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Constructing positive public relations in China: Integrating public relations dimensions, dialogic theory of public relations and the Chinese philosophical thinking of Yin and Yang

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ABSTRACT

After thirty years of development in mainland China, public relations is suffering from a stigma because of its negative connotations, misconception and paradoxical perception among the general public, and development constraints. To overcome this stigmatization, a positive public relations theory that posits the positive functions of public relations in contemporary China is proposed by integrating the three public relations dimensions (i.e., communication, organization-public relationships, and ecological networks), the dialogic theory of public relations and the Chinese philosophical thinking of Yin and Yang. To achieve this, the paper first explains the cause of stigmatization in public relations. Second, it introduces the three dimensions of public relations as a profession and discipline. It then articulates how the dialogic theory of public relations and the Yin Yang philosophy contribute to the development of positive public relations. Lastly, it proposes the Taiji model of public relations and the underpinnings of positive public relations. It is important to note that positive public relations serves as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, existing theories of public relations.

1. Introduction

Research about public relations in mainland China (hereinafter “China”) has drawn wide academic attention in a variety of topics, such as public relations and Chinese modernity (e.g., Hu, Huang, & Zhang, 2015), corporate social responsibility (e.g., Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Boyd, 2016; Kim & Ji, 2017), social media for public relations practitioners (e.g., Luo & Jiang, 2012), public diplomacy (e.g., Zhong & Lu, 2013), issues and strategies in public relations (e.g., Meng, Yan, & Hung-Baesecke, 2013), crisis management (e.g., Liu, Chang, & Zhao, 2009), and stakeholder engagement and organization-public relationships (OPRs) on social networking sites (e.g., Chen, 2017; Men & Tsai, 2013). However, modern public relations in China, originally driven by the market economy in the early 1980s (Hung & Chen, 2004), is struggling with its legitimacy as a profession and discipline for many reasons (Chen, 2009; Hu et al., 2015; Huang, 2018).

Existing public relations literature, largely developed in North America, has demonstrated public relations as a function that provides values in relationship cultivation and development (Grunig & Huang, 2000), reputation management (Hong & Yang, 2011), and stakeholder

engagement (Johnston & Taylor, 2018). Unfortunately, public relations is stigmatized in China and most Chinese societies despite the rapid growth of studies conducted in these areas that contribute to the body of knowledge about it.

To overcome this stigmatization, this conceptual paper proposes a positive public relations theory that posits the positive functions of public relations in contemporary China by integrating the three public relations dimensions (i.e., communication, organization-public relationships, and ecological networks), the dialogic theory of public relations and the Chinese philosophical thinking of Yin and Yang. To that end, the paper first explains the cause of stigmatization in public relations applying Foucault (1984) problematization. Second, it introduces the three dimensions of public relations as a profession and discipline. It then articulates how the dialogic theory of public relations and the Yin Yang philosophy contribute to the development of positive public relations. Lastly, it proposes the Taiji model of public relations and the underpinnings of the positive theory of public relations. It is important to note that positive public relations serves as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, existing theories of public relations.

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2. Foucault's problematization approach

Foucault's problematization approach provides an intellectual method that enables scholars to question and examine the role of public relations in society (Motion & Leitch, 2007). Problematization is an approach through which scholars ask tough questions in order to reflect and explain how particular systems of thought and practice become accepted in society. This skill pinpoints paradoxes, difficulties, challenges, and conditions "where people question who they are, what they do, and the world in which they live" (Foucault, 1984, p. 10; Motion & Leitch, 2007). From Foucault's viewpoint, "why public relations in China has been stigmatized" is crucial to understanding and predicting the development of public relations in the nation. Public relations scholars should ponder why normative public relations concepts are weakly conceived while negative or unethical concepts are commonly associated with public relations by both public relations experts and laypeople in society. Public relations scholars should also strive to overcome the challenge of advocating normative public relations to bring out the discipline's positive contributions (e.g., creating of shared values, disaster relief, and reviving democracy) to organizations, stakeholders and society as a whole (Cheng, Jin, Hung-Baesecke, & Chen, 2018; Hung-Baesecke et al., 2016; Kent, 2013; Liu & Kim, 2011; McKie, Motion, & Munshi, 2004). From this direction, we first address the negative connotation, misconception and paradoxical perception, and the unprofessional public relations practices, that lead to stigmatization of public relations in China. To counter the stigmatization of public relations, we then develop the positive public relations theory to show how professional public relations can be practiced so as to enhance this profession's reputation and to bring harmony to the society.

