2016

De-Westernizing public relations: A comparative analysis of culture and economics structure in China and Mexico

César García

De-Westernizing public relations: A comparative analysis of culture and economics structure in China and Mexico

Cesar Garcia, Central Washington University

Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to challenge the normative ideal of public relations, usually shaped by a Western perspective, highlighting there is a broad typology of non-Western PR models, which are the norm across the world. This article emphasizes how public relations principles of excellence are not only exceptionally met but also suggests that Western public relations can learn from the rest of the world about, for example, how personal relations can enrich the profession. Using a qualitative method, this paper compares two populated countries with large economies, China and Mexico. The main finding of the article is that there are important forces, such as patronage relationships and economic structures, which place limitations on the trend toward homogenization in how the public relations discipline is understood, as well as in the convenience and even need of looking for a set of universal public relations standards.

Key words: Public Relations; China; Mexico

Introduction

Historically, the state of public relations outside of the Western countries, mainly the United States and Europe, has been described as perpetually catching up with the 'West.' For example, in her introductory chapter to public relations in South America, Ferrari (2009) admits a lack of legitimation of the profession in the sub-continent but at the same time argues that most professionals hold "as a universal truth that public relations is a managerial, strategic role and that a technical or tactical focus is not appropriate" (p. 723). Similarly, this 'catching-up' view leads to numerous examples of public relations in the Asia-Pacific being "misinterpreted as anomalies, contradictions or 'delays'" (Halff & Gregory, 2014), especially when public relations is more government than corporate centered.

These biases have persisted despite the efforts of numerous scholars to demonstrate respect for the idea of diversity through the use of generic principles that should vary across cultures and nation-states. Gupta and Bartlett (2007) pointed out how the role of collectivism and business management in Asia shapes public relations practice in this continent. Grunig (2010) argued public relations in most of the world is more effective when it adapts some generic principles to the specific cultural, political, social and economic conditions. Sriramesh (2010) suggests 'glocalisation' as a way that some universal principles of public relations can be made to fit local cultures.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the North American origin of these generalizations, mainly the ubiquously quoted generic principles of PR excellence (Vercic, Grunig, & Grunig, 1996; Grunig, 2010), introduce a clear Western bias in terms of orientation (Choi & Cameron, 2005; Gregory and Halff, 2013). Pritchard (2006) and Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) argued that generic principles (in the public relations domain or any discipline) lead to the reinforcement of intellectual domination and a managerial logic at the expense of alternative and dissenting voices. In other words, if we agree that the generic principles of public relations should adapt and find their voice in different cultures, then we are admitting that those (Western inspired) principles are the right ones.

There are few non-Western examples of that. Fuse, Land and Lambiase (2010) used one of a few different approaches offering Confucionism from Asia and the Palaver Tree concept from Africa as an alternative to Western utilitarianism, or in other words, an ethical perspective rather than a strategical or tactical approach. Halff and Gregory (2014) additionally proposed disregarding universalist and epistemological approaches and developing instead an analysis based on indigenous and historiographic data.

Therefore, a de-Westernization of the public relations field seems appropriate not only to avoid ethnocentrism but also as a method to put forward local paradigms that can contribute to the enrichment of the profession across cultures (Servaes, 2014).

Cross-cultural or cross-national comparisons are relatively frequent in public relations scholarship (Taylor, 2000; Pan & Xu, 2009; García, 2011; Toledano & Avidar, 2016). What is less frequent, however, are comparisons that don't include any Western democracies but only emerging countries from different continents. Those that include Western democracies and emerging countries have tended to be restricted to longitudinal surveys (Yang & Taylor, 2013). One of the few exceptions, the cross-nation comparative use of craft public relations models in Greece, Taiwan and India, aimed to demonstrate the generic applicability of some principles of the two-way symmetrical model even in non-Western cultures (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Yi-Hui & Lyra, 1995).

Taking into consideration that North America and Europe represent barely 15 percent of the global population (United Nations, 2015), and that most public relations

models deviate from the norm (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2012), the idea of "provincializing Europe" (Chakrabarty, 2000) does not look unreasonable based on two premises:

> "First, the recognition that Europe's acquisition of the adjective 'modern' for itself is an integral part of the story of European imperialism within global history; and second, the understanding that this equating of a certain version of Europe with 'modernity' is not the work of Europeans alone; third-world nationalisms, as modernizing ideologies par excellence, have been equal partners in the process" (p. 43).

