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Citation: Hou, Z., Zhu, Y. & Bromley, M. S. (2013). Understanding Public Relations in China: Multiple Logics and Identities. JOURNAL OF BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, 27(3), pp. 308-328. doi: 10.1177/1050651913479926

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Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651913479926

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Understanding Public Relations in China: Multiple logics and identities

Zhengye Hou[1], Yunxia Zhu[2] and Michael Bromley[3]

Abstract

To contribute to critical public relations (PR) and communication research, the authors employ an institutional perspective in examining how actors conceptualize PR and make sense of PR practice in relation to their shared and competing logics. Specifically, they highlight the primacy of logics and identities in the social construction of PR by exploring how a wide range of actors interpret and understand PR in Chinese cultural contexts. In conducting 40 semi-structured interviews with PR agency consultants, in-house PR practitioners, media journalists and industry association officers, the authors have found multiple and competing logics within the field that, in turn, confer reconciled identities upon Chinese PR. The Chinese cultural contexts serve as a repertoire for stakeholders to draw institutional logics and legitimize their interpretations of PR practice in China.

Keywords

Public relations, institutional logics, identity, Chinese culture, *guanxi*, harmony

[1] School of Journalism & Communication, University of Queensland, Queensland, Australia

[2] School of Business, University of Queensland, Queensland, Australia

[3] School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University of London, London, UK

Introduction

Public relations (PR) is often seen as an important area of professional and business communication (Botan, 1992; Broom, 2009; Wilson & Herndl, 2007). More recently, with the rise of China as an important player in the world economic arena, increasing research attention has been given to PR in China. Yet, compared to the "well-established" PR practice in the West (Kirat, 2005), PR was introduced to China as a relatively new concept and practice in the wake of China's reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s (Chen, 1992). Nascent Chinese PR studies tend to borrow mainstream western concepts and models, such as the four PR system models (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and excellence theory (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). These models are based largely on a managerial approach, which reflects the weakness in PR research in general (Brown, 2012). According to Heath (2009), the system approach focuses on functionality and managerialism whereas a critical approach attempts to isolate the meanings of communication within PR in order to explain how PR establishes its position within a competitive communication environment. Although a critical approach might be more reflective of the processes and practices of PR, it is much less frequently adopted. This kind of lopsided system-based focus is evident in Chinese PR research.

This lack of a critical model of PR presents challenges for PR research and it could be the reason why Gower (Gower, 2006) called for scholars to enrich PR research with new theories from other disciplines in order to explore how PR is practiced especially in the critical tradition. In response to this call, we propose an institutional lens (Scott, 2001) for exploring nuanced PR practice in China. In particular, we apply institutional logics defined by Jackall (1988) as embodied in practices that are underpinned and reproduced by cultural assumptions and political struggles. Specifically, through extensive interviews, we investigate how various PR practitioners conceive PR practice and the multiple logics and identities that these practitioners follow in their practice. In this way, we contribute to the critical PR

research that examines PR as a practice rather than as function in achieving "excellence" (Grunig, 1992). After all, the prevalent excellence model explicates only one set of logics based on functionality, which may not reflect the complexities of PR institutional logics.

Specifically, we aim to open up a critical dialogue and explore how different stakeholders - ranging from PR agency consultants and in-house practitioners to media journalists and PR industry associations- perceive, interpret and make sense of PR practices in Chinese cultural contexts. First, we provide a brief introduction to PR contexts in China. Then we review the literature in PR research and institutional theory relating to logics and identity and summarize the Chinese cultural contexts. Next, we explain our methodology and present our research findings. Finally, we discuss the study and its implications in order to offer a holistic view of the complexities of Chinese PR practices.