3. Stigmatization of public relations in China

Public relations is a scientific discipline that brings value to organizations and publics through communication. However, in many societies, including China's, public relations has a poor reputation. Despite thirty years of development in China since 1988 (Hu et al., 2015), the professionalism of public relations has been only slightly increased. The profession is suffering from a stigma in the minds of Chinese. In China, it is difficult for public relations to earn legitimacy due to its negative connotations, misconception and paradoxical perception, and unprofessional practice.

3.1. Negative connotations of public relations in China

Modern public relations is a concept imported from the West, not well-known by the Chinese (Hung & Chen, 2004). Chen (2009) pointed out in her book *Modern Public Relations* that the "stakeholder" element of public relations is emphasized in the United States by examining communication strategies and effects as the focus. In Germany, the discipline (*Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*) looks deeply into the "public" tenet of public relations, focusing on the public participation in public affairs. Public relations in Japan emphasizes the "information" function of public relations and uses the name 広報, which means publicity by intensive media coverage. Public relations in Korean is 홍보활동 or "Hong Bo" (Park, 2001). Both terms stress the "relationship" element of public relations with emphasis on personal influence. Public relations in China, as argued by Chen (2009), emphasizes "relations" and "culture." The pronunciation of public relations in Chinese is *gong gong guan xi* and its acronym (i.e., PR) is "*gong guan*." This phrase for public relations and its acronym are often misunderstood and given a distorted meaning in Chinese language and culture. *Guan xi*, the Chinese word for relations, typically means "interpersonal relationships" or "affairs" that has no connotation of being "public" (in terms of being civic and transparent). Thus, Chinese people tend to perceive public relations as an expertise in the business of interpersonal relationships, especially in an improper way. This misconception was strengthened by the popular television

drama, *Miss Public Relations*, aired in 1989, due to the "Miss" in the title that implies prostitution in the cultural context and the image of public relations practitioners the drama portrayed (Hu et al., 2015). As a result, public relations in China has had connotations, such as "private relations," "exploitative relationships" and "relationship manipulation."

In addition, the Chinese acronym of public relations (i.e., *gong guan*) is easily confused with the phonetically similar term *Gongguan*, which often implies the malpractice of power abuse, bribery, coercion, and exploitation of relationships to overcome difficulties. *Guan xi* is perceived differently among Chinese from personal relationships from the Western perspective (Chua, Morris, & Ingram, 2008). *Guan xi* is a form of social capital resulting from networking and can be used in a positive or negative way in China. The cultural tradition associated with the name of the discipline results in negative connotations in China.

3.2. Misconception and paradoxical perception of public relations in China

The Chinese practice of public relations stands out in the global public relations industry (Ovaitt, 2011), in part because of how the local public views public relations. Zhang and Chen (2014) surveyed five groups of people in China who would be expected to have a better understanding of public relation than others: public officials, businessmen/entrepreneurs, media practitioners and scholars (working at universities), undergraduate students, and public relations and advertising (PRA) practitioners. The survey revealed six major findings as follows.

First, 52.9% of the four non-PRA groups of respondents (except public relations and advertising practitioners) perceived public relations as the practice of building and cultivating social relationships, instead of as a credible profession that provides expert consultation and solution. In addition, there was a significant perceptual difference of public relations among all the five groups of respondents. These findings suggest that the general public holds a misconception of public relations due to its limited knowledge about the profession.

Second, when asking about the public evaluation of public relations as ethical by fulfilling its responsibilities (i.e., "bright" public relations) or unethical by using deceptive tactics (i.e., "dark" public relations), the respondents of the five groups generally evaluated public relations as more ethical than unethical. However, there was a dramatic difference in the evaluation across the five groups. Less than 40% of the respondents in the PRA industry viewed public relations as ethical, while the surveyed media professionals and scholars had the most negative perception towards public relations.

Third, when asking about the issue of public interests or client interests pursued by public relations, the majority of respondents contended that public relations should pursue the interests of the public and promote public kindness. Only a few respondents believed that public relations professionals should aim at the interests of organizations or stakeholders they work for.

Fourth, only half of the respondents in general believed that public relations is "overt" (i.e., being transparent) rather than "covert" (i.e., having a hidden agenda) in its practice, with most (more than 80%) respondents in the PRA industry buying into the value and practice of "overt public relations." Also, while half of the respondents in general agreed that public relations has a positive image among the public in China, a few saw the public image as "ugly."