An appropriate way to provincialize Europe (or North America) is to develop comparative analyses between dissimilar enough non-Western countries, avoiding the temptation of identifying one of the terms of comparison with the normative ideal as has traditionally been done because most of the scholarship has been implemented by Western or Western-based scholars. If periphery is the norm, a comparison between two "peripherical countries" should help to prove that not only is the current perspective of the field ethnocentric but also that there is a varied tipology of non-Western countries that should be placed in a different part of the public relations continuum according to the environmental factors shaping the public relations practice.

Most recent global public relations approaches to these environmental factors highlight the importance of the culture as the primary factor (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2012) without undermining other factors such as the political culture and economic structure (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009; García, 2013, 2015).

Method

This article uses a critical-conceptual method, meaning "a re-conceptualization of themes from secondary qualitative analysis of existing qualitative data sets and reviews of published qualitative papers" (Protheroe, Rogers, Kennedy, Macdonald, & Lee, 2008, p. 3). Through the collection and review of existing data, this qualitative article analyzes the interaction between public relations practice, the concept of clientelism, and economic structure in China and Mexico, two populated countries with large economies and societies ruled by principles such as *guanxi*, *clientelismo* and *caciquismo.* The similarities between these concepts and their implications in the public relations industry have been demonstrated in recent literature on this topic (García, 2013; 2014). In both countries, due to the force of myth and tradition, information is considered private and some of the strategies used by organizations, such as the exchange of favors, gift giving, or banquet attendance, are not very strategic by Western standards.

For that purpose, the article follows three steps. First, it analyzes some key cultural, historical and economic similarities that make these two countries an identifiable example of characteristics that are the norm in most of the world. Second, it describes their common characteristics of public relations practice. Third, it explains how there is a correlation between culture, politics and degree of economic development that questions the traditional parameters of excellent public relations, which, to a certain extent, should be considered a Western invention.

Key cultural, historical and economic similarities of Mexico & China

The practice of public relations in China shares a number of characteristics that distinguish it from the West. Some of the same characteristics can also be found, in some ways more sharply defined and in other ways less, in the public relations practice of Latin American countries, particularly Mexico. Drawing a similarity between China and

Mexico may come as a surprise for some, but there are clear historical parallels between the two regions.

Both cultures share the importance of building personal relationships around the concept of reciprocity, and their history and present represent a combination of authoritarian and liberal features. While the Chinese state is a highly authoritarian regime of control, Mexico still had a democratic deficit until very recent times (one party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional [PRI] ruled Mexico for seven decades). Moreover, their political cultures, although different, are antithetical to capitalistic developments. To bring the Chinese public relations practice into a comparison involves "a recognition of its Leninist and Maoist legacies in relation to the worldwide struggles against capitalism and Western imperialism" (Zhao, 2012, p. 150). Likewise, it requires an understanding of the role of activism and revolutionary movements in Mexico. Rebeil, Montoya and Hidalgo (2009) argue, due to the need of public policy reform, that social movements in Mexico tend to address their demands more to the government than the corporate sector, which is still widely distrusted.

Clientelismo, caciquismo and *guanxi*

Although the English language cannot capture fully the meaning of these terms in their own languages, *clientelismo*, *caciquismo* and *guanxi* are socio-political phenomena. *Clientelismo* 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). *Caciquismo* is a patronage system whereby the domination of a local or regional boss is based "on a combination of family- and kinship-based (including ritual kinship, *compadrazgo*) alliances and patron-client networks, control over patronage resources and coercive sanctions" (Middlebrook, 2009, p. 421). The main difference between the two terms is that *caciquismo* usually has a regional or local character and in its origins was restricted to rural areas because patron-client ties can be more easily manipulated at a local level. A *cacique*'s position and power are generally informal but sometimes also occupy elective or administrative positions. In its most modern forms, *caciques* can be found in settings such as trade unions, squatter settlements and universities (Knight & Pansters, 2005).

However, *caciquismo* usually manifests itself through political *clientelismo*. It involves an informal/unofficial exchange of favors between the patron and his/her supporters (clients) whereby the clients receive economic and social support from the patron and the patron can dispose freely of his/her supporters' votes to retain power. Therefore, 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 an acceptance that they should be monopolized and allocated freely by the patron or *cacique* (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984).

Guanxi can be understood as a type of *clientelismo* based on the existence of patron-client ties between a state's administration and private businesses (Wank, 1996; 2002; Barrington, 2012). The Chinese expression *guanxi* is made up of two characters. The character *guan* means gate or hurdle while *xi* refers to a relationship or connection. In a literal sense of the word, *guanxi* can be translated as "pass the gate and get connected" (Lee & Dawes, 2005). The concept of *guanxi* covers the private and the public spheres by involving personal, family, political and/or business relationships. A main difference between *guanxi* and 'networking' in Western or Latin countries is that the latter is more impersonal and usually refers only to the professional sphere (Chan, 2006).

