entered China's market since the economic reform. They stated that these companies introduced and popularized professional public relations practice in China. Especially during the earlier years, to a great extent, Chinese people's understanding of public relations has developed through these MNCs' representation of public relations. As one senior professor indicated:

At the beginning of the 80s, public relations had entered mainland China. At the time, not many people had ever heard of public relations, let alone understood what it did. Since China's economic reform, many MNCs and international PR agencies have flown into China's market. Most of them have public relations departments. Through lots of interactions and learning, they have taught us what public relations was. It was a good education for us.

Echoing his comments, another participant shared:

When the concept of public relations was introduced to China, it was international public relations agencies that picked up the term first. These

international agencies are following international standards. They have taught us lots of cutting-edge knowledge and skills about public relations. They are very professional. We have learned a lot from them. Even today, there are still a lot that we could learn from these top MNCs, such as their management philosophies, communication management, and organizational cultures. Therefore, to a great extent, especially during the earlier stage of Chinese public relations, many people learned what public relations is and does through the representation of MNCs.

### *Consumption*

Consumption refers to the process of decoding the meanings encoded by producers. Consumption is always related to production. The following lists themes that illustrate how Chinese public relations educators, students, and practitioners “consume” the imported body of knowledge of U.S. public relations. This process of consuming also illustrates the intricate relationship between consumption and production, as well as the intrinsic role of power in the meaning making process.

#### *“Consuming” the Imported Body of Knowledge in Public Relations*

Participants “consumed” the imported body of knowledge in public relations as playing an indispensably vital role in contributing to the continuous theoretical and professional development of Chinese public relations. In their consumption of this imported body of knowledge, Chinese scholars, educators, and practitioners frequently described the U.S. body of knowledge in public relations as “the best,” “the cutting-edge theory,” and “the authority.” As a result of their respect and admiration for U.S. scholars, most participants believed that the importation of the

U.S. body of knowledge in public relations is beneficial to continuously pushing forward the theoretical and professional development of Chinese public relations. As one professor noted:

These imported theories and concepts have helped our understanding of public relations. Therefore, I don't think the presence of Western theories in China is a problem. In fact, I think there are many things that we need to emulate, such as research methods and how to conduct rigorous research. We need to learn from the best.

In fact, participants believed that the importation of these Western theories and concepts is not only beneficial but also a *necessary* step to furthering the theoretical and professional development of Chinese public relations. To elaborate on this point, one senior professor delineated several concrete phases that Western theories in China have gone through:

There are different phases regarding the presence of Western theories in China: from the beginning importing and examining, to the current digesting and imitating, and to the future creating and innovating. Based on the current state of Chinese public relations education, we are, at most, at the imitating phase. Mostly, we are still in the process of studying and digesting Western public relations theories and concepts. It is only in the application process that we incorporate Chinese cultural nuances and cases and inject our own thoughts. Our next step is to create and innovate, but we are not there yet. In this regard, I don't think having Western public relations theories and

concepts in China is going to damage the theoretical development of Chinese public relations. In fact, I think this is a *necessary* step.

Similarly, other scholars commented on the necessity of importing Western theories because public relations, after all, was not invented in China. As one professor stated, “Knowing the historical root and background that gave birth to public relations is necessary for us to understand public relations.” Additionally, participants suggested that the young history of Chinese public relations itself furthers the need to “import more U.S. public relations theories and concepts to China.”

Likewise, students believed that having Western theories and concepts in China has pushed forward the theoretical and professional development of Chinese public relations. As one PR-major student said:

Having Western public relations in China is beneficial to the theoretical development of Chinese public relations. Although they may not be that relevant to my everyday life, they are very helpful, especially in terms of training one’s ability to engage in theoretical inquiries, development, and innovations. If you can truly grasp their theoretical reasoning and development, even though there are cultural differences, you can still benefit a great deal from them.

### *Consuming While Localizing*

The aforementioned agreement to the contribution of Western public relations theories and concepts does not mean that these theories and concepts can be applied to the Chinese context without encountering any problems. In fact, participants did point out several cultural differences between China and the U.S. that may cause



barriers to the implementation of these imported theories and concepts, such as power distribution (China's centralized versus America's equalized), freedom of speech (the relative absence of it in China), emphasis on individual rights in the U.S. as opposed to collective interest in China, and the absence of a democratic political system in China. As one professor indicated:

Public relations originated in the United States. Its development in China experienced cultural resistance. For example, China is a very relationship-oriented society. Relationality is the core of the Chinese society. However, as soon as we start talking about relationship, we cannot avoid discussing the Chinese cultural emphasis on sympathy, relationship, and feelings or showing concern for others (人情味). These cultural emphases exemplify at two levels: the material level and the emotional level. When people dwell too much on the former, it becomes *gao guanxi* (an unethical use of relationships) and using inappropriate means to obtain things. When such unethical practices are prevalent, public relations loses its meaning and purpose.

Similarly, another professor offered more concrete examples:

The contemporary market economy emphasizes efficiency. You always strive to be the first to do and try something. However, traditional Chinese cultural values discourage being the first to try anything. We have sayings such as the first bird to fly will be shot. In the face of crisis, public relations theories state that we have to react as fast as possible, within 24 hours. However, traditional Chinese cultural values tell us the opposite: scandals should only stay at home and not travel afar. We always try to hide as much as possible as though

nothing had ever happened. Fortunately, right now, the situation is changing.

The Chinese government has learned its lesson [referring to several crises that the Chinese government had experienced in the past].

However, in the face of these incompatibilities between public relations and traditional Chinese culture, rather than simply rejecting their coming, educators argued that a more important question to consider is how to localize the imported U.S. theories and models to better fit into the Chinese context. Educators believed that such localization is more the responsibility of Chinese public relations scholars. They should shoulder the responsibility of discerning the applicability of Western theories and localizing them to fit into the Chinese context. For example, one senior educator stated:

Whether or not these imported theories will hinder the development of Chinese public relations is up to how culturally sensitive Chinese scholars are. After all, we are living in a global community. There are and will continue to be lots of intellectual discussions and exchanges on a global scale. We cannot isolate ourselves. Nor could we stop these Western theories and concepts from coming to China. Within this context, it is impossible if you just go ahead and create your own stuff. As we continue to engage in this constant interaction with Western theories and concepts, it is up to our Chinese scholars to develop a sense of awareness of Chinese cultural uniqueness, which should not be watered down by Western thoughts.

In response to his caution, participants seemed to demonstrate a high level of cultural sensitivity while they are “consuming” the imported body of knowledge in

public relations. They have engaged in various degrees of localization. As one professor commented:

Chinese culture is different from others. I don't think we can just duplicate other countries' practices and theories. China is China. It is not the United States, not the United Kingdom, not Europe, not Japan. China is China. Public relations came to China from the United States. This is very good for the development of Chinese public relations. However, we need to think about how we could transplant the Western concepts to China based in China's unique cultural characteristics. How could we maximize the utility of these Western theories and use them to their fullest extent to benefit the Chinese public relations industry and academia?

Similarly, another professor elaborated:

I am well aware of the cultural differences between China and the U.S. China is a developing country. Its sociopolitical and economic systems are different from those of developed countries. Also, theories are highly contextualized in the environments that gave birth to them. Theories are summaries of practices. American public relations theories are summaries of American public relations practices. When you transplant their theories to China without making necessary modifications, there will be problems. . . . I always tell my students to keep a critical eye while examining these Western theories.

In a similar vein, another scholar particularly stressed Chinese scholars' awareness of localization:

Chinese educators have a *very strong* sense of localizing these imported theories and concepts. We won't accept their theories completely. Nor will we duplicate their theories rigidly. We will modify them based on the specific social situation and cultural context of China. For example, for the classes that I teach, I localized all of the borrowed theories and concepts. I bring in appropriate Chinese cases to elaborate on these theories. I also tell my students that the Western theories were originally meant to be understood this way. However, in the Chinese context, they are going to apply them in a different way.

Still some scholars used a combination of Western and Chinese public relations theories in their teaching to balance and counter the flow of Western theories. As one scholar indicated:

I use a combination of Western and Chinese public relations theories. Western theories are more advanced. They are very useful for our teaching. However, in China, you cannot really teach anything detached from its cultural context. Especially in terms of theory applications, we have to tightly relate them to practice. Although we use classic Western cases and examples, more often we rely on Chinese cases to elaborate on the theories and illustrate cultural nuances and assumptions underlying the theories.

*(Re)production*

Knowledge does not have meaning until it is consumed. The process of consumption is also the process of production and reproduction—or localization. As an imported concept, public relations in China has experienced various degrees of

localization and reproduction in accordance with the Chinese context. In the following, I describe several approaches distinctive to the Chinese context as participants engaged in a process of consumption and reproduction. These approaches are *Xing Xiang*,<sup>11</sup> building harmonious relationship, and CIS (corporate identity system). There are also a few non-mainstream approaches listed under the category of “others.”

### *The Xing Xiang Approach*

*Xing Xiang* is a most well-established, systematic, and influential approach among the various approaches to Chinese public relations. Its theoretical foundation is more rigorous than any other approaches. *Xing Xiang*, literally, means ‘image’ in English. However, participants underscored that the Chinese phrase *Xing Xiang* entails far more meanings than image. The Chinese translation incorporates reputation management. As one professor shared:

It is wrong to translate *Xing Xiang* into ‘image.’ *Xing Xiang* incorporates more meanings than *image*. It is a delicate integration of the external visual image and the internal essence or integrity of a product, a person, or an organization.

Without such a contextualization, the participant continued, “China’s using *Xing Xiang* to understand public relations may surprise lots of Western scholars. However, *Xing Xiang*, grounded in the Chinese context, is not wrong. It just has to be understood within the Chinese context.”

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<sup>11</sup> The literal translation of the Chinese words *Xing Xiang* is ‘image.’ However, the interview data have clearly demonstrated that what the Chinese mean by *Xing Xiang* is ‘reputation management.’

Specifically, participants suggested several ways to interpret *Xing Xiang* based in the Chinese context. One educator described *Xing Xiang* as a multifaceted concept that entails two aspects: quality and reputation. As he explained:

By *quality*, I mean that, regardless of the quality of management or the quality of a product, a good quality means a good *Xing Xiang*. By *reputation*, I mean that whether it is through written contract or verbal agreement, once you have reached a mutual agreement, you have to keep your word. This is reputation. Whether you could keep your word is considered the core by the general public.

Another professor interpreted *Xing Xiang* by elevating it to a moral and ethical level. As she stated:

Why do we need to pay attention to morality and ethics? To a great extent, it helps manage the *Xing Xiang* of an organization. Morality and ethics and *Xing Xiang* are reciprocal. Each supports the existence of the other.

Positioning *Xing Xiang* at such a moral level, the participant brought up two additional aspects: self-critique and others-critique. As she explained:

*Xing Xiang* includes self-evaluation and self-critique and the public's evaluation and critique. You have to integrate this self-critique and other-critique to understand the *Xing Xiang* of an organization. *Xing Xiang* is a two-way cycle, from the inside to the outside and then outside to the inside. It is never one-way.

Still some interpreted *Xing Xiang* through the lens of intangible capitals. One professor suggested that “*Xing Xiang* helps the management team expand its attention

from tangible capitals to intangible ones, such as relationship, *Xing Xiang*, information, and so forth.”

Moreover, some participants rendered their interpretation of *Xing Xiang* from a historical perspective. They believed that *Xing Xiang* is a prevalent cultural concept that can be dated back to Confucius’ time. As one participant shared:

Confucius talked about *Xing Xiang* as an integration of inner virtues and outer beauty. In fact, I think many corporations have begun to manage their *Xing Xiang* by paying attention to their inner virtues, such as giving back to society and becoming good citizens. I disagree that corporations are only out to make profit. I think more corporations have begun to develop an awareness of corporate social responsibilities.

Furthermore, participants listed several reasons leading to the growing popularity of the *Xing Xiang* approach. One important reason concerns some historical factors. As one senior public relations professor explained:

In the history of Chinese public relations, there are a few classic and influential public relations books that have shaped people’s understanding of public relations even until today. One such book was written by Professor An Xiang Ming, entitled *The Art of Xing Xiang Management: An Introduction to Public Relations*, published at the beginning of the 80s. As you can tell from the name, the main title of the book is *Xing Xiang* management and the subtitle is public relations. This book had successfully planted the seed for the later *Xing Xiang* school of thought.

Other participants pointed out some pragmatic reasons contributing to the popularity of *Xing Xiang*. As one senior professor shared:

*Xing Xiang* is an easier way to explain to the general public what public relations is and does. The academic definition of *public relations* is too abstract to educate the general public. In contrast, *Xing Xiang* is much more vivid. People can easily understand it. Although such a rendering of public relations may seem shallow, it works well for those who know nothing about public relations. Having some basic knowledge or awareness is better than not knowing anything at all. Conceiving of public relations as *Xing Xiang* management helps people at least start to pay attention to public relations and realize its value, although there may also be misunderstandings.

However, in spite of its popularity, there are also voices against the *Xing Xiang* approach. Some argued that its emphasis on the external image, even though the original intent is a combination of the internal and external, distorts the true nature of public relations. As one senior professor shared:

The problem is that if you focus only on the external image of *Xing Xiang*, it becomes so superficial that it distorts the real nature of public relations.

People would just interpret public relations as a professional way to package oneself. This has real, damaging effects on public relations.

Similarly, another professor discussed why *Xing Xiang* should not be conceived of as the core of public relations. She justified her explanation through a detailed account of what is meant by *core*:



The core represents the deepest and most essential and profound characteristics of something. It must be invisible. You can sense it, but you cannot see it. For example, the core of an apple, you cannot see it from the outside. In this regard, the core of public relations cannot be *Xing Xiang*, which is visible from the outside.

Nevertheless, many participants believed that *Xing Xiang* is a necessary transitional stage to “a more sophisticated understanding of public relations.”

#### *The Approach of Building Harmonious Relationships and Society*

Another mainstream, localized conceptualization of public relations is to build harmonious relationships and society. As one professor stated, “I think the ultimate goal of public relations is seeking harmony and building harmonious relationships between organizations and the public, nation and state, and country and country.” Commenting on the relationship between harmony and public relations, another senior professor shared:

The primary goal of public relations is to build internal harmony and unity and external development.<sup>12</sup> The public is both internal and external. Organizations communicate with their public through the means of communication. Both internal and external publics are necessary for the organization to develop. The premises for long-term external organizational development are internal unity, harmony, and innovation. Harmony is the core. It does not mean the absence of conflicts. Rather, it denotes the harmonization of differences and disagreements so as to create a harmonious

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<sup>12</sup> The participant mentioned that he did not come up with the definition on his own. He read it from a book and really agreed with it.

atmosphere conducive to unity-building. Only when we have achieved internal unity and harmony could we have external development.

### *The CIS Approach*

CIS—or Corporate Identity System—has become a most popular approach to examining public relations since it entered China. CIS includes MI (mind identity), BI (behavior identity), and VI (visual identity). One participant offered a detailed explanation of the components of CIS:

*MI* focuses on organizations' vision and mission, things that are more at a philosophical level. *BI* refers to communication activities at behavioral levels, including public relations, advertising, marketing, and product development. As far as public relations is concerned, it includes external services for the public as well as internal training and education for employees. Specifically, it focuses on EI (employee identity) and CI (customer identity). Both are equally important to public relations. *VI* encompasses things at a visual level such as organizational logos. *VI* is mostly handled by people majoring in graphic design. Public relations is more concerned with *MI* and *BI*, which are tightly related to the strategic function of public relations.

Given that CIS is an imported concept, one professor added two additional components to make the concept better fit into the Chinese context. These two added components are AI (audio identity) and EI (environmental identity). The professor explained that “these five elements together serve as a whole system helping us develop a more comprehensive understanding of public relations.”

### *Non-Mainstream Approaches*

Besides the dominant schools of thoughts, the data suggested several alternative approaches to interpreting public relations. For example, some professors and students defined public relations as a science and an art. *Science* is used in the sense that public relations is scientific and has its own body of knowledge. *Art* is used in the sense that public relations is creative and artistic.

Other participants offered much more complicated definitions of public relations. For example, one professor differentiated process from outcome and used them to conceptualize public relations. He believed that harmonizing relationships and managing *Xing Xiang* are all outcomes of effective public relations practice. What public relations really is, according to him, “is the *process* that leads to these outcomes. The process employs communication.” The participant further offered a detailed account of what he meant by *public relations communication*:

Public relations communication is not simply communicating. Otherwise, propaganda alone would be enough. The process of public relations communication is a combination of deeds and words. It is the combination of these two that makes a person or organization trustworthy. The process cannot simply be interpreted as communication but a combination of communication and meaningful actions.

Another senior professor conceptualized public relations as a state-of-being:

Every organization has a state-of-being, regardless of whether you admit it or not. This default state-of-being can be understood as its reputation or the public recognition of the organization. If you have a good reputation, it means

that your state-of-being is good, and vice versa. To change your state-of-being, you have to employ strategic public relations. This is what makes public relations a profession.

Even more systematically, another professor defined public relations as containing five levels:

The first level concerns relationship. Public relations is a state-of-being. The existence of an organization means it has relationships with many other agents in the society, admit it or not. Public relations manage these relationships. Second, public relations is an activity or persuasion if you wish. At this level, public relations is used as a verb. This level also demonstrates the applied nature of public relations. Third, public relations is a profession. Its goal is to help organizations have sustainable development by managing *Xing Xiang*, coordinating and harmonizing different interests, and creating and maintaining a favorable environment for the organization to develop continuously. Next, public relations is a discipline that commands its own body of knowledge. Last, public relations is a guiding philosophy. It directs everyday practice.

Still some consolidate various schools of thought to define *public relations*. As one practitioner shared:

I equate public relations with soft power. It is an important strategic tool to help an organization manage its *Xing Xiang* and build harmonious relationships. For example, in the face of crises, strategic public relations can help transform crises into opportunities. In fact, crises and risks offer a wonderful channel for the outside world to know more about China. In such

situations, public relations is communication management. Effective practice helps project a positive *Xing Xiang* even in the face of crises. In this regard, if we interpret public relations as contributing to societal harmony, it has values for both soft and hard power.

Apart from these systematic renderings of public relations, some participants, in contrast, felt reluctant to give *public relations* a definition. They argued that the current state of Chinese public relations is not mature enough to conceptualize what Chinese public relations is and does. If such a definition is imposed upon, it would be a misrepresentation of the real nature of Chinese public relations. As one participant explained:

China' public relations has a history of only 20 years. With such a short time span, it is way too early to construct a definition of *Chinese public relations*. There are still negative connotations surrounding public relations such as banqueting, gift-giving, PR ladies, and so on. With the presence of such notions, any conceptualization would be a misrepresentation of the real nature of Chinese public relations. We have to wait until public relations develops to a more mature level and then start to theorize what Chinese public relations is.

In summary, regardless of their leverage, these various schools of thought coexist in Chinese public relations education, with some being more influential than others. Most participants believed that this diversity in perspectives is beneficial to the long-term healthy development of Chinese public relations. As one distinguished senior professor shared:

To use a metaphor, I think the current state is like having the blind touch an elephant. Each person senses part of the picture, not the whole. However, together, they offer a portrayal of Chinese public relations. For example, as the creator of the *Xing Xiang* approach, I know its development very well. I am aware that there are people against it. But, it is *absolutely* fine. I think it is quite healthy if we think about the long-term development of the field. I think diversity in opinions and perspectives pushes forward the development of a discipline in a healthier way. I may not agree with what you say, but I respect and appreciate the different perspectives that you present.

*Consumption and (Re)production: The Relationship Between Academy and Industry*

Consumption and production are two overlapping points. As an applied field of communication, public relations education shows particular interest to the relationship between academy and industry, namely, between the producer of knowledge and the consumer of knowledge. At an international level, production and consumption concern the transmission of knowledge from the U.S. to China's higher educational settings. The U.S. can be conceived of as the "producer" and the Chinese as the "consumer" of knowledge. Within the national context of China, producer and consumer can be conceived of as either academia or industry. Since the earlier section has described the transmission of knowledge at an international level (i.e., how Chinese participants perceive the presence of Western theories and models in China), in the following, I include themes that highlight the contested nature of Chinese public relations education through the lens of production and consumption and between academia and industry. Specifically, themes include the nature of public

relations as an applied field of communication, the extent to which industry connects with and disconnects from academia, and the interactions between educators and professionals.

*Public Relations as An Applied Field of Communication*

In general, participants agreed that public relations is an applied field of study. It is crucial to connect theory with practice. As one senior professor shared:

Public relations is an applied field of study. Especially at the undergraduate level, it should be practice-focused. Universities have to provide students with ample opportunities to practice what they have learned in the classroom.

Ultimately, I think theory is to serve practice and guide practice. Educators have to have such awareness and their teaching cannot depart from practice but should be tightly tied to it. Teachers' main goal is to teach students how to use theory to guide practice.

Similarly, another professor noted:

When teaching public relations, I am very against teaching theories for the sake of teaching them. Public relations is an applied field; theories are grounded in everyday practice. If you are only teaching theories without using any professional experience to back them up, your teaching will touch upon only the surface of public relations.

Additionally, from students' standpoint, participants agreed that it is important to teach students knowledge that can help them secure jobs after graduation. For example, one professor commented, "Chinese undergraduate students face severe job-search pressure upon graduation. The market is very competitive. Therefore, students'

main concern is to secure jobs after graduation. They don't just want to learn things that cannot be applied." Echoing him, another professor stated:

Chinese students are very pragmatic. They are only interested in learning things that can be applied right away, and the skills that can help them find jobs and make money right away. They are not interested in theories.

However, for some good students, after they have worked in industry for one or two years, they would come to realize the importance of theory, and those courses that have immediate benefits to their career do not seem to be that useful after a while.

Students in focus groups raised the same point. Many of them believed that, to be promoted to managerial positions, having a thorough understanding of public relations is crucial. However, there are also students asserted the opposite. As one student asserted, "You cannot learn everything in the classroom. Many things have to be learned through practice." Some students even questioned the necessity and legitimacy of teaching public relations at undergraduate levels. As one shared:

I don't think it is necessary to teach public relations at the undergraduate level. This is like swimming. You cannot really rely on a theory to teach people how to swim in the classroom. They have to *practice* it. There are so many things that you cannot teach in the classroom.

Nevertheless, participants all agreed that as an applied field of communication, both theory and practice are equally important. As one professor shared:



Practice is important. Theory is also important. To advance public relations, you need to have a solid system. Otherwise, if a discipline does not have its own system and does not have its own undergraduate and graduate education, including master's and doctoral levels, the discipline is not going to last long. For any type of applied field, it is necessary to have a solid theoretical foundation to guide practice. We cannot just rely on our practical experience to advance the academic discipline. Once you reach a certain level, you should have the ability to synthesize, abstract, and theorize concrete everyday practices. Then, you use this newly gained knowledge to guide practice. This is an ongoing cycle, from knowledge to practice and from practice to knowledge. This is process, a *necessary* and *important* step.

#### *The Connection and Disconnection Between Industry and Academia*

Participants hold divergent perspectives in terms of the extent to which education connects with or disconnects from industry. Some believed that there is a widening gap between theory and practice, evident in a lack of interaction between academia and industry and academia's falling behind the industry. In contrast, there are also participants argued that academia stays closely updated with the industry, and some believed that academia is ahead of the industry. Because practitioners, students, and educators hold divergent positions and opinions, the following lists the three groups separately.

*Practitioners' perspective.* Practitioners in general believed that industry has been ahead of academia for at least a decade. Some argued that the rapid development of the public relations industry is what has been pushing forward the theoretical

development of Chinese public relations education. As one CEO of a top domestic public relations agency stated:

In China, the industry is developing very fast. This has significantly hastened the theoretical development of Chinese public relations, which in turn pushes forward public relations research. In this regard, I think the development in industry lays a solid foundation for theoretical development and innovation.

Similarly, another CEO at a top local public relations agency noted:

We have a public relations academic committee and a professional committee. Each is supposed to have annual publications. Compared to the academic committee, the professional committee has far better publications and many of our cases have gotten world attention.

*Educators' perspective.* Some educators hold similar perspectives as that of practitioners, both believing that academia is falling behind the industry. They also indicated that the lack of interaction between academia and industry offers little help to close that gap. As one professor argued:

The current state of the relationship between theory and practice is like two parallel lines. The industry focuses on the industry and the academia on academia. There are few intersections. Because of this lack of communication, practitioners sometimes look down upon academicians and devalue our scholarly work. To put it differently, while academicians are thinking highly of their works, practitioners are observing us in an aloof manner as though we were creating nothing of practical value.

In a similar vein, some believed that public relations education does not deliver the type of talents that the industry expects. As one senior public relations professor stated, “Many public relations agencies are short on talents, but there is a big disconnect between what we prepare for them and what they really want. This is not just in terms of knowledge but the overall quality of students.” More concretely, another professor stated that universities have been focusing too much on training students in the technical skills while failing to cultivate students’ strategic thinking and management skills. As he noted:

[A] most serious problem that deserves our immediate attention is the lack of public relations practitioners playing managerial roles. Our public relations education has prepared lots of good students, but many of them are at the low level, the technical level. What the industry really needs are people who can see the big picture and who know how to manage things strategically at a macro-level.