Fifth, when dealing with a crisis, most respondents thought that professional crisis communication should respond to the crisis immediately by considering the interests of both the organization and the public. However, the current public relations practice in this area was not viewed as meeting public expectations. Sixth, most respondents agreed on the positive contribution of public relations to journalism and believed the two professions should work together as a team.

In summary, the survey results suggest that the public has a dialectical view of public relations as a practice that both benefits and

harms the society. Although the public perception of public relations among the mainland Chinese is moving from the negative to the positive aspect, the perception is overall uncertain and diverse among the public.

3.3. Unprofessional practice of public relations in China

Chinese public relations practice has always been in a dilemma. On one hand, the market scale of public relations in China has rapidly grown with a total revenue of 1.5 billion yuan in 2000, 6 billion yuan in 2005, 21 billion yuan in 2010, and 43 billion yuan in 2015, representing an annual growth rate of 13.2%. The industry in 2016 reported an annual revenue growth rate of 16.3% with total revenue of 50 billion yuan (China International Public Relations Association Annual Survey, 2017). The data suggest that public relations is increasingly used by organizations and has become an important tool for marketing communication and image building.

On the other hand, the Chinese public relations industry has always faced serious development constraints resulting from malpractice and business challenges arising from the ever-changing media landscapes. The general public in China has witnessed public relations malpractice, including manipulating facts, sugar-coating, suppressing unfavorable news, bribing media and government officials, and removing negative comments and attacking competitors via rumors or fake negative comments on social media. The malpractice has seriously damaged the legitimacy of public relations.

At the same time, changing media landscapes result in business challenges that call for a change of business models. For instance, the prevalence of social media breaks down the silos of public relations and advertising and the two functions have therefore become more integrated than before. This creates threats and opportunities to the development of public relations in the market. The social media dominance has also lead to the era of big data in which the trends of “computing instead of thinking” and “cloud brain instead of human brain” have emerged. Consequently, some public relations firms (e.g., Blue Focus Communication) have transformed themselves into a more data-driven practice (i.e., “de-public-relationalization”), which further challenges the legitimacy and existence of public relations as a profession (Chen & Zhang, 2017). Not to mention that the practice of public relations in the transition surely has much room for improvement. Moreover, it is worth noting that the academic community of public relations in China has limitations in theorizing public relations that provides practical implications for the industry (Hu et al., 2015).

To deal with the stigmatization, this paper proposes a positive public relations theory that posits the positive functions of public relations in contemporary China by integrating the three public relations dimensions (i.e., communication, organization-public relationships, and ecological networks), the dialogic theory of public relations and the Chinese philosophical thinking of Yin and Yang.

4. The positive theory of public relations in China

Theorizing positive public relations started six years ago with its first deliverable of 15 principles of “Sunshine Public Relations” at the 6th International Forum of Public Relations and Advertising in Wuhan, China in 2013. Termed Sunshine Public Relations, Chen (2015) developed the 15 principles that articulate the positive quality of public relations, with a vision of constructing a cognitive framework of normative public relations similar to the Excellence Theory, to destigmatize public relations (see Chen & Chen, 2017; Zhang, Chen, Chen, & Lai, 2014, for details of Sunshine Public Relations). Under the influence of positive psychology (Sheldon & King, 2001), X. Chen later renamed Sunshine Public Relations to positive public relations to reflect the nuances of the theory that articulates the strengths and virtues of public relations that enable the profession and discipline to thrive.

4.1. Three dimensions of public relations

Chen (2016) asserted that as an academic concept and research discipline, public relations has three dimensions: public communication, public relationships, and ecological network. These dimensions constitute the essence of public relations and thus form the three approaches of public relations research (Chen, 2016).