Chang and Holt (2001) described four different ways to build *guanxi* with another person: first, appealing to kin relationships; second, claiming a prior association; third,

using personal connections or mediators; fourth, using social skills like the ability to exchange favors to enhance social interactions.

Despite the importance given to personal ties, there are still significant differences between *clientelismo* and *guanxi*. While the success of clientelism in Mexico can be explained by a lack of social capital, in China *guanxi* is an inheritance of Confucianism, a philosophy of human nature.

Clientelismo and *caciquismo* can be explained through the persistence of traditional hierarchical social structures inherited from feudal times, particularly the personal dependence of rural populations on landowners that alienated those individuals who lacked access to the centers of power (Roniger & Gunes-Ayata, 1984). Indeed, it is a consequence of the late development of liberal institutions in Southern Europe and Latin America and the relatively low development of rational-legal authority (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002).

In China, *guanxi* is not a response to the system's failures to adapt to modernity, but rather is based on a millenary secular religion or philosophy, Confucianism, that guides people towards fulfilment and perfection (Huang, 2000). Although there is a notion of *gao guanxi* (manipulating relationships), and *guanxi* can be seen as a source of legitimacy for the Chinese upper classes to retain their power, *guanxi* can also be considered idealistic in its search for a hierarchical social order proclaimed by Confucianism to preserve society's harmony. Therefore, this asymmetry of power should not be considered unethical in nature (Lovett, Simmons & Kali, 1999). 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). *Guanxi* should not be explained as a failure to configurate an open society as is the case of clientelistic societies such as Mexico's.

Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984) highlight another important distinction between these concepts. While in hierarchical societies such as China's the principles of access to public goods have traditionally been particularistic, for example in the hands of government officials, in clientelistic societies they have been universalistic in theory. The preamble of the first Mexican Constitution of 1824 established that all Mexican citizens should enjoy equal rights, with open markets and the organization of the means of production not embedded in ascriptive units.

Nonetheless, the fact that the limited access of certain groups to the centers of production was not based on the basic premises of society makes clientelistic systems more fragile and permeable, which is not necessarily the case in the Chinese ascriptive hierarchical model. Patrons or *caciques* in Mexico had prominent positions as holders of political and economic power or social capital but they were also vulnerable because the relative hierarchical standing of patrons and clients was not fully prescribed and therefore disputes between patrons and clients arose frequently. Ultimately, the relative level of openness in Mexican society may give clients the capacity to accumulate resources in a number of markets and thereby threaten the patron's monopoly over the centers of decisions and markets. The history of Carlos Slim, the multi-billionaire owner of the media empire Televisa, provides one such example. The son of Lebanese immigrants who was able to circumvent social barriers thanks to his business acumen and success, Slim became part of the Mexican clientelistic establishment and amassed his fortune (Danner, 2015).

In order to understand the influence of *guanxi* and *clientelism* in public relations and to draw parallels between China and Mexico, certain cultural elements such as the importance of personal relationships and mechanisms of reciprocity must be examined.

Cultural elements

Power distance

Clientelismo, *caciquismo* and *guanxi* flourish in societies with a certain pattern of cultural characteristics that shape the life of organizations and public relations as well as the form of organizational behavior.

According to Hofstede (2001) and Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), power distance in particular affects the culture of organizations and, thus, how they relate to their publics (García, 2015). Power distance refers to the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept inequality and power asymmetries (Martin & Nakayama, 2013). China belongs to the group of high power distance countries (score: 80, rank: 7) and Mexico has an even higher ranking (score: 81, rank: 5).

High power distance levels involve centralized organizational structures with an empowered top management that determines the functioning rules (including communication management). Larger power distance societies have lower levels of activism. China and Mexico would be grouped under the umbrella of the 'family' model. Both countries are characterized by an authoritarian organizational approach to conflict resolution and a reluctance to let the public drive a company's reputation. The 'family' model would be characteristic of Asian cultures where "the owner-manager is the almighty (grand)father" (246), and the 'pyramid' model would fit Mexico and other Latin American countries where authority tends to be centralized and "the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat" (Hofstede, 2016, para. 3). Although both models believe in a common boss that **makes** decisions and solves conflicts, the main difference is in how each culture copes with ambiguity. While Chinese people feel comfortable in asymmetrical relationships with a very limited set of rules, Mexicans develop rigorous sets of rules even if they are not followed or respected very closely by any of the parties involved. In sum, there seems to be a clear correlation between concentration of power in one person, high power distance and the need for individuals and/or organizations to engage in patronage relationships through a display of personal relationship tactics to obtain favors from authority figures.