Background: public relations in China

Public relations was first practiced in China in the late 1970s when China implemented the policy of economic reform and opening-up (Chen, 1992). It was initially practiced by some foreign corporations and Sino-foreign joint ventures in China (Black, 1990-1991). The first PR department in local organizations was founded in 1984 in a state-owned enterprise, the practices of which were characterized as developing guest relations and "*gao guanxi*" (building personal relations) (Huang, 2000, p. 10). Since the 1990s when China began to establish a hybrid socialist-market economy, PR has gradually matured under the influence of international PR agencies, such as Hill & Knowlton and Burson-Marsteller. For example, the 2008 Olympic Games was a cooperative venture between Hill & Knowlton and the Chinese central government. Hill & Knowlton introduced Western PR approaches to the government, helping the government establish a spokesperson system to manage international media relations (Sheng, 2009). In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and

since then PR has gained a more strategic position and has been listed officially as an occupation (Zhang, 2010).

Today, after 30 years of development, PR has emerged as a booming field in China. According to the 2007 China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA) Report, there were 20 to 30 thousand trained PR professionals and 2 thousand PR firms in 2006. The annual turnover of the PR market was more than 10.8 billion Chinese dollars, increasing by 2.8 billion over the previous year (Chen, 2009). The field of PR practices has evolved from media-based news releases to integrated marketing communication. Nonetheless, China's institutional environment remains in transition, with the market-oriented economy, political reform and restructuring, and commercialization of the state-owned media creating multiple fissures in Chinese PR. As a result, there are various social misperceptions about PR and fuzzy practices in the field. For example, as long as the PR initiatives are not against the government stance on such "sensitive" issues as the "3Ts" – Tibet, Taiwan, and the Tian'anmen square crackdown – organizations seem to embrace ample space for PR marketing activities (Chang, 2011). Moreover, the industry association, CIPRA seems to occupy an embarrassing position in the field. Thus, the institutional context in China, with its short but rapid development involving both modern PR and traditional cultural factors, offers an interesting site for examining multiple institutional logics.

Literature review

Public Relations in Extant Literature: Genesis and Definitions

The practice of public relations originated in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century in a typical western institutional context (Hill, 1993; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).The mainstream definitions and theories of PR are characterised characterized by such underpinning values as openness, rationality, efficiency and effectiveness (Hackley & Dong,

2001; Vercic & Grunig, 1995). As such, most US scholars define PR as a "managerial" function (Hutton, 1999). For example, Wilcox , Ault and Agee et al. (1998) found that the essential descriptors and elements of the American U.S. conceptions of PR include: "deliberate", "planned", "performance", "public interest", "two-way communication" and "management function" (p.6). In essence, the American U.S. paradigm of the definition assumes that PR is a democratic structure in which competing groups seek legitimacy and power through public opinion and elections, which is "not always the norm in many parts of the world" (Vercic, 2000, p. 167). Thus, the American U.S. conception of PR is usually a normative application of societal legitimacy, and reflecting the normative dimension of PR (Macnamara, 2012).

Another school of thought, also known as the "European body" of PR knowledge (Vercic, 2000), tends to exhibit certain features of a critical PR tradition (Heath, 2009). For example, Vercic, Ruler, Butschi and Flodin (2001) adopted a "reflective paradigm" that defines PR as a strategic tool to help organizations build acceptance and gain legitimacy for their existence and practices (p. 381). The European conception is concerned with analyzing and adjusting organizational standards and values in accordance with social responsibility in order to strive for legitimacy. Although the European scholars' definition of PR as a reflective function differs from their US counterparts' definition of PR as a managerial function, it still implies the norms of "publics" and the "public sphere" arising from the Western context. In spite of its limitations, the reflective paradigm represents a promising shift toward a critical direction in PR research (Brown, 2012; Heath, 2009).

In this study, we will incorporate cultural factors for understanding PR in China. As some cultural relativists have argued (Botan, 1992; Huang, 1997; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2001), PR research should take into account specific non-western cultures in which "none of the conditions (e.g. democracy, capitalism) which led to and dictated the use of PR in the West

exists" (Al-Enad, 1990, p. 25). We view these factors from an institutional perspective that involves logics and identity.