The dimension of public communication views public relations as “the management of communication between an organization and its public” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6). Public relations practices for communication management should be in the public sphere and under public scrutiny, take public interests into account, and establish mutual understanding and constructive dialogues between the organization and the public based on facts, logic, listening, and respect (Macnamara, 2013). The dimension of public relationships sees public relations as the management of OPRs (Cutlip, 1994), social interactions that drive trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality (Hon & Grunig, 1999). The dimension of “ecological network” looks at public relations as an organization’s management of social networks with its publics, with other organizations, and with the environment (i.e., the entire populations of organizations) it operates (Chen, 2016; Yang & Taylor, 2015). The dimension examines the organization’s and the public’s power in the organization-public-environment system. Effective management of ecological network aims to construct networks with the structure and size that allow an organization to achieve its goals (Yang & Taylor, 2015) and form its identity while maintaining harmony with the organization-public-environment system (Chen, 2016). Public relations literature suggests that these three dimensions have become the main research domains in the discipline. The communication perspective is to address the questions on how organizations should conduct communication practices with publics. This perspective emphasizes the public nature of public relations and the symmetrical world view. The communicative perspective treats monologue and dialogue as two ends of a continuum. Public relations practices are communication processes moving from monologue to dialogue. Theoretical frameworks of the communicative perspective are developed from concepts of language, narrative, symbol, rhetoric, and discourse power of issue. This perspective eventually leads to the communication management and rhetoric paradigms (Chen, 2016).

The most fundamental question posed by the relational perspective is how public relations can build relationships with stakeholders. In other words, in certain situations, public relations outcomes show whether one party attempts to build trust or manipulate the other party. The relational perspective emphasizes the public nature of public relations and the world view of dialogue. The goal is to build mutually understanding and trusting relationships and to fulfill an organization’s social responsibility. As a result, public relations practitioners and managers should help organizations to reach mutual understanding with publics, rather than only being concerned with their own benefits (Chen, 2016).

The ecological perspective has provided a macro research direction to public relations, by emphasizing the network nature of public relations and the ecological world view (Yang & Taylor, 2015). This perspective mainly concerns the inquiries on how organizational ecological networks are influenced and constructed by public relations strategies, and how public relations strategies and tactics affect ecological networks formed by organizations, publics and the environment. Studies in this perspective are not about simple organization-centric dyadic relationships with publics; rather, they are about the complex and pluralistic relationships among organizations, publics and their environment. It starts with the core concepts such as sense of community (Kruckeberg, Starck, & Vujnovic, 2006), communalism (Lai, 2004), social network, communication flow, and the ecological niche approach (Chen, 2006) to explore the meanings and functions of public relations. Concepts from the field of sociology such as strong/weak relationships and social capital are the theoretical foundation of this perspective

(Chen, 2016).

These three research perspectives did not emerge simultaneously. There has been a theoretical shift from the communication paradigm to the relational and ecological paradigms. Specifically, the ecological perspective has filled the gap in the Excellence Theory in that this perspective shows the influence of the ecological environment on public relations practices. In addition, this perspective provides opportunities to foster the strategic and humanistic aspects of public relations practices.

Taking social practices and ontology into account, concepts of public communication, public relationships and ecological network are always co-existing. On one hand, public relationships frame the content and formats of public communication; on the other hand, both public relationships and public communication function in a large ecological network of the organization. All in all, processes of public relations can be considered as the interactive and dialogic processes by which public communication and public relationships interact with each other and facilitate the ecological network (Chen, 2016).

Furthermore, Chen (2016), applied Stewart (1999) three types of interpersonal communication to public relations and contended the following. Public relations strategically deals with the interplay of organization-public communication, OPRs, and network ecology in the organization-public-environment system. To reach this, there are three types of interactions (i.e., flow) in the networks: information flow (related to Stewart (1999) impersonal communication) on the level of social division of labor; culture flow on the level of values resulting from one's role (related to Stewart (1999) quasi-personal communication); and emotion flow on the level of interpersonal exchanges (related to Stewart (1999) personal communication). Stewart (2006) believed that these three types of flow are communication processes which have moved from social division of labor for task completion to cultural values for making connections and finally reached interpersonal emotional relationships. These thoughts therefore formed the theoretical foundation of the positive public relations proposed by this study.