Interdependence and personal relationships

For a number of non-Western collectivistic cultures, including China and Mexico, "the group to which a person belongs is the most important social units" (Lustig & Koester, p. 116). Therefore, "it is the 'other' or the 'self-in-relation-to-other'" that is focal in individual experience" (Markus & Kitayama, p. 225).

"A defining character of people in collectivist cultures is their notable concern with relationships" (Triandis & Suh, 2002, p. 139). In these societies, building and preserving personal relationships is the cornerstone of people's stability (Leung, 1997). People rely on their relationships (family, friends, organizations, etc.) to look after them and in exchange these people offer their loyalty to the group.

A number of concepts in the Chinese and Mexican cultures tell us about the relevance of personal relationships that permeate every aspect of life. Though not equivalent terms, it can be said that *guanxi* (relationships), *mianzi* (prestige face), *renqing* (special favors) and *bao* (reciprocity and practice of gifting) can find correlative terms in the Mexican culture. Four Spanish words are strongly connected to the importance of forging strong personal relationships, the importance of personal reputation and the sentiment of reciprocity: *simpatía (*emotional support*)*, *palanca* (power derived from personal connections), *confianza* (trust) and *estabilidad* (long lasting relationships).

No other term like *guanxi* better synthesizes the importance of personal connections, not only for organizational but also for social purposes, in the Chinese culture. The construction of *guanxi* involves the exchange of *renqing* and *bao* as they affect relationships. *Renqing* and *bao* are inseparable concepts as reflected in the old Chinese proverb that "repaying renqing is more pressing than that of (repaying) any financial debt" (Chan, 2011).

Gouldner (1960) highlights the universality of reciprocity but also notes how its manifestations vary with time and place. Yan (1996) argues the Western ideology of pure gift has obscured the fact that gift exchange in Western societies is also regulated by many rules and serves to deal with "relationships that are important but insecure" (Caplow, 1982, p. 391). For Yang (1989), the main difference with Western reciprocity is that the units involve families and not just individuals; the return of *renqing* or *bao* does not have to target the original giver but other relatives or close acquaintances.

As a high-context and collectivistic culture, in Mexico the use of personal influence or having connections plays a large role in the public relations arena (Hackley, Dong & Howard, 2009).

A key factor to building a network and forging strong personal relationships is *simpatía*. To be "*simpático*" means to have an attractive, sparkling personality, a quality that opens the gate to relationships. Being *simpático* is perceived as a virtue that stresses commitment to harmony and cooperation and organizations and, therefore, is "something to strive for in organizational relationships and is demonstrated through communication behaviors that show positive emotional connection with others" (Lindsley & Braithwaite, 2006, p. 282).

The concept of *palanca* "refers to leverage, or power derived from affiliated connections." *Tener palanca* emphasizes one's network of contacts in the professional world but also among family members, former classmates or friends. It is one's capacity to make the capital of relationships accumulated over a lifetime operational in order to circumvent rules or accelerate processes if and when needed (Archer & Fitch, 1994). Like *renqing*, *palanca* does not necessarily involve money or gifts, but is more a system of mutual obligation and reciprocity.

Like in China, one of the core aspects of a solid relationship in Mexico is the generation of *confianza* (Hodges & Daymon, 2008), which "is built through communicative behaviors that adhere to cultural norms for face saving" (Lindsley & Braithwaite, 2006, p. 281). *Confianza* is co-created when there is reciprocity between both parts implying that each party should protect the other's positive face in interactions. Likewise, *mianzi* is related to reputation gained by personal effort and smart maneuvering: "it is a kind of recognition ego dependent on the external environment" (Chan, 2006). In China, it is a method of building *guanxi* for a person and helping another person maintain his or her face and do 'face-work.' Mianzi creates trust between people and it is an essential, although sometimes insufficient, part of *guanxi*.

Estabilidad, or stability, should be the outcome of a *relación de confianza* (trust relationship) in Mexico. This stability can only be achieved when there are strong personal bonds and reciprocal favors, and it is reflected in the tendency of prioritizing relationships over tasks (Lindsley & Braithwaite, 2006, p. 283). In *guanxi* terms, "when people say they have good *guanxi* with another person, they mean that they have known the other person for a relatively long time and that they have helped each other before" (Chung & Hamilton, 2001, p. 327).

The commonalities between Chinese and Mexican key cultural terms should not be surprising. According to Hofstede (2001), there is a correlation between collectivism, long-term orientation and emphasis on personal relationships.