Institutional Theories: Logics and Identity

Although Jackall (1988) perceived institutional logics as embodied in practices that are underpinned and reproduced by cultural assumptions and political struggles, Thornton and Ocasio (2008) viewed such logics as a bridge between "individual agency and cognition and socially constructed institutional practices and rule structures" (p. 101). Aligning these ideas, we adopt Scott's (2001) definition of institutional logics, which refers to "sets of cultural beliefs and related practices that constitute a field's organizing principles, and are available to actors to elaborate" (p. 139). From this definition, we note first that, institutional logics, by defining means and ends, are cognitive maps and belief systems that field participants carry in order to view and interpret the world and guide and give meaning to their practices and second that, multiple field constituents may compete over the "definition of issues" (Hoffman, 1999, p. 352). On the whole, institutional logics derive from actor's interaction with the broader established cultural contexts; however, they also have a perceptual component that operates at the individual level (Suddaby, 2010). Thus, institutional logics provide a valuable perspective to probe how Chinese PR stakeholders incorporate cultural elements into their perceptions and how they make sense of PR in China. We see institutional logics as related to group identity.

Being a rather young practice, PR still struggles to establish its identity (Vercic, 2000). Consequently, Identity is a key issue in PR study and needs to draw close scholarly attention (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). From a social constructionist perspective, social actors use language and other cultural resources in the ongoing construction of personal and group identity (Schilling-Estes, 2004). In this research, we place the concept of group identity

within institutional and communication contexts. In other words, we see identity as part of the group or the organization involved such as a PR agency. In a similar constructive vein, Albert and Whetten (1985) noted that an identity should satisfy three criteria: the essential properties or attributes, features that distinguish it from others, and features that exhibit continuity over time. Czarniawska (1997) argued that identity includes materials drawn from available "cultural resources", or "cultural toolkits" (Swidler, 1986) or "cultural frames" (Callero, 2003). It is neither fixed nor given but rather negotiated and contested. As such, Creed et al. (2010) developed the concept of "identity reconciliation" which describes actors' attempts to establish the coherence and authenticity of the self through which "institutional contradictions and marginalisation can be resolved". In addition, Gilroy (1997) argued that identity, then, involves a question of power and authority, insisting that "identities depend on the marking of difference [and that] calculating the relationship between identity and difference, sameness and otherness, is an intrinsically political operation" (p. 302).

Relevant Cultural Factors in the Chinese Contexts

China has a rich institutional landscape made up of numerous cultural elements that have evolved over a long history and still play important roles in contemporary society (Chen, 2001). As documented in the existing PR literature (Chen, 1996; Huang, 2000; Wu, 2002), there are several Chinese cultural values closely related to people's perceptions and practices of PR including *guanxi*, elite- authoritarianism, and Harmony.

Guanxi originally derives from pre-existing kinships, classmates, friends, people from the same native place, relatives, superiors or subordinates in the same workplace and so on (Fei, 1985; Yang, 1988, p. 41; Zhu, 2009). Specifically, *guanxi* is built on *ganqing* (love and good feelings), which implies that people build *ganqing* before making business (Zhu, 2009; Zhu, Nel, & Bhat, 2006). Additionally, behind *guanxi* is trust which can be created

through the repeated exchange of favors. Such trust acknowledges the legitimacy both of seeking to accomplish instrumental aims through friends, and of building relationships through mutual support, as long as the instrumental use is subordinated to the cultivation of the relationship (Yang, 1994). Thus, trust justifies the use of *guanxi* for personal or organizational benefits.

Elite-authoritarianism is also an important factor. As Chen (2004) stated, "The most salient difference of institutional settings between China and the West lies in its elite-authoritarian culture and polity" (p. 395). As part of the Chinese heritage over thousands of years, the Chinese government has continuously controlled not only valuable tangible resources, such as capital and land, but also intangible resources, such as approval mechanisms and preferential policies, on which organizations depend for their survival and development (He & Tian, 2008). This elite-authoritarianism is a critical aspect of Chinese culture that undergirds Chinese PR practices (Hou & Zhu, 2012; Wu, 2002) and we will examine it here.

Harmony in Chinese culture is characterized by the co-existence of similarities and differences (Zhang, 2010). As such, harmony opens up room for debate, disagreement and resistance, without which there would be no harmony. Even when actively engaging in politics, Confucius argued that "the purpose of criticising rulers is to urge them to follow the way of harmony" (Wang, 2004, p. 61) . Harmony, thus, is not achieved through naive conformity, but through constructive criticism. As such, instead of being homogenous, Confucian harmony is inclusive, embracing both commonalities and conflicts.