4.2. Dialogic theory of public relations

Dialogic public relations is an emerging approach in the field (Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018). Dialogic scholars in public relations emphasize that dialogue is public-centric and for cultivating OPRs, rather than treating the public as the means to the organization's end (Kent, 2018; Kent & Taylor, 1998). Organizations and publics in dialogue respect each other, engage with listening and feedback, and pursue mutually acceptable decisions and mutually beneficial OPRs (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). As Taylor and Kent (2014) argued, dialogue is an orientation. It is a communication outcome but more importantly, it is a positive emotional and cognitive experience and a willingness to communicate continuously. Dialogue represents a positive aspect of public relations because it facilitates organization-public communication, quality OPRs, and healthy community networks. As a result, dialogic public relations serves as a good approach to construct the positive theory of public relations. The development of dialogue research can be traced back to work done by Bakhtin, Bohm, Buber, Gadamer, and Habermas (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). The concept of dialogue has been discussed in different disciplines, for example, interpersonal communication (Rawlins, 2009), organizational communication (Medved, 2004), health communication (Dutta & Basnyat, 2008), development communication (Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1997), and activism and social change (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). In public relations, research on dialogue started with Pearson (1989) work, which adopted Habermas' approach. Pearson developed a theory of ethics in public relations. His ethical approach mandated that stakeholders should be empowered to engage in dialogue with organizations. Pearson (1989) considered that what ethical public relations should do was to establish a dialogic system, instead of monologue strategies. In addition, the dialogic approach of ethics also advocated the public-centered

approach in developing relationships with stakeholders, instead of "seeing the job of public relations professionals as hired guns who primarily serve organizational goals" (Kent, 2018, p. 133).

Since Pearson, Kent and Taylor have undertaken a series of research studies on dialogue theory and the five dialogic principles (for example, Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). The five dialogic principles (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kent, 2018) are as follows: Risk, meaning one understands the vulnerability of entering into unexpected circumstances, is open, and accepts the uniqueness of others. Mutuality highlights being collaborative with others and the acknowledgement that interacting with others and publics should be on an equal basis. Proximity involves presence and real-time interactions, as well as one's being aware of others' beliefs which govern relationships past, present, and future. Empathy is about being supportive of others and having a communal motivation that values the other's wellbeing as being more than or equal to one's own. Commitment is about being genuine and being committed in keeping an open and continuous conversation and effort to understand what others are saying and feeling.

In addition, Taylor and Kent (2014), cited in Kent, 2018) have proposed a continuum with one pole being propagandistic and monologue, and the other pole as dialogue. Propaganda is considered one-way communication while dialogue values interactions between individuals and fosters the values of being understanding, doing something meaningful, co-creating reality and being sympathetic and empathetic. Between the two poles of the continuum, there exist different contextual factors that affect the communication process and success. For the two dialogic theorists, dialogue means the communication process is rule-bounded, but is also a process of relationship building (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

4.3. The Chinese Taiji culture and its Yin Yang philosophy

In traditional Chinese culture, Taiji enjoys a priority status in sociology. Taiji is formed from the Confucian Classics and the Six Classical Arts, which means the origin of all things (Yu, 2008). Literally, "Tai" means coming to, and "Ji" means limitations. That is to say, be as great as possible or as small as possible, standing for infinity and infinitesimal. It is so grand that it has no limits, or so small that it has no inherence. It would be appropriate to describe the far-reaching practice sector and the lack of standing point in the academic sector of public relations with the term Taiji. Taiji is the chaos at the very first beginning of all things on earth. When Taiji divides into two, the clear air goes up and becomes Tian (heaven), whereas the turbid air goes down and becomes Di (earth). Tian, also known as Yang, is characteristic of positivity, motivation, vigor and forward progress. Di, also known as Yin, is characteristic of passivity, retreat, compliance and backward progress (Yu, 2008).

The major concept of Taiji culture is the philosophy of Yin and Yang, which significantly influences the Chinese cognitive process (Chen, 2002). In elaborating the philosophical characteristics of Yin Yang, G-M. Chen (2008) provided an insightful explanation, *I Ching* (i.e., the *Book of Changes*) and the continuum nature of dichotomies as follows:

As an unalterable rule, change dictates the fundamental principle of the universe. Chinese sages used to say that change itself is the only constant phenomenon of the universe...In Chinese intellectual pursuit, the concept of change was mainly stipulated in the ancient Chinese writing, *I Ching*, or the *Book of Changes*. The concept of change not only gives *I Ching* its name but also formulates its system of thought...It is comprised of sun and moon. The sun represents the nature of yang, and the moon the nature of yin. Together, the interaction of sun and moon comes to the emphasis of yin and yang in *I Ching*. ...Change as a fundamental principle of the universe forms ontological assumptions of the Chinese philosophy and was further

developed into a set of guidelines for Chinese beliefs and behaviors. Change discourse naturally became the central focus in early Chinese discursive practices. ...According to I Ching, the formation of change relies on the dialectical interaction of yin and yang, the two opposite but complementary forces of the universe, with yin representing the attributes of yieldingness and submissiveness and yang representing unyieldingness and dominance....This discourse of endless, cyclic, and transforming movement of change continues to influence the philosophical discourse and its assumptions never cease to affect Chinese behaviors in the contemporary Chinese world (pp. 7–9).