Economic structure

The impact of the economic structure on the development of symmetrical public relations, assuming a liberal free market economy, has been overlooked (Zaharna, 2001). In the 2015 Index of Economic Freedom by The Heritage Foundation, a ranking that measures degrees of state intervention, Mexico and China fell way behind. In a list of 178 countries, China (144) was included in the group labeled as "mostly unfree," while Mexico (62) was "moderately free." Only 38 of 178 countries in the world have economies that can be considered "free" or "mostly free." In most of the world, excessive government regulation, lack of private capital or corruption make economies "moderately free" when not "unfree" or "repressed."

Indeed, the Chinese state still controls many enterprises including the corporate Chinese giants. The state owns more than 145,000 companies (Bradsher, 2012). In the top 12 Chinese companies on the Forbes' list, and 76 out of the top 98 corporations, the Chinese government is the main shareholder (Cendrowski, 2015). These represent 38 percent of China's industrial assets (Curran, 2015). Considering that local and national administrations are financially dependent on the profits of state enterprises and they provide political patronage for factions of the Communist Party whose support is crucial to the government, it should not be surprising that "the government is often the 'sole public'" of many public relations efforts (Sriramesh & Enxi, 2004, p. 16).

Similarly, it is often more important for Mexican businesses to build clientelistic relationships with government officials to try to circumvent the rules. Mexico is the best example of the so-called *capitalismo de amigos* (crony capitalism). For example, in the 1990's, state privatization of most of the country's largest companies favored financial groups close to then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, including the richest man in the world, Carlos Slim (Guillén, 1996). Another characteristic of the Mexican economy is that 99 percent of companies are small and mid-size enterprises (SMEs) and they are much smaller than in developed countries (OECD, 2013). The competitiveness of these companies tends to be mostly based on price rather than brand building.

As we will see next when analyzing the commonalities between both countries regarding the public relations landscape, the prominent role of the government in the economic decisions explain the centrality of government relations and how *clientelismo* and *guanxi* shape the definition of public relations strategic thinking in each of these countries.

Common characteristics of public relations practice

China and Mexico are not twins in cultural and economic terms. After all, even considering all of its imbalances and imperfections, Mexico is a democracy with a powerful private sector that represents 84 percent of the total economic activity (Foncerrada, 2009). In turn, and despite its market-oriented state companies and vigorous private sector, China is still an authoritarian regime operated by a single party that controls the media through its Propaganda Department (McGregor, 2011).

However, the discrepancies between the countries seem to carry less weight than the similarities when describing the characteristics of their public relations landscapes. Indeed, there are a number of shared characteristics of the public relations profession in both countries that can also be found in other regions of the world (Southern Europe, India or Latin America) where personal relationships are crucial, there are clientelistic

practices and the state plays a decisive role in the economic life (Grunig *et al.*, 1995; García, 2015). The main commonalities concerning public relations in China and Mexico are its minor status as a discipline, the different focus of the profession, an emphasis on media relations, the importance of personal relationships and the significant role of government relations.

The minor status of public relations as a communication discipline

Public relations is a relatively new field in both China and Mexico. Incipient capitalism or dictatorships made its practice as such impossible beyond propaganda during most of the 20th century.

Political and economic events have shaped the practice of public relations in both countries. Although China is still an authoritarian regime today, Chen and Culbertson (2009) describe how the profession started to gain a public presence in the country at the beginning of the 1980s after Deng Xiaoping led reforms. In Mexico, the 70-year rule of the PRI created a *de facto* dictatorship for most of the 20th century with a highly centralized power base thanks to which large business organizations made political and economic decisions for their own benefit (*Rebeil et al.*, 2009).

As a consequence of the lack of political and economic freedom, public relations work has long been considered an occupation, and education in the field is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the case of Mexico, the US influence has been decisive. Two Mexican universities, Universidad Latinoamericana and Universidad del Pacífico, began offering a focus on public relations as part of the communication profession by 1976 (Rebeil*, Montoya and Hidalgo, 2009). In 1994, the Chinese education administration appointed Sun Yat-Sen University as the first university to offer a public relations major as an experimental project (Zhang, 2010).

Like in other South American countries, normative theories in Mexico are provided by foreign publications that do not fit the political, social, or cultural context (Ferrari, 2009 Public relations studies in China also have tended to largely borrow from American theories and models based on a rational choice and managerial perspective that do not square well with Chinese cultural principles (Hou & Zhu, 2012).

The outcome is that, as a communication discipline, public relations has a relatively minor status in both countries, especially when compared to journalism. In China, public relations education is offered in departments of journalism or mass communication (Chen & Culbertson, 2009) and is still subordinated to sales or marketing (Zhang, Hongmei & Jiang, 2009). In Mexico, the perception has evolved since the 1970s and 1980s when public relations was still labeled as pro-capitalism and pro-imperialism, and there are numerous specializations and masters in public relations. However, the profession is frequently associated with tasks like sending gifts, scheduling special events, and cultivating personal relationships (Long, 2004).