Based on this literature review, we address in this study the following research questions:

1. How do different stakeholders in China conceptualise and understand PR?

2. What shared or competing logics are embedded in stakeholders' understanding of PR?

Method

Our primary source of data was from in-depth interviews with 40 participants in Beijing (the capital city of China), each averaging 90 minutes in duration. The interview participants were "snowball" sampled (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) from 4 types of organizations. All 40 participants were either Chinese nationals or native Chinese, including 11 PR consultants from both international and local PR agencies in China; 10 in-house PR practitioners from multinational corporation (MNC) in China, state-owned enterprise (SOE) or local Chinese enterprise; 9 journalists from either state-owned or commercially orientated media; and 10 professional association officers from CIPRA. We conducted the interviews in Chinese. Table 1 provides specific organisational and personal attributes of the 40 participants. Although these individual attributes vary between the participants, we focus on group identity and view the participants as part of the overall group of PR actors. In interviews we focused on the participants' a) conceptualization of Chinese PR; b) interpretation of Chinese culture in relation to PR practice; and c) subjective sense of their own identity.

(Insert Table 1 around here.)

To analyse the data we used an inductive thematic approach (Burns, 2000) by coding, revising and recoding the entire data set with the assistance of software Nvivo. The unit of analysis is the group of PR participants, including agency consultants, in-house PR practitioners, journalists, and industry association officers. Our analysis concerns aspects of defining PR, including: a) the dimensions that the participants mentioned in their conceptualisation of PR; b) the paradigms that emerged from their conceptualizations; and c) the relationship between each paradigm of conceptualization and the group identity of actors.

We coded the interview scripts based on the emergence of themes. First, we imported each transcript into the Nvivo 9 software, which allowed us to assign and reassign codes to variable segments of interview texts. Second, we looked though the entire data set to gain a general understanding of the participants' definitions of PR. We generated some initial codes, including the value-orientation, cultural characteristics, essence, means and ends of PR. Based on these initial codes, two of us authors independently pre-coded 10 interview transcripts in order to calculate the inter-coder reliability, which turned out to be *pi=.75*. By doing this, we further refined the coding scheme. Then we then coded the rest of the transcripts individually by using iterative passes through the data set based on the refined coding scheme. In so doing, we identified recurring and significant themes with each code. By its number of occurrences and by its relevance we determined whether a theme was significant (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By comparing and contrasting each group of participants, we identified the shared or competing logics underpinning the corresponding interpretations of PR in a Chinese context.

Analysis of findings

In the following analysis of our findings, we discuss our results for each of our two research questions.

Shared Conceptualizations of PR within Stakeholder Groups

Our first research question asks: How do different stakeholders in China conceptualize and understand PR? To examine that question, we categorized participants' interpretations according to their respective group: agency consultants, in-house PR practitioners, media journalists and industry association officers. We found that their interpretations were closely related to the identity of their group, and that group members had similar conceptualisations of PR and its position within the group.

Agency Consultants: PR as perception management based mainly on media relations

In analyzing participants' interpretations of PR, we referred to the poststructuralist literature that holds that identity should be viewed as an ongoing reflexive accomplishment to address the questions of who a group is and – by implication – how its members should act (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). We found that PR consultants tend to position themselves as professionals who are equipped with expertise and formalized knowledge of PR that in turn, as Bartlett et al. (2007) argued, sustain relatively established practices. As one senior PR consultant from a local agency clarified, "PR people should not be misperceived as 'Miss PR' or 'Mr PR' who actively engage in dining and wining, searching for new contacts or networking. Rather, they are PR professionals possessing a body of knowledge in communication strategies and management." To label themselves as professionals, the agency consultants conceptualized PR as managing public perceptions via media deployment and integration. One consultant defined that PR as "shaping positive public opinion through skillful news publicity and communication", which is somewhat in line with the Western description of PR people as "spin doctors" (Ewen, 1996) who reconstruct a positive meaning by selectively showing different aspects of a truth to the public. But, the Chinese PR professionals justified such a practice by acknowledging the existence of truth while highlighting the importance of communication strategy in order to achieve an organizational goal. As a CEO of a local agency commented,

> Yes, truth cannot be changed, but people's minds can be changed. What we can do is to tailor a key message to a targeted audience which is then delivered through a right medium at a right time. This is what I mean by "professional expertise".