However, there are also educators who believe the opposite, arguing that academia is ahead of the industry and that many of the cutting-edge studies that scholars conduct are beyond practitioners’ interest and ability to grasp. For example, one first-generation senior professor shared:

It is far from correct to think that the industry is ahead of academia by 15 years. That is impossible. It might be the fact that many things conducted by practitioners are not what we [educators] are interested in. We are more interested in theorizing at the strategic level rather than the technical level that might be of more interest to practitioners.

The participant further used his personal experience to rebut the argument that academia falls behind the industry. As he stated:

When I started to serve as a senior consultant for the Global Public Relations agency since its establishment in 1986, there was still no public relations industry in China. There were only a few other senior public relations educators like myself helping in the industry. In other words, when I started doing public relations, these public relations agencies and firms that you see today were *not* there yet. In this regard, I disagree that public relations academia is behind the industry.

He further pointed out that many first-generation public relations practitioners are his students. These students have maintained frequent interactions with him to get his advice on many practical issues that they deal with on a daily basis. As he shared:

Many practitioners working in the industry are our [first-generation public relations educators] students. I mean those who have received formal academic training in public relations. We help them *a lot* in their everyday businesses. We offer them constant advice and guidance. For example, during the Olympic Games this year [2008], one of our famous athletes had a health crisis. Right after that happened, I was there at the front line offering practitioners guidance on how to cope with the situation. I was helping them analyze the case in terms of risk management and crisis management. These types of interactions with the industry are *way too many*. As soon as something happens, we will get phone calls from practitioners asking for help. Therefore, how could you say that there is a big gap between theory and

practice? How could you say that academia is lagging behind the industry? I don't think so.

Furthermore, the participant argued that many studies that he did were theoretical in nature and were beyond practitioners' interest or ability to grasp:

Each year, I will write an academic paper, and each month, I will write some opinion or column articles. The one I wrote last month was about how to deal with an angry public by applying game theory. Another article that I wrote was about how to handle crises by employing risk management, crisis management, risk communication, and crisis communication. These theories and concepts are really beyond the scope of practitioners' knowledge base. In this regard, I really don't think there is a big gap between academia and industry.

Finally, the participant rebutted the argument by highlighting the different perspectives that academicians and practitioners adopt to evaluate the gap. As he stated:

The contemporary public relations market in China is still not mature. The market has all sorts of needs. Because of these demands, some firms would just do it and call it public relations regardless of whether it is intrinsically public relations or not. However, just because they are calling it public relations services, it does not mean that we have to study it. Things like news releases and how much they cost per word, what is the theoretical value of studying them? Therefore, from the industry's perspective, if they are thinking that academia is not offering them enough guidance on their everyday practice

or is lagging behind them, we have to really question what they are talking about and in terms of what. If they mean from a technical level or from a service perspective, I admit that we did little research in this regard. However, it does not mean that we do not do research on public relations theory.

Because practitioners are evaluating the relationship between academia and industry from their own perspectives, they are searching for “theories” that could contribute to their market expansion. However, our task is not to examine technical skills that could contribute to increasing market shares because such things are too trivial.

At the same time, there are also educators arguing that it is quite natural to have academia fall behind the industry. For example, Professor Cheng stated:

I think it is quite normal that there is a gap between theory and practice.

Society is ever-changing. Researchers can only observe what happens first and then theorize about them second. Theory and practice cannot proceed in a parallel manner unless educators spend their entire time in the industry.

Sometimes, what you notice is only the surface of a phenomenon. You need to spend more time to contemplate on it and then have theoretical contributions.

In fact, some educators believed that it is beneficial to the theoretical construction of public relations if there is some distance between the industry and academia. As one professor said:

In fact, I think if academia becomes too close to the industry, it will lower researchers’ productivity and theoretical sensitivity. You will become too involved in the details in everyday practices so that you will lose your critical

eye and ability to see the big picture. I always try to keep some distance from industry. I just notice their mistakes and problems and then point them out. If I become too close to the industry, I will lose my critical perspective.

Nevertheless, regardless of the perspective that one takes, educators interviewed suggested that an important question to ask is *how* to evaluate the gap. As one senior professor stated:

I think there has to be some benchmark to evaluate the gap. What do you mean by *gap*? What are the benchmarks that you use to characterize gap? I don't think that scholars in the United States would say that the benchmark for the gap is that academicians are not studying concrete public relations practices or techniques. I don't believe so. I think the benchmark must be theory. But again, we need to ask, what is *theory*? What are the theories that the industry wants? What are the theories that we want?

*Students' perspective.* Students' voices highlighted a disconnect between what they learned in the classroom and what they were expected to do in the industry. Several students thought that their education did not teach them the necessary skills and knowledge that they needed to excel in practice. Students identified several aspects that exemplify this disconnect. One aspect concerns the lack of management courses that public relations education provides. As one non-major student shared:

My internship experience told me that public relations is inherently a management function. However, this was not what I was taught in the classroom. What I learned in the classroom had little relevance to what I was expected to do in the industry. I think we desperately need to offer more

management courses at the university. There are lots of good management models that are helpful for public relations practice.

However, in terms of management courses, even students who took courses in this area also felt a disconnect between what they learned in the classroom (i.e., strategic management) and what they were expected to do in the industry (i.e. technical-level tasks). As one PR major student noted:

There is a big disconnect between what I learned in the classroom and what I do in practice. When I first started working, I realized that many of the things I learned in the classroom cannot be applied in practice. What I learned is more at a macro-level, such as strategic management. But when I go to the workplace, I cannot really practice it, and they don't really expect me to get involved in the management team. What I am expected to do instead are those basic things such as writing news releases, making copies and phone calls, and so on. These basic things are merely to test my ability to write and speak. I have no chance to practice my strategic management skills. It seems to be a long way before I can reach that level.

Another aspect of the disconnect concerns the lack of support that academia gets from the industry. As one PR-major student shared:

Public relations education in China does not receive enough support from the industry. They may not even demonstrate a preference for PR major students. They believe that they can take any advertising and journalism major students and then give them some public relations training so that they can become competent public relations practitioners. This is like a vicious cycle. These



practitioners have to change their perceptions of public relations major students. Otherwise, we cannot really improve the overall status of Chinese PR education.

In this regard, students offered some recommendations from both educators' and students' perspectives to connect the two domains of public relations. From the educators' or schools' side, as one PR-major student recommended:

Schools should think about how to better connect academia and industry.

There are lots of ways. Students can become part-time students and spend the rest of their time in the industry. They can also build internship centers that offer students a platform to practice what they have learned in the classroom.

Although there are schools doing this right now, we need more. Or, at least, if schools cannot create such opportunities, they should allow students to create them on their own.

Another PR-major student commented:

Students should understand the importance of practical experience to their public relations education. They should go all out to find internship experiences whenever possible. At the same time, they should take advantage of the 4-year college experience to develop their PR-consciousness and train themselves holistically.

However, not all students agreed that the gap between education and practice is a problem. In fact, some argued that it is quite normal to find theories cannot be applied to practice. For example, one student believed that "theories are only abstract representations of reality and should not be expected to be neatly applied to reality,

which is much messier and more complex and contradictory.” As a result, the student continued:

When theories cannot be applied to practice in the exact way as we wanted, it does not mean that the education itself has or the theories themselves have problems. We cannot hold theories as rulers and expect them to solve all of the everyday problems.

Rather, she suggested:

We need to have sufficient professional experiences to help us better absorb and digest the theoretical frameworks learned in the classroom. We cannot learn everything at school, and the school can only teach us certain things. We have to immerse ourselves in the real world to acquire professional experiences, which may also help us have a deeper understanding of the abstract theories. We need to build enough professional experience to help us make sense of and apply these theories.

Similarly, in terms of the disconnect, there are also students arguing that their undergraduate education has excellently prepared them for their future careers. As one PR-major student<sup>13</sup> shared:

I like all of the courses offered at my university. All of them are very helpful. Ever since I started working, it just proves again and again that all that I have learned in the classroom is helpful and useful. My everyday experience is simply a positive reinforcement of the usefulness of the theories that I learned

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<sup>13</sup> This student participant was introduced to me by a public relations educator whom I interviewed. She spoke highly of the student’s performance and strongly recommended I interview her. The student works at a famous real-estate company in Hang Zhou and was one of the three people who were hired out of the thousands of job applicants competing for the opening position at the real-estate company. She attributed a great deal of her success to her college education.

in the classroom. I learned cutting-edge theories, knowledge, and skills. Those who never had an opportunity to receive such a systematic training in the field may spend 10 years in the industry to develop these theories on their own. However, I, without spending these 10 years, have developed a thorough understanding of them [the theories] upon graduation. This makes me very competitive.

Nevertheless, in spite of the divergent perspectives, students who are PR majors spoke more positively about their undergraduate education. They mentioned that a greatest benefit that they received from their undergraduate education is a PR-consciousness or “PR-sense” (in students’ words). This PR-consciousness helped them keep a “public relations” eye on everyday practice. As one student in the focus group indicated:

I don’t think it is a particular course that really benefits me but the overall training that I received as an undergraduate student. It helped me develop a way of thinking and a PR-sense. Such a PR-sense is very important, yet, it is not something that you can learn at work within a short period of time. I accredited my PR-sense to my 4-year’s training in college. For example, I am working in a corporate team that has five members including me. The other four team members all graduated from Ivy League universities in China and the United States. However, the senior VP always praises me because of my PR-sense. In contrast, my team members who are not PR majors do not have such a PR-sense.

Similarly, another PR-major student shared:

The PR-consciousness that I developed in college really helped me see the presence of public relations everywhere, such as in internal public relations, government public relations, media relations, and so forth. But those who are not in the field do not have such theoretical sensitivity. My PR-consciousness also helps me see the big picture. I know what I am doing, and I understand why I am doing it.

Further, several students mentioned that developing this public relations-consciousness should be the focus of undergraduate public relations education.

#### *The Interactions Between Academia and Industry*

Public relations educators and practitioners seemed to have a very dynamic and interactive relationship. Each side undertakes a great number of initiatives to remain connected with the other. In the following, I describe how educators and practitioners interact with each side and illustrate to what extent and in what aspects these interactions have affected Chinese public relations education.

*Educators in industry.* An important aspect to understanding the relationship between theory and practice concerns the role that educators play in the industry. Participants suggested that they are making substantial effort to develop an interactive relationship with practitioners in the industry. Almost all of the educators interviewed had some sort of involvement in the industry, serving either as long-term consultants or as frequent guest speakers by giving talks lectures and conducting workshops for practitioners. Some teachers have also brought students with them to go to the industry to develop hands-on experiences. Participants stressed that to succeed in China's public relations intellectual community, engaging in frequent interactions

with the industry is necessary and crucial. Without substantial experience, educators would not be able to deliver the high quality teaching that students deserve. As one professor stated:

To teach public relations well, you cannot stay detached from the industry.

You have to have some professional experience to teach public relations. You have to know the industry well so that your teaching is interesting and you can bring in the latest examples from the industry to the classroom. I spent a great amount of time and effort building relationships with practitioners by offering them free talks and seminars and developing collaborations with them through internship centers, for example. This is to make sure that I stay connected with the industry.

Students' voices helped validate the professors' stance on this matter. As one student stated:

It is *very* important for public relations educators to have some professional experience. If they don't have any connection with the industry, they won't really know what public relations is or be able to master a deep understanding of it. Then, how could they teach us? Plus, if they don't have enough professional experience, their teaching will be very dry. It is hard to concentrate. Real-life examples are more vivid and captivating.

Interestingly, the active role that public relations educators play leads to a unique phenomenon characterizing Chinese public relations education. That is, educators who are well-established in academia are also well-respected and sought-after figures in the industry. As one senior educator revealed:

One thing unique about Chinese public relations education is that those who are well-known and established in academia are also respected figures in the industry. It cannot be any other way. There are quite a few scholars like me who are active in both academia and industry. We hold very high positions in the industry and are well-respected by practitioners. To a great extent, this is because of the expertise and knowledge that we have. We have the ability to transform knowledge into productivity.

#### *Connecting Academia with Industry*

Participants agreed that it is important to connect practice with education. They took various initiatives to bridge the gap between industry and academia, such as being a scholar-practitioner, teaching students the importance of acquiring professional experience, interacting with the industry, teaching what is not available in the textbook, using the case-study approach, and implementing internship centers and PR labs. In the following, I review these initiatives respectively.

*Being a scholar-practitioner.* Educators interviewed mentioned that they had made substantial effort to train themselves to become scholars-practitioners. They have done so to enrich their professional experience so that they can improve their teaching. As one professor noted:

I think the quality of educators themselves is very important. Public relations, as an applied field, requires its teachers to have expertise in the field as well as adequate professional experience. To some extent, the quality of educators determines the future of a profession.

To that end, many educators have undertaken various initiatives to enrich their professional experiences. As one professor shared:

To enrich my professional experience, I have immersed myself into a wide range of industries, such as hospital, police station, health sectors, food, and so on, to understand public relations practice. I have also written extensively about these experiences and published them in *Public Relations World* and *International Public Relations*.

Even more so, some educators have quit their full-time jobs to immerse themselves into the industry as a way to acquire professional experience. As one senior professor shared:

I went to a former student's company in Shen Zhen. I worked there for three years. I didn't care about how much money I made. I simply wanted to gain more professional experience, strengthen my PR-consciousness, and understand the practical applications and implications of public relations theories. When I came to the student's company, he owed 18,000,000 RMB<sup>14</sup> to others, and someone owed him 12,000,000 RMB. After 3 years, I helped the student return all of his 18,000,000 RMB debt and got back half of the money that the person owed him. This success is not due to me per se, but to the knowledge and expertise that I commanded in public relations. I think anyone who really understands the value of public relations would be able to do the same.

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<sup>14</sup> Chinese currency. One U.S. dollar equals 7 Chinese RMB.

Like him, most of the educators interviewed demonstrated an eagerness to train themselves not just to become scholars but scholars and professionals. As one professor shared:

If a theory has no value to practice, it is not a good theory. Theories have to be able to guide practice. To produce such theories, it is crucial to immerse ourselves in the industry and then remove ourselves from it to engage in theoretical development.

*Teaching students the importance of acquiring professional experience.*

Participants believed that the best way to train students' theoretical sensitivity is through practice. Most participants realized the importance of acquiring professional experience and how it can affect the overall quality of public relations education. Many of them have spent a good deal of time in class teaching students the importance of professional experience and how it can benefit their careers and understandings of the abstract theories that they learned in the class. As one senior professor indicated:

I always tell my students that they need to immerse themselves in industry. At the same time, they have to keep a researcher's eye to observe and analyze while they are in the industry. They cannot just stay in the library and read a few books and think they have mastered public relations. They have to communicate with practitioners and take part in practical projects. The process of doing public relations is a most effective way to train students' theoretical sensitivity and ability to conduct research.

Similarly, another professor shared:



We really want to make sure that students know how to choose the correct theory and how to apply it flexibly and effectively to everyday practice. We pay close attention to students' ability to apply theories to everyday practice. Our worst fear is that students hold what they have learned in the classroom as the bible and apply it to every situation. This is against the purpose of education.

*Interacting with the industry.* Engaging in frequent interactions with the industry emerged as another effective channel to connect theory and practice. Educators suggested various means to help students get involved in the industry. One professor shared the approach that her school has adopted, called *going out and coming in*. As she explained:

What we mean by *going out* is that students go out to firms or public relations agencies to gain practical experience. By *coming in*, we refer to inviting senior-level practitioners into the classroom to tell students about their everyday practices and to teach them the important tips and necessary skills. We also have activities such as forums and dialogues between practitioners and students regarding various topics concerning public relations. In fact, last week, I just took a group of students to a few famous firms in order to understand their public relations practices.

To that end, many professors have invited students to join them on their research projects across various professions, such as banking, hotel service, food safety, health centers, labor unions, and so on. Through these experiences, students

could familiarize themselves with the industry while deepening their theoretical understandings.

Besides these efforts from the teachers' side, several educators mentioned that students themselves are equally motivated to seek opportunities to gain professional experiences, such as doing internships at firms or public relations agencies. Equally important, students also found resources on campus to improve their professional knowledge, for instance, applying for grants, taking leadership positions in various student government groups, and participating in the national public relations case competition organized by CIPRA.

*“Teach what is not available in the textbooks.”* Another strategy that teachers adopt to better connect theory and practice is to teach students what is not available in the textbooks. An important reason that motivated teachers to adopt this strategy is the changed attitude among contemporary students. The indicated that most of the students do not want to come to class and have the teacher repeat everything in the book. They would think of this as a waste of time because they could learn everything in the book on their own at home. Teachers, as a result, have to tell students what is not available in the textbook. As one senior professor shared:

What we should teach is what is *not* available on the textbooks. You have to teach students the latest knowledge. A most important concept in teaching is innovation, which represents the frontier of knowledge. You teach students the latest knowledge that they do not know but should know. For example, when I teach my classes, I always tell my students that the textbook is outdated and what I am going to teach them is much more relevant and useful.

However, they still need the textbook because they need to know the basic knowledge and theoretical frameworks.

*Case-study approach.* All participants expressed their preference for case study as an effective method to bridge the gap between theory and practice. As one professor shared:

Case study is a good approach to keep students interested in learning public relations, especially for non-major students. Since most students take public relations courses mostly for practical purposes, using the case-study method is a good way to expose them to a wide range of public relations theories and practical issues, while still keeping them interested and attentive.

Students also expressed their interest in case-study courses. As one public relations major student in the focus group noted:

The course Public Relations Cases and Analyses helped us get to know many cases and learn many things that you cannot learn from textbooks, such as procedures of events, MC scripts, news releases, and so forth. We are also exposed to a wide range of clients from various professions, and we get to know their needs and expectations. This course really helped me develop a better understanding of the industry.

Additionally, several educators mentioned that the case-study approach provided them with a good opportunity to teach students important lessons such as morality and ethics because many cases deal with such topics. As one senior professor stated:

Morality and ethics are important values that society needs. There are lots of practical benefits for those who follow moral and ethical protocols. For example, being sincere and honest brings an organization good reputation, which in turn results in more positive interactions between the organization and its publics. This further helps an organization manage its relationship with the public. Case study is an easy way to incorporate these lessons while still making the teaching interesting.

*Internship centers.* A promising feature about Chinese public relations education that helps connect the industry and education is public relations internship centers. These centers are collaborations between universities and their selected organizations to offer students opportunities to acquire professional experience. Among the educators that I interviewed, one stood out in this regard. He approached a number of organizations (e.g., shopping malls, traditional movie theaters, etc.) to invite them to become internship centers for his public relations students to develop some hands-on experience. He explained to the selected potential organizations that his students would conduct research to help them better understand their publics and develop effective public relations campaigns to attract more customers and better serve the existing ones. The professor's proposal received lots of positive feedback from both students and organizations. I had the opportunity to interview the top manager from one of the organizations involved in the collaboration (a shopping mall). She commented positively on students' performances and spoke highly of the value of such collaboration. In fact, the organization has signed a formal contract to

become an official internship center for this particular university and is determined to make this collaboration a long-term project.

One reason that contributed to the success of this particular collaboration is the interactive nature of the collaboration that involves students, the teacher, and practitioners. The collaboration followed a well-developed structure. Before the project starts, students would engage in frequent communication with the organization to get to know its organizational culture, structure, and management styles and its publics. Such communication also continues throughout the project. Students are divided into groups, and each group is in charge of a particular area of the project. Once the project is completed, students turn in their final reports to the top management of the organization for feedback. After a few rounds of revisions, the top management would go to the classroom to listen to students' presentations and give them more feedback. After that, a final version of the report would be submitted to the organization. I examined the documents of all of the students' projects, which had been carefully edited and commented on by the top management team. They also categorized these students' reports as top-secret documents for internal review only.

Unfortunately, not all internship centers are like this exemplary one. Many still have problems. One major problem concerns the implementation of these centers. Several participants suggested that, even though the school may have internship centers written into their curricular plans, it remains questionable to what extent the school has implemented them. Also, the depth of the collaboration can be another problem. As one senior professor observed:

For students, they want to gain some professional experience, whereas for the company, they are merely looking for cheap labor. The collaboration is merely at a surface level. Oftentimes, these internship centers are only implemented at a superficial level. Students can only have a rough understanding of the general procedure but cannot get involved in strategic decision-making at deeper levels.

*PR labs.* A few universities have built public relations labs to help students acquire more professional experience on campus. However, many of the public relations labs are still at an early developmental stage. As one professor stated:

Our university has a PR lab. The idea is very innovative, but the implementation has problems. We haven't really done much about our PR lab. It has been mainly used as a conference room so far. The school needs to invest more time and money in this.

Besides the few universities that have executed the idea, the majority are still in the thinking and planning mode for building such PR labs. As one senior professor elaborated:

I have been thinking about building a PR lab for a long time. I want it to be the best one in China. I came up with three basic requirements: scientific, systematic, and professional. Such a lab would be a great contribution to the profession and academia. It will be a holistic system that integrates theory, practice, and teaching. The lab will bring the latest public relations theories into practice and test their applicability and effects. It will provide students with ample opportunities to develop hands-on experience so that they do not

have to worry about going into the industry to secure such opportunities, given time and budget constraints. Ultimately, I want to have such a lab serving as a platform interlocking public relations scholars and professionals at home and abroad.

### *A System of Preparing Public Relations Students*

CIPRA developed a system to train public relations students that also helps connect industry and practice. Adopting a holistic approach, the system helps educators deliver the type of students that the industry wants. The system is composed of four elements: public relations internship center (based in organizations), public relations training center (based in universities), national public relations case competition, and public relations talent network. I interviewed the person who helped develop these programs. He said that most of these plans and centers are still developing, especially the public relations talent network. However, for the ones that have been implemented, he has received much positive feedback. Participants commented on how these programs helped them have a much better understanding of and stay more connected with the industry. In the following, I offer a review of the different components of the system.

*Public relations internship centers (based in organizations).* The function of this public relations internship center is similar to the internship centers reviewed earlier. The only difference is that this one was organized by CIPRA, whereas the ones reviewed earlier were developed by individual schools. The internship centers initiated by CIPRA are located in the public relations departments at various organizations or public relations agencies. CIPRA engaged in a careful selection

process to decide which organizations were qualified to host such centers. The major goal of the internship center is to provide students with a platform to acquire professional experience and deepen their theoretical understandings. Specifically, the participant identified three objectives that the internship center aimed to accomplish:

The first objective is to offer an internship center to bridge the gap between what students have learned in the classroom and what they are expected to do in the industry. The second is to offer an opportunity for the selected organizations' and agencies' leadership teams to go to the classroom to engage in dialogues with students about the nature of public relations by offering them timely and practical guidance on their academic studies. The last objective is to provide students with potential employment opportunities. This last objective is particularly relevant to seniors given the severe job-search pressure that they face upon graduation.

The participant further shared that 2008 was the second time that they had run such PR internship centers. In addition to the 10 agencies that they had during the first term, six more joined during the second term.<sup>15</sup>

Both students and practitioners commented positively on the establishment of these public relations internship centers, particularly their contributions to connect academia and industry. As one senior practitioner mentioned:

Our CEO is a big supporter of building such internship centers and collaborating with universities. It helps bridge the gap between what we ask

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<sup>15</sup> I had an opportunity to interview many of the managers working at these selected organizations hosting the public relations internship centers. All of them commented positively on the value of such collaborations, which also helped them correct their initial understanding of the value of public relations education.



students to do and what they have learned in the classroom. Our agency is actually one of the internship centers assigned by CIPRA. We have student interns coming from various backgrounds such as international relations, journalism, law, and so forth.

*Public relations training centers (based in universities).* In contrast to the internship centers that are based in organizations, the public relations training centers are based in universities. Instead of selecting firms and public relations agencies, CIPRA helped recruit a few top universities to host the training centers. In general, the training centers share the same objectives as the internship centers, but their focus shifts from public relations agencies to colleges and universities. At the time when I conducted the interviews in the summer of 2008, CIPRA has not yet started to recruit participating universities. The organizer revealed that his plan was to start recruiting in late 2008. Nevertheless, the participant projected, “Our ultimate goal of having these two centers is to better serve the public relations discipline in a parallel manner by interlocking theory and practice”

*Public relations case competition.* The public relations case competition started in 2007 and received substantial positive feedback from the participants. CIPRA run the competition a second time in 2008. Due to its huge success in the first year, the number of participants tripled in the second year. As the organizer himself shared, “The case competition itself has become a well-established system. It has helped capable students stand out during the competition.”

The participant shared lots of benefits for students taking part in the competition. The first benefit is that winners of the case competition will be offered

jobs on the spot. This result is extremely attractive to students considering the severe job-search pressure after graduation.<sup>16</sup> Second, participating in the competition helps students have a much better understanding of the real nature of public relations. Because all of the cases come from the practical issues and problems that practitioners deal with on a daily basis, students' involvement in these cases helps them tap into the core of the public relations industry. Third, given that most people serving on the judging committee are experienced professionals, students can help the committee members have an updated understanding of the outcomes of public relations education and the quality of students.