In summary, and despite the fact that increasingly more universities are teaching the discipline, in both countries public relations still lacks a managerial perspective and a theoretical body to confer it academic prestige.

The different focus of the public relations profession

Chen and Culbertson (2009) describe a public relations profession in China very different from the West, where the boundaries are not clearly defined, and tasks such as guest relations, translation services and guided tours are often viewed as public relations. At the same time, other areas such as political communication are considered a different discipline. Under this premise, and not surprisingly, public relations in China has a lower status than marketing or sales because it is seen as not bringing substantial financial gains to organizations (Zhang *et al.,* 2009).

Despite the fact that in Mexico in recent years public relations has begun to be considered a strategic tool for organizations, in practice most marketing agencies and their clients lack professional with specialized expertise in public relations (Rebeil *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, there are indications that advertising is how corporations shape the tailoring of content in Mexican media. Tellingly, the largest advertiser in Mexico is billionaire bottler and financier Eugenio Garza while Carlos Slim controls companies that make up the second-largest advertising group (Hughes, 2008).

An additional factor that explains the lack of a more specific focus -- or, some would say, professionalism -- in public relations is the economic structure. With 99 percent of the Chinese companies being SMEs, and largely not integrated into global or regional value chains due to their low capacity for innovation (OECD, 2013; Zhang & Xia, 2014), they exclude the use of symmetrical public relations models that require investment in research and a strategic approach.

Media relations at the center

Not surprisingly, the majority of companies in Mexico and China practice asymmetrical public relations where the main purpose is the placement of content in the media.

For example, even top Chinese PR firms highlight on their websites a specific methodology for reaching the media (Zhang *et al.*, 2009), an aspect usually absent in Western firms, where media relations, although widely practiced, is considered a low value-added service. As a consequence of this, the work of journalists and PR practitioners is intermingled through commissions, sponsorships and content created directly by the government, which is the ultimate media owner (Chen & Culbertson, 2009). In Mexico, media relations still represents 44 percent of all public relations services (García 2015, p. 138). Long (2004) and Rebeil *et al*. (2009) emphasize the importance of message placement in the Mexican public relations industry, where often the task is considered completed when a press release gets published or an interview arranged.

The relevance of personal relationships

The role of *guanxi* highlights the importance of personal relationships as a prerequisite for doing business in China. Therefore, the boundaries between PR and *guanxi* are so blurred that building *guanxi* before implementing a public relations campaign is a must (Hou & Zhu, 2012). The practice of giving gifts, networking, keeping daily contact with target individuals, or exchanging favors is considered an essential part of the job of a PR practitioner in China.

The personal factor is equally relevant in Latin America, where successful public relations requires a physical presence (Montenegro, 2004). In Mexico, being *simpático* may be more constructive than other credentials in gaining access to resources and building up trust (Jones, 2004). As pointed out when defining what *palanca* means, Mexicans tend to choose business partners and employees according to their position in the social hierarchy or the power derived from extensive interpersonal connections (Daymon and Hodges, 2009).

In conclusion, it is correct to say that knowing how to deal with the personal factor is part of the strategic menu of organizations operating in China or Mexico.

The importance of government relations

In China and Mexico, democracy and/or industrialization have taken place later than in other Western countries. In both societies, the family and the state have filled the gap of

what in the Western world is usually called civil society, meaning a community of citizens who work collectively for a common purpose outside of their private sphere (Fukuyama, 1995).

Mexico and China have different economic structures but, for distinct reasons, businesses and organizations in both countries tend to be much more politicized than in the United States. Most companies in Mexico are privately owned: for example, only 25 of the 500 most important companies in this country are public (Expansión, 2015). Although economic freedom in Mexico is much higher than in China, the corruption and vulnerability of the judicial system put many corporations in the position of looking for some kind of support from the state (through government contracts, a lack of competition and indirect subsidies) (Heritage Foundation, 2015).

Likewise, in China, a hierarchical conception of society sustained by Confucian values, a weak economic development until very recent times, and an authoritarian political system has made the Chinese government the cornerstone of Chinese society. Although economic reforms are taking place, political reforms are not. Besides the cultural factor, the importance of *guanxi* and the personal influence model in China can also be explained by the political structure of the country, where it's empowered by the fact that the Communist Party, through its economic system, diminishes the rule of law and respect for contracts. Indeed, China's judicial system is highly vulnerable to political influence and corruption (Heritage Foundation, 2015). Not surprisingly, So and Walker (2005) explain *guanxi* as a method of social organization that, like *clientelismo*, circumvents the law and/or other formal rules. That makes relationship building in China not necessarily principle-centered, but rather based on interpersonal relationships that take place in a closed environment where banquets or gift exchange are the norm (Hackley & Dong, 2001). The privatization of public relations thanks to the existence of an important private sphere is a characteristic feature of China.