Thus, our analysis showed that PR agents strongly viewed PR as a professional approach that reflected who they are and what they are doing. The image they were trying to

create seems to align with modern PR practice in the Western world. But, they also stressed the importance of perception management that was tied harmoniously to various stakeholders, ranging from media, government, consumers and the like.

In-house PR practitioners: PR as an instrument assisting organizational marketing and branding

Our data analysis indicated that regardless of whether they worked at MNCs, SOEs or local Chinese enterprises, in-house PR practitioners tended to conceive of PR as an instrument for marketing or branding. Concerning their identity, the in-house PR practitioners saw themselves as part of a department that was usually marginalized in an organizational structure. Most of the PR managers that we interviewed had constrained access to top-level decision making. In a MNC's PR manager's words, "this indicated the limited power of the PR unit in an organization." Some Chinese organisations even nested the PR department under the umbrella of corporate culture or the company secretary's office. As one in-house PR manager from a private enterprise explained, "the major function of PR is to pave the way for promoting the sales of our products. The effect of PR is evaluated in relation to the sales amount." Accordingly, most of the participants highlighted the instrumentality of PR to organizational marketing and profit making. One in-house PR manager from an SOE noted:

> PR in Chinese enterprises is mainly positioned as a tool of marketing, because we are quite concerned about selling out our products and earning money. Maybe only matured multinational corporations tend to view PR as branding or reputation management, thus attaching importance to relations with different publics. But for us, we are keen on the economic interest brought by PR.

Nonetheless, our research identified that the in-house PR practitioners were gradually making efforts to change their organizational top leaders' perception of PR from that of a

marketing tool to that of a communication management function. In other words, in-house PR people struggled to shift the institutional logics of PR from being marketing that is outcome-driven to being communication that is process-oriented. This attempted shift in logics arose from the difficulty in evaluating the effect of PR on marketing or sales. As the comment of a PR manager shows:

> Unlike sales, we can't use specific numbers to "prove" the effect of PR. For example, how can we say the increase in marketing or sales is a result of PR, rather than a result of advertising? I think this evaluation is a bit problematic and makes our job difficult.

Media Journalists: PR as persuasive communication targeted specific audiences based on *guanxi*

Journalists mostly questioned the third-party status of PR agencies. For instance, some junior journalists said that they did not understand why enterprises needed such a third party between them and the media that seemed to make their communication less smooth. As one journalist put it, "A PR agency is just like the meat in a sandwich and thus hampers the direct conversation between an organization and media." Moreover, some journalists even commented that PR in China was still in a "basic" stage since it is dearth of core theories and methodologies meant it could not be considered to be a "profession" or "discipline." In fact, in their perceptions, PR practices in China largely involve in interpersonal *guanxi* for the purpose of organizational problem solving. In response to the agencies' conception of PR as a professional practice based on media relations, some journalists revealed that even media relations were mostly done through *guanxi* that facilitates news publicity.

Additionally, as most of the journalist participants positioned themselves as objective communicators, they proposed a normative definition of PR as providing and disseminating truth-based news and contributing to the free flow of information. In so doing, these

journalists called on the agency participants to professionalize the use of *guanxi* in their organizational PR practices; for example, by advantageously combining *guanxi* with their expertise in communication.

