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The emerging “field” of public relations in China: *Multiple interplaying logics and evolving actors’ inter-relations*

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ABSTRACT

While public relations (PR) scholars have increasingly criticized the privilege of organizational *interest*, limited research has problematized the dominant analytical locus of organizational *site*. As a consequence, our understanding of the complexity and fluidity of PR in wider socio-cultural contexts has been constrained. To combat this shortcoming, this paper invokes the notion of “field” from institutional theory to examine how the *field* of Chinese PR is socially constructed, negotiated and contested by a range of actors based on their shared or competing logics and contingent inter-relations. Data were mainly collected through 48 in-depth interviews with PR agency consultants, in-house PR practitioners, journalists and industrial regulators as well as through complementary documents. The results indicate that studying PR as a socially constructed *field* can refresh extant PR scholarship by providing a dynamic and relational account of PR practices, and by reflecting the multifaceted interaction among various institutional actors.

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1. Introduction

There has been growing criticism (e.g., Gower, 2006; Heath, 2006; L’Etang, 2008) over the functionalist-managerial paradigm of PR for its linear, deterministic models and privileged organizational *interest*. As Edwards (2012) asserts, it is necessary, firstly, to question organization *site*, the central locus of functionalist PR study before challenging organizational *interest*. Owing to the focus on organizational *site*, mainstream PR literature has sought for normative practices to achieve organizational goals and interests (Brown, 2012; Edwards & Hodges, 2011). Indiscriminately applying those normative theories to a non-Western context will, consequently, reinforce “a Western notion of what PR is and isn’t” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 205). To overcome these drawbacks, a few scholars (e.g., Ihlen, 2009; Sandhu, 2009; Tsetsura, 2010) have recently called for studying PR as a socially constructed *field*, although little empirical research has been done. It is only through a “field” lens that we can observe the interplay between PR practices and wider socio-cultural contexts, and understand how the field of PR emerges from, and sustains, a particular set of norms and structures (Edwards & Hodge, 2011). It is even more important to examine PR as a *field* in a non-Western context like China where “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).

China has been in “large-scale institutional transitions” (e.g., from a planned to a market-oriented economy, government restructuring) since its economic reform and opening-up in the late 1970s (Peng, 2003). The US-originating PR was initially introduced by foreign and joint ventures to China in the early 1980s (Black, 1990–1991). China’s booming market has spurred large adoption of PR in various organizations ranging across corporations, governments, NGOs and professional consultan-

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cies (Strenski & Yue, 1998). In the wake of Chinese media's commercialization, PR in China is evolving within the greater space of the business world but meanwhile under strong one-Party government influence (Chen, 2003a). Parallel with Chinese PR development is the growing research on PR practices that are shaped by Chinese culture such as *guanxi* (personal connections) (e.g., Huang, 2000; Zhang, Shen, & Jiang, 2009), elite-authoritarianism (Chen, 2004; Wu, 2002), and Confucianism (e.g., harmony, doctrine of mean/*zhongyong*) (e.g., Chung, 2011; Zhang, 2010). However, most of research into Chinese PR has overlooked the interplay among its multi-cultural dimensions (Gupta & Bartlett, 2007) and failed to embrace broad economic and political culture (Hodges, 2006; Sriramesh & Duhe, 2009). Furthermore, because of the excessive emphasis on organizational site, a fundamental question remains unanswered: how is the field of Chinese PR emerging from wider economic, political and socio-cultural contexts when it is, more than being influenced by organizational interests?

To fill in the above research gap, this paper provides a “radical socio-cultural” (Edwards & Hodges, 2011) account of the field of Chinese PR. “Radical” refers to the politicized and contestable nature of the PR field that might result from multiple institutional forces. To this end, this paper introduces DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of “field”, adapted to institutional theory from Bourdieu's (Bourdieu, 1977) notion of “field”. They regard “field” to be composed of “sets of differentiated but interdependent actors who participate in a similar practice and constitute an area of institutional life, containing key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other actors who produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Logics, referring to a set of values, beliefs or prescriptions that govern and legitimize related practices, are central to a field analysis (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Field constituents (actors) contest over the logics of practices and their inter-relations (Hoffman, 1999). As a result, a “field” signifies both “common purpose and an arena of strategy and conflict” (DiMaggio, 1983, p. 149).