Significance of study

American public relations theory assumes that a democratic political structure, as well as explicit laws and legal codes, should create a transparent public sphere where competing groups fight for audience attention. This is not the case in the Chinese and Mexican public spheres, where high levels of government intervention derived from authoritarian traditions favor the development of clientelist relationships between governments and organizations. Under this premise, the development and the convenience of symmetrical relationships between organizations and their publics seems almost utopian.

The commonalities and differences between the West and two countries, dissimilar themselves, like China and Mexico illustrate that there are important forces that limit the tendencies toward homogeneization in the understanding of the public relations discipline. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest a tendency toward convergence in the future or an assumption that differences in the practice of public relations will eventually disappear across the world.

Contradictions with traditional Western parameters of excellent public relations

A certain level of idealization in the West has contributed to generating such a perception. Multiple authors have argued that relationships and patronage systems exist to some degree in all modern societies, and have highlighted the importance of organizations seeking favors from power elites in the European Union, United States or Japan (Kawata, 2006; Ogawa 2006; Wakefield, 2013). Likewise, the Western world is not a monolithic entity and there is diversity and clientelism there, such as in Southern Europe (García, 2013).

However, as the comparison between *clientelismo* and *guanxi* demonstrates, this is an Anglo-centered conception that assumes the existence of rational-legal ways of thinking that exclude the irrationality of tradition, religion, and myth characteristic of clientelistic societies. Symmetrical public relations is based on horizontal, equal relationships between organizations and publics, while organizations that operate in clientelistic environments tend to see the world as unequal, and clients must develop strategies to fight against those inequalities or to take advantage of them.

The reality is that in countries such as Mexico or China, with smaller, low-added value industries, and in which there is a different conception of what transparency means (eg, more importance is given to what happens in the private sphere), the normative understanding of the strategic management of communication is just not possible. It may not even be economically viable for companies to hire, for example, a communication strategist, and most hire multifunctional technicians, employees capable of posting to Facebook, organizing a banquet, giving gifts, contacting journalists for media placement or taking care of marketing and sales all at the same time. It is probably a more efficient method for them.

Most societies of the world are clientelistic (and *guanxi* can be understood as a Chinese variation). There is a need to cultivate power elites, and that requires strong interpersonal contact as well as a heavy emphasis on media relations as part of the negotiation and bargaining process. In these societies, public relations sometimes needs to be *private* relations because information is not shared with most of the stakeholders, making the practice at times an exclusive business between politicians and organizations.

It is even questionable if minimizing personal relationships, as often happens in Anglo countries, necessarily implies a better use of strategic communication than in Asian or Latin societies. After all, it is reasonable to argue that values of personal loyalty are more representative of a society than those of organizations. Is it worse to call in a friend with political connections to improve a business or to avoid sexual affairs because of public scrutiny, as in the United States?

Public scholarship has traditionally overlooked the fact that many practitioners pride themselves on their personal relationships. Concepts such as *bao*, *renqing*, *simpatía* or *palanca* do not have to be unethical at all. They involve identifying connections, being gentle with them, and treating them as ends more than means to an end, which need not be seen in a negative light.

The author of this paper argues that after more than two decades, globalization does not produce convergence but rather hybridization in the field of public relations. Strategic management of communication or relationship building with stakeholders seem to be the public relations normative ideals in all latitudes, but there is a wide gap in the way practitioners from different cultures think these goals can be achieved. After many years, trying to set up a single standard seems utopian, among other reasons, because it should not be set in stone where that standard should come from. A de-Westernization of the practice is called for. As Gregory and Halff (2013) argue, diversity should be the only reality and source of reflection acknowledged as the practice of public relations develops around the world.

Nonetheless, despite divergence, more work is needed in the search to explain commonalities and variations across the world. There is a need for alternative approaches to public relations practice without comparison to the Anglo American models. Indeed, this article itself does have its limitations because, when referring to public relations standards it takes into consideration, at least indirectly, the excellence model. Nonetheless, this article raises new factors, such as patronage relationships and

economic structure that - together with ethics - shape the field of public relations across cultures.

Future studies on this subject should explore different manifestations of clientelism and patronage relationships across Western and non-Western nations. For example, there are important similarities and variations between the Indian and the Chinese personal influence model. The creation of a continuum of countries according to the type of personal relationships and levels of reciprocity would also help to clarify the situation. This essay expects to open a door for these future scholarship endeavors.