PR Association Officers: PR as information control and management in maintaining the state's interest

We recruited our industry association participants from CIPRA which regulates the PR industry in China. But this group of people were struggling with their identities. On the one hand, as a senior leader in CIPRA explained, CIPRA was deemed to be "the spokesman of the government in the guise of a Non-government organisation (NGO)" and thus it must embody the government's will. On the other hand, it was expected to represent the interests of its member organizations, including both PR agencies and organizational in-house PR units. Nonetheless, industry associations tended to conceptualize PR on a macro level and from the perspective of the state. For example, a senior leader in CIPRA defined PR in this way:

> PR is about information control and management which is an important source of the government political power. PR in China should develop within the framework of Chinese laws and regulation. It ought to be ideologically correct and fit in with the Party-state line.

Thus, each group of actors consciously or unconsciously conceptualized and comprehended PR in relation to their identities.

Shared and Competing Logics between Different Stakeholder Groups

Our second research question concerns the shared or competing logics that are embedded in different stakeholders' understanding of PR. As we have noted, these aspects are important

for understanding Chinese PR practice based in light of critical PR research (Heath, 2009). By comparing and contrasting each group, we identified both widely shared and competing logics across the different groups of PR stakeholders.

Shared Logics

In examining participants' interpretations of PR in relation to Chinese culture, we found that some sets of logics that different stakeholders shared emerged from deeply-rooted Chinese cultural values. These logics sets, then, were culturally based as opposed to the more dominant functionality-based logics.

The first set of culturally based logics that participants shared emerged from the cultural value of *guanxi*. As a highly formalized institution in Chinese society (Aufrecht & Bun, 1995), *gao guanxi* was deemed to be pervasive in every single aspect of PR practices. By defining PR in terms of means and ends, Chinese PR stakeholders considered it acceptable and justifiable to establish *guanxi* before entering business transactions. In other words, they considered such efforts to be legitimate organizational PR practices. As one PR consultant argued,

> China is a *guanxi*-rooted society. It entails acquaintance with one another by means of banquets, giving gifts or networking. Only two parties in a *qing*-based *guanxi* are likely to exchange favours.

But the data also suggested that Chinese PR practitioners attempted to transcend from such a focus on *guanxi* in order to build an organizationally based practice because they regarded *guanxi* as solely an instrument to achieve organizational goals.

The second set of culturally based logics that participants shared stemmed from the elite-authoritarianism. This cultural value explains why these stakeholders achieved a

consensual view that the government was the most important and sometimes the sole public for organizational PR. In addition, the various PR stakeholders agreed that remaining in line with the policies and framework of the government was always the priority and bottom line principle of organizational PR initiatives. PR stories revolving around this logic easily secured media exposure, as an in-house PR manager noted:

> Since we contest with journalists' in terms of defining news values, following the state guideline can always be a platform, or an opportunity for negotiating cooperation between different PR stakeholders. Either commercially-oriented media or market-oriented PR should follow the Party ideology and the state themes.

In this regard, the value of elite-authoritarianism seemed to provide a "platform" with which various actors could resonate with the logics of the government body, media and PR entities. It constituted an essential and principal logic for Chinese PR practices.

Competing Logics

In analysing the data we identified several conflicts in institutional logics between different groups of PR stakeholders. We argue that these conflicts arose from the different interests that participants pursued and the different degrees of power that they possessed.

First, in-house PRs and agency consultants had competing logics because they pursued they pursued different PR outcomes. The former seemed to pursue tangible outcomes, such as the quantity of media exposure or the increase in sales, whereas the latter tended to emphasize details and quality in processes of communication. This conflict arose from the participants' different conceptions of PR. Because the in-house PR practitioners tended to conceive PR as a subordinate function to marketing, they tended to pursue the immediate effects in publicity such as positive coverage. But agency consultants conceived PR as the

long-term and strategic communication through which public perceptions are delicately managed rather than as a means for developing organizational image. One PR consultant described it this way:

> PR is a deliberate effort of communication rather than a one-off tool for promotion. Chinese organizations tend to pursue result-driven and effect-guaranteed PR, which has led Chinese PR to positioning itself with a function of tactical implementation rather than strategic consulting.