In general, participants commented positively on the impact of the case competition. As one professor shared, "I think this case competition is definitely a good thing. It helps popularize a correct understanding of public relations. This is a great contribution to the field."

Likewise, practitioners interviewed also spoke positively of the contribution of the case competition to Chinese public relations education. Many of the practitioner participants were top managers or CEOs working at the top national and international public relations agencies. Most of them served on the judging committee for the case competition. The year that I did the interview was the second time that the competition had been held. Practitioners indicated that the competition had become much better in terms of both its overall organization and the quality of student participants' work. As one CEO expressed:

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, I had the opportunity to interview a student who was winner of the 2008 competition. As a result of her excellent performance at the competition, she was offered a great job opportunity at a top international public relations firm. The student spoke highly of the value of participating in the competition and the critical role it played in her career.

The public relations case competition has lots of benefits at both personal and societal levels. Personally, it helps students have more interactions with the industry and acquire more hands-on experience. At a societal level, the competition helps promote a correct understanding of public relations and helps more people realize its value and contribution.

Similarly, another practitioner believed that the competition “offers an ideal platform that connects the industry and academia. It is definitely a positive push to improve the overall status of public relations in China.”

By the same token, students shared how they benefited from participating in the competition. The most direct benefit is that it helped them secure PR-related jobs on the spot. As one PR-major student, who was also a winner in the competition, stated:

Taking part in the case competition was very helpful for my professional development. I learned how to use many public relations theories and also the importance of teamwork, brainstorming, and team spirit. I learned how to be responsible for my work and how to collaborate with others. Also, because I was a winner in the competition, it helped me secure a job right on the spot.

However, the case competition is not without limitations. Several senior professors highlighted some of the problems of the case competition. As one professor shared, “I think the cases are too hard for students to handle. You are asking them to develop year-long strategic and budget plans. I don't think students are quite capable of doing that.” Another educator commented, “We don't really know to what extent and in what aspects the winning cases have been implemented.”

Nevertheless, regardless of the limitations, participants all agreed that the case competition has far more benefits than disadvantages for both academia and the industry. As the organizer himself summarized:

The case competition has lots of practical and theoretical implications. From a practical standpoint, we finally understood how public relations should be taught and what the most effective way is to teach public relations. From a theoretical and macro perspective, the case competition has successfully integrated academia, industry, and students into a whole system to form a collective force elevating the professional and theoretical status of Chinese public relations.

*Public relations talent network.* The public relations talent network aims to connect students majoring in public relations or working in the field so as to create a database of resources for students to share. However, this network had not been implemented at the time the interview was conducted.

### *Identity*

Curtin and Gaither (2007) explicated that identity consists of multiple levels such as individual, cultural, and national. These levels are all interrelated in constructing an identity for a given communicative message or product. The identity of Chinese public relations education is a reflection of the contest and negotiation of power inequalities embedded in the identities of China and the U.S., operating at both national and disciplinary levels. In the following, I include themes that illustrate how power interplays with culture and identity and how their interactions affect participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education.

*Asymmetrical Flow of Communication Between the U.S. and Chinese Public Relations Communities*

At an international level, the flow of communication in regard to public relations is largely one way and asymmetrical in nature, that is, to China from the U.S. Compared to American scholars' understanding of Chinese public relations, Chinese scholars' understanding of American public relations is much more updated and deeper. As more U.S. theories, concepts, and models are entering China's higher educational settings, few Chinese theories and concepts are present in the U.S. public relations literature. This lack of communication to a great extent contributed to American scholars' outdated understanding of the status quo of Chinese public relations. For example, one educator shared:

One year, one American public relations professor came to China to give a talk. I found this professor's understanding of Chinese PR was outdated. The theories that he recommended have already been used in China for a long time. Chinese public relations scholars have created lots of innovative public relations theories. However, American public relations scholars didn't really know what we were doing. In fact, in terms of theoretical inquiry and research, Chinese scholars have made lots of progress. I think the problem is that we don't know each side that well, and we do not have enough communication.

Similarly, another professor pointed out that many changes in Chinese public relations have not been reported in the international scholarship. As one senior professor noted:

Chinese public relations has changed a lot. Our research has become more rigorous. Undergraduate and graduate students' theses have become much better. We used to be bad at research methodology, but now we have improved and become more professional. Unfortunately, such progress hasn't been reported yet.

As a result, many educators called for introducing more Chinese public relations theories and concepts to the outside world to counter the asymmetrical flow of communication and information exchange. As one professor recommended:

We need to bring Chinese public relations to the outside world to explain what we do and how we interpret public relations. But, unfortunately, many times those scholars coming from overseas have adopted a biased lens to examine Chinese public relations.

#### *Intellectual Hegemony—Dominant Discourse*

While participants unanimously agreed to the benefits of having Western theories and concepts in China, they also expressed their concerns about the dominant position that these intellectual discourses have occupied. They argued that having such a dominant perspective increases the tendency for scholars to engage in careless cross-cultural comparisons by applying Western standards as the benchmarks for evaluating Chinese public relations. One senior professor offered a concrete example to elaborate on this point:

There was one Chinese professor from XXX University in China. She did some research on the theoretical development of Chinese public relations and compared the status quo of Chinese public relations with that of the U.S. She

concluded that the theoretical development of Chinese public relations is behind the U.S. by at least 10 to 15 years. I disagree with her research findings. Her research was based on data collected from academic journals. However, in China, there are few academic public relations journals. Therefore, you cannot use journals as your sample to examine the theoretical development of Chinese public relations and then make comparisons with that of the U.S. To truly examine the issue, you have to use books. In China, there are far more books on public relations than journal articles. Although some books are not systematic in terms of theoretical integration, even if only 10% of a book, for example, is valuable, that 10% is equivalent to the content of at least one journal article.

In particular, several participants pointed out that graduate students receiving overseas public relations educations tended to engage in this type of cross-cultural study. As one senior professor criticized:

I don't think they [Chinese graduate students studying abroad] have done a good job at grasping and representing the essence of Chinese culture and how that has influenced Chinese public relations. For example, one doctoral student who received her graduate education in public relations in the United States came to me to help her data collection. I looked at the fundamental structure of her dissertation, which was intrinsically flawed. The way she framed her dissertation automatically assumed that Chinese public relations would have this and that problems. In reality, things were not like what she had assumed.

Consequentially, participants pointed out the harmful effects of relying on the U.S. theories and concepts as the yardstick. As one professor contended:

I am against using American public relations criteria to evaluate Chinese public relations. I don't think there is any comparability to begin with. The premises are different, and the contexts are different. If we do use such criteria, of course, Chinese public relations will seem worthless within the Western framework. I think studies applying American standards to evaluate Chinese public relations are not useful. In fact, I don't even want to call them *research*. You cannot just "worship" a particular Western scholar and use his or her theories to evaluate China. Of course, you do need to have an international perspective, which is necessary in today's society.

Moreover, participants suggested that a more harmful effect of having a dominant perspective is that, to a great extent, it determines what is considered acceptable and unacceptable, and publishable and unpublishable to mainstream public relations journals. Many Chinese educators have encountered difficulties in having their articles published in the mainstream journals. They argued one reason is the Chinese people's distinctive ways of reasoning and expressing their thoughts that are different from those of the U.S. scholars. For example, one professor mentioned that American academic writing focuses more on logical reasoning and supporting claims with literature, whereas Chinese writing is more poetic and artistic that "tends to leave lots of things unsaid." As a result of these differences, what is considered publishable by Chinese standards may not necessarily be so by American standards. As one professor shared:



I don't think that only articles that follow the U.S. standards can be called academic articles. I sometimes have a hard time reading American academic publications. I don't know what exactly what they are trying to say. They cite many references to back up a point to the extent that I feel lost about what the author is trying to articulate.

Furthermore, the professor stated that this standard of relying on references has prevented lots of quality opinion articles from getting published. As he continued:

Sometimes, I have some good ideas and just want to share them with the public. But because of this standard, I cannot really publish them. There were also times when I just wanted to express something, which hasn't been brought up by the Americans, but I couldn't do so because I was criticized for a lack of references. But because I cannot really cite any earlier works, does it mean that I cannot express my own viewpoints? Does it mean that what hasn't been mentioned by the Americans cannot be mentioned by us? My work is solely grounded in China, aiming to solve China's public relations problems. How should people like me write articles? Do only the journals published abroad have credibility and authority? Only the articles praised by them are good articles? And only articles cited by them are good ones? But, I just want to solve China's problems. Where could I publish such articles?

Because of the restricting nature of having certain styles of articles accepted, the participant concluded:

Following such rigid standards is detrimental to scholarly creativity and originality. You have personal opinions but you cannot say them. You have to

cite so many others' works and then use your opinions to match theirs. I don't think this is a healthy practice.

Encouragingly, parallel to the dominant position of Western intellectual discourse is the emergence of a small group of Chinese scholars adopting a more critical lens to examine Western public relations theories and concepts. They have taken the initiative to encourage more Chinese scholars to adopt an inside-out or emic approach to exploring and theorizing about Chinese public relations grounded in the Chinese context. As Professor Cheng stated:

I am very into theorizing how public relations is practiced in the Chinese context. When I start a research topic, what I do first is collecting all of the books and journal articles available domestically and internationally. I read them first and then forget all about them. Next, I embark on my own writing. I think the biggest challenge for many Chinese scholars is that, in the face of this amount of Western books, journals, articles, and such, they tend to be influenced by their opinions to the extent that they don't have any of their own.

Concurring with Professor Cheng, another professor stressed the importance of conducting original research. As he stated:

China has to build its own frameworks and conduct its own independent research. We cannot always rely on the existing Western frameworks and models to theorize about Chinese public relations, although this may seem to be the easiest to accomplish. I think such research is all secondary.

*Adoption of the U.S. Public Relations Textbooks*

Participants shared that, as a young field, Chinese public relations does not have lots of high quality public relations textbooks to offer to its students. As one junior public relations professor shared:

It is really time consuming to find good teaching materials. Some teachers would use outdated textbooks to teach. I think this is unacceptable. I believe, for any course that you teach, you have to constantly modify and update its content. Especially, if you are teaching public relations cases, you have to update them all the time. But it is really hard to find quality public relations case books.

Agreeing with her, another professor shared his difficulty in finding quality public relations case-study textbooks. As he stated:

I really couldn't find a good textbook for public relations cases. There are some books in this area, but they all have problems. For example, the recently published book on public relations cases, I think the author's perspective is too narrow. It is limited to only a particular geographic region in China. Other books that did incorporate an international perspective, however, are outdated. Also, most authors' analyses of the cases are not thorough enough, nor are they systematically arranged. A good case-study book should not simply be a collection of cases. There has to be some theoretical connections from one part to another, but that connection is absent in most case-study textbooks.

As a result of this lack of quality public relations textbooks, many professors indicated that they turned to original English-language textbooks to search for resources, such as Cultip's *Effective Public Relations*. Many of these textbooks are

used either as required course materials or supplementary readings. However, such books are not without problems either, given cultural differences in thinking and expressing oneself. As one professor shared:

American academic writing emphasizes originality. But Chinese students are not used to this type of reading. For them, American textbooks do not read like textbooks but more like monographs. Therefore, if we want to use the original English-version books as textbooks, we have to do lots of modifications. I think this reflects cultural differences in our way of thinking. Most Chinese students would have a hard time reading the original English works. They would find the content hard to understand and thoughts too scattered. Chinese students are much more used to the outline-type of writing, in which everything is clearly laid out.

There are also professors who use a combination of English and Chinese textbooks. As one professor noted:

In my teaching, I use both the original English version and the translated Chinese version. Fortunately, most of the cutting-edge English-written textbooks have Chinese translations. In my class, I ask students to have both the original and the Chinese version. I use a combination of English and Chinese to teach my class. This is what we called bilingual teaching.

*The Brief History of Chinese Public Relations and Its Weak Theoretical Foundation*

Chinese public relations education has a history of less than 2 decades. At the same time, there is not yet a well-developed body of knowledge in public relations.

As one professor stated:

Although Chinese public relations educators have done a lot in terms of pushing forward the theoretical development of the field, not much effort has been dedicated to synthesizing and integrating the various theoretical frameworks. Nor have we done a good job at creating abstract models and grand theories at macro-levels. Most of the research is still practice-driven.

This weak theoretical foundation, along with the infancy of Chinese public relations education, has resulted in a tendency to borrow from the U.S. As one professor commented:

With the presence of these many theories and models from the U.S., people tend to use what is available [the theories and concepts imported from the U.S.]. Not much effort has been designated to innovate based on what we have. We haven't put the extra effort to go beyond them [the imported public relations theories, concepts, and models from the U.S.]

In a similar vein, students mentioned that college did not give them sufficient training in theoretical thinking and development. As one public relations major student commented:

I had hoped that we could have deepened our theoretical training during my undergraduate education. Unfortunately, my school, probably because it is not a research university, does not really strengthen the importance of theories. For example, I remember that we learned the four models of public relations, but I have long forgotten them. We really didn't engage in any deep discussion about them.

In a similar vein, students who had been in the industry for several years shared the importance of learning theory. As one student in the focus group shared:

Theories can help us see the big picture. They are really useful in terms of organizing concrete points and building arguments in a most reasonable and logical manner. In fact, I think I would have a much deeper grasp of the industry if I had learned more theories and deepened my understanding of them while I was in college.

Besides a weak theoretical foundation underpinning Chinese public relations education, the rapid development of the industry caused further barriers to theoretical development. The rapid growth in the Chinese public relations industry distracted educators' energy and effort that could have been devoted to theoretical construction. As one senior faculty shared, "There are lots of public relations educators like myself who are very involved in the industry. This left us little time to engage in theoretical development." From a practical standpoint, practice-driven projects are highly favored by the industry and there is an ever-increasing market demand for this type of study. As one professor stated, "If I have to choose between solving practical issues and engaging in theoretical development, I would choose the former because there is a huge demand for it and the market really needs our expertise. Doing so seems to be more valuable for Chinese society at this point."

#### *Perceived as a "Marginalized" Field of Study*

Within the Chinese scholarship community itself, participants described public relations as a "marginalized" field, not so much in the sense of being a nonmainstream field of study but in the sense of the multidisciplinary nature in which

public relations exhibits. This multidisciplinary nature poses challenges for public relations to exist as a stand-alone field of study. Unlike many other mainstream subjects, the public relations knowledge base is not solidly grounded in public relations but comes from many other fields, such as communication, management, psychology, sociology, communication, and marketing. Participants suggested that this broad knowledge base makes public relations a highly replaceable field of study.

*RQ2: What is the role of Confucianism in Chinese public relations education?*

*To what extent and in what aspects have Confucian values influenced participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education?*

Confucianism emerged as the major underlying philosophy that has affected participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Research findings suggested both constructive and destructive aspects of Confucianism. Participants stated that a major task facing contemporary public relations scholars is to tease out the virtues and merits embodied in Confucianism in order to benefit Chinese public relations education and practice. In the following sections, I review several important Confucian values that have affected participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education.

*Undergraduate Public Relations Education: Training the Overall Quality of Students*

An important aspect of Confucian teaching is to use it as a means to teach students to engage in personhood cultivation in order to become complete people. This emphasis on cultivating the overall quality of people has greatly influenced participants' understanding of the purpose of undergraduate public relations education. Many of them believed that the purpose of undergraduate public relations

education is to develop the overall quality of students as opposed to merely focusing on academic subjects. As one senior professor shared, “Students spend 4 years in college and two years in graduate school. If all that teachers tell them is knowledge, students won’t develop the wisdom necessary to prepare themselves for their careers in public relations.”

Echoing this emphasis on cultivating overall quality, many practitioners interviewed equate public relations practice with learning how to become complete people. They argued that quality public relations education should train students to engage in self-cultivation and teach them how to develop inner strengths and virtues. As one senior practitioner elaborated:

Doing public relations is a test of the inner strengths that a person commands, such as sincerity, honesty, kindness, compassion, and tolerance. These are the most important qualities that students should equip themselves with before they enter the field. To a great extent, these inner virtues and the overall qualities of students are more important than the concrete skills and knowledge that they learned in the classroom. Regardless of whether you are an intern or a manager, these qualities are equally important. When I hire students, I pay closer attention to these qualities than their academic backgrounds.

To that end, one senior practitioner working at HR suggested a list of questions that a quality education should prepare students to think about:

Teachers should educate students about what they are going to do with the knowledge they have learned in the classroom and how to use it responsibly.



They should also provide insights into such questions as what can I do for society upon finishing up my degree? How could I contribute to the Common Good?

In this regard, practitioners suggested that an important purpose of undergraduate public relations education is to focus on holistic training. As one senior practitioner commented:

Public relations is a holistic training for anyone choosing public relations as a career field. You are constantly learning about and renewing yourself and expanding your knowledge base by working with people from various professions. The public relations profession is like a miniature of the larger social environment. It trains you in multiple directions.

Similarly, students interviewed believed that the purpose of public relations education or even college in general is not simply to learn knowledge but to develop a way of thinking and a perspective on life. As one student in the focus group shared:

You can learn knowledge any place, not necessarily at universities. What is more important is that school should help students develop a way of thinking and a perspective on life. You have to learn to engage in independent thinking; at the same time, you should keep an open mind towards other people's way of thinking and doing things. A person's way of thinking is what differentiates a great person from an ordinary one. This way of thinking is what we should learn at school.

In this regard, practitioners helped identify several desirable qualities that students should equip themselves with upon embarking on a new career in the

industry, such as team spirit, self-discipline, sincerity and honesty, diligence, IQ, and emotional intelligence. In a more elaborative manner, one senior practitioner working at the HR department at a top international PR agency summarized three core qualities that any public relations practitioner should have regardless of being a new graduate or an experienced professional. These three qualities are passion, common sense, and a good command of English:

*Passion* means that you have to love public relations. You may not have enough academic background, but as long as you have passion, we can train you and help you build your knowledge base. *Passion* also refers to whether the person is passionate about life and knows what he or she wants to get out of life. What are the fundamental values that ground who she or he is? What role does the person play in society, and what could she or he contribute to society?

In terms of common sense, the participant explained:

*Common sense* means that a person has to have at least a fundamental understanding of many things. For example, you have to know that, in European countries, people drive on the left side, whereas in Asian countries, people drive on the right. This is common sense.

With respect to English skills, she continued:

We are a multinational company. Employees have to be good at English and, of course, Chinese as well. You have to know how to organize your words and must be able to translate English into Chinese and Chinese into English.

Among these qualities, passion seems to be an important one mentioned by several practitioners. As one CEO shared, “Passion is really important. It motivates you to innovate and to be brave, to be willing to try new things, supported by strategy and knowledge.”

To further elaborate on training the overall quality of students, practitioners interviewed stressed the importance of having a broad knowledge base beyond students’ immediate academic discipline. They mentioned that it is important for students not to limit their knowledge base to public relations only, but to reach out to other fields such as marketing, advertising, journalism, and such. They also pointed out the necessity of acquiring knowledge in specialized professions such as automobiles, IT, computers, and so on. As one CEO shared:

What makes us most interested in students is not their communication or public relations background per se, but to what extent they have oriented themselves to disciplines outside of public relations or communication. In other words, whether students command a multidisciplinary knowledge base is what we give lots of thought to.

In a similar vein, another practitioner stated:

It is very important for students to have expertise in specialized professions. For example, if we have a client in the automobile industry, you may have to help the client test the car, examine the car, and drive the car. At the same time, you also need to have the ability to write news releases or maybe even translate them if necessary. It demands a broad knowledge base in addition to specialized expertise.

However, in the pursuit of a broad knowledge base, participants cautioned that balance between breadth and depth is the key. They also warned of the danger of achieving breadth at the cost of depth, that is, knowing many things on a surface level without mastering any depth of knowledge in any particular field. As one practitioner indicated:

Public relations practitioners have, first, to be specialists and, then, generalists. If students are trained to be generalists too early, when they go into industry, they will have a hard time focusing on a particular area. They will constantly shift their interest from one place to another, causing problems for teamwork. What we want are students who are down-to-earth and can finish one thing at a time.

*Public relations and quality education.* Equating public relations with cultivating the overall quality of students speaks to the essence of quality education<sup>17</sup> required by the MOE. Quality education aims to improve the overall quality of students, particularly with an emphasis on morality. Intending to counteract an over-emphasis on academic performance, quality education helps students develop holistically, expanding their vision from academia to a much broader spectrum on life. Participants mentioned that public relations, because of “the breadth and depth that its body of knowledge touches upon,” can contribute to cultivating the overall quality of students. Students receiving a systematic training in public relations are helped to develop a PR-consciousness (公关意识), which helps cultivate their overall qualities and develop skills necessary for them to succeed in careers and lives. In

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<sup>17</sup> The MOE’s English document also referred to quality education as “essential-qualities-oriented.”

particular, one participant identified four levels that constitute this PR-consciousness. The first level is communication-consciousness, which sheds light on the overall quality of students. As he stated:

In the past, the situation was that, if you are the emperor's daughter, you would never be worried about getting married to a decent gentleman (皇帝的  
女儿不愁嫁). Now, the situation has changed to the following: Even if you have the best liquor for example in the world, you still have to market and advertise it as much as possible (酒好也怕巷子深). This altered mindset strengthens the importance of communication and realizing the necessity of communicating well.

The second level concerns public-consciousness:

This level asks one to consider not only oneself but all of his or her public, such as community, government, students, clients, and so forth. You have to respect other parties' interests as much as possible. Otherwise, there will be conflicts. This public-consciousness is the core of public relations.

The third level relates to harmony:

For any situation, as long as there are more than two people involved, there will be different stances and opinions. Anyone with a PR-consciousness understands the necessity of coordinating these stances to build harmonious relationships.

The last level of PR-consciousness concerns the concept of *Xing Xiang*:

On a surface level, in everyday social interactions, people have to pay attention to their manners, regardless whether you are an ordinary citizen or

the president of a country. Doing so not only shows respect to others but also boosts self-esteem. Anyone with a PR-consciousness has to pay attention to *Xing Xiang*.

The participant summarized by indicating that, because all of these consciousnesses contain desirable characteristics that society wants, public relations courses, by helping students develop these characteristics, are deemed helpful for improving the overall quality of students.

However, although most universities do place an emphasis on quality education, participants suggested that, to really cultivate the overall quality of students, quality education has to start before college because, by the time students enter college, their fundamental values and beliefs are already established. College comes too late to change who they are. Important values have to be instilled in students' minds when they are young, starting in kindergarten and at home. As one professor stated:

To cultivate the inner virtues of students and to improve their overall quality is a collective effort. It is based on the knowledge from multiple disciplines and professors and supervisors from various backgrounds at levels below and beyond colleges. These people have to work together to ensure our intended outcomes happen. It cannot be done by a single professor alone. Everyone has to contribute to it: teachers, parents, mass media, and society in general.

Along similar lines, some participants argued that to fully actualize quality education, the responsibility is not on educators alone, but on students themselves as

well. Students play an equally important role in shaping the outcome of their undergraduate public relations education. As one professor commented:

Students themselves to a great extent can influence the outcome of their education. They have to search for opportunities to enrich their professional experiences and to sharpen their theoretical understandings. Learning is a holistic process. Knowledge does not come from teachers alone. Rather, it is through the platform of education that students accomplish something bigger and more meaningful. Students have to self-train themselves. The school offers them the platform and various educational resources. They have to take the initiative to use the advantage of these resources to their fullest benefits.

#### *Confucian Value of Propriety and Public Relations Etiquette*

An important cardinal principle of Confucianism is propriety,<sup>18</sup> referring to the rules and rituals passed down from generation-to-generation. They guide people's everyday interactions and behaviors. This Confucian value of propriety to a certain extent helps explain the increasing popularity of public relations etiquette. Public relations etiquette in general teaches protocols about how to engage in proper behaviors at various social and professional settings. Public relations etiquette is a unique cultural pattern characterizing Chinese public relations.

Participants suggested several ways to categorize etiquette. One way is based on different professions, such as government etiquette, business etiquette, teachers' etiquette, nurses' etiquette, and so on, and another way is based on the nature of etiquette itself, such as meeting etiquette, negotiation etiquette, bargaining etiquette, and such. Etiquette has become an increasingly popular subject among college

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<sup>18</sup> The literature has suggested other translations such as 'civility' and 'rituality.'

students. As one educators shared, “One third of the college students’ population is interested in this area.” In fact, even among managers, there is an increase in demand for more training and workshops in etiquette.

In general, participants suggested two approaches to teaching etiquette. One approach is based on the belief that etiquette is tightly related to public relations because etiquette helps *Xing Xiang* management and, thus, contributes to building harmonious relationships. Therefore, etiquette should be offered as a necessary public relations course such as public relations etiquette. As one participant shared:

Etiquette should definitely be part of public relations. It is about how to use proper behaviors and protocols to regulate interpersonal communication.

Appropriate behaviors can make communication smoother, which helps build harmonious relationships and manage organizational *Xing Xiang*. It can also improve the overall quality of human beings, which is essential for public relations.