The Yin Yang philosophy captures the Chinese view of paradox as “interdependent” rather than “exclusive” opposites (Fang, 2011). In other words, Chinese perceive an entity as “both/and” instead of “either/or” (Fang, 2011, p. 34). For example, “weiji,” the Chinese word for crisis, means danger (i.e., “wei”) and opportunity (i.e., “ji”). Chinese culture contains both femininity and masculinity (Fletcher & Fang, 2006) and the Chinese view public relations as both positive and negative (Zhang & Chen, 2014). Taiji has been depicted as a round diagram consisting of two fish-like shapes of the black and white colors, also known as Yin Yang Fish. The diagram of Taiji fish conveys the philosophical idea that everything is constructed by Yin and Yang, which interplay with each other to form a dynamic and paradoxical unity (Fang, 2011).

4.4. The Taiji model of public relations

Applying Yin Yang in the Chinese Taiji culture (Fang & Faure, 2011), this study proposes the “Taiji model of public relations” (see Fig. 1), a dialectical model that illustrates a mutual conversion of positive and passive public relations.

In the Taiji model of public relations, the dashed circle at the outermost limit stands for the ecological network environment of organization-public dialogue. Three lines respectively represent the communication, relationship and content continuums between organizations and publics; these three continuums describe directed, continuously changing, and gradually drilling-down public relations processes. Positive public relations considers the communication between organizations and publics as a communication continuum moving from monologue to dialogue; relationships between organizations and publics as a relationship continuum moving from mutual control to mutual trust; and communication content between organizations and publics as a content continuum moving from professional messages to cultural values and finally reaching emotional commitment. In the relational ecological system formed by organizations, publics and the

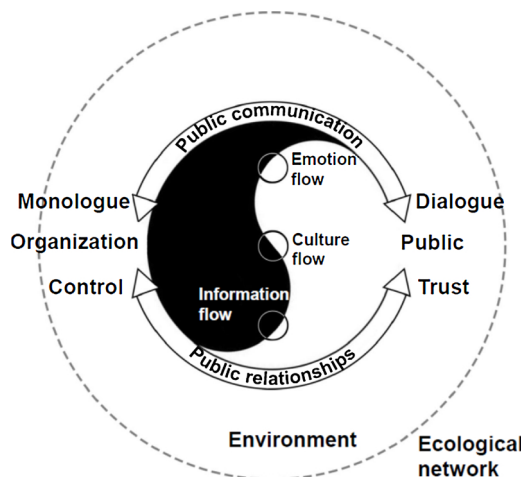


Fig. 1. Taiji model of public relations.

environment, these three continuums keep changing, influencing and interacting with each other; moving from positive to passive and back again; and eventually create two patterns in the model: the positive public relations (the Yang (white) fish) and the passive public relations (the Yin (black) fish).

Positive public relations can be best illustrated by the Chinese Taiji culture, meaning the communication process continuously moves between positivity and passivity. It is a process of maintaining the equilibrium between organizational autonomy and engaging with publics, between propaganda and dialogue, between reason and affection, between control and trust, and between cultural hegemony and sharing. It also illustrates the process in which public relations attempts to identify and explore the co-existing strategies for positive and passive public relations, respectively. Positive public relations encourages actions that create values to the organization, public, and society.

4.5. Fundamental principles of the Taiji model of public relations

The proposed Taiji model follows three main principles that capture the nuances of public relations in China: simplicity, variability and immutability. *Simplicity* refers to the model’s application to explain the dynamic and paradoxical nature of every public relations practice by the duality of Yin (positive/explicit public relations) and Yang (passive/implicit public relations) (Mao, 2017).

Variability refers to the unlimited possibilities of how public relations can be developed and practiced based on the interplay of Yin and Yang. Even though a phenomenon or entity can be explained by two opposite yet interdependent elements, the two elements will mutually transform into each other in a process of balancing under various conditions to form mutual affinity (for consistency and equilibrium) and mutual negation (for completeness and punctuated shift) (Li et al., 2009, p. 416). Public relations continuously takes dual considerations (e.g., organization versus public, monologue versus dialogue, etc.) in practice. The Taiji model of public relations indicates a diversity of strategies by considering the communication, relationships, and ecology between organizations and publics and among each other. While the practice of public relations can employ various strategies, positive public relations aims to help organizations and publics to take actions that express kindness, attentiveness, benevolence, and benefits to each other.