This description suggests the competing logic that has occurred to the growing market economy in China. As we have noted, the Chinese economy is a hybrid of socialist-market economy. As the features of a market economy surfaced, Chinese organisations resorted to the excellence model. With the introduction of competition and privitization, they needed to sustain profits in order to survive. Yet, China still backs away from the Western excellence-based logic clearly stressing the "long-term effort of communication" on a strategic level (Grunig, 1992, p. 231). Rather, PR in China focuses on the tactic level and short-term benefits.

Second, agency consultants and media journalists had competing logics because PR agencies are committed to keeping their clients in a favored position, they share the logic of selecting what aspects of the truth they will disseminate in order to optimize the effect of media exposure. But quite a few of the journalist participants expressed that journalism pursued the news value of truth and objectivity rather than "spun" stories. As one journalist noted:

> We hope PR agencies can be a real 'third party' or 'bridge' between us and enterprises by providing more truth-based facts and authentic sources of information.

This comment indicated that the two stakeholder groups struggle over the news value of facts and truth while they cooperate with each other in disseminating organizational information to the public.

Third, in-house PRs and industry associations had competing logics in how they practiced PR. The majority of the in-house PRs emphasized that creative PR initiatives were vital to the success of their PR efforts whereas industry associations insisted that commercially-oriented PR must not go beyond the government framework and guidelines. As a CIPRA officer stated, "Chinese business organizations can only do PR within the framework of government policy rather than transcend the bottom line." The phrase "within the framework of government policy" actually indicates the scope of the negotiation over the legitimacy of practice. We can also infer from this analysis that conflicts in the logics between actors were inevitable due to the power imbalance between the commercial force and government authority.

Discussion and implications

This study contributes to critical research on PR practices in Chinese contexts. Specifically, it unpacks the complexities of Chinese PR practices through an institutional lens. Instead of applying the Western PR theory of excellence to the Chinese situation as the extant research tends to do, we have critically identified the specific ways in which PR practitioners interpret and understand Chinese PR practices involving multiple identities, and shared and conflicting logics. A more revealing finding is that all these logics have been followed in harmonious sociocultural contexts. Moreover, such harmony makes possible the coexistence of the conflicting logics of market competition and traditional cultural values. We have explored how and why multiple logics emerge from Chinese PR practice and what these logics entail for understanding Chinese PR practice and other related communication issues.

Firstly, we have found that different groups of stakeholders conceptualize and understand PR in a way that is closely related to their own identities, particularly their group identity. Marquis and Lounsbury (2007) have pointed out that an abundant literature of institutional thought has argued that professional identity is a significant stimulus to action, especially when autonomy is threatened. As our research results illustrate, when the expertise of agency consultants was questioned by both in-house PRs and journalists, the consultants tended to position themselves as professionals armed with a body of scientific knowledge about doing PR. They conceptualized PR as a practice that is neither purely marketing nor purely *guanxi*. In-house PR practitioners, because of their identities, share the logic of using PR to pursue economic interests. Journalists distinguished PR's "spun" facts from journalism's news coverage based on truth. Industry associations positioned PR from the state level as information control and management because they represent the government's will and interest to a certain extent. Thus, these groups contextualised their specific definitions according to who they are and what they practice as a group.

Second, we have identified the shared logics within the groups that underpin members' conceptualisation of PR practice in China. The prominence of cultural factors in their shared logics is revealing. For example, multiple participants agreed with the logics of establishing *guanxi* before doing business as well as always following the party line and government guidelines. The Chinese culture of harmony provides an embracive platform for these actors to negotiate meanings of PR practice regardless of their competing roles.

Third, we have found that different groups of stakeholders competed with each other in order to fulfill their own interests that were driven by the market-oriented economy. As such, we can see Chinese PR as a "contested field" that involves multiple stakeholders' power struggles to maintain or achieve for a favored position (Hoffman, 1999). Those struggles can also be interpreted as opportunities to "reposition" themselves in the field

(Bourdieu, 1977). On the whole, the coexistence of shared and competing logics within the field of Chinese PR can be explained by the Chinese culture characterized by harmony, which embraces and sustains both consensus and contestation (Wang, 2004). Moreover, the Chinese cultural characteristic of harmony can explain the co-existence of multiple value-orientations in the field of Chinese PR (Williams, 2004). This cultural focus on harmony also helps to explain why PR in China is a different social and communicative phenomenon from the PR in Western culture. Although PR in China also struggles for its identity (Vercic, 2000), the meaning of PR is negotiated by various PR actors who possess multiple logics, consciously or unconsciously based on available "cultural resources" (Czarniawska, 1997). In so doing, multiple stakeholders adjust themselves and their relationships in order to create a "reconciled identity" of Chinese PR in which a wide range of interests can be embedded and balanced (Creed, Dejordy, & Jaco, 2010, p. 1338) in the harmonious context.