In alignment with this perspective, there is one university, Hang Zhou Communication City College, that offers very systematic training in public relations etiquette. The university offers an undergraduate degree in public relations and international etiquette. I interviewed one<sup>19</sup> of the college’s senior educators, who serves as the director for the Teaching and Research Division. She offered a detailed account of the curricular design for the major. According to her:

Our goal is to train students from a holistic perspective in order to equip them with a broad knowledge base so that they can develop in whatever direction

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<sup>19</sup> The participant is a distinguished educator in the field of etiquette. She is sought after by many organizations to give talks and conduct workshops on etiquette. She also served on the national etiquette committee to prepare for the Olympic Games held in the summer of 2008 in Beijing, China.



that interests them the most. For the general knowledge component, we have a wide variety of courses, such as arts appreciation, literature appreciation, music appreciation and analysis, film production, classic Chinese, contemporary Chinese, reading, public speaking, and so on. In terms of courses for their particular major, we have introduction to management, communication theory, introduction to communication, public relations strategy and planning, crisis communication, public relations psychology, kinesics, performance, and such.

The participant herself has been recognized as an expert in the field of public relations etiquette. She firmly believed that etiquette is an essential component to train competent public relations practitioners. As she asserted:

Etiquette is based on such core values as sincerity, kindness, and beauty.

Beauty is an important aspect to etiquette. I am not talking about beauty from the outside merely, but a combination of internal and external beauty. People who have an appreciation for beauty are also kind and compassionate. They pay close attention to their inner virtues and outer behavioral manifestations.

Those people are easy to work with. I, therefore, believe that etiquette should be a required course for public relations students.

She further used a popular Chinese phrase to summarize the essence of etiquette:

In Chinese language, we have the phrase *mei de* (美德, virtue), which is actually composed of two characters—beauty and virtue. I think these two concepts are inherently interconnected. Without beauty, there is no virtue, and vice versa.

In contrast, scholars adopting the second approach argue that etiquette has nothing to do with public relations. They contended that etiquette should not be taught as public relations etiquette nor be considered a mainstream research topic in public relations. As one junior professor shared:

I think it is wrong to name it public relations etiquette. Etiquette is etiquette. I really don't like it when people call it public relations etiquette. Are you indicating that public relations etiquette is different from other professions so that it needs to have a special term? I don't think so.

Instead, these scholars argued that etiquette should be taught as a stand-alone course, a general knowledge course for everyone to take. As one senior professor indicated:

Etiquette is certainly a very useful course. However, it is only a part of public relations, definitely not the whole. When you teach etiquette, you have to approach the subject very carefully. Otherwise, it becomes unprofessional. You have to use etiquette as a means to help students engage in self-cultivation and overall character-training. In this regard, such a course would be very useful for students to take before they graduate from college.

Students interviewed seem to share a similar understanding. One student commented:

Etiquette is a representation of a person's overall quality. It is a necessary subject to learn. As China becomes more open to the outside world, there are lots of things that we need to catch up on. Therefore, I think etiquette should not be limited to public relations majors only, but be offered as a general knowledge course open to all students across disciplines.

Nevertheless, etiquette is surely becoming more popular. Participants identified several reasons leading to the growing popularity of etiquette. Some suggested that one important reason concerns the ever-increasing market need for training in professionalism. The economic reform has opened the door for China to interact with the outside world. This opportunity has spurred a corresponding interest in becoming more educated about etiquette and international professional standards. As one distinguished professor in the field of public relations etiquette shared:

China had been isolated from the outside world for such a long time. We had little knowledge about international standards and protocols for various social settings and events, such as exhibitions and press conferences. Organizations had never learned how to deal with the public directly. Now, China has entered the WTO and just welcomed the Olympics, and we definitely need to catch up with the West in this domain. We have imported lots of books from the West on this subject. We learned their values and standards for beauty and their strong sense of independence and self-sufficiency. For example, at the dinner table, Chinese people tend to show their hospitality by suggesting the guests eat and drink as much as possible, to the extent that their behaviors may become annoying. Therefore, we have to learn the proper conduct in these social occasions to prevent embarrassing moments from happening.

Participants suggested that a second reason contributing to the popularity of etiquette relates to the deeply rooted cultural heritage of propriety. China has long been known as the “land of ceremony and propriety” (礼仪之邦). Etiquette is a cultural practice that has thousands of years of history and can be dated back to

Confucius. Therefore, compared to etiquette, public relations is a much younger and more foreign concept with a history of, at most, 30 years. In this regard, “Etiquette has just become a natural gateway to teach the public more about public relations,” as one educator suggested. The public is much more receptive to etiquette than public relations. Even the Chinese government has demonstrated its approval and support for etiquette by holding a national competition entitled “Welcoming Olympics and Showcasing Civility—Etiquette Competition (迎奥运讲文明—礼仪大赛)” hosted by China Central Television (CCTV), a very influential news outlet in China. One educator who served on the judging committee for the competition commented on the positive effects of this competition in terms of popularizing a correct understanding of public relations, stating, “I discussed etiquette through the theoretical lens of building harmonious relationships and managing *Xing Xiang*, which are essentially what public relations does.”

Additionally, another senior educator discussed etiquette in comparison to American cultural values:

If we trace the history back, American and Western cultural tradition are influenced by Aristotle, who believed that every single issue has a persuasive point. That’s why in the U.S., they emphasize debate, argumentation, persuasion, and one’s ability to engage in public speaking. However, Chinese society is very much influenced by Confucianism, which talks about social order, harmony, and hierarchy. These cultural traditions correspondingly gave birth to the importance of *Xing Xiang* [image and reputation] and etiquette,

meaning having appropriate behaviors in various situations based on the societal role that one plays and the position that one occupies.

### *An Emphasis on Relationship*<sup>20</sup>

The Confucian emphasis on relationship has exerted an equally great impact on the people's understanding of public relations. As one professor said, "Chinese culture emphasizes relationship building, which is also the core of public relations. This emphasis on relationship has actually helped the development of public relations." Similarly, another professor stated, "In China, if you want to promote something, you cannot just rely on commercials, for example. You have to rely on one-on-one relationships. You spend time and effort to build these long-term relationships. Relationships are very important in China." Still, some teachers mentioned that they used readings from classic Chinese literature to teach students about relationship-building and management and strategizing. However, participants noted that the Chinese emphasis on relationship differs from the Western notion of relationship management.

Specifically, one senior professor discussed this emphasis on relationship through an etymological standpoint in reference to the Confucian value of benevolence (仁 *Ren*):

To really understand the nature of relationship, you have to trace back to traditional Chinese culture. Why? This is because of our deeply-rooted cultural concept, *Ren* (benevolence), which gave birth to this emphasis on relationship. In Chinese, we have the saying that a benevolent person is a

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<sup>20</sup> Participants actually used the word *guanxi* instead of *relationship*. However, because of the connotations involved in *guanxi*, I chose to use *relationship* to convey the original meaning suggested by the participants.

complete person<sup>21</sup> (仁者人也). Look at the composition of the Chinese character *Ren* (仁). The left side of the character (人) means people and the right side (二) means two. This is a perfect explanation of how Chinese people interpret benevolence. It is through a pair of people or a relationship that we demonstrate the virtuous characters of benevolence. Therefore, people as individual agents do not really exist in China. You always have to be in a pair. This means that relationship is absolutely crucial in China. It is through this paired relationship that you develop your identity and demonstrate your virtuous characters. Therefore, in China, to have something done, you have to follow the rules and ascertain the relationship (e.g., teacher-student, students, people from the same town, and alumni) first. Only then could you communicate your real agenda.<sup>22</sup>

This emphasis on relationship through the lens of benevolence has brought up a few relevant cultural values that have affected participants' understanding and practice of Chinese public relations. One participant discussed righteousness (义) in reference to benevolence (仁 *Ren*). As he elaborated:

Chinese public relations is about benevolence (仁 *Ren*) and righteousness (义 *Yi*). What *righteousness* refers to is what one should do. Benevolence talks about emotion, feelings, or sympathy (情 *Qing*). If there is benevolence, there will also be righteousness; however, if there is righteousness, it is not necessary to have benevolence. This is the relationship between

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<sup>21</sup> This sentence did not come from the participant but a famous saying from Confucius' *Analects*.

<sup>22</sup> These last two sentences are actually my translation of the Chinese idioms 名不正则言不顺, 言不顺则事不成.

feelings/emotions and rational reasoning. If there are feelings/emotions, there will also be rational reasoning; however, if there is rational reasoning, there are not necessary feelings/emotions. That is their dialectic relationship.

This inherently contradictory relationship between feelings/emotion and rational reasoning affects the way that Chinese people practice public relations, which tends to place more emphasis on soft power (e.g., inner virtues and moralities) than on concrete laws or policies to regulate communicative behaviors. As one professor shared:

In the Chinese context, feelings/emotions<sup>23</sup> outweigh law (情理法), whereas in the U.S., it is law that outweighs feelings/emotions (法理情). In China, showing sympathy and concern for the relationship and people carries more weight than logical reasoning. This is a big cultural difference between China and the U.S. Within China's relationship-oriented society, if you don't address feelings/emotions and concerns for relationships and people, you cannot really practice public relations.

Regarding this cultural emphasis on relationship and showing concerns for others, another participant observed, "China's communication style, which is more artistic, may seem unscientific from the American standpoint given its emphasis on rational thinking and logical reasoning."

### *Harmony*

Harmony is an important cultural value underpinning Confucianism. It emerges as an important cultural construct influencing participants' meaning making

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<sup>23</sup> The literature used "concerns for human" where I used "feelings/emotions" to demonstrate. I chose them because feelings/emotions are more accurate at reflecting the original Chinese world *Qing* (情).

of Chinese public relations. Among the various approaches to public relations, building harmonious relationships and society appears as a dominant discourse characterizing Chinese public relations. Many participants also suggested harmony as an end goal for public relations scholars and practitioners to pursue. As one senior professor remarked:

I think the ultimate goal of public relations is seeking harmony. We need to maintain a harmonious state-of-being not only between organizations and the public, but also between organizations and between nations in the world.

He further elaborated on what he meant by “harmony as the ultimate goal.” As he continued:

At present, for example, a popular understanding of public relations is helping organizations manage *Xing Xiang*. However, this is only a superficial understanding. Why do we want to have a positive *Xing Xiang*? Ultimately, it is to build harmony. As our society continues to develop, we need to search for means leading to a sustainable life. To do so, we have to search for an ultimate goal. I think such an ultimate goal is Grand Union, unity among all people and species in the universe. This is the ultimate goal, and harmony leads to the actualization of this goal.

Similarly, practitioners also believed that public relations is meant to build societal harmony. As one CEO at a top local PR agency stated:

China now emphasizes building a harmonious society. I think this, indeed, reflects the essence of public relations, which is to build harmonious



relationships among all parties involved. Effective public relations practice can contribute to building harmonious society.

Many practitioners additionally stated that positioning public relations as an agent contributing to societal harmony has brought more opportunities for the public relation industry. One practitioner used his agency as a case in point to illustrate public relations' contribution to building societal harmony:

For our clients right now, we have police PR aiming to build harmonious relationships between policemen and the public. We also have city PR aiming to enhance the overall reputation of many cities in China. We want to build a harmonious city. For instance, Qu Fu, the hometown for Confucius, has done an impressive job of promoting the city as a center for global cultural exchange.

Besides these opportunities, practitioners stated that conceiving of public relations as a social actor contributing to societal harmony elevates the field to a new strategic level and makes the profession more meaningful. Many organizations, as a result, have shifted their focus away from serving as news agencies to engaging in “two-way symmetrical communication with the public, to communicate with them, and to get to know them instead of always telling them what to do.” For example, one agency got a PR award, nominated by the *PR Weekly*, because of a CSR project that it did. As the organizer of this project stated, “We won this award because the project focused on two-way symmetrical communication, corporate social responsibility, and building harmonious relationships, which are timely topics for contemporary Chinese society.”

Furthermore, one senior educator helped identified two levels of harmony: a lower level evident in the harmony between neighbors, friends, family, and community and a higher level reflected in the harmony between countries. However, he stressed that the higher level of harmony does not mean “a simple addition of harmony to the lower level.” According to him, what this higher level of harmony represents:

is an ideal state of Grand Union, a peaceful co-existence among all human and non-human species. Many sages in Chinese history talked about this concept of Grand Union. This is very advanced thinking, even when we examine it today. However, to really achieve this higher level of harmony on a global scale, Confucianism alone is not enough, although harmony was a concept originated in China. By all means, we should avoid a China-centered mentality. Such a mentality is indeed against the notion of harmony. We need wisdom and contributions from other countries in the world. This is like all streams fall into the ocean and every creature in the world will eventually return to their original form.<sup>24</sup>

Following this notion of Grand Union, another aspect of harmony concerns the harmony between human and nature. According to one professor:

Harmony is a very good Confucian value. Public relations is all about building harmonious relationships. Harmony between humanity and nature is another great Confucian value. This concept of maintaining harmony between nature and humans offers valuable insights into the nature of public relations. Its

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<sup>24</sup> 万物归宗

ultimate goal is seeking harmony between human and nature, human and society, and human and human.

*Intellectual coexistence as opposed to competition.* Another ramification of Confucian emphasis on harmony is participants' belief in intellectual harmony and coexistence as opposed to competition and resistance. Regarding the presence of the imported Western theories, models, and concepts, many participants stated that it is not a conflict to have this Western body of knowledge coexist with Chinese ideas. In fact, they believed that there are commonalities and common characteristics underlying these theories. As one professor said:

I read most of the classic books in public relations inside as well as outside of China. I think these authors have truly mastered the highest understanding of public relations theory and practice. I think anyone, if you really understand and digest the gist of these classic pieces, would not see a contradictory relationship between the existence of Western theories in China and the development of Chinese public relations theories. In fact, the two can coexist beautifully and peacefully.

Referring to commonalities, another educator shared:

Although Chinese and American cultures are different, fundamental things are the same, such as communication management, facilitating, coordinating, harmonizing, two-way communication, and symmetrical communication.

These concepts themselves have no problems.

Agreeing with his perspective, one more professor noted:

Regardless of Western or Chinese public relations, I believe that different roads lead to Rome. There are generic principles that can be applied across countries. No matter whether Western or Chinese public relations, we are walking towards the same destination. If we interpret the meaning of public relations from a Western perspective, its core is communication. From the Chinese standpoint, the core is also communication, although how we communicate differs as a result of cultural differences. Whereas the Western communication is based on fairness, openness, and equality, the Chinese places more stress on relationships, sympathy, and showing concerns for feelings/emotions (人情味). But beyond these apparent differences, the underlying generic principles are still the same. Chinese public relations probably won't surpass American public relations. It will continue to walk on its own road. Eventually, both are walking toward the same goal.

At an even higher level, two senior professors offered some enlightening remarks with respect to cultural differences in public relations between China and the U.S. One professor indicated:

I think different cultures' existence is not meant for us to make cross-cultural comparisons to determine which one is better and which one is worse. Cultures are natural products of different environments. They exist in alignment with the corresponding environments that produced them. People from different countries should develop mutual understandings. You don't have to accept me but I hope that you can understand me. Understanding is more important than acceptance.

Similarly, the other remarked:

Knowledge and science do not have cultural boundaries. If it is a true theory, it belongs to the world. It should not be confined to a particular country or culture. Our purpose is to use the theories to help solve practical issues in China. If the theory can do such a job, we should not care about where the theory comes from. If it is the truth, regardless where it comes from, it is useful. I firmly believe that knowledge and science do not have cultural boundaries. If it is a true theory, everyone can and should use it.

Following this train of thought, educators posed a more important question for public relations scholars to ponder concerning the presence of Western theories and concepts: How could Chinese public relations scholars tease out the merits of these imported Western theories and concepts and consolidate them with Chinese cultures, using them to benefit Chinese public relations to its fullest extent? One professor posed the questions:

How could we better localize these imported theories and concepts so that they can better fit into the Chinese sociocultural and political context? How could we find ways to integrate the Western emphases on being scientific, systematic, and analytical with the Chinese focuses on harmony, relationship, sympathy, and holism? I think these are much more meaningful and important questions to think about.

Furthermore, participants underscored that the presence of these cultural differences should not devalue the merits inherent in Western theories and concepts. As one distinguished senior scholar asserted:

If a particular theory cannot be applied to the Chinese context, it does not mean the theory is flawed. In fact, the theory itself may still have lots of valuable points for people to learn. Just because we cannot directly apply them [Western theories] to the Chinese context does not mean that we have to overturn the value of these theories. They are still useful.

Similarly, another participant expressed:

We don't have to completely abandon them [Western public relations theories] and then create something brand new. What we need to do is to innovate and recreate based on these available Western theories. After all, what they have theorized is the result of their many years of trial and error and lessons and mistakes. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. I believe that real science does not have cultural boundaries.

Similarly, students interviewed and participated in the focus groups agreed to the possibility of intellectual coexistence. They also believed that the imported U.S. theories and concepts offered far more benefits than disadvantages. As one PR-major student in the focus group shared:

At least in the field of communication, I think 90% of the imported theories can be applied to the Chinese context. This is the same as in anthropology and sociology. There are some commonalities universal to all cultures. I don't think having Western theories in China is a big problem. For example, if you want to change American people's perception of China, you use a particular theory. By the same token, you can apply the same theory to change Chinese

people's perception of the U.S. It is the same. What differs might be what has been communicated.

Additionally, students believed that acquainting themselves with Western theories exposed them to a much more diverse range of perspectives conducive to their academic learning. According to one student, "Learning the Western body of knowledge in public relations helps broaden our vision. We don't have to follow all of them, but it benefits us to know how others think and what they think." Moreover, from a historical stance, students believed that it is necessary to familiarize themselves with the historical backgrounds that gave birth to public relations because public relations is, after all, an imported concept in China. One student noted:

After all, public relations' origin is in the United States. To really understand the field, you have to trace its history back and understand its root. Since we are using textbooks from the West, it is inevitable we will encounter Western theories. Therefore, it is necessary to learn their background. Plus, communication in general is a young field in China. We don't have as many seminal works as in the West. We have to learn from them.

In this regard, students did not seem to see the issue as intellectual hegemony but basic knowledge learning. As one PR-major student contended:

At present, there are scholars arguing that the Western public relations scholarship plays such a dominant role that scholars from other countries are losing their voices. However, I don't think this is a problem. We have to learn from the best. That is the way things are.

### *The Benefits of Traditional Chinese Cultural Values to Public Relations*

Participants acknowledged the benefits of traditional Chinese culture and its contributions to public relations education at home and abroad. For example, one senior professor stated, “*Analects* is a classic Chinese book that offers much wisdom that public relations could benefit from. It is the essence of Chinese culture and should certainly be kept and passed down from generation to generation.”

More concretely, another scholar offered some examples to elaborate on the benefits of traditional cultural values:

*Xing Xiang* is a continuation of the good parts of the cultural tradition. There are also other examples, such as *zhang you wu qi*<sup>25</sup> (长幼无欺). It is a good example that concerns reputation. Other traditional values are benevolence (仁 *Ren*), righteousness (义 *yi*), ritual or propriety (礼 *li*), wisdom (智 *zhi*), and sincerity/honesty (信 *xin*). All of them are helpful for strengthening the intangible capital of an organization or a person.

However, not much scholarly effort has been devoted to identifying the specific ways that traditional cultural values could contribute to Chinese public relations education. Nor has much effort been taken to translate these cultural values into public relations theories and practices helpful to academia and industry. As one educator remarked:

Traditional Chinese cultural values are very important. In fact, they are the core. However, not much attention has been paid to this area. Not many

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<sup>25</sup> This phrase means that you are doing business with people, and you should never deceive others regardless of how old or how young they are.



scholars have conducted systematic research on the contribution of traditional cultural values to public relations theory and practice.

In response to this lack of effort to theorize using traditional values, one professor offered his insights:

At present, we are still in the process of understanding what public relations is. Therefore, if we haven't mastered the fundamentals yet, how could we advance to the next step of teasing out the nutrient of traditional Chinese cultural values and using them to the benefits of Chinese public relations? We are not there yet.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### Discussion

Adopting qualitative methods, this study explored Chinese public relations educators', practitioners', and students' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. It adopted the circuit of culture model as a major theoretical lens for examining participants' meaning making within the context of Confucianism. Research findings of the study offered a detailed description of the nature of Chinese public relations education; the interplay of culture, power, and identity and how it affected participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education, the presence of Western theories, models, and concepts in China, and the roles and effects of Confucianism in Chinese public relations education. Identifying several concrete Confucian values (i.e., harmony, Grand Union, benevolence, propriety, emotion/sympathy, relationality) grounding Chinese public relations education, the present study suggested Confucianism as a possible philosophy to guide public relations education and practice.

Forty-nine people from three major cities in China (i.e., Beijing, Hang Zhou, and Shanghai) took part in the study. There were 20 public-relations educators, including 7 in Hang Zhou, 5 in Shanghai, and 8 in Beijing; 7 public-relations practitioners (all at the top management level) from various top domestic and international public-relations agencies based in Beijing; and 22 student participants, including 7 for in-depth interviews and 15 in 2 focus groups with 7 and 8 students in each group.

The exploratory nature of the study rendered a thick description of the details and nuances of participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations. Research findings updated the existing literature on Chinese public relations education and explored many of the intact areas. Wolcott's description-analysis-interpretation is used to analyze the data. Throughout the data collection and analysis, I let the data speak to me and dictate my research agenda. The collected data emerged into themes used to explore the two posited research questions, while pointing out fruitful directions for future research.

In the following, I discuss research findings in regards to the two research questions. In terms of RQ1, I first offer a summary of the tensions, complexities, and contradictions implicit in participants' meaning making and then discuss research findings within the theoretical framework of the five moments of the circuit of culture model. Particularly, I shed light on the presence of U.S. public relations theories, models, and concepts in China, given their widespread presence in Asian public relations education. At the same time, I offer insights into how power, particularly power inequality, plays an implicit role in affecting participants' meaning making of the U.S. body of knowledge in China. With respect to RQ2, I discuss the ways in which Confucianism has affected participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education and identify concrete Confucian values grounding public relations education. Finally, juxtaposing Confucianism with the circuit of culture model, I integrate and synthesize research findings and discuss the interplay of culture, power, and identity and how they compete and negotiate an identity for Chinese public relations education. At the same time, I suggest theoretical implications, limitations of

the study, and fruitful directions for future research. *Tensions, Complexities, and Contradictions Implicit in Participants' Meaning Making*

Composed of five moments, the circuit of culture model illustrates the tensions, complexities, and controversies involved in a meaning-making process. Research findings of the present study exemplify the tensions among various sociological forces affecting participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education. These forces are contradictory in nature and have exerted great influence on how to interpret Chinese public relations education.

One tension is between two groups of scholars: one group of scholars has access to original English materials because of their ability to speak English, and the other group does not have access to these materials due to language barriers. Particularly, within the first group, there is one group of scholars called the "first-generation" public relations educators, who helped introduce public relations from overseas to mainland China. Their relatively higher level of English proficiency enabled them to read original English textbooks, journal articles, and relevant public relations materials. Some of them have also received overseas educations, though not necessary in the field of communication or public relations. They identified themselves as the bridge between China and the outside world. As one first-generation public relations educator expressed, "We helped introduce the best public relations materials to mainland China. Since its very beginning, Chinese public relations was on the right track." Their effort to bring in additional Western literature additionally helped update the Chinese people's understanding of public relations overseas, particularly U.S. public relations. This group of scholars has also engaged

in frequent interactions with Western public relations scholars. As a result, their understandings of public relations are primarily influenced by Western scholarly works, particularly the management approach represented by James Grunig and his Excellence study, which have become household names in the Chinese public relations community.

The second group of scholars includes those who do not have direct access to English course materials because of language barriers. Most of them do not speak or read English. They have little interaction with Western scholarship. The only way they can get access to the Western body of knowledge is through translated works. Their knowledge of public relations is primarily based on scholars from Hong Kong and Taiwan who are also native Chinese speakers. This group of scholars' research is tightly grounded in issues unique to China. As one educator noted, "They do not really 'worship' Western public relations theories because they do not know how advanced Western public relations theories and research are." In short, the tension between these two groups of scholars, to a great extent, illustrates the underlying tensions between the global and local, namely, the Western public relations theories in China and Chinese public relations education.

The second tension underlying participants' meaning making is between a scientific and professional approach to public relations, and a worldly and unethical one. The scientific approach conceives of public relations as an academic discipline that commands its own body of knowledge and a profession that has its own code of conduct. Educators who favor this approach believe that students should equip themselves with a solid knowledge base before they enter the field. All the educators

interviewed in the present study identified themselves with this approach. In terms of the second worldly and unethical approach, participants suggested that it consists of people (i.e., a few public relations educators but predominantly practitioners) who do not really understand what public relations is, nor do they understand the difference between public relations and marketing. Many of the people falling into this group still equate public relations with unethical practices such as *gao guanxi* (unethical use of relationships), banqueting, gift-giving, and so on. They believe that doing anything to increase market shares can be called *public relations*. None of the participants in the present study was in favor of this approach.