Immutability refers to the never-changing tenet of the change (i.e., the mutual transformation of Yin and Yang): people should cultivate a harmonious relationship inside themselves and with their organizations, societies, and the ecological environment through their virtues and charity (Mao, 2017). This principle suggests that public relations professionals and scholars should cultivate what is best within themselves (e.g., integrity and virtues) to advance in their profession and facilitate mutual benefits to the organization and the public such as to form harmony with their world and thrive. It also argues that public relations is a scientific study that focuses on not only on the strategy and tactics but also “people” involved in the process.

5. Seven underpinnings of positive public relations in China

Based on the Taiji model of public relations, this study proposes seven theoretical underpinnings of positive public relations in China as follows.

5.1. Underpinning 1

The nature of an organization’s communication with its publics is a continuum of monologue and dialogue. The more the communication moves towards dialogue, the more positive public relations behaviors will be. Conversely, the more the communication moves towards monologue, the more passive public relations behaviors will be.

5.2. Underpinning 2

The nature of the organization-public relationship is a continuum of control over each other and mutual trust. Positive public relations behavior moves towards the relationship from one side controlling to mutual trust. When the behavior leads to increasing control, the public relations behavior becomes more passive.

5.3. Underpinning 3

Positive public relations drives the content of organization-public communication to be more informational, shared value-driven, and accompanied by emotions (i.e., humane/audience-centric content). The more a communication content is inhumane/egoistic (i.e., emphasizing the information itself while ignoring the other two elements), the more passive the public relations practice is.

5.4. Underpinning 4

The practice of positive public relations is dynamic by considering the communication continuum of monologue versus dialogue, the relationship continuum of control versus trust, and the communication content continuum of inhumane versus humane (information versus cultural value versus emotion).

5.5. Underpinning 5

Positive public relations ethics are affected by cultural values embedded in the organization-public dialogue. The more a dialogue between an organization and its publics adapts to shared values, the more ethical the positive public relations behaviors are. The more dominating an organization is in asserting its own value in dialogues with its publics, the more unethical the public relations behaviors will be.

5.6. Underpinning 6

The level of positivity of an organization's public relations practices is affected by the positive human functioning (i.e., the desire to make one's own life meaningful) of its public relations professionals and the dynamics of the organization's ecological network.

5.7. Underpinning 7

Positive and passive public relations are not dichotomous. They co-exist in the realm of an organization's practices. Positive public relations refers to the process of transforming such practice from passivity (control, monologue, egoistic content) to positivity (trust, dialogue, audience-centric content) through dialogues in order to maximize the positive functions of public relations in contemporary China. Generally speaking, as a theoretical proposition, positive public relations adopts both the Chinese Yin and Yang perspective and Western dialogic approach to comprehend and advance the positive aspect of public relations. To be specific, positive public relations includes the aims to understand and improve (1) the willingness and action of dialogue in public communication, (2) the positive perception and emotional experience of public relations, (3) the positive characteristics of public relations professionals, (4) the construction of the systematization of positive public relations, and (5) the ecological network environment of positive public relations. Positive public relations calls for efforts to overcome the negative perceptions, passive strategies and emergency responses in the traditional practices of public relations. It asks for more positive, more cheerful and more appreciative mindset, insight and practice, so as to exploit the positive potential, motivation and capacity of the practice of public relations.

6. Conclusion

Since its birth, modern public relations in China has been a discipline and profession with a mixed reputation. With the stigmatization of public relations resulting from some unprofessional and unethical practices, publics' negative perceptions on this profession have been reinforced over time. Public relations scholars have been working hard attempting to demonstrate the values of public relations and to establish normative theories for public relations.

To illustrate how positive development and practices of public relations in Chinese society can become possible, we developed the Taiji model of public relations and its seven underpinnings, encompassing the Chinese wisdom that depicts a Yin-Yang dialectic relationship of the dynamic conversion between positive and passive public relations. In addition, we also incorporated the dialogic theory of public relations developed from the Western perspective to further pave the way to enhancing more positive and ethical practices in this profession. We believe this theory and the underpinnings can alleviate the stigmatization of public relations in Chinese society.

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