Our findings relating to multiple logics and identities shed light on future studies of the complexities of PR practice in China. Because the Chinese cultural values, particularly *guanxi* and elite-authoritarianism, are deeply rooted in the society, Chinese PR is easily misperceived as an extension of interpersonal *guanxi*, or is narrowly conceived of as government relations. In other words, these misperceptions or misconduct can be attributed to the nonexistence of a genuine Western "public" in China (Wu, 2002) and to the multiple logics underpinning the PR and communication practice. The upward orientation of *guanxi* guides Chinese PR to build relationships with the government authority which, in turn, reflects the key structure of government control in the current PR field. But as the trend toward democracy continues, this situation might ease and stakeholders of more equal status might share power. We suggest that institutional logics and identities can be useful parameters for understanding the dynamic future of PR practice in China.

In addition, these research findings have theoretical implications for enriching PR research with a critical perspective. We have shown that institutional logics and cultural factors can be applied to PR research, hence combining the Western institutional theory with cultural specifics (Chinese-specific and indigenous perspective). This combination is promising for future research that contributes to the critical tradition of PR research such as studying the evolution of logics and PR identities. Such research must use theoretical frameworks with both universal implications and indigenous relevance. Our nuanced findings about the Chinese PR practice further illustrate and validate this point. But, future research may also extend this dimension to further test its relevance and validity on a broader scale involving more PR organizations and cultural contexts outside of China.

Last but not least, our research findings have practical implications about understanding PR practice in complex cultural contexts such as in China. Through the lens of institutional logics and cultural factors, Chinese PR reflects a multifaceted evolving practice that incorporates both marketing competition and harmony-based *guanxi*. Understanding such complexities will provide a platform for collaborating with Chinese PR organizations and for conducting PR practice in China and beyond.

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Author Biographies

Zhengye Hou is a final year PhD candidate from the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Queensland (UQ) Australia. Her research interest revolves around public relations and institutional studies.

Yunxia Zhu teaches cross-cultural management and business negotiation at the University of Queensland. Her research interests include cross-cultural business communication, and business and organizational discourse studies. She has won numerous research awards including Research Excellence by the Association for Business Communication in 2011 and by the University of Queensland Business School in 2008.

Michael Bromley received an MA in history from Yale University in the USA, and a PhD in sociology (media studies) from City University London. His research and teaching interests are in journalism practices, investigative journalism, citizen journalism, and the sociocultural uses of journalism. His work has been published in Australia, France, Portugal, Brazil, Russia, the Netherlands, Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, Romania, Slovenia, and the United States.

Table 1 Organizational and Personal Attributes of the Participants

Organizational Attributes		**Personal Attributes**		
Categories of Organizations	**Industry Ranking**	**Gender**	**Position**	**PR Experience**
● PR agencies (n = 11) ● In-house PR (n = 10) ● Media (n = 9) ● PR associations (n = 10)	● Top 10 (n = 16) ● Top 50 (n = 14) ● Top 100 (n = 10)	● Female (n = 14) ● Male (n = 26)	● Practitioners (n = 14) ● Divisional managers (n = 16) ● Top executives (n = 10)	● 1-5 years (n = 14) ● 6-10 years (n = 16) ● Above 10 years (n = 10)
Total: N = 40	N = 40	N = 40	N = 40	N = 40

Note: (a) The PR agencies in this research include both international PR agencies in China and local PR agencies; (b) In-house PR units include multinational corporations (MNC) in China, state-owned enterprises (SOE) and Chinese private enterprises; and (c) N stands for the number.