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Introduction

Cultures of Crisis Response: Chinese Public Relations Practices in Context

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The field of public relations and strategic communication has changed radically in recent years. The spread of social media has changed public expectations about the way organizations communicate with their stakeholders and how public relations and strategic communication professionals operate. Moreover, because of the global expansion of multinational corporations and the fast-growing economy of Greater China, there have been rapid growth and development in the academic research focused on public relations, strategic communication, and communication management. However, much of the previous research on emerging trends and challenges in public relations and strategic communication in the digital era has been rooted in data sets and theories originating in Western countries. Comparatively fewer studies have focused on the Greater China region.

It is therefore incumbent upon scholars of Chinese public relations practice to examine culturally distinct characteristics as they pertain to key issues, emerging trends, and future challenges. Hence, this special issue addresses theoretical, social, cultural, and political questions to better understand the distinct characteristics of the public relations field in Greater China. It is hoped that the articles selected for inclusion in this special issue will contribute to the development of theoretical models and research methods that are culturally sensitive.

Four studies included in this issue emphasize the unique cultural characteristics of public relations practices in Greater China. Augustine Pang, Yang Hu, and Eugene Woon compare differences in crisis management between state-owned enterprises (SOE) and privately owned enterprises (POE) in terms of media relations, government relations, and crisis response in China. Conducting multi-case studies, Hu and Pang explore the relevance of cultural influence on indigenous corporate crisis response strategies in the context of mainland China. Highlighting the importance of risk perception and public trust in local government, Qing Huang examines how perceived dread and perceived inequality mediate the effects of media use on public trust in local governments. Yi-Ru Regina Chen examines the charitable behavior of Chinese millennial donors and explicates the mechanism of donor engagement with mobile social network sites (SNS) that facilitate such behavior.

Two articles in this issue adopt a comparative model. Tianduo Zhang, Liudmila Khalitova, Barbara Myslik, Tiffany L. Mohr, Ji Young Kim, Craig Carroll, and Spiro Kiouis compare the agenda-building influence of Chinese state-sponsored media with that of Taiwanese and Singaporean media during the 2014 “umbrella protests” in Hong Kong.

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Michael A. Cacciatore, Juan Meng, Bryan Reber, and Ben Boyd compare trust predictors in the US and China.

Two convergent themes emerge from the articles included in this special issue, which reflect certain trends in Chinese society: (1) governmental communication as the focus of Chinese public relations and/or strategic communication research; (2) trust as an essential commodity of communication management in the “risk society.”

Governmental Communication as the Focus of Chinese Public Relations and/or Strategic Communication Research

Huang, Wu, and Cheng (2016) found evidence that the Chinese crisis communication research focused on mainland China was preoccupied with governmental crisis communication. The government’s influence on public relations was evident not only during crises or disasters but also in everyday life. In this issue, Zhang et al. demonstrate that state-sponsored media in China potentially influence the international news coverage of Chinese crisis situations. Similarly, Pang et al.’s article reveals several important differences between SOEs and POEs in China with respect to their strategic crisis-response behaviors: SOEs seek shelter from the government during crises, whereas POEs seek goodwill from the government; SOEs seek to control the media, whereas POEs seek to circumvent media exposure; SOEs predominantly employ the “barnacle” strategy in their crisis responses and occasionally use third-party endorsements and establish new topics, while POEs employ third-party endorsements and establish new topics without deploying the barnacle strategy.

Several factors explain the overwhelming influence of government communication in Chinese public relations. The Chinese government attempts to play the role of a patriarch who rewards, disciplines, and protects his citizen sons and daughters (Huang & Bedford, 2009). Chinese history and tradition have also endowed the government with huge advantages in social status, resource possession, and power. In mainland China, the government has the power and requisite access to interrupt and intervene in a crisis event (Lyu, 2012). As a result, the government often assumes the principal acting role in conjunction with or instead of other institutions involved in the crisis. In general, authoritarian rule has long been the focus of research concerned with the region’s social structure, which emphasizes hierarchy, group orientation, and obedience to political authority (Pye, 1988). Furthermore, most East Asian countries and territories share a political culture that emphasizes statism, which limits the development of active citizenship (Huang et al., 2017). In particular, the ubiquitous intervention by authoritarian governments leads to unique strategic communication and public relations practices.

The “risk society” and trust as an essential commodity of communication management

Although economic development has created prosperity in Chinese societies, it has given rise to what has been referred to as the “risk society” (Giddens, 1998). Various social problems, such as food-and-water safety, corrupt management, environmental pollution, and political scandals, seem to go hand in hand with economic development. Indeed, no Chinese society studied in the essays included in this special issue has escaped such problems. Increased risk seems inevitable in market economies. Failures in crisis communication can cause extensive public distrust of the government and private corporations. Thus, trust has become an important commodity in strategic communication and public relations practice.

In this issue, Q. Huang examines how media use, perceived dread, and perceived inequality interact to affect public trust in local governments and environmental risks in China. Cacciatore et al. explore the extent to which demographics, political ideology, and related variables affect public trust in business, government, and non-governmental organizations (NGO). R. Chen finds that trust in the WeChat application's ability to facilitate payments is a major predictor of WeChat payment donations among Chinese millennial philanthropists.

The articles included in this issue consider the significant role of trust as a commodity in public relations practice. However, the different viewpoints shed light on the need for a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between public trust and various measures used to ensure the effectiveness of communication.

The existing literature examines trust from an outcome or performance-based perspective, but the articles in this issue emphasize the importance of non-performance-based beliefs and seek to understand the underlying psychological mechanism that produces or undermines people's trust. Because non-instrumental or non-performance characteristics, such as personal value systems and perceptions of a trustee's benevolence and integrity, are important, further research is needed to account for their effects on public trust.

In the existing scholarship, trust has been defined according to its relation to categories such as risk and confidence. Trust was first defined by Canary and Cupach (1988) as "a willingness to risk oneself because the relational partner is perceived as benevolent and honest" (p. 308). From a cultural perspective, the concept of "trust" in Chinese society is derived from Confucianism. Trust can indicate "discretion" and "congruence" in historically Confucian cultures (Huang, Ao, Lu, Ip, & Kao, 2017). Huang et al. (2017) also proposed "fairness" and "honesty" as two additional dimensions that can be used to measure social trust in China. When interpersonal and cultural perspectives are integrated, trust may be defined as the public's trust in a trustee's ability, benevolence, integrity, faithfulness, discretion, congruence, fairness, and honesty. These qualities or categories can serve as conduits for exploring public trust in Chinese societies.

Nevertheless, the complex contextual factors associated with mainland Chinese society provide no general theory about the conditions under which trust in government facilitates or fails to affect strategic communication. Thus, in addition to examining direct relationships between public trust and related outcomes, it is also sensible to propose that trust may not always result in certain communication effects because some situational factors may negate citizen action (Huang, 2015). Therefore, identifying the factors that could influence the relationship between citizens' trust and the presence or absence of communication behaviors is also important. Ultimately, to evaluate trust in relation to communication behaviors, it is essential to understand the dynamics that are inherent in the cultural contexts of specific strategic communication practices.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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