At the same time, students' meaning making also suggested tensions and contradictions. For example, students majoring in public relations or taking it as a concentration held a different perspective on the quality of their undergraduate public relations education than those who had taken only a few courses in public relations as electives. The former received a much more comprehensive and systematic training in public relations than the latter. They also commented more positively on the overall value of public relations education and its contribution to their career development. As one public relations major student indicated, "I don't see any problem with my public relations education. It has served me very well." They also see a clear relationship between what they learned in the classroom and what they are expected to do in the industry. For example, one student who graduated from Sun Yat-Sen University, the first university in China that was permitted by the MOE to offer a public relations major, spoke highly of her undergraduate curricular design and the overall college experience. Similarly, another student majoring in public relations and

international etiquette from Hang Zhou Communication City College asserted that her everyday working experience was simply “a positive reinforcement of the usefulness of all that [she has] learned in the classroom.” In contrast, students who merely took one or two courses in public relations as electives felt more of a disconnect between education and practice. They saw little relevance between what they learned in the classroom and what they were expected to do in the industry and felt that the courses that they took did not really prepare them for their careers.

Within the context of these tensions and contradictory forces, participants offered their interpretations of Chinese public relations education and how they understood the role of Western theories, concepts, and models in China. Many of their interpretations, as a result, are also contradictory in nature. For example, in terms of the larger regulatory context, some participants suggested that Chinese government public relations is making substantial improvements and is becoming more accepting of public relations practice and education. On the other hand, there are still a number of scholars who are afraid of calling their practices *public relations* because of the negative connotations embedded in the term. As an academic discipline, public relations still hasn't been approved by the Ministry of Education (MOE) as an official major. Meanwhile, public relations scholars do not have top academic public relations journals to showcase their professional achievements and research outcomes. As a result, many educators have to keep public relations as a secondary research interest, which lowers their tendency to conduct rigorous research. Additionally, not many educators, especially the first-generation, have received any systematic academic training in public relations. Although some did receive their

degrees in related fields such as journalism, the majority switched to public relations from non-related fields such as Chinese literature, English literature, philosophy, political science, computer science, medicine, chemistry, and Marxism.

In terms of participants' understanding regarding the presence of Western public relations theories, concepts, and models in China, a similar contradictory pattern emerged in the data analysis. On the one hand, participants unanimously agreed that the presence of this imported body of knowledge in public relations has brought far more benefits than disadvantages to Chinese public relations education. They referred to this importation as a good thing and argued that its presence has significantly pushed forward the theoretical and professional development of Chinese public relations. In this regard, participants expressed a strong eagerness of having more cutting-edge U.S. public relations theories enter China to guide Chinese public relations practice and education. On the other hand, participants expressed concerns about the hegemonic influences of this well-established body of knowledge in that it has set the criteria for what is considered acceptable and unacceptable and publishable and unpublishable by mainstream public relations journals. Many educators expressed their frustrations at changing their work to adapt to the format of American journals.

Furthermore, as an applied field of communication, public relations encompasses two domains: theoretical and professional. Participants' meaning making suggested divergent stances with respect to the connect or disconnect between the two domains. For example, many public relations practitioners believed that the industry is ahead of academia by at least 10 to 15 years. They argued that



professional development in the industry is what has been pushing forward the theoretical development of Chinese public relations education. They believed that teachers' course materials were outdated and their teaching methods were dry, without enough industry experience to substantiate their teaching. On the other hand, there were educators, particularly among the first generation, advocating the opposite, that is, claiming that public relations academia is not only not lagging behind but is ahead of the industry because of scholars' ability to conduct cutting-edge research, which is beyond the interest and ability of practitioners to grasp.

Nevertheless, regardless of the different perspectives, there are a number of scholars and practitioners who have frequent interactions with industry and academia serving as guest speakers, conducting workshops, and engaging in collaborative research projects. As a result of their positive experiences, many practitioners commented positively on the overall value of Chinese public relations education in training quality public relations students. They also seemed to have a more up-to-date and accurate understanding of the status quo of Chinese public relations education. Some of them have even developed long-term collaborative projects with colleges and universities such as internship centers. Many CEOs and top managers are also serving on the judging committee for the nationally held public relations case competition organized by CIPRA.

With the aforementioned detailed account of the complexities, tensions, and contradictions underpinning Chinese public relations education, the present study filled a void in Chinese public relations education and updates the existing U.S. literature on Chinese public relations education. The only notable article that offered

a description of Chinese public relations education was published in 1994 by Chen. More than a decade has passed, and Chen's original article no longer reflects the nature of contemporary Chinese public relations education. Nor did the article capture many of the latest changes that gave considerable leverage to elevating the status of Chinese public relations education. In fact, apart from being outdated, many of the educators criticized the existing literature's lack of accurate representation of Chinese public relations education. For example, one educator commented on a book chapter on Chinese public relations published in the *Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003). As she complained, "The chapter is a far cry from representing the real nature of Chinese public relations. I told my students to keep a critical eye while examining the chapter."

Consequently, the present research highlights an urgent need to engage in more symmetrical cross-cultural communication between public relations scholarship in China and in the U.S. Although Chinese public relations educators, students, and practitioners have demonstrated a paramount interest in learning more about Western public relations, there is a greater need to have more Chinese public relations theories, concepts, and models enter overseas markets so that the outside world will know more about the theoretical and professional progress happening in Chinese public relations education. Clearly, more communication and exchange in this direction remains necessary. Only then could scholarly effort counter the asymmetrical flow of information on a global scale. Such effort could also encourage the two sides to learn from each other by teasing out the merits and virtues within

each and consolidating them to push forward the development of public relations conducive to each one's own cultural context.

Encouragingly, in spite of the challenges and problems, participants, especially senior educators, have shown their dedication to the theoretical and professional development of Chinese public relations education. As one senior professor shared:

The reason that I took part in your study was not because you are a doctoral student. Nor because you came from the University of Maryland, one of the best universities in the U.S. that offers public relations programs. I help you because of my passion for and dedication to public relations, as well as my willingness to train young people. You young people are those holding the future of Chinese public relations. I want to tell you all that I know so that you can improve your scholarship and contribute to the field to make public relations more scientific and professional. This is what I really care about.

Along with such passion and dedication, participants believed that education is the key to elevating public relations academia and profession to a new level and to helping make an undergraduate degree in public relations become the “port of entry,” in the words of the 1999 Commission report, for anyone interested in pursuing a career in the field. In this regard, Chinese public relations educators and practitioners have made substantial progress in cultivating a “professional bonding relationship” between academia and industry, as called for by the 2006 Commission report.

## *Circuit of Culture Model*

### *Regulation*

Regulation provides the context “in which public relations takes place” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 38). It refers to the rules, regulations, laws, controls, and institutionalized systems that influence public relations practice. Within the context of Chinese public relations education, one important regulation that affects participants’ meaning making is the MOE’s disapproval of public relations as an official major to be listed in the national *Educational Catalogue*. This disapproval has put public relations into a “marginalized” position within academia. It has also created a series of problems for Chinese public relations educators, such as the difficulty in educators’ tenure and promotion, pursuing public relations as a primary research interest, and the lack of academic journals to showcase research findings and professional accomplishments.

Interestingly, parallel to the MOE’s disapproval is Chinese movement’s gradual recognition of public relations as a legitimate profession. As China has become more open to the outside world, the Chinese government has shifted its development strategy from focusing on GDP growth towards building a harmonious society that emphasizes sustainable development, human equality, and social justice. Within this context, the government has gradually realized the importance of soft power and its effectiveness in managing national reputation and international relations. Particularly, through a number of national crises, such as the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic, the Chinese government has learned the importance of communication, transparency, and public’s rights to be informed.

Correspondingly, the market has demonstrated a greater demand for public relations professionals. As a result, many universities have begun to offer public relations as a general knowledge course, responding to the increasing market demand in this area. Many public relations educators have also been invited by national and local governments to lecture on government public relations or public relations in general. Some of them have even been invited by the government to take part in strategic decision making affecting policies nationwide.

### *Representation*

Representation intertwines with power, identity, and culture to create a meaning for a particular product or message. Among the various approaches to public relations identified in the U.S. public relations literature (i.e., management approach, critical and rhetorical approach, feminist approach, and integrated marketing communication), only the management approach is represented in Chinese public relations education as the dominant discourse representing the U.S. public relations scholarship. Although the management approach is also a dominant voice in the U.S. public relations scholarship, other approaches have exerted considerable leverage on how public relations is interpreted and practiced. However, this tension and diversity underlying the U.S. literature are not represented in the Chinese public relations community. Particularly, those who do not speak nor read English would not have access to alternative voices in the U.S. public relations literature. Represented as the most correct way to understand and practice public relations, the management approach has become the yardstick on which Chinese educators, students, and practitioners have based frequent comparisons.

At the same time, participants have created an imagined “perfect” and “superpower” identity for U.S. public relations. In alignment with this impeccable identity, both Cutlip’s and Grunig’s works have been represented as the authoritative voices in public relations, which Chinese scholars should emulate. Particularly, the first-generation public-relations scholars who introduced leading U.S. scholars’ works into China and translated them into Chinese demonstrated a high degree of respect and admiration for the U.S. body of knowledge. These scholars also thought highly of their efforts to bring in the latest knowledge in public relations from overseas to China’s public relations education. As a result of such representation, the leading U.S. scholars’ publications, such as textbooks and journal articles, have been adopted by Chinese educators as major textbooks or supplementary readings for their public relations courses.

Besides these educators’ efforts, the imported body of knowledge is presented to the Chinese audience through direct translation of the original English materials and etic-based and comparative studies. Scholars with relatively higher levels of English proficiency have been active in translating course materials from English into Chinese to make them available to Chinese students, practitioners, and educators. In fact, Grunig’s edited book *Excellence in Public Relations* (1992) has just been translated into Chinese. Students at various universities are expected to use the book as a major reference.

In terms of etic-based and comparative studies, the present study confirmed their presence in Chinese public relations education as well as their harmful effects. Both of these two types of studies aim to apply existing Western public relations

theories or models to diverse cultural settings either to test their applicability or to make cross-cultural comparisons when many assumptions embedded in the Western frameworks are held to be inapplicable in the diverse cultural settings. For example, educators suggested that scholars tend to apply Western theoretical frameworks and principles as the yardstick to evaluate Chinese public relations, comparing things that are not comparable in the first place. Such a comparison made Chinese public relations seem “worthless” within the Western frameworks. Additionally, several educators suggested that students receiving overseas public relations education are more tempted to make such comparisons. Participants criticized that most of the students do not have sufficient cultural sensitivity to fully and accurately capture and reflect the real nature of Chinese public relations. Many of those students framed their studies in ways that assumed that Chinese public relations would have certain problems. These studies further fortified the dominant position that the U.S. body of knowledge represented in the Chinese public relations education.

### *Consumption*

Originating in the U.S., public relations is a borrowed concept in China. An important issue intrinsic to consumption concerns the presence of the Western body of knowledge in China. The research data confirmed the influence of Western public relations theories and concepts in Chinese public relations education to be what Sriramesh (2007) called “an American bias.” To some extent, the present study also confirmed the findings of previous studies (e.g., Bardahn, 2003; Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Sriramesh, 2004, 2007) concerning the harmful effects of having Western theories in China. The compelling voice in the

U.S. public relations scholarship suggested that the presence of American public relations theories and concepts is detrimental to the theoretical development of public relations in countries whose public relations is only at an early developmental stage. The extant literature also suggested that developing countries' heavy reliance on Western public relations theories and concepts, to a great extent, attributed to their slow development of a local body of knowledge in public relations.

However, my research data suggested a much more controversial picture than what has been indicated in the literature. To some extent, the dominant voice did exert barriers to developing a local body of knowledge. However, to a greater extent, participants stressed that the imported body of knowledge has brought far more benefits than disadvantages to China's public relations education and, therefore, is considered "a good thing." In other words, participants "consumed" the imported body of knowledge as playing a vital role in contributing to the theoretical and professional development of Chinese public relations. In their "consumption" of this imported body of knowledge, participants frequently described the U.S. body of knowledge as "the best," "the cutting-edge theory," and "the authority." Some participants even discredited critical scholars' warnings about the harmful effects of U.S. writing of having a dominant voice in public-relations scholarship. In their eyes, people have to "learn from the best," which is thought of as the U.S. body of knowledge that occupies a leadership position in the field of public relations. As a result of their respect and admiration for the U.S. scholarship, participants believed that the importation of the U.S. body of knowledge is not only beneficial but also a necessary step for the professionalization of Chinese public relations. In this regard,



as several participants have asserted, Chinese public relations scholars need to learn from and emulate the U.S. In alignment with this perspective, participants called for having more U.S. theories enter China's higher education.

*(Re)Production*

Consumption and production are two overlapping points on the circuit of culture model. Consumption is both approbation and localization. The process of localizing the imported knowledge is also the process of reproducing new knowledge based on the unique context of a particular country. Although public relations itself is an imported concept in China, participants developed distinctive alternative approaches to conceptualize public relations based in the Chinese context. Stated differently, Chinese public relations educators, students, and practitioners are not passive "consumers" of the imported knowledge. Rather, they have engaged in an active meaning making of these imported models, theories, and concepts in reference to their own sociopolitical and cultural context. In other words, Chinese participants are consumers of the imported knowledge on the one hand and producers of it on the other hand. Their high level of cultural sensitivity toward localizing the imported body of knowledge also illustrates the overlapping nature of consumption and production. Participants stressed that the U.S.-based theories cannot be applied to the Chinese context without making necessary modifications. While consuming, participants engaged in a simultaneous process of production and reproduction to determine how a particular concept or theory should be "consumed." Localization is also reproduction, which generates new meanings for a given theory, concept, or model based in the Chinese context. Participants' meaning making has shown that

models and theories based in the U.S. context and intended for U.S. audiences do not convey the same application in the Chinese context and for Chinese audience.

However, in their efforts to localize and modify, participants suggested that such changes should not overturn the inherent values of the imported Western theories, models, and concepts.

Understanding consumption through the lens of production and (re)production through the lens of consumption renders an empowerment model. It empowers the “consumers” of knowledge in that they play an equally important role in the meaning-making process of a theory, concept, or model. They are not passive consumers waiting for a meaning to be instilled into them. Both producers and consumers are equal contributors to the ultimate meaning of Chinese public relations education. From production to consumption and consumption to reproduction, meanings change through use. This dynamic nature of meaning making helps explain participants’ argument that the presence of Western public relations theories and concepts “are not a big problem” because a significant amount of localization is involved in the application of these theories, concepts, and models.

Additionally, the reproduction process has incorporated distinctive Confucian cultural values such as harmony, Grand Union, propriety, and benevolence. These Confucian values influence how participants make meaning of the imported knowledge. They also demonstrate the integration between global and local, and suggest the possibility of cultural convergence and intellectual coexistence. Particularly, Confucian values of harmony and Grand Union have influenced participants’ not seeing the presence of the U.S. body of knowledge in China and the

development of Chinese public relations as contradictory. Rather, they see their presence as opportunities for mutual learning. In other words, rather than resisting and competing, participants advocated for cultural convergence and intellectual coexistence and collaboration between the imported U.S. body of knowledge and Chinese public relations education.

The Confucian embracing stance also resonates with what the circuit of culture model has suggested. The circuit model rejects notions such as cultural imperialism because it still suggests that some cultures as superior to others. Instead, the model advocates cultural coexistence and mutual learning. In this regard, participants' meaning making also resonates well with the increasingly globalized environment.

### *Identity*

Curtin and Gaither (2007) explained that identity consists of multiple levels, such as individual, cultural, and national, and that they are all interrelated in constructing an identity for a given communicative message or product. The identity of Chinese public relations education is a reflection of how power inequalities negotiate and play out between China and the U.S. at both national and disciplinary levels. At the national level, the U.S. is identified as a world superpower that has great leverage over many important sociopolitical and economic issues on a global scale. In terms of public relations as a discipline and profession, the U.S. is identified as a leader in the field. Originating in the U.S., the U.S. public relations discourse is considered the dominant discourse in the international public relations community (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). As a result of the dominant position that U.S public

relations occupies, public relations in diverse cultural settings, especially in developing countries, has been marginalized and treated like “the other.” As Pompper (2004) contended, as long as Whiteness remains as the unspoken norm in understanding and practicing public relations, other races will continue to be labeled as different, distanced, and marginalized. The dominant position that the U.S. dominant discourse enjoys privileges the American voice over that of many other voices.

My research findings provide evidence to support the aforementioned claims. For example, in terms of academic publications, the educators interviewed suggested that the dominant U.S. discourse, to a great extent, determines what is considered acceptable and unacceptable and publishable and unpublishable by such mainstream public relations journals such *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research*. Chinese scholars, thus, have encountered varying degrees of difficulty in having their works published in these mainstream public relations journals. For example, one professor stated that his article was rejected by one American journal because it was not considered academic enough based on “international standards.” Also, educator participants suggested that there are cultural differences in thinking, reasoning, and expressing oneself, which cause further difficulties in having their articles published. Whereas U.S. writing is based on logical reasoning and citing references, Chinese writing tends to be more artistic and “leave lots of things unsaid, which may seem unscientific following the U.S. standards.” Particularly, one educator shared that following these standards has prevented many insightful opinion pieces from getting published. He believed that

having such standards dominate public relations scholarship destroys scholarly creativity and originality, which is unhealthy in the long run and may further hinder theoretical development.

As a result of the dominance embodied in the U.S. public relations identity, the flow of communication at the international level is largely one way and asymmetrical, predominantly from U.S. to China. Although Chinese participants have demonstrated a great interest in having more U.S.-based theories enter China, they also expressed their dismay at the few Chinese public relations theories, concepts, and models being introduced to U.S. higher educational settings.

At the same time, participants have constructed an imaginary “superpower” and “perfect” identity for the U.S. public relations scholarship. They frequently referred to the U.S. body of knowledge as “the best,” “the authority,” and “the cutting-edge.” Based on their construction of an imaginary impeccable identity, participants made frequent comparisons between Chinese public relations and that of the U.S., as though the latter were the prototype. In fact, throughout the data-collection process, participants were frequently surprised by the fact that U.S. public relations scholarship faced many of the same problems and challenges that have been plaguing Chinese public relations education, such as the gap between theory and practice and a lack of qualified public relations educators who have both academic and professional credentials. Nevertheless, in the light of the well-established body of knowledge on U.S. public relations, Chinese public relations seems young, considering its short history and weak theoretical foundation. After all, Chinese public relations is still in the early developmental and transitional stage. These power

differences have resulted in a sense of being inferior among Chinese participants, which further increased their tendency to look up to the U.S. as a respectable leader in the field and fortified the “superpower” and “perfect” identity that they have constructed for U.S. public relations scholarship.

### *Confucianism and Public Relations Education*

#### *Relationship, Sympathy/Emotion, and Benevolence*

Confucianism emerged as an underlying philosophy that has influenced participants’ meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Many of the emerged themes could be traced back to Confucian teaching. For example, Confucian emphases on relationship and feelings/emotions appeared as important concepts that have influenced participants’ understanding of Chinese public-relations education. They affected people’s belief that, to practice public relations in China, people have to ascertain relationships and deal with feelings/emotions first and then turn to the solving of problems. As one educator commented:

In the Chinese context, it is feelings/emotions outweigh law (*情理法*), whereas in the U.S., it is law that outweighs feelings/emotions (*法理情*). In China, showing sympathy and concern for the relationship and people carries more weight than logical reasoning. . . . Within China’s relationship-oriented society, if you don’t address feelings/emotions and concerns for relationships and people, you cannot really practice public relations.

Underlying these emphases on relationship and feelings/emotions is an important Confucian cardinal principle—benevolence (*Ren*, 仁), which, by and large, shapes the Chinese people’s relationship orientation. Etymologically speaking, the

composition of *Ren* is a vivid illustration of what Confucius meant by *benevolence*. The Chinese word *benevolence* (仁) is composed of two parts. The left side (人) of the character means ‘people’ and the right side means ‘two’ (二). A combination of them means ‘two people,’ which connotes relationship. Thus, it is through relationships that one demonstrates benevolence and virtuous character. Therefore, in the Chinese context, the self does not exist unless it is in relationship to others. It is through relationships with others that one practices self-cultivation and demonstrates virtuous behavior. As the Master remarked, “The man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others” (*Analects*, 6:30). In this process of improving others, one first improves oneself. Through relationship with others, one practices self-cultivation and demonstrates benevolence.

The relationality in *Ren* (benevolence) is what gives self-existence and personhood meaning. It has also blurred the line between what constitutes personal interest and collective interest. As one educator pointed out, “Personal interest has far less weight than collective interest. To a great extent, collective interest *is* personal interest.” In such a collectivist community, Confucius taught that relying on soft power such as inner virtues and morality to regulate human interactions is much more effective than relying on laws and policies. Again, such reliance on soft power is based on relationship, virtue, emotions/feelings, and benevolence. As the Master taught:

If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of

shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good. (*Analects*, II: 3)

#### *Propriety, Public Relations Etiquette, and Harmony*

Etiquette or public relations etiquette emerged as a unique aspect of Chinese public relations influenced by Confucianism. Participants suggested that etiquette has become an increasingly popular subject not only among college students but also among practitioners at both entry-level and top management levels. Many universities have begun to offer etiquette or public relations etiquette either as a required course for public relations majors or an elective course for students to fulfill the requirement of general-knowledge education. Participants believed that etiquette is an integral element to quality education because etiquette improves *Xing Xiang* (reputation) in that appropriate etiquette enhances personal, organizational, and national *Xing Xiang*, which, in turn, helps build harmonious relationships between organizations and the public, considered to be an ultimate goal of public relations.

The emphasis on etiquette can also find its root in Confucianism. Etiquette in Chinese is described by two words: *Li* (礼) and *Yi* (仪). The first word *Li* is the same as *propriety*, which is one of the Confucian cardinal principles. *Li* means propriety, referring to the ritual activities that have passed down from generation-to-generation. It dictates people abide by proper rituals in social interactions based on the societal roles that they play and positions that they occupy. Following these rules and rituals ensures societal harmony at a macro-level. Confucius offered a great deal of wisdom on the connection between propriety (*Li* 礼) and harmony:



When practicing the ritual, what matters most is harmony. This is what made the beauty of the way of the ancient kings; it inspired their every move, great or small. Yet, they knew where to stop: harmony cannot be sought for its own sake, it must always be subordinated to the ritual; otherwise it would not do.

(Leys, 1997, p. 5)

Stated differently, *Li* (propriety) and harmony go hand-in-hand. Harmony should not be favored at the cost of forsaking propriety. Otherwise, the resulting harmony is not the real harmony that Confucius advocated. Participants believed that the ultimate goal of public relations is to build societal harmony. Teaching students etiquette can help build that societal harmony. At the same time, participants contended that to achieve harmony on a global scale, the wisdom of Confucianism alone is not sufficient. It needs wisdom from other philosophical foundations as well. Building societal harmony on a global scale requires a collective effort that goes beyond Confucianism, incorporating wisdom from other philosophical stances outside of China. Otherwise, the resulting “harmony” would be contradictory to what Confucian harmony has called for.

To accomplish this goal of achieving harmony through propriety, propriety (*Li*) has also to be understood within the context of benevolence (*Ren*). Benevolence speaks to the goodness of human nature, and propriety is an external manifestation of how well one engages in the self-cultivation of inner virtue. In other words, propriety is a reflection of a person’s self-cultivation of virtue and benevolence. In this respect, a person of benevolence will also command good characteristics and personal traits

and demonstrate appropriate behaviors in accordance with the societal role that one plays and position that one occupies. In this way, society is able to achieve harmony.

### *Harmony and Grand Union*

Among all of the aforementioned Confucian values, harmony serves as the foundation leading to the ultimate state of Grand Union. Confucian emphases on harmony and Grand Union help explain participants' beliefs in the non-contradictory relationship between Western theories in China and the development of Chinese public relations. Confucian harmony is grounded in a peaceful coexistence of differences. Without differences, harmony loses its meaning. As a result of this Confucian influence, participants are prone to support a peaceful coexistence of American public relations and Chinese public relations rather than a fierce competition between the two. This stance suggests possibilities of mutual learning. Public relations scholarship has to go beyond the apparent cultural differences to the core of humanity, which is held accountable across all cultures. To that end, Western public relations theories and the theoretical development of Chinese public relations theories can complement and enrich the existence of each other. As one senior educator eloquently stated:

Knowledge and science do not have cultural boundaries. If it is a true theory, it belongs to the world. It should not be confined to a particular country or culture. Our purpose is to use the theories to help solve practical issues in China. If the theory can do such a job, we should not care about where the theory comes from. If it is the truth, regardless of where it comes from, it is

useful. I firmly believe that knowledge and science do not have cultural boundaries. If it is a true theory, everyone can and should use it.

*Circuit of Culture Model, Confucianism, and Public Relations Education:*

*The Interplay of Culture, Power, and Identity*

The present study offers a detailed account of participants' meaning making of Chinese public-relations education through the theoretical lens of the five moments constituting the circuit of culture model. It also sheds light on the ways in which Confucianism has affected participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education. Research findings revealed the complexities, tensions, and contradictions implicit in the meaning-making process. They also offer insights into the interplay of culture, power, and identity and how it has affected the meaning-making process. Curtin and Gaither (2007) indicated that the circuit model suggested the "need for a new, iterative model of public relations that embraces the interrelationships of culture, identity, and power" (p. 204). Examining Chinese public relations education through the three underlying mechanisms of culture, power, and identity, the study enriches the existing understanding of the circuit model. Such an understanding is particularly helpful for understanding how Chinese participants perceive the presence of the Western body of knowledge in Chinese public relations education.

Intertwined with culture and power, identity provides an avenue to examine the interplay of multiple sociological forces in constructing a meaning for Chinese public relations education. The identity that participants constructed for Chinese public relations education is developed within the framework of power or a lack of power operating at both national and disciplinary levels between China and the U.S. Internationally, the U.S. is identified as a world superpower. Identified as a developed

country, the U.S. has exerted the greatest economic, social, and political impact on the world. Academically, public relations originated in the U.S. The U.S. public relations scholarship has a well-developed body of knowledge of more than 25 years. As a leader in public relations worldwide, the “international” discourse is, by and large, representing the American voice (Curtin & Gaither, 2007).

In contrast, nationally, although China appears to be an emerging power, it is still a developing country with a large number of citizens living below the poverty line. In terms of public relations, the concept did not enter China until the 1980s. Chinese public relations education has a history of less than 2 decades. Formal education in public relations as an academic major did not begin until recently. Chinese public relations scholarship does not have a well-developed body of knowledge, nor has it been accepted by the Ministry of Education as an official major. Few educators, especially senior ones, have received any formal training in public relations. When these interviews were conducted in the summer of 2008, I had the opportunity to interview the first and only doctoral student in public relations. In fact, as many participants suggested, most people are still trying to understand what public relations is and does. Nationwide, there is still resistance against professional public relations practice. At the same time, China is not a democratic society; it does not have many of the fundamental values grounding the Western notion of public relations. Public relations, by and large, remains a foreign concept in China.

Within this context, Chinese scholars have developed a high degree of respect for American public relations scholarship. Educators have made substantial effort to translate English-written public relations textbooks into Chinese to make them

available to students, educators, practitioners, and the general public. Especially, educators who have maintained ongoing relationships with overseas scholars are also active in inviting leading U.S. public relations scholars to China to give talks at major universities and conferences. As a result of their respect and admiration for U.S. public relations scholarship, participants made frequent comparisons between Chinese public relations and that of the U.S., speaking of the latter as “the authority,” “the cutting-edge,” and “the frontier of knowledge.” As a result, professors who maintained close contact with U.S. scholars also spoke with a sense of pride because of their staying in touch with the “frontier of knowledge.”

This inherent power inequality between the two countries furthered Chinese scholars, students, and practitioners’ tendency to look up to the U.S. as a respectable leader in the field and furthered their tendency to borrow more theories, models, and concepts from the U.S. Participants’ reference to the U.S. body of knowledge as the benchmark and prototype seemed to suggest that Chinese public relations still has “a long way to go until they catch up to the United States” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 256). In fact, one senior professor’s construction of the five phases of Chinese public-relations development well illustrates this mentality of Chinese inferiority in this field. He argued that the development of Chinese public relations has to go through the beginning of importation and examination, to the present of digestion and imitation, before moving to the future of creation and innovation. It seems that an acceptable belief to most participants is that the development and advancement of Chinese public relations has to be based on U.S. public relations. In other words, the U.S. body of knowledge in public relations seems to lay the groundwork for Chinese

public relations to develop and advance. Few participants ever questioned the rationale behind this mentality by asking such questions as whether Chinese public relations development must be based on the U.S. scholarship or whether Chinese public relations could advance without relying on U.S. scholarship as the groundwork. In this regard, it seems that Chinese public relations educators, students, and practitioners have become the actors sustaining and fortifying the existing dominant discourse's hegemonic position and influence.

However, the above conclusion seems ethnocentric if participants' interpretation is placed only within the Western framework of hegemony to examine that interpretation. Confucianism, a deeply-rooted Chinese philosophy, has to be brought into the picture to render a thorough examination of participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. In fact, the Western notion of hegemony underpinning many critical scholars' claims runs counter to many important Confucian values, such as harmony and Grand Union. The Confucian value of harmony plays an indispensably vital role in interpreting participants' understanding of Chinese public relations education. Contrary to hegemony, Confucian harmony suggests an embracing stance. Rather than resisting or rejecting, Confucian harmony calls for scholars to tease out the virtues and merits within each culture and consolidate them and use them to the fullest extent to benefit a country's public relations practice and education based on its unique context. In other words, harmony promotes a peaceful coexistence of differences. It is through differences that harmony finds its meaning. Greatly influenced by this Confucian perspective,

participants are in favor of intellectual coexistence and collaboration as opposed to resistance and competition.

The aforementioned perspective on harmony is also in alignment with today's increasingly global environment in which constant information and intellectual exchange occur. As participants noted, in today's global community, it is unavoidable to have more Western theories, models, and concepts enter China. Within this context, it would be shorted-sighted to simply resist their coming. Instead, a more fruitful approach is to tease out the merits and virtues embedded in the imported Western theories, concepts, and models and use them to the fullest extent to benefit Chinese public relations education. In this application process, modification and localization become crucial. It is at this point that Chinese scholars need to employ their cultural sensitivity and depth of cultural knowledge to make sound judgment. Intellectual discussions have to go beyond merely acknowledging the pitfalls of the imported Western theories to investigating how Chinese public relations education can benefit from this wide range of perspectives and localize them to fit into the Chinese context.

Moreover, the embracing standpoint underpinning Confucianism resonates with the circuit model's advocacy of cultural diversity and coexistence. Confucian harmony is inclusive harmony. It suggests that differences should not compete but complement one another. The Confucian perspective does not see differences as threatening but as opportunities for mutual learning. It prioritizes collaboration and cooperation over competition and resistance. It is within this harmonious state-of-being that people can achieve the ultimate state of Grand Union.

Correspondingly, the Confucian notion of harmony can help explain participants' belief in a non-contradictory relationship between Western public relations theories in China and Chinese public relations development. As educators frequently mentioned, "knowledge does not have cultural boundaries"; "if it is a good theory, it should be used by people across the world regardless of where it comes from"; and "true knowledge belongs to the world." As the research data have shown, that U.S. scholars see the presence of Western theories in China as hegemonic influence and Chinese scholars see those same theories as opportunities for mutual learning and self-improvement profoundly illustrates how culture serves as an indispensable regulatory power affecting the meaning-making process. In this regard, the research findings confirmed what the circuit model has suggested; that is, culture is the essence of the model and should be given considerable attention in the process of (international) public relations practice. It is a crucial underlying mechanism affecting the meaning-making process.

In China, Confucianism provides the context that regulates the intellectual and cultural tensions between the global (U.S.) and the local (China). China's higher education has become a site where a culture of U.S. public relations (a culture embodying values such as democracy, capitalism, freedom of expression, efficiency, and management) competes with traditional Chinese cultural values (Confucian values such as benevolence, emotions/feelings, relationship, and harmony) underpinning Chinese public relations. What results from this contest and negotiation is an emerging hybrid identity that is neither purely Chinese nor American. As Curtin and Gaither (2007) noted, "As consumers appropriate global culture in local ways,



identity is arising not within particular national boundaries but in the relationship between cultures and identities, forming an infinite variety of hybrid identities” (p. 182). This emerging hybrid identity for Chinese public relations is a reflection of cultural convergence and intellectual coexistence.

The introduction of U.S. public relations into China’s higher educational settings has brought a set of such corresponding values as transparency, freedom of speech, management, and democracy. These values have shaped the identity of Chinese public relations education and changed Chinese public relations practice. However, the introduction of these values does not mean the erosion of traditional Chinese cultural values. Rather, the imported body of knowledge has become a “U.S. symbol appropriated for Chinese consumption” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 86). The result of the meaning making is a hybrid identity that is based on, yet transcends, both American and Chinese values. For example, the *Xing Xiang* approach is a combination of traditional Chinese cultural values such as face and propriety and the American management philosophy. Participants engaged in a simultaneous process of production and consumption to localize the imported body of knowledge and reproduce what it means for Chinese public relations education. The imported body of knowledge of U.S. public relations has been represented as a symbol contributing to “what it means to be Chinese” public relations and “nullifies it” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 86).

In alignment with this belief, educators suggested that, when the local encounters the global, it is important to adopt constructive approaches rather than a simple resistance, which is destructive to the long-term development of a discipline.

Abandoning a resistance mentality, educators posed several meaningful questions to ponder, such as how to localize Western theories and concepts to make them fit better into the Chinese context and how to tease out the virtues and merits of Western public relations and use them to the fullest extent to benefit Chinese public relations theory and practice. What can Chinese public relations offer to the outside world? How could Chinese scholars find ways to integrate the Western emphases on being scientific, systematic, and analytical with the Chinese focuses on harmony, relationship, sympathy, and holism? These questions also resonate with what communication scholars Roper and Weymes (2007) have called for: “Could Eastern and Western business practices and values *converge* [emphasis original] to become more ethical and more acceptable globally?” (p. 141). Participants believed that engaging in such discussions can generate more fruitful and healthier intellectual collaborations.

All in all, serving as the underlying mechanisms grounding the circuit model, power, identity, and culture have exerted considerable impact in the meaning-making process. Each of the mechanisms interacts with the other moments of the circuit model. Together, they shape the outcome of participants’ meaning making of Chinese public relations education.

#### Methodological Implications and Future Research

##### *Implications for Methodology*

Although the qualitative nature of the present study allows for great freedom to explore the nuances and subtleties of Chinese educators’, practitioners’, and students’ meaning making of Chinese public relations education, I found the

methodology is still limiting in a number of ways. A most restricting limitation concerns the categorization of themes. Although it helps to synthesize and present data, categorization makes the data become too rigid to fully reveal the dynamic nature of themes and the contradictions and tensions embedded in the meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Oftentimes, I found a particular theme belonged to multiple categories simultaneously. The moment that I made a categorization, I lost the dynamic nature of that theme. The theme was no longer as alive as it had been before the categorization was made. Besides this inherent limitation pertaining to the methodology itself, two additional limitations are discussed in the following sections: sampling limitation and procedural limitations.

#### *Sampling Limitation*

The major sampling limitation was my lack of access to public relations organizations. Most of my professional network is limited to Chinese public relations educators. I knew few practitioners who would be interested in participating in my study. As an alternative, I approached the director in charge of the Education and Research department at CIPRA to seek help. He gave me a long list of practitioners working at the various top 10 local and international public-relations agencies that I could contact. He also asked his assistant to call these agencies ahead of time and tell them my background and inform them of my study and research topic, as well as my upcoming visit. His relationship with these agencies proved to be extremely helpful for my participant recruitment. Almost all of the practitioners participating in the project were introduced to me by this director working at CIPRA.

However, given CIPRA's mission to promote Chinese public relations and its role of serving as the bridge to introduce Chinese public relations to the outside world, I do not know to what extent the organizational agenda of CIPRA affected the selection of possible organizations to take part in my study. Nor do I know whether the director intentionally selected the best agencies that have the most frequent interactions with academia so that I would project a more promising picture of Chinese public relations education. Although participants suggested that there are still unethical practices in public relations, the practitioners interviewed all identified themselves as following ethical and professional practices of public relations. This limited sample may have affected the rendering of practitioners' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Nevertheless, although the number was below what I had planned to recruit, I was able to interview many high-ranking practitioners, such as managers and CEOs working at various top domestic and international public relations agencies. Their insight and experience have significantly enriched the research data in a way that might not otherwise have been possible.

Another limitation concerns student sampling. When I conducted these interviews, students were in their summer break. I was unable to find enough students in public-relations or relevant majors to participate in my study. This situation significantly reduced the number of students that I had planned to interview. Most of my student participants were introduced to me by the educators that I interviewed. It is likely that these educators selected the best students available so that I could offer a favorable portrayal of Chinese public-relations education.

### *Procedural Limitation*

Because of the relatively advanced stage of American public relations, my participants demonstrated great eagerness to learn anything they could about U.S. public relations curricula, course structure, faculty background, pedagogy, and so on. Oftentimes, our interviews were a combination of my asking them questions about Chinese public relations education and their asking me questions about American public relations education. However, I am not sure to what extent that my disclosure of American public relations education affected their telling me of Chinese public relations. Also, given the reputation of the University of Maryland's public-relations program in China, I do not know whether and to what extent my academic background influenced their meaning making of Chinese public relations, particularly their comments on the Excellence study. However, each of our conversations turned out to be fruitful and refreshing dialogue, fruitful in the sense of intellectual stimulation and possible research collaborations and refreshing in the sense of clarifying a number of assumptions and misunderstandings that one side held about the other.

Moreover, due to the bilingual nature of the present study, I encountered a number of language barriers in fully articulating what I wanted to ask and conveying as accurately as possible the original meanings of the Chinese words. However hard I tried, there are quite a few cultural practices, particularly the deeply-rooted cultural values (e.g., *qing*, *qing li fa*, *fa li qing*, *Xing Xiang*) and idioms (e.g., 皇帝的女儿不

愁嫁<sup>26</sup>, 酒好也怕巷子深<sup>27</sup>), that have posed great challenges to conveying their original meanings. Many of these concepts are deeply grounded in the context of China's 5000-year history so that offering an accurate translation is almost impossible to accomplish. Although I did send back my translated work to the interviewees to double-check its meaning, the language barrier may still present difficulties for the reader to fully grasp the meaning of these concepts in their original contexts.

### *Reflexivity*

As a qualitative scholar, I have found that reflexivity is an integral part of craftsmanship. Although I did not test the applicability of any particular Western theory in China, I still found that it is challenging to completely deconstruct all the knowledge that I have learned in the past 6 years at Syracuse University and the University of Maryland, in particular. At the University of Maryland, I have received a most rigorous and systematic training in public relations, which I am very grateful for. These theoretical constructs have become part of me and may have influenced my perception of public relations in terms of how it should be interpreted and practiced.

Oftentimes, in the interviews, when my participants told me something different from my expectations, I could not help jumping into the conversation and telling them how things were interpreted in the U.S. Particularly, when participants were explaining concepts bound to the Chinese context, I had a hard time grasping what they were trying to say. Although I am a native Chinese and spent 24 years in China before I came to the U.S., I received little education in public relations while I

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<sup>26</sup> If you are the emperor's daughter, you would never worry about having yourself married to a decent gentleman.

<sup>27</sup> Even if you have the best liquor, for example, in the world, you still have to market and advertise it as much as possible.

was a college student in China. In fact, when I was an undergraduate student, public relations—and even communication in general—was not offered at many universities. It was not until recently that more schools have begun to teach public relations and offer relevant majors or concentrations. By and large, my body of knowledge in public relations has been developed since I came to the University of Maryland.

Consequently, my little background in Chinese public relations along with my 4-years' systematic training in public relations at the University of Maryland caused considerable challenges for me in fully capturing the meaning of Chinese public relations from a pure inside-out perspective. For example, when participants told me about the popularity of the *Xing Xiang* approach in China's higher education, my immediate response was to resist and criticize because the literal translation of *Xing Xiang* is 'image,' and I know that Grunig was against such a projection of public relations. It was only later, as I engaged in more in-depth interviews, that I realized that the Chinese translation of *Xing Xiang* meant 'reputation management' even though the literal meaning of *Xing Xiang* is 'image.' There are many examples like this one. Although I was improving in this respect as I approached the end of the data collection, I had to make a conscious effort to suspend my knowledge so that it did not influence me to make any premature decisions. Nevertheless, many times I may have made judgment unconsciously.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

Chinese public relations education is not a highly populated research area. The present study employed qualitative methods to explore the tensions, complexities, and contradictions involved in participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations.

This exploration also aimed to shed light on the interplay of culture, power, and identity and how they affected participants' meaning-making process. The study also examined the effects and roles of Confucianism in Chinese public-relations education. The findings of the current study have helped identify several fruitful areas worthy of further exploration.

### *Theorizing About Chinese Cultural Values*

A theoretical lens through which one can examine Chinese public relations is Confucianism. Many Confucian values such as harmony, Grand Union, benevolence, righteousness, relationship, and sincerity/honesty can serve as theoretical constructs to develop a theory for Chinese public relations education. These values have demonstrated a strong relevance to public relations practice and are highly sought after by practitioners. Future scholars can begin to build theoretical connections between these traditional Chinese cultural values and public relations practice.

On a global scale, educators interviewed noted that traditional Chinese cultural values might be what Chinese public relations could offer to the outside world. Future research could identify possible means to facilitate such a cultural convergence and intellectual integration. Some possible questions to ponder are the following: How could Chinese public relations scholars develop theories for Chinese public relations without relying on the Western body of knowledge as the groundwork? In what aspects could Confucian emphases on relationality, harmony, holism, and benevolence complement the dominant Western discourse's emphases on scientism, procedure, and linearity?



### *Conducting More Qualitative Inside-Out Studies*

In order to develop a truly rich interpretation of a phenomenon as complex, uncertain, and controversial as the state of Chinese public relations education, qualitative methodology shows its usefulness. Without attempting to examine the applicability of any particular Western theory, the current project was able to offer a rich and thick description of the details and nuances of Chinese public relations education. Such an exploration exposes the contradictory and contested nature inherent in the meaning making process, while highlighting several concrete cultural values that deserve further examination such as *Xing Xiang* (reputation), feelings/emotions (*Qing* 情), harmony, Grand Union, and propriety/civility (*Li*). Further research could embark on a similar path to continue to explore the meanings of these concepts in order to further enrich the existing understanding of Chinese public relations education. Doing so could help to continue to tease out the virtues and merits embedded in Chinese public relations that might be of value to public relations outside China.

### Implications for Theory and Practice

The present study contributes to the body of knowledge in public relations in three important ways. First, it sheds light on the utility and applicability of the circuit of culture model in understanding public relations education. Research findings not only helped confirm the contested nature of Chinese public relations education, but also offer avenues to modify and complicate the existing circuit model.

Second, the present study offers a thorough discussion of Confucianism and its ramifications for Chinese public relations education, particularly through the lens

of Confucian emphases on harmony and Grand Union. These Confucian values provide the larger regulatory context in which participants' meaning making takes place. Also, identifying the impact of Confucianism on Chinese public relations, the study suggested the possibility of Confucianism in serving as a philosophy to guide public relations education and practice.

A third contribution of the study is that it helps enrich the developing body of knowledge in Chinese public relations education. It updates the only article on Chinese public relations education published in 1994. Particularly, the study responds to international and critical scholars' concerns about the widespread presence of Western public relations theories, models, and concepts in developing countries such as China because their presence may hamper the development of a local body of knowledge in public relations. Juxtaposing Confucianism with the circuit of culture model, the present study sheds light on the tensions between the global and local. Participants' interpretations offered a detailed account of how they perceive the presence of the imported body of knowledge while highlighting the interplay of culture, power, and identity resulting in their understanding. Thus, the present study offered insight as to where to draw the line between intellectual hegemony and competition following Western scholars' criticisms and intellectual coexistence and collaboration in accordance with Confucianism.

#### *Revisiting the Circuit of Culture Model*

Composed of five moments, the circuit of culture model illustrates how multiple sociological forces interact and compete in negotiating a meaning for a given communication phenomenon. The model positions culture, power, and identity as the

underlying mechanisms influencing the meaning-making process. The present study adds power to the utility of the circuit model in understanding the meaning-making process of complex communication events. Particularly, the study highlights the important roles of power, identity, and culture and how they change and shape the interactions of the other moments of the circuit model. For example, power inequalities between China and the U.S. at both national and disciplinary levels resulted in an attitude of inferiority among Chinese participants and increased their tendency to look up to the U.S. as a respectable leader in the field and to borrow theories and models from the U.S. Many participants believed that doing so is a *necessary* step contributing to the theoretical and professional development of Chinese public relations. In other words, it seems to be an acceptable belief to the participants that the development of Chinese public relations has to be based on U.S. scholarship. Few participants ever questioned the rationale behind this belief or asked such critical questions as whether the development of Chinese public relations must be based on U.S. public relations and whether Chinese public relations could develop without relying on that of the U.S. as the groundwork.

Furthermore, power inequalities changed how representation plays out in the meaning making process. Rather than having producers engage in an effort to represent its message (as suggested by the circuit model), Chinese public relations educators, particularly the first-generation PR educators, took the initiative of representing the U.S. body of knowledge in the Chinese context, representing it as “the best,” “the cutting-edge theory,” and “the frontier of knowledge.” This representation portrays the U.S. body of knowledge as the prototype that Chinese

public relations scholarship learns from and tries to emulate. Indeed, throughout the data collection, participants made frequent comparisons between Chinese public relations and that of the U.S. while relying on the latter as the yardstick. As a result, this inferior mentality further fortifies the dominant position that the U.S. body of knowledge occupies and reinforces the imaginary “perfect” and “superpower” identity that Chinese participants have constructed for the U.S. public relations scholarship. In this regard, participants have become the actors sustaining and reinforcing power inequalities embedded in the existing structure.

However, the above conclusion may seem ethnocentric if participants’ interpretations are examined only within the Western framework of power and hegemony. In fact, Confucianism plays an equally important role in shaping participants’ understanding of the influence of Western theories and models in China. The Confucian values of harmony and Grand Union, to a great extent, can explain participants’ interpretation of a non-contradictory relationship between the presence of the U.S. body of knowledge in China and the development of Chinese public-relations education. Harmony promotes a peaceful coexistence of differences. It is through differences that harmony derives its meaning. Therefore, influenced by this Confucian notion of inclusive harmony, participants called for cultural convergence and intellectual coexistence between Chinese and U.S. public relations scholarship, as opposed to resisting and competing.

In short, given the centrality of power, culture, and identity in affecting the ultimate meaning-making process, I modified the existing circuit of culture model (see Figure 2) to highlight their importance.

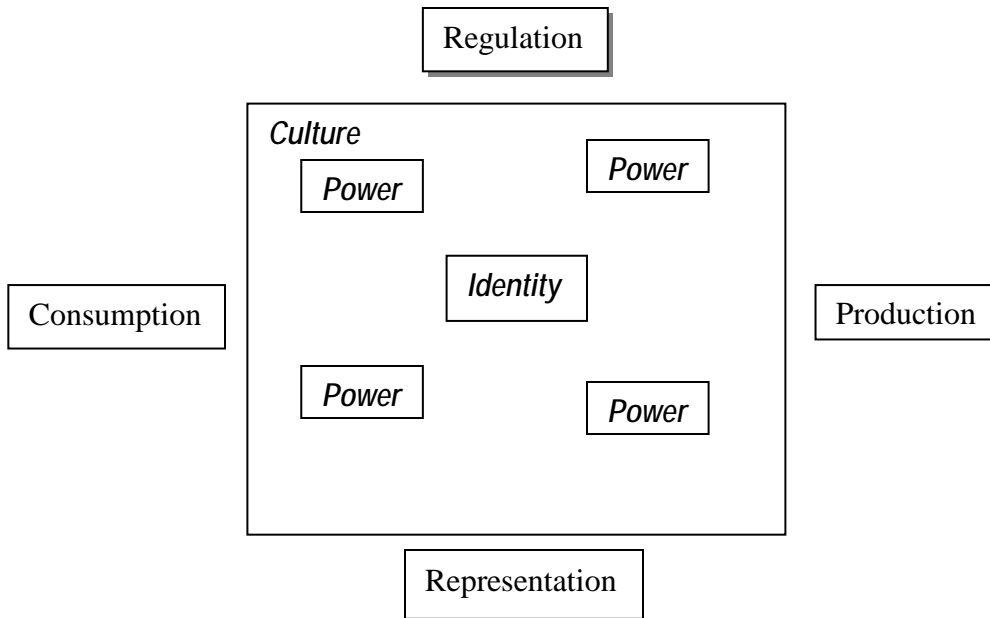


Figure 2. Modified circuit of culture model

The original model contains the five moments but does not highlight the important roles of power, identity, and culture in shaping the meaning-making process. The modified model aims to foreground culture, power, and identity without changing the original nature of the model. It places culture as the context within which meaning making takes place. I move identity, one of the original five moments of the circuit model, to the center of the modified model to foreground its central role in meaning construction and reconstruction and its intricate interactions with other moments.

Also, I include power in the revised model. Although the original model underscored power as an implicit element, it does not visually show how power interacts with the other moments. The resulting model, by placing power as the link connecting every two of the four moments, highlights how power plays a role in meaning making and how power can affect the interactions between and among other moments. Still adhering to the original nature of the circuit model, the revised version improves the

original model by including what was missing yet crucial in the original model. It vividly highlights how various moments interact and how the interplay of culture, power, and identity affects the meaning-making process.