References

Archer, L., & Fitch, K. L. (1994). Communication in Latin American multinational organizations. In R. L. Wiseman & R. Shurer (Eds.), *Communicating in multinational organizations* (pp. 75-93). Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage.

Barrington, L. (2012). *Comparative Politics: Structures and Choices*. Boston, MA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Bradsher, K. (2012, November 9). China's greap on economy will test new leaders. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on November 21, 2016 from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/world/asia/state-enterprises-pose-test-for-chinas-new-leaders.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Broadfoot, K.J. & Munshi, D. (2007). Diverse voices and alternative rationalities: Imagining forms of postcolonial organization communication. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 21 (2), pp. 249-267.

Caplow, T. (1982). Christmas gifts and kin networks. *American sociological review*, 47 (3), 383-392.

Cendrowski, S. (2015, July 22). China's global 500 companies are bigger than ever – and mostly state-owned. Fortune Magazine. It can be retrieved at http://fortune.com/2015/07/22/china-global-500-government-owned/

Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chan, A. (2006). The Chinese concepts of Guanxi, Mianzi, Renqing, and Bao: Their interrelationships and implications for international business. Paper presented at the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy conference. Brisbane, Queensland. Retrieved on March 17, 2016 from http://www.anzmac.org/conference_archive/2006/documents/Chan_Alvin.pdf

Chen, N., & Culbertson, H. M. (2009). Public relations in mainland China: An adolescent with growing pains. In S. Krishnamurthy, and D. Verčič, (Eds.), *The global public relations handbook. Theory, research and practice*, (pp. 175-197). New York: Routledge.

Choi, Y. & Cameron, G. T. (2005). Overcoming ethnocentrism: The role of identity in contingent practice of international public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17 (1), pp. 171-189. In R. Appelbaum, W. Felstiner & V. Gessner (Eds.), *Rules and networks: The legal culture of global business transactions*, (pp. 325-347). Portland, OR: Hart Publishing.

Chung, W., & Hamilton, G. (2001). Social logic as business logic: *Guanxi*, trustworthiness, and the embeddedness of Chinese business practices.

Curran, E. (2015, July 30). State companies: Back on China's to-do list. *Bloomberg*. It can be retrieved on http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-07-30/china-s-state-owned-companies-may-face-reform

Danner, C. (2015, August 2). Meet Carlos Slim Helú, the wealthiest man in Mexico. *Business Insider*. It can be retrieved on http://www.businessinsider.com/carlos-slim helu-is mexicos-wealthiest-man-2015-7

Daymon, C. and Hodges, C. (2009), "Researching the occupational culture of public relations in Mexico", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 429-433.

Eisenstadt, S. N., & Roniger. (1984). *Patrons, clients and friends. Interpersonal relations] and the structure of trust in society.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Expansión. (2015). Las 500 empresas más importantes de México. *Expansión*. It can be retrieved at http://expansion.mx/rankings/2016/03/29/las-500-empresas-mas-importantes-de-mexico-de-expansion-2015

Ferrari, M. A. (2009). Overview of public relations in South America, in S. Krishnamurthy, and D. Verčič (Eds.), *The global public relations handbook. Theory, research and practice*, (pp.704-726). New York: Routledge.

Foncerrada, L. (2009, October). La importancia del sector privado en México. *Entorno*, 254, pp. 26-27. Retrieved on April 12 from http://www.coparmex.org.mx/upload/bibVirtualDocs/8_entorno_octubre_09.pdf

Fukuyama, F. (1995). *Trust. The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. New York: The Free Press.

Fuse, L., Land. M., & Lambiase, J. (2010). Expanding the philosophical base for ethical public relations base. Cross-cultural case application of non-Western ethical philosophies. *Western Journal of Communication*, 74, 4, 436-455.

García, C. (2011). Sex scandals: A cross-cultural analysis of image repair strategies in the cases of Bill Clinton and Silvio Berlusconi. *Public Relations Review*, 37 (3), 292-296.

García, C. (2013). Clientelism, economic structure and public relations in Southern Europe: An example of diversity in the Western world. *Public Relations Journal*, 7(2). It can be retrieved on http://www.prsa.org/Intelligence/PRJournal/

García, C. (2014). Clientelism and *guanxi*: Southern European and Chinese public relations in comparative perspective. *Public Relations Review*, 40 (5), pp. 798-806.

García, C. (2015). PR, clientelism and economics: A comparison of Southern Europe and Latin America. *Journal of Communication Management*, 19 (2), 133-149.

Gouldner, A. (1960). The norