



Clientelism and *guanxi*: Southern European and Chinese public relations in comparative perspective



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ABSTRACT

This paper compares and analyzes the practice of public relations between Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) and China. The author argues Western countries are not a monolithic entity and there are a number of similarities, mainly focused on the importance of personal relationships, that shape the public relations field in Europe and Asia. A review of the concepts of *guanxi* and *clientelism*, both based on the asymmetrical character of relationships based on the abdication by the client of any potential autonomous access to the use of resources and to the setting up of public goods and services, revealed the importance of personal relationships and the emphasis of government relationships at the expense of other publics. Despite the consideration of the Anglo-Saxon symmetrical public relations model as a normative ideal among professionals, persuasive models are prevalent in the public relations practice in these societies.

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1. Introduction

The practice of public relations in Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) shares a number of characteristics that distinguish it from the rest of the West and particularly the English-speaking countries. This is a management subdivision ('the Southern European region') that numerous multinationals have been using for decades. Some of the same characteristics can also be found, even more sharply defined, in the public relations practice of Asian countries, particularly China. Drawing a similarity between Southern Europe and China may come as a surprise for some, but there are clear historical parallels between the two regions. For example, a tendency to circumvent the rules and the fact that, from an historical perspective, European Mediterranean countries are relatively new democracies with authoritarian traditions while China is still under an authoritarian regime with some liberal features. This paper attempts to develop a theoretical understanding of these similarities, focusing particularly on how clientelism and *guanxi* shape public relations practice in these regions.

One of the main purposes of this essay is to demonstrate, by elucidating the commonalities between European Mediterranean countries and the Chinese model, that advanced Western democracies are not a monolithic entity. Furthermore, using Edward Said's terminology, there has been a kind of *orientalism* in public relations research, as in a number of Western countries, public relations is still fundamentally asymmetrical. For example, Gupta and Bartlett (2007) created a chart summarizing the various business practices in Asia and the West. This chart, probably influenced by the overwhelming presence of books on the subject published in English-speaking countries, acknowledged as typically Western a distinct

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difference between personal and business relationships and a protestant work ethic. There are, however, a number of Western countries (such as, but not limited to, the Southern Europeans) where this is not the case. This paper makes the argument that in certain aspects, and because of the importance of the personal influence model, Southern European PR presents a number of similarities with China that disprove the existence of an entity that can be called simply “Western public relations.”

2. Clientelism and *guanxi*: a comparison

Clientelism, a concept with political and economic implications, can be defined as “a pattern of social organization in which access to resources is controlled by patrons and delivered to clients in exchange for deference and various kinds of support” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 135). Clientelism adopts a dyadic form, based on individual relations of dependence, and affects all kinds of social, political and economic interactions (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002). A crucial aspect in the clientelistic model is its asymmetrical character. It is based on the abdication by the client of any potential autonomous access to the use of resources and to the setting up of public goods and services. It requires “the mediation of some patron, whether a person or an organization (i.e. party or trade union), within which the clients do not obtain autonomous access to major loci of power” (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984, p. 168). Individuals and organizations in clientelistic societies have to face a larger dependence on the government or political parties that have assumed many of the functions of the individual patrons of an earlier era.

Scholars often tend to identify *guanxi* as a variety of clientelism based on the existence of patron–client ties between a state’s administration and private businesses (Barrington, 2012; Wank, 1996, 2002). This identification, although pertinent because both phenomena share the same features (Sapio, 2009), makes comparative analysis difficult.

Despite the importance given to personal ties, there are, however, significant differences between clientelism – called *rousfeti* in Greece and *clientelismo* in Italy, Portugal, and the Spanish-speaking countries (where it is also called *caciquismo*) – and *guanxi*. For starters, they have different roots. While the success of clientelism in Southern Europe can be explained by a lack of social capital, in China *guanxi* is an inheritance of Confucianism, a philosophy of human nature.

Clientelismo can be defined as a response to the persistence of traditional hierarchical social structures inherited from feudal times, the personal dependence of rural populations on landholders that alienated the individual who lacked access to the centers of power through markets, representative political institutions or a universalistic legal system (Roniger & Gunes-Ayata, 1984). Indeed, it is a consequence of the late development of liberal institutions in Southern Europe and the relatively low development of rational-legal authority (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002). It was transplanted from the Iberian Peninsula to Latin America, where social and economic asymmetries were combined with the racial inequalities derived from conquest and, in some societies like Brazil, slavery.

On the other hand, in China *guanxi* does not emerge as a response to the system’s failures to adapt to modernity, rather it is based on a millenary secular religion or philosophy, Confucianism, that guides people toward fulfillment and perfection (Huang, 2000). Indeed, there is an intrinsic component of idealism in *guanxi* as a means to reach the hierarchical social order proclaimed by Confucianism to preserve society’s harmony. According to Confucianism, everybody has an assigned place in the social structure – some at the top and others at the base of the pyramid. For example, government officials would be at the top of the state and husbands would be at the top of their families (Hackley & Dong, 2001). Thus, from a Confucian perspective, power and wealth should be distributed unequally in order to preserve a harmonic society (Huang, 2000).

Although they produce similar outcomes, the ethics of *clientelismo* and *guanxi* are divergent. While *clientelismo* constitutes a pragmatic response to a lack of trust in the existence a rational-legal authority that led individuals to commit to their particular interests and reject the notion of the “common good” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), *guanxi* is not unethical in nature (Lovett, Simmons, & Kali, 1999). Although there is a notion of *gao guanxi* (manipulating relationships) and *guanxi* can also be seen as a source of legitimacy for the Chinese upper classes to retain their power, there is an element of idealism in Confucianism and *guanxi* to preserve order and harmony in society.

Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984) highlight another important distinction between both concepts regarding how institutional spheres were structured and differentiated in both cultures. While in hierarchical societies such as China these principles of access to public goods have been traditionally particularistic, for example in the hands of government officials, in clientelistic societies they have been universalistic in theory with open markets and the organization of means of production not embedded in ascriptive units or in the relations between them. Nonetheless, against the most universalistic models such as the American model, clientelistic models also tended to limit the access of certain groups to the bases of production although this limitation was not derived from the basic premises of society such as in the Chinese ascriptive hierarchical model (or the Indian kinship model). *Caciques* in Spain or *signori* in Italy acted as intercessors and sponsors for individuals because of their position as holders of political and economic power or social capital. However, because these inequalities were not legitimized in the clientelistic model as they were in the ascriptive-hierarchical Chinese model, they were much more fragile. Moreover, because the relative hierarchical standing of patrons and clients was not fully prescribed, disputes between patrons and clients arose frequently. Ultimately, the relative level of openness of Mediterranean societies enables clients the capacity to accumulate resources in a number of markets and threaten the patron’s monopoly over the centers of decision and markets.

Clientelist relationships have survived in Southern Europe despite being undermined by European integration that imposes common standards of rational-legal authority (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Likewise, the traditional hierarchical structure of human relationships has survived in China despite the inherent pressures of the globalization process through the

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