### *Confucianism and Public Relations Education*

Confucianism emerged as an underlying philosophy guiding public relations education and practice. The present study offered a detailed account of Confucianism and many of its fundamental values and cardinal principles and how they have exerted an impact on participants' meaning making of Chinese public relations education. Participants believed in a non-contradictory relationship between Western public relations theories in China and Chinese public relations development. Given the young history of Chinese public relations, participants also contended that the importation of these Western public relations theories was a necessary step to advance the theoretical and professional development of Chinese public relations. Apart from power inequalities that resulted in an attitude of inferiority among Chinese participants and a belief that China has to learn from the U.S., their collaborative and embracing mentality, to a great extent, can be explained by the Confucian cultural values of harmony and Grand Union. Participants believed that the ultimate goal of public relations is to seek harmony and build harmony among people, organizations, nations, and states. This belief in a harmonious state-of-being runs counter to what hegemony has suggested. This finding confirms the regulatory power of culture in the meaning making process. Within the Chinese context, culture and Confucianism in particular serve as the regulatory context that affects participants' understanding of the presence of Western theories and models in China. Their

resulting meaning making suggested and confirmed the possibility of intellectual coexistence and collaboration as opposed to resistance and competition.

Conceiving of public relations as contributing to societal harmony also highlights the inherent ethical dimension of public relations. This idea helps open up new opportunities for practitioners to conduct businesses contributing to the social well-being of all rather than the self-interest of their employers' organizations. This perspective resonates well with the rhetorical paradigm of public relations. Rhetorical scholars (e.g., Heath, 1992) have long considered public relations practitioners to be public rhetors, stressing their ethical responsibilities in facilitating ethical decision-making and contributing to society. Public relations practitioners are responsible for advocating public interest dedicated to the social well-being of all rather than to the narrow self-interests of their employers.

All in all, the Confucian values of harmony and Grand Union serving as a foundation engenders a way of thinking that liberates public relations scholarship from the dichotomous *either-or* mindset grounded in Western philosophy to the more embracing *both-and* mindset in Eastern philosophy. Eventually, as participants suggested, regardless of Chinese public relations or American public relations and regardless of whatever particular path one embarks on, both American and Chinese public relations are necessary and beneficial to the long-term development of public relations as a discipline and profession, and both are moving toward the same destination, leading to the improvement of society and contributing to the Common Good.

*Confucianism as an Underlying Philosophy for Public Relations Education*

Confucianism, with its emphases on morality, relationship, self-cultivation, harmony, and Grand Union, can serve as a possible philosophical base to guide public relations education and practice. In fact, J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2002) called for the need to “provide students, PR professionals and senior managers with an overarching philosophy and understanding of the role of public relations that differ from conventional views of the discipline” (p. 37). Such a foundation could provide “a vision of the field and its purpose” (p.69). The insights provided by the participants helped reinforce the importance of such a vision. Practitioners advocated that public relations education should focus more on developing the overall quality of students and cultivating their inner virtues and strengths than merely teaching them concrete knowledge and technical skills. These overall qualities (inner virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, sincerity/honesty, sympathy, tolerance, and so forth.) are more valuable than academic studies. Some senior practitioners even equated public relations with learning how to become complete people. Therefore, public-relations education can benefit from adopting a holistic approach aimed at educating and nurturing students’ hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. This perspective further confirms the utility of Confucianism in guiding public-relations education and practice in that the core of Confucian teaching is to engage in self-cultivation in order to actualize many of the desirable traits and characteristics identified by public-relations practitioners.

Additionally, the Confucian emphasis on holism can complement the Western linear approach and emphasis on scientism. Communication and education scholars have already called for such intellectual integration and cultural convergence. In



short, acquainting students with such a Confucian philosophical foundation can help them better understand the core values grounding public relations practice, such as professional codes of conduct (Bivins, 1989), as well as the “responsible and responsive” (p. 66) roles that public relations practitioners play. Such training based on Confucian values would help students engage in introspection and personhood cultivation to develop many of the desirable personal traits and ethical consciousness, recommended by the 2006 Commission report.

*Summary: Intellectual Hegemony or Coexistence—The Presence of  
Western Theories, Models, and Concepts in China*

The circuit of culture model demonstrated its utility in understanding the dynamic or non-linear nature of meaning making. Conceiving of knowledge as product, its meaning is simultaneously constructed and co-constructed by producers and consumers. An important critical question to this meaning-making process concerns the presence of the Western body of knowledge in public relations in Chinese public relations education. Should this imported knowledge be conceived of as intellectual hegemony or opportunities for mutual learning and intellectual collaboration? The compelling voice in the existing U.S. public relations literature seems to suggest that the presence of this body of knowledge in public relations is detrimental to the development of a local body of knowledge in diverse cultural settings such as in China. However, contrary to such claims, research participants unanimously agreed that these Western theories, models, and concepts have brought far more benefits than disadvantages to Chinese public relations education. As a

result, they considered the importation “a good thing” and a necessary step to advancing the theoretical and professional development of Chinese public relations.

What underlying participant mentality can be explained, in part, by power inequalities between China and the U.S. operating at both national and disciplinary levels and, in part, by Confucianism that serves as the larger regulatory context affecting participants’ meaning making. Internationally, the U.S. is a developed country and is identified as a world superpower that has exerted considerable leverage on many important global issues. Academically, public relations originated in the U.S. In the face of the well-established U.S. body of knowledge, Chinese public relations is young with a much shorter history and weaker theoretical foundation. These power inequalities have resulted in an attitude of inferiority among Chinese participants and furthered their tendency to look up to the U.S. as a respectable leader in the field and to borrow theories, models, and concepts from it. It seems an acceptable belief to the participants is that the development of Chinese public relations has to be based on that of the U.S. Few participants ever questioned the rationale behind this belief. In this regard, Chinese participants have become the actors and players sustaining and fortifying the inequalities embedded in the existing power structure.

However, if participants’ interpretations are placed only within the Western notion of hegemony, the present study seems to commit the same mistake that it criticizes. Rather, Confucianism has to be considered to render a thorough examination of participants’ meaning making. Compared to the concept of power, Confucianism plays an equally important role in participants’ meaning making. The

Confucian values of harmony and Grand Union, to a great extent, resulted in participants' understanding of a non-contradictory relationship between Western theories in China and the development of Chinese public relations education.

Harmony promotes a peaceful coexistence among differences. Therefore, rather than a simple resistance and rejection, participants favored an embracing and welcoming approach to the imported body of knowledge in public relations. They argued that, in the face of globalization, it is inevitable to have Western theories and concepts enter China. Thus, a greater concern is to adopt a constructive approach to learning how to localize the imported theories, concepts, and models to fit into the Chinese context in order to benefit its public relations education and practice to the fullest extent.

Furthermore, participants argued that the problems that the imported theories encountered during the process of localization do not overturn the inherent values of these theories. Scholars can still tease out the merits and virtues within these theories to learn more about theoretical construction and development. Supportive of an embracing stance, participants demonstrated great eagerness to have more cutting-edge Western public relations theories and concepts enter China's higher educational setting, although they also expressed their dismay at the few Chinese theories and concepts entering U.S. public relations education.

Therefore, in regard to the question of whether the presence of U.S. public relations scholarship is intellectual hegemony or an opportunity for mutual learning, the answer is both. Research findings called for a constructive and embracing approach that transcends the existing dominant *either-or* or dichotomous mode of inquiry. The resulting meaning making of Chinese public relations education

encompasses a hybrid identity that is neither purely Chinese nor American, but has elements of both cultures while simultaneously transcending both. In fact, there are scholars in the field of communication (Roper & Weymes, 2007) and education (Lin, 2008; Wang, 2007; Tu, 2008) who have already pointed out the utility of such a possible cultural convergence and intellectual coexistence and collaboration.

Particularly, as Roper and Weymes noted, “Could Eastern and Western business practices and values *converge* [emphasis original] to become more ethical and more acceptable globally?” (p. 141). In a similar vein, educators have asserted that integrating Western scientism and Eastern holism can be beneficial to both countries and can transcend the limitations bound to a particular cultural context. The resulting reconstruction and reproduction of public relations can help elevate the profession to a new level. In addition, in this contemporary global environment in which boundaries between cultures have become increasingly blurred, a collaborative and cooperative mindset seems to be more helpful at generating constructive outcomes than pure competition and resistance could ever accomplish.

### Conclusion

The goals of this dissertation were to explore Chinese public-relations educators’, students’, and practitioners’ meaning making of Chinese public-relations education through the theoretical lens of the circuit of culture model and within the context of Confucianism. Employing qualitative methods (i.e., in-depth interviews and focus groups), I sought to accomplish these two goals.

Theoretically, the findings extend and enrich the existing understanding of Chinese public-relations education. Also, the findings offer a much more detailed

account of the interplay of culture, power, and identity and how they affect participants' understanding of Chinese public relations and particularly the presence of Western theories, models, and concepts in China. The study also identified and discussed several important Confucian concepts that have affected participants' understanding of Chinese public-relations education, such as harmony, benevolence (*Ren*), propriety or civility (*Li*), righteousness (*Yi*), relationship or relationality, and Grand Union.

Confucianism emerged as a useful philosophical foundation to ground public-relations education and practice because of its emphases on using education to change practice and develop moral character and on engaging in self-cultivation to transform the self within and the society without. Particularly, Confucianism emphasizes on harmony and Grand Union underscore the importance of inclusive harmony, embracing differences and similarities. A harmonious state-of-being is the soil for intellectual collaboration and unity rather than competition and separation. As one senior educator eloquently asserted, "Knowledge and science do not have cultural boundaries. If it is a true theory, it belongs to the world. It should not be confined to a particular country or culture." Many participants echoed this perspective. That participants' interpreted the presence of Western theories and concepts in China as both intellectual hegemony and opportunities for mutual learning (though more of the latter) reveals another important Chinese cultural value, that of Yin and Yang. To conclude this dissertation, I would like to render an ontological interpretation of the research findings within the Yin-Yang paradigm (Figure 3).

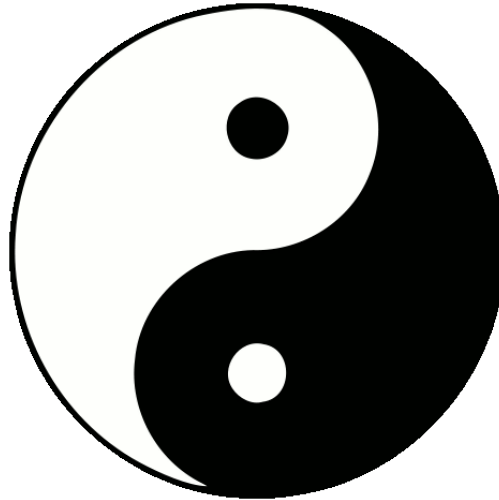


Figure 3. Yin –Yang diagram.

Yin-Yang depicts the inherent contradictory nature of all living creatures on earth. Yin represents the female energy, and Yang represents the male energy. However, the two are never in a mutually exclusive or dichotomous relationship, but an inclusive one. Within the Yin energy lies the Yang energy, and within the Yang energy lies the Yin energy. Yin and Yang coexist. The Yin is never deprived of Yang, nor is the Yang deprived of Yin. In other words, the two do not compete but complement and enrich the existence of each other. The Yin-Yang diagram offers a visual interpretation of the contradictory and complementary relationship between Western public-relations theories and concepts in China and Chinese public-relations theoretical and professional development.

The shaded area of the diagram represents Yin, and the white area represents Yang. The circle symbolizes a harmonious state-of-being in the cosmos. What is unique about this Yin-Yang diagram is that it highlights the interdependent relationships among all living creatures on earth. Within the shaded area, there is a white circle, and within the white area there is a black circle. These shapes symbolize

the inclusive nature of Yin and Yang. There is always Yin in Yang and Yang in Yin. Nothing is absolute, even among seemingly opposite things. From Yin to Yang and from Yang to Yin, there is a fluid flow of energy. Together, they contribute to the wholeness of the universe.

I use this diagram to illustrate the relationship between Western public relations in China and Chinese public-relations development. Neither the independent Chinese public relations (Yin for example) nor the independent American public relations (Yang for example) is conducive to the overall status of the public-relations scholarship community at large. Each needs the other to complement what one does not have. As the literature review chapter and the research findings have shown, Western scientism and Eastern holism can converge, benefit, and enrich one another. Just as there are always black in white and white in black, there are always commonalities and connections, even among seemingly contradictory things. This concept of coexistence and interdependence not only helps modify the existing understanding of the circuit of culture model, but also highlights what constitutes real harmony, the harmony that Confucius has advocated, that is, a peaceful coexistence among differences and similarities. Educators preparing public-relations talent for the 21st century would benefit from such a liberated mentality rather than the one of resistance and competition.

Finally, as a qualitative scholar, my intent is not to dictate how the reader should interpret Chinese public-relations education but to point out what to look for so that the reader can construct his or her meaning making in Chinese public-relations education. I hope that this study's qualitative rendering has achieved this purpose by

helping illustrate “the main features of the garden” as explained in Potter’s (1996) garden metaphor (p. 11).



## Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Ai Zhang, a doctoral student studying public relations at the Communication Department at the University of Maryland.

Currently, I am conducting dissertation on Chinese students, educators, and practitioners' understanding of Chinese public relations. I am contacting you because you belong to one of the above group. I sincerely hope that you can help with this project. Research outcome will make significant contributions to public relations education. You will also benefit from having a better understanding of the status of Chinese public relations education.

Your identities will be kept confidential. In no way would I disclose your name and personal information in the final report. Your participation is voluntary, and you can decline to answer specific questions or to end your participation at any time without penalty. You will not be asked questions that would compromise your position as public relations educator, student, or practitioner.

Should you agree to participate, please feel free to email me back clarifying any concerns that you may have. Or, you may feel the need to verify my identity and research project. Please feel free to do so. You may contact my dissertation advisor

Dr. Elizabeth Toth who is also the Department Chair at 301-405-8077 or by e-mail to [eltoth@umd.edu](mailto:eltoth@umd.edu), or me at 315-345-5078 or [aizhang79@gmail.com](mailto:aizhang79@gmail.com).

Please let me know if you are willing to participant. Your participation will make a significant contribution to the present study on public relations education in China. Please seriously consider sharing your opinions about public relations education. I will be looking forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Ai Zhang

Doctoral Student

Department of Communication

University of Maryland, College Park

[Aizhang79@gmail.com](mailto:Aizhang79@gmail.com)

<http://www.comm.umd.edu/gradstudents.html#Zhang>

## Appendix B Interview Guide

(For Public Relations Educators)

- 1) How long have you been teaching public relations courses?
  - a) What courses do you teach?
    - i) Graduate or undergraduate level?
  - b) How long has your department been offering public relations program?
  - c) What courses are required for an undergraduate degree in PR?
- 2) What is your academic background?
  - a) Credentials?
- 3) What is your professional background?
  - a) Credentials?
  - b) Professional experiences?
- 4) What is the nature of Chinese PR? How is it described?
  - a) What is your understanding of Chinese PR?
  - b) How do you define PR? How do you characterize PR?
  - c) How is PR interpreted?
    - i) Is PR the same as marketing and advertising? How do you differentiate them?
    - ii) What is the connotation embedded in PR? Negative (spinning, manipulation of truth, etc.) or positive (contributing to social well-being, a management function, etc.)?
  - d) How is PR major perceived compared with other professional fields such as law, medicine, nursing, etc.?

- 5) What is the nature of Chinese public relations education?
  - a) What is its status quo?
  - b) What are the changes that Chinese public relations has undergone over the past two decades?
  - c) What are the milestones exhibited in the history of Chinese public relations education?
- 6) What is the relationship between education and practice?
  - a) To what extent and in what aspects do you engage in interactions with professionals?
  - b) Among these interactions with professionals, what are the interactions that you have engaged in the most and the least?
    - i) Why?
    - ii) What are the benefits? Please discuss them in relation to public relations education such as pedagogical needs.
    - iii) With practitioners that you have the most and least interactions, what are their positions, titles, professional backgrounds, and orientation on public relations education?
  - c) How do your interactions affect your understanding and teaching of PR education including, but are not limited to, your consideration of the role of PR education, and what and how PR should be taught?
  - d) Do you think that your interaction has contributed positively or negatively or neutrally to public relations education? In what aspects is it positive/negative?
  - e) What is your expectation for professional involvement in PR education?

- i) To what extent and in what aspects do you think PR education has actualized your expected level of professional involvement?
  - (1) Why so?
  - (2) Recommendation for improvement
- 7) How do you perceive and understand the presence of Western theories, models, and concepts in China? What roles do they play in terms of the overall development of Chinese public relations education?
- 8) What are the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese PR education?
  - a) Please specify and give an example for each that you have identified.  
Examples can be based on our personal experience.
  - b) Please also explicate why you think they are strengths and weaknesses, and why they should be of concern to public relations educators and to what extent and in what aspects they have affected public relations education.
  - c) Could you recommend possible means to overcome them?
- 9) What are the challenges and opportunities facing Chinese PR education?
  - a) Please specify and give an example for each that you have identified.  
Examples can be based on our personal experience.
  - b) Please also explicate why you think they are challenges and opportunities, and why they should be of concern to public relations educators and to what extent and in what aspects they have affected public relations education.
  - c) Could you recommend possible means to overcome them?
- 10) What is your expectation for quality public relations education?
  - a) What makes believe so?

- i) Please use examples or personal stories to elaborate on the underlying factors contributing to your expectation of Chinese PR education?
  - b) How does this expectation affect your teaching of PR?
    - i) To what extent and in what aspects do you incorporate your expectation into your teaching of PR courses?
  - c) What is your philosophy for PR education?
  - d) Why so?
- 11) Chinese PR education and Confucianism?
- a) What does Confucianism mean to you?
  - b) How do you characterize Confucianism?
  - c) How has Confucianism affected your understanding of PR education?
- 12) What are the concrete Confucian cultural values that have affected your meaning making of Chinese public relations education?
- a) Could you give an example to elaborate on each value?
  - b) How do these values exemplify themselves in public relations practice?
  - c) To what extent do you think education has or has not trained students to have these values?

## Appendix C Interview Guide

(For Public Relations Practitioners)

1. Tell me about your job in this organization.
  - a. What do you do? Tell me about your responsibilities.
  - b. How long have you been working at the organization?
  - c. What is your job title?
2. What is your professional background?
  - a. Credentials?
  - b. Any other professional experience in public relations before you joined the organization?
  - c. Have you participated in any sort of professional training or workshops on PR organized by your organization or professional associations?
3. What is your academic background?
  - a. Credentials?
  - b. Formal education in public relations?
    - i. If so, when and where?
      1. How does it benefit or not your public relations practice?
    - ii. Are there areas in your public relations practice that have not been sufficiently addressed or have been ignored by public relations education? What are they? Please specify and give examples.

- iii. Have you received any continuing education in PR since your graduation from universities (if you have formal degrees in PR)?
          1. If so, why?
          2. If not, do you see a need of doing so?
4. What is the nature of Chinese PR? How is it described?
  - a. What is your understanding of Chinese PR?
  - b. How do you define PR? How do you characterize PR?
  - c. How is PR interpreted?
    - i. Is PR the same as marketing and advertising? How do you differentiate them?
    - ii. What is the connotation embedded in PR? Negative (spinning, manipulation of truth, etc.) or positive (contributing to social well-being, a management function, etc.)?
  - d. How is PR major perceived compared with other professional fields such as law, medicine, nursing, etc.?
5. What is the nature of Chinese public relations education?
  - a. What is its status quo?
  - b. What are the changes that Chinese public relations has undergone over the past two decades?
  - c. What are the milestones exhibited in the history of Chinese public relations education?
6. What is the relationship between education and practice?



- a. To what extent and in what aspects do you engage in interactions with educators?
- b. Among these interactions, what are the interactions that you have engaged in the most and the least?
  - i. Why?
  - ii. How do you think this interaction can benefit PR education?  
Please specify the benefits in relation to PR education.
  - iii. With educators that you have the most and least interactions, what are their positions, titles, academic backgrounds, and orientations on public relations education?
- c. How do you think your interaction with educators has affected educators' understanding and teaching of PR education including, but are not limited to, their consideration of the role of PR education, and what and how PR should be taught?
- d. Do you think that your interaction has contributed positively or negatively or neutrally to public relations education? In what aspects is it positive/negative?
- e. What is your expectation for professional involvement in PR education?
  - i. To what extent and in what aspects do you think PR education has actualized your expected level of professional involvement?
    1. Why so?

## 2. Recommendation for improvement

7. How do you perceive and understand the presence of Western theories, models, and concepts in China? What roles do they play in terms of the overall development of Chinese public relations education?
8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese PR education?
  - a. Please specify and give an example for each that you have identified.  
Examples can be based on our personal experience.
  - b. Please also explicate why you think they are strengths and weaknesses, and why they should be of concern to public relations educators and to what extent and in what aspects they have affected public relations education.
  - c. Could you recommend possible means to overcome them?
9. What are the challenges and opportunities facing Chinese PR education?
  - a. Please specify and give an example for each that you have identified.  
Examples can be based on our personal experience.
  - b. Please also explicate why you think they are strengths and weaknesses, and why they should be of concern to public relations educators and to what extent and in what aspects they have affected public relations education.
  - c. Could you recommend possible means to overcome them?
10. What is your expectation for quality public relations education?
  - a. What makes believe so?

- i. Please use examples or personal stories to elaborate on the underlying factors contributing to your expectation of Chinese PR education?
  - b. How does this expectation affect PR education?
    - i. To what extent and in what aspects do you think educators have incorporated this expectation into their teaching of PR courses?
  - c. What is your philosophy for PR education?
    - i. Why so?

11. Chinese PR education and Confucianism?

- a. What does Confucianism mean to you?
- b. How do you characterize Confucianism?
- c. How has Confucianism affected your understanding of PR education?

12. What are the concrete Confucian cultural values that have affected your meaning making of Chinese public relations education?

- a. Could you give an example to elaborate on each value?
- b. How do these values exemplify themselves in public relations practice?
- c. To what extent do you think education has or has not trained students to have these values?

Appendix D: Interview and Focus Group Guide  
(For Public Relations Students)

1. Tell me about your academic background
  - a. Where do you study? Major?
2. What is your professional background?
  - a. Credentials?
  - b. Working or internship experience (in PR)?
    - i. How long?
    - ii. What is your title, position, and responsibility?
  - c. What are the aspects in your working experience that you think your education (in PR) has well prepared you and ill prepared you?
3. What is the nature of Chinese PR? How is it described?
  - a. What is your understanding of Chinese PR?
  - b. How do you define PR? How do you characterize PR?
  - c. How is PR interpreted?
    - i. Is PR the same as marketing and advertising? How do you differentiate them?
    - ii. What is the connotation embedded in PR? Negative (spinning, manipulation of truth, etc.) or positive (contributing to social well-being, a management function, etc.)?
  - d. How is PR major perceived compared with other professional fields such as law, medicine, nursing, etc.?
4. What is the nature of Chinese public relations education?

- a. What is its status quo?
  - b. What are the changes that Chinese public relations has undergone over the past two decades?
  - c. What are the milestones exhibited in the history of Chinese public relations education?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese PR education?
- a. Please specify and give an example for each that you have identified. Examples can be based on our personal experience.
  - b. Please also explicate why you think they are strengths and weaknesses, and why they should be of concern to public relations educators and to what extent and in what aspects they have affected public relations education.
  - c. Could you recommend possible means to overcome them?
6. What are the challenges and opportunities facing Chinese PR education?
- a. Please specify and give an example for each that you have identified. Examples can be based on our personal experience.
  - b. Please also explicate why you think they are strengths and weaknesses, and why they should be of concern to public relations educators and to what extent and in what aspects they have affected public relations education.
  - c. Could you recommend possible means to overcome them?
7. What is your expectation for quality public relations education?
- a. What makes you believe so?

- i. Please use examples or personal stories to elaborate on the underlying factors contributing to your expectation of Chinese PR education?
  - b. How does this expectation affect your teaching of PR?
    - i. To what extent and in what aspects do you incorporate your expectation into your teaching of PR courses?
  - c. What is your philosophy for PR education?
    - i. Why so?
  - d. Please specify to what extent and in what aspects you think PR educators have incorporated your expectation into their approach to PR education, including, but are not limited to, what and how PR should be taught.
8. How do you perceive and understand the presence of Western theories, models, and concepts in China? What roles do they play in terms of the overall development of Chinese public relations education?
9. What is the relationship between education and practice?
  - a. To what extent and in what aspects do you think PR education has involved professionals?
  - b. How do you think professional involvement in public relations education? How has it affected public relations education?
    - i. In what aspects is it positive/negative?
    - ii. In what aspects do you wish there would be improvement?

- c. Do you think that PR education has well prepared you for your future career paths (become practitioners or enter graduate school)?
  - i. Please specify in what aspects it has well and ill prepared you and give an example for each aspect.
- d. What is your expectation for professional involvement in PR education?
  - i. To what extent and in what aspects do you think PR education has actualized your expected level of professional involvement?
    - 1. Why so?
    - 2. Recommendation for improvement

10. Chinese PR education and Confucianism?

- a. What does Confucianism mean to you?
- b. How do you characterize Confucianism?
- c. How has Confucianism affected your understanding of PR education?

11. What are the concrete Confucian cultural values that have affected your meaning making of Chinese public relations education?

- a. Could you give an example to elaborate on each value?
- b. How do these values exemplify themselves in public relations practice?
- c. To what extent do you think education has or has not trained students to have these values?