Based on these theoretically coherent concepts (e.g., field, logics, actors), this paper investigates four groups of actors involved in the field of Chinese PR: professional agency consultants (suppliers), in-house PR practitioners (consumers), journalists (competitors) and professional association regulators (regulatory body). Two research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What logics of PR practices are developed from actors' interaction with Chinese socio-cultural contexts, and how do the logics interplay to shape the field of PR?

RQ2: Based on the above logics, how do the actors inter-relate and/or interact to construct the field of Chinese PR?

2. Theoretical approach

2.1. The relevance of institutional theory to PR research

There has recently emerged a new but growing trend to study PR within a neo-institutional framework, also known as organizational sociology or institutionalism (Scott, 2008) (hereafter for short “institutional theory”) [See special issues of *Public Relations Inquiry* 2(2) and *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 3(2)]. One immediate reason for the “marriage” of PR and institutional theory (Fredriksson, Pallas & Wehmeier, 2013) is that organizational legitimacy, a central theme to institutional theory (Waeraas, 2007), lies “at the core of most, if not all, public relations activities” (Metzler, 2001, p. 321). Suchman (1995) defines “legitimacy” as “a generalized perception or assumption that something is desirable, proper, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). The nature of social construction and the mutual interest in legitimacy makes institutional theory a promising framework for PR study (Zerfass, 2009).

A few other conceptual papers (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2013; Fredriksson et al., 2013; Grandien & Johansson, 2012; Sandhu, 2009) articulate the relevance and potential of using institutional theory to expand our knowledge of PR. One argument is that the dialectic between agency and structure in institutional theory increasingly applies to PR's emerging role in the mediation between organizations and their environments (Fredriksson et al., 2013), which accords with recent sociological perspectives of PR (e.g., Edwards, 2012; Ihlen, van Ruler & Fredriksson, 2009). Through an institutional lens, PR is no longer determined by organizational interests, but simultaneously conditioned by, and actively engaging in affecting broad environments (Merkelsen, 2013). Field, as a critical unit to bridge macro-level environments and micro-level organizations (Scott, 2001), enables researchers to observe how PR functions as organizational boundary spanner and thereby analyses conditions for preserving legitimacy for organizations (Merkelsen, 2013). Further, logics, as organizing principles of a field, can help us gain an in-depth understanding of PR as value-guided practices, how the complexity of a field comes to the fore, and how PR challenges and reshapes the foundations on which social actors interact (Fredriksson et al., 2013).

Despite the increasing theoretical arguments of its value, institutional theory has only been used in limited empirical PR study (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013), that is, on two levels of the institutionalization of PR. At a social level, scholars (e.g., Bartlett, Tywoniak, & Hatcher, 2007; Pieczka, 2002) examine whether PR is institutionalized as a socially accepted occupation characterized with specialized training, a unique body of knowledge, and thus exclusive professional practice. Large attention has been paid to how education and labor markets shape the roles of PR, or how social perceptions influence the status of the PR profession (Grandien & Johansson, 2012). At an organizational level, researchers focus on either PR institutionalized as a regular organizational function (e.g., Invernizzi & Romenti, 2009; Swerling & Sen, 2009; Tench et al., 2009), or how PR helps organizations accomplish institutionalization (Gregory, Invernizzi, & Romenti, 2013). The former largely uses quantitative surveys to measure the outcome (degree) of institutionalization of PR within organizations, of which the three most prominent studies are Corporate Communication International (CCI) Practices, The Generally Accepted Practices (GAP) Surveys and European Communication Monitor (ECM) (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013). The latter research

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