## Appendix E: Public Relations Education in the United States

### Commissions on Public Relations Education

Formal public relations education in the United States began in 1923 (Fenner, 2004). Within a time span of more than eight decades, public relations has experienced rapid growth (Wright, Hinson, Flaherty, & Ford, 2007). The growth is evident in the number of universities and colleges that have offered public relations programs as well as students' enrollment at universities and colleges in the U.S. (Wright et al., 2007). As a young academic discipline, public relations has grown from being a part of journalism to having its own programs, journals, and scholarly and professional organizations. The body of knowledge of public relations, which is about 25 years old (Toth, 2006), continues to develop and expand at a steady speed (Kruckeberg, 1998; Turk, 1989; Wakefield & Cottone, 1986; Wright, 1982; Sallot., Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones., 2003). The thousands of active members at various organizations have further kept the field dynamic and progressing, professionally and academically.

However, the rapid development of public relations does not mean that the field is short of problems. In fact, many of the problems facing public relations education today are the same as those plaguing the field during its early development (Wright et al., 2007), such as the ongoing debate about the relationship between education and practice, a lack of interdisciplinary focus, multiculturalism, philosophical foundation for public relations curricular design, and ethnic diversity in public relations educators' backgrounds; and there is also a shortage of qualified educators who have both academic and professional credentials. Over the past, public



relations educators and practitioners have undertaken many (collaborative) initiatives to address these problems and challenges to better prepare public relations students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the following, I review several major initiatives dedicated to the improvement of public relations education in North America.

*1975 AEJ/PRSA Study*

The first Commission was established in 1973, made up of seven practitioners and educators appointed by the Association for Education in Journalism's (AEJ) Public Relations Division and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). J. Carroll Bateman and Scott Cutlip were the co-chairs of this commission. In 1975, the Commission published a report, entitled *A Design for Public Relations Education*. The report called for the need for public relations curricular improvement. As the Commission stated, "There is [an] urgent need for a thorough examination and review of the educational process in respect to preparing persons for the practice of public relations, and for managerial and administrative positions, so that they will have an appropriate understanding of public relations and its values." Specifically, the report highlighted several pitfalls in public relations education:

1. Too many course are "taught by people with little or no experience in the field" (p. 17)
2. Most educators lack higher degrees—masters or Ph.D.s
3. Too many programs depend on a single instructor to teach the course in sequence. (cited in Fischer, 2000, p. 16)

Meanwhile, the report pointed out another pressing need of having more interaction/dialogue between education and practice. Along this line, an

interdisciplinary focus and a balanced curricular design had been identified as priority concerns. As the report noted:

1. The public relations program should include the arts, and humanities, with special emphasis in communication and public relations.
  2. The [public relations] program should conform to AEJ guidelines with 25% of coursework in the major and 75% in liberal arts and sciences.
- (cited in Fischer, 2000, p. 16)

#### *1987 AEJMC/PRSA Study*

The 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education consisted of 27 people co-chaired by William Ehling and Besty Plank. The 1987 report reaffirmed many of the earlier recommendations, such as an interdisciplinary focus integrating arts, sciences, and humanities, and incorporating the internship into public relations education. Moreover, the Commission pointed out a continued deficiency in qualified public relations faculty with either professional experience or advanced degrees in public relations (Commission, 1987).

Specifically, the 1987 AEJMC/PRSA Commission recommended a “five-course rule” format, encompassing five main areas of study under public relations: principles and theory, techniques (writing), research, strategy and implementation, and internship. These five-courses have become the standard guiding public relations undergraduate curricula (Fischer, 2000, p.17).

*1990 IPRA Gold Paper No. 7*

The 1990 IPRA Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education issued a report entitled *Public Relations Education—Recommendations and Standards* under the chairmanship of Goran Sjoberg. The Commission intended to standardize and internationalize public relations education by identifying several essential elements while showing respect to individual country's "cultural and historical background" (IPRA, 1990, P. 4). The Commission stressed many of the earlier identified needs such as a broad liberal base, a solid intellectual base, internship experience, and qualified educators who are experienced in both the academy and the profession. The report particularly stressed the importance of cultivating a healthy relationship between educators and practitioners. Specifically, the report listed five elements:

- Dialogue between academics and practitioners in general;
- Contribution of practitioners to training programs and curricula;
- Position of internships (or placement) in training programmes;
- Relation between the (academic) teachers and practice;
- Possibility of teaching professional practice aspects in the curricula.

(p. 16)

Furthermore, the Gold Paper conceptualized public relations education as a "wheel of education." The wheel is composed of three concentric circles with public relations theory and practice placed at the center; surrounded by communication-related courses (e.g., theory and process of communication, writing for mass media, editing, graphics of communication, media analysis, research, media law and ethics,

and advertising) in the second circle; and by liberal arts, sciences, and humanities (e.g., organization structure and behavior, statistics, language, natural science, social services, humanities, personal management, management science, public administration, government organization, political science, economics, and business administration) in the third and largest circle.

#### *1991 PRSA Task Force*

The 1991 Second Task Force on the Structure and Role of Public Relations was chaired by Phil Lesly. Its recommendations were:

1. Inform high school and community college students and their advisors about public relations.
2. Invite practitioners into the colleges as lectures, mentors, resources, members of advisory boards.
3. Review curriculum periodically.
4. Interlock college training with postgraduate seminars and other organizations. (Cited in Fischer, 2000, P. 18)

#### *1993 Integrated Communication Task Force*

The 1993 Integrated Communication Task Force consisted of 22 members chaired by Tom Duncan, Clarke Caywood, and Doug Newsom. They again noted a need for interdisciplinarity in public relations education. As they suggested:

- Advertising and public relations students be offered an integrated communication program.
- A strong emphasis on liberal arts.
- Training in oral, written, and visual communication.

- Solid understanding of business and organizational behavior
- Understanding and respect for the other communication

disciplines/specialties. (Cited in Fischer, 2000, p. 19)

*1999 Commission on Public Relations Education*

The 1999 Commission report on public relations education is perhaps arguably the most comprehensive effort that has been ever undertaken. The report entitled, *Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—A Port of Entry*, incorporated input from members of various professional and scholarly organizations such as Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Institute for Public Relations (IPR), National Communication Association (NCA), Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), the Association for Women in Communication, the International Communication Association, the International Association of Business and Communicators (IABC), and IPRA.

There are three goals guiding the study:

1. To report what skills, knowledge and concepts practitioners and educators think are currently being taught in public relations curricula.
2. To compare these with what educators and practitioners think should be taught.
3. To document the level of agreement between practitioners and academics as to what is taught and what should be taught.

(Commission, 1999)

The Commission sent out a survey to 1,312 people including educators and practitioners. Approximately 12% of practitioners and 30% of educators in the sample

responded to the survey, which was about 100 practitioners and 175 educators. Result from this study identified a list of knowledge areas and skills that undergraduate public relations curriculum should entail (see appendix H for a list of specific recommendations).

#### *2006 Commission on Public Relations Education*

The 2006 Commission report on public relations education is entitled *Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—The Professional Bond*. Similar to the 1999 Commission report, the 2006 one is comprehensive in scope and depth. The report covers four basic categories (i.e., foundation, curriculum, faculty and infrastructure, and professional) encompassing several sections: research, ethics, diversity, communication, technology, global implications, undergraduate education, graduate education, supervised experience, distance learning, governance and academic support, faculty credentials, professional and pre-professional organizations, and program certification and accreditation. Similarly, results from this study recommended a list of knowledge areas and skills that undergraduate public relations curriculum should entail (see appendix I for a list of specific recommendations).

The 2006 report also clarifies what it means for public relations to be a profession. It defines public relations in a broad sense, that is, public relations is “an essential management function that helps an organization and its publics build relationships that enable them to understand and support one another” (p. 11). The report further added several conditions to qualify an occupation to become profession. As it notes:

- A substantial body of research-based knowledge;

- Standardized education systems to help create and disseminate knowledge;
- A commitment to lifelong professional learning;
- Core ethical principles
- And a fundamental sense of responsibility, increasingly global in scope, for bettering our civil society. (p.11)

A primary mission of the report is to encourage more interactions and dialogue between the academy and practice. As the name *Professional Bond* indicates, the report hoped to cultivate a *bonding* [emphasis added] relationship between education and practice. As it is highlighted in its purpose, the report is “to demonstrate, facilitate and encourage the kind of linking of public relations education and practice that is the hallmark of any profession” (p. 5). To fulfill this goal, the report dedicated a special section called “A Call to Action” to promote more interactions and dialogue between public relations education and practice.

The Relationship Between Education and Practice in the United States  
*Integration or Separation: An Ongoing Debate*

As an applied field of communication, public relations encompasses two domains: theoretical and professional (Lauzen & Dozier, 2000). The two domains are equally important to the professionalization of public relations (J. E. Grunig, 1989). Both practitioners and educators shoulder the responsibility to support “the decision that the profession of public relations requires specialized scholarship and education” (p. 23). In fact, research continues to confirm the necessity of a solid knowledge-,

skill- and intellect-base to ensure effective public relations practice (Sriramesh, 2002; Taylor, 2001).

However, tensions still exert in the academy in terms of where to draw the line between education and practice, pertaining to what and even whether public relations should be taught at universities (Wright & Turk, 2003). This debate about the relationship between academy and practice, however, is not new. When the first Commission report was published in 1975, the Commission urged public relations educators and practitioners to have more dialogue. Decades have passed since the initial call; unfortunately, the academy is still unsettled about “the need for, and contents of” public relations education (White, 2002). In general, there are two opposing views concerning what and how public relations should be taught.

On the one hand, one school of scholars argues for an either-or position, meaning that public relations education should be either professionally-driven or theoretically-driven. Those who believe in a professional focus advocate that public relations education should provide more skill-based training, whereas those believe in the latter advocate a more intellectual-focused public relations education. Teachers who are against a professional-focus or a skill-based training worry that “higher education is becoming a training ground for corporations, rather than places of intellectual development” (Kent & Taylor, 2005, p. 14). Scholars who want to distant education from practice claim that “theory tied to practice must reinforce organizations’ powerful influence on societies” (Toth, 2006, p. 110). Still some (e.g., Kent and Taylor, 2005) express concern that skilled-based training “at the expense of critical thinking and reasoning,” make students “become *less* [italics original], not



more capable of succeeding in public relations”(p. 14). Considering that people change their jobs “as many as seven times” (p. 14), students trained in one area are not going to excel in organizational settings, in which communication, management, and business have all become intertwined.

However, regardless of the theoretically-driven or professionally-driven stance, both are extreme positions detrimental to the healthy development of the field. The IPRA Gold Paper No. 7 (1990) considered these extreme positions as two groups of elitist: one is “elitist teachers claiming the total responsibility in their own field without any interference by practitioners,” and the other is “elitist practitioners demanding training that is 100 per cent devoted to practical situations” (p. 16). Objecting to such an elitist stance, The Gold Paper contended that extreme viewpoints “harm the education of young people who seek a career in public relations practice” (p. 16). After all, as the 2006 *Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—The Professional Bond* explicates, “The purpose of an undergraduate public relations degree is still to prepare students for entry-level positions and to advance over the course of their careers into leadership roles” (p. 43). This emphasis on preparing students for entry-level positions should be underscored when evaluating the relationship between education and practice.

In fact, constructive dialogue between education and practice cannot be fruitful with the presence of such extreme attitudes (Gold Paper No. 7, 1990). A quality public relations curriculum should reflect a healthy combination of practice and theory (J. E. Gruing & L. Gruing, 2002). Such an integrative focus is necessary to advance public relations, identified as an applied field of communication. Proponents

of this integrative viewpoint represent the second school of thought regarding the relationship between education and practice.

In contrast to the either-or position, the second school of scholars (e.g., Toth, 2006) favors an integrative educational focus. This more balanced approach concurs with the recommendations suggested by various Commission reports. For example, the 1985 Commission report stated:

Practitioners and educators must act in concert to guide public relations in the direction of professionalism. Without this necessary partnership, the practice of public relations will never attain the professional status it needs and deserves to perform the communication and management tasks it has been assigned in the United States. (p. 5)

The IPRA Gold Paper No. 7 (1990) contended:

It is strongly recommended that teachers must have acquired practical experience as well as academic training and that they keep in contact with daily practice by consulting or doing some planned public relations assignments in addition to their teaching activities. Sabbaticals also provide an opportunity for renewal of professional experience. (p. 17)

More recently, in its 2006 *Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—The Professional Bond*, the Commission on Public Relations Education argued for the same position, that is, cultivating a professional bonding relationship between practitioners and educators. The report stressed that both knowledge and skills are necessary and should be “integrated throughout public relations curriculum” so that students could “better understand the interdisciplinary nature of the practice” (p. 45).

Such a professional bond between education and practice has become more important than ever.

Unfortunately, in spite of these forceful calls for a necessary integrated educational focus, public relations education continues to suffer from a huge disconnect between education and practice (Wright & Turk, 2007). A cursory review of public relations literature will find that the disconnect between education and practice evident in two aspects.

The first aspect of the disconnect pertains to public relations education's lack of relevance to practitioners' needs. Studies have confirmed an uncomfortable discrepancy between educational outcomes and expectations of practitioners (Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Hon, Fitzpatrick, & Hall, 2004; Toth, 1999; Wright & Turk, 2007). That is, what public relations educators deliver cannot fully fulfill practitioners' needs and demands. Similarly, Hon et al. (2004) found that graduate students in public relations felt strongly that the educational programs did not meet their expectations for becoming competent professionals.

Toth's (1999) study of public relations professionals also offered insights on this uncomfortable discrepancy between public relations curricular content and practitioners' expectations of what constitutes quality public relations education. She found that what professionals expected from public relations education was a solid management knowledge-base, with emphases on research, management, problem-solving skills and knowledge. Unfortunately, public relations education with a predominant focus on media and technical skills falls far behind materializing practitioners' hope. Nevertheless, practitioners' emphasis on a management

knowledge-base should not be surprising for educators to note. Public relations, after all, is conceived of as a management function (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In fact, earlier studies (Gibson, 1987; Stephenson, 1960; Walker, 1982) had shown the same necessity of management training in quality public relations education. This continued deficiency in management, according to these scholars, has disserved public relations students while reinforcing practitioners' belief that public relations education is not relevant to their everyday practice.

The second aspect of the disconnect concerns the devaluation of university-based public relations degrees. Compared to other well-established professional fields such as medicine and law, there is a discrepancy in terms of the value of obtaining a formal degree in public relations and in other professional fields (Ehling, 1992). Wright and Turk (2007) commented on this popular mentality of the devaluation of public relations education by noting:

When people want to become physicians they go to medical schools; when they want to become attorneys they go to law school. This is also the case in engineering, nursing, accounting and many other occupational groups. In public relations, however, having a university degree in the field is too often the exception not the rule. (p. 586)

The reality is that most practitioners believe that public relations scholarship bears little relevance to their everyday practice. Many do not see the necessity of pursuing public relations education "beyond the technical level" (Wright & Turk, 2007, p. 586). In fact,

only a very small number of the nation's senior-level public relations executives and managers studied public relations at university, and many of those hired for entry-level jobs with corporations, agencies, and other organizations today are *not graduates* [emphasis added] of university-based public relations programs. (p. 582)

The 2006 *Professional Bond* Commission report reaffirmed the same situation:

By comparison [with law, medicine, and accounting], public relations practice and education for public relations are still works-in-progress. Contemporary public relations education is still young, still searching for its 'home' – and often its legitimacy—in academe. The first initiative to define a curriculum was made only 31 years ago. The field is still populated by practitioners who *never* [emphasis added] had an opportunity for its formal study. (p. 85)

As a result, in reality, public relations practitioners are neither interested in reading or publishing at scholarly journals nor in attending academic conferences or networking with academics (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). In fact, some might even be discouraged from doing so. Moreover, in terms of securing entry-level positions, “[N]either a course in public relations nor a public relations degree is a prerequisite for employment in public relations” (Wright et al., p 6). Such unwarranted norms and beliefs are dangerous to the future of public relations as a discipline and profession. They reinforce the public mentality that a college degree in public relations is not necessary to excel in public relations practice. Ferguson (1987), a proponent of public relations education, criticized, “Public relations will never reach the status of a profession as long as people can get into the field and prosper without having

completed a fairly rigorous course of study in the field” (p. 3). Although the 1999 Commission report, entitled *Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—A Port of Entry*, clearly spelled out the skills and knowledge necessary for entry-level public relations positions, there is still a long way to go “before practitioners attach enough importance to public relations education as *the* port of entry into the profession and to advancing the professionalism of the discipline” (Wright & Turk, 2007, p. 582). To that end, public relations education itself needs to become more rigorous and demanding, as much as “the preparation expected of other professions” (White, 2002, p. 8).

Nevertheless, scholars have suggested several channels to reduce the disconnect between education and practice. One such channel is to incorporate more management-related courses to make public relations curricula become more relevant to everyday practice (Haslam, 2002). Such an endeavor to reach out to other disciplines helps fortify the interdisciplinary base of public relations. A broadened focus will eventually help cultivate desirable abilities among public relations students to successfully manage and facilitate the flow of communication in contemporary organizational settings, in which management, communication, politics, commerce, and business have all become interrelated. It is only through such an interdisciplinary focus that public relations education can train competent workers for an increasingly dynamic and complex organizational environment.

In addition to reaching out to other disciplines, Haslam (2002) suggested that public relations educators, as communicators themselves, should make deliberate efforts to enhance the esteem of the field. Educators should take the initiative to

become familiar with the assets inherent in the profession that would make an impact on the business world. They should take these assets into consideration in their curricular design so as to internally raise the bar of public relations and make it become “a specialist profession” (Haslam, 2002, p. 19).

Encouragingly, with these initiatives, progress has been made over the past. Several positive signs have emerged in public relations literature. One such sign is a major shift in educational focus from “simple message preparation” to “managing complex relationships” (Fischer, 2000, p. 20). This shift indicates that public relations education is seeking to become more management-oriented.

Another encouraging sign is “a closer working relationship between educators and practitioners” compared to the situation five years ago (*Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—The Professional Bond*, 2006). Specifically, this closer working relationship is evident in a shared discourse between educators and practitioners regarding the essential skills and knowledge that an ideal public relations program should entail (Stacks, Botan, & Turk, 1999; Shen & Toth, 2007). Studies (e.g., Neff, Walker, Smith, & Creedon, 1999) have shown that educators and practitioners have come to a strong agreement on the expected “training, experience and expertise outcomes” (p. 29) that public relations education should be able to render. Stacks et al.’s (1999) study found practitioners and educators perceived little difference with respect to the nature and outcomes of public relations (Stacks et al., 1999, p. 27). Fisher’s (2000) review of various studies about public relations education confirmed the same vision, “[T]here is broad consensus on what should be included in a public relations program” (p. 20). In its 2006 *Public Relations*

*Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—The Professional Bond*, the Commission report pointed out, “[T]here is substantial agreement between educators and practitioners on what a public relations undergraduate student should learn, and therefore be able to perform at the practitioner entry level” (p. 5). These voices seem to envision a new future for public relations education that challenges the conventional view that practitioners and educators were “speak[ing] with two voices regarding their expectations for students” (Neff et al., 1999, p. 44).

Another sign of this shared vision between practitioners and educators is the support for public relations education. The Excellence study has shown that professionals equipped with a solid knowledge-base are more likely to advance in their careers, become excellent practitioners, and achieve managerial positions (J. E. Gruing & L. A. Gruing, 2002). As J. E. Gruing and L. A. Gruing note:

The excellence study showed that excellent PR departments are characterized by a professional base of knowledge—especially the knowledge needed to play a managerial, strategic, symmetrical and ethics role in an organization. Increasingly, excellent PR practitioners have studied PR formally in a university, continuing education programme, or lectures and seminars of a professionally organization. Even more commonly, it was found that excellent practitioners continually read, study and learn –through books, scholarly journals and professional publications. They think about and approach their work like a scholar: thinking, searching the literature, planning and evaluating what they do. (p. 40)



Resonating with J. Grunig and L. Gruning, Toth (2006) argued that practitioners can learn to become appreciative of public relations theories and apply them to their fullest benefits in everyday practices. Toth's experience of teaching public relations professionals theory, through the Syracuse University distance learning master's program in communication management, convinced her that public relations professionals can "understand that the theoretical language that is available to them in the scholarly books and journals of public relations" could contribute to their career advancement and understanding of "their own professional experiences and relationship building enterprise of organizations" (p. 110). This experience also helped Toth debunk the claim that professionals learn theories only to reinforce their power statuses. Instead, as Toth noted, professionals "learn and use public relations theory to widen their options for professional careers in public relations that will be meaningful to them" (p. 111).

In short, the aforementioned voices suggest a promising outlook on the future of public relations, a field that will be based more on collaboration rather than separation between academy and practice. These positive signs help highlight the transformative power of educators in effecting meaningful social changes. To help thoroughly prepare public relations students, educators shoulder the responsibility of bridging the gap between knowledge and profession and making theories more accessible to practitioners. As J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2002) note, "PR education is the key to advancing the PR profession to a level comparable to that of established professions such as medicine, law, or teaching" (p. 36). They pinpointed:

PR education at all levels, therefore, must strive to help PR professionals think and behave like scholars and researchers. Professionals should approach each important decision they must make by searching for research-based knowledge or doing research themselves to create the knowledge they need.

(p. 40)

However, the aforementioned shared vision and progress should not overshadow the disconnect between what is expected by professionals and what is actually delivered by educators. The reality is that the disconnect remains. Yet, as the shared vision has demonstrated, the disconnect does not lie so much in knowing what is desired than in finding the *means* to achieve what is desired. As Neff et al. (1999) contend, the goals of public relations education may have become clear, however, “the means of achieving these goals, including curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment may not be as clear” (p. 44). Thus, a foremost need facing public relations education is to identify the means to deliver the outcomes envisioned by both educators and practitioners and recommended by various commission reports.

Nevertheless, whether public relations education and practice should be integrated or separated cannot be answered by practitioners or educators alone, but a collective effort of both. Ever more importantly, a dialogue among educators, practitioners, and students is crucial to rectify the existing problems and challenges, and to identify possible means to overcome them. Undoubtedly, educators shoulder the outmost responsibility of bridging the gap between education and practice. After all, the mission of undergraduate public relations education, according to the 2006 *Public Relations for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—The Professional Bond*, is to prepare students

for entry-level positions. Educators play an indispensable role in the improvement and innovation of public relations education. As L'Etang (2002) stressed, "Education is the crucial plan in PR's quest for professional status. It is education that can provide the cognitive core to the occupation and thus help define the field of jurisdiction" (p. 47). To conclude this section on the relationship between education and practice, I would use Wright et al.'s (2007) contention to envision a future that public relations education should strive for. According to them:

If public relations education was excellent, if the faculty were highly qualified in both theory and practice and if the curriculum contained the kind of up-to-date, cutting-edge, state-of-the-art knowledge found in disciplines such as business, law, medicine, and so forth, employers with entry-level positions would fight over public relations graduates in a manner similar to what happens in other occupations. And, it would be the exception rather than the rule to have graduates from other academic disciplines hired for entry-level positions in public relations. (pp. 4-5)

## Appendix F: The 1999 Commission Report on Recommendations for PR Education

The 1999 Commission on Public Relations Education recommended the following knowledge areas to be included into public relations education.

- Communication and persuasion concepts and strategies including mass media, organizational, small group and interpersonal channels of communication.
- Communication and public relations theory, including public relations' role in society and in an organization.
- Relationships and relationship building
- Societal trends
- Ethical issues
- Legal requirements and issues
- Marketing and finance
- Public relations history
- Uses of research and forecasting
- Multicultural and global issues
- Organizational change and development
- Management concepts and theories. (p. 14)

The 1999 Commission on Public Relations Education recommended the following skill areas to be included into public relations education.

- Research, including methods, analysis, recommendations, reporting, environmental and social assessment and statistics
- Management of information including its role in the public relations

## Appendix G: The 2006 Commission Report on Recommendations for PR Education

The 2006 Commission on Public Relations Education recommended the following knowledge areas to be included into public relations education.

- Communication and persuasion concepts and strategies
- Communication and public relations theories
- Relationships and relationship-building
- Societal trends
- Ethical issues
- Legal requirements and issues
- Marketing and finance
- Public relations history
- Uses of research and forecasting
- Multicultural and global issues
- The business case for diversity
- Various world social, political, economic and historical frameworks
- Organizational change and development
- Management concepts and theories

The 2006 Commission on Public Relations Education recommended the following skill areas to be included into public relations education.

- Research methods and analysis
- Management of information
- Mastery of language in written and oral communication

- Problem-solving and negotiation
- Management of communication
- Strategic planning
- Issues management
- Audience segmentation
- Informative and persuasive writing
- Community, consumer and employee relations and other practice areas
- Technological and visual literacy
- Managing people, programs and resources
- Sensitive interpersonal communication
- Critical listening skills
- Fluency in a foreign language
- Ethical decision-making
- Participation in the professional public relations community
- Message production
- Working with current issues
- Environmental monitoring
- Public speaking and presentation
- Applying cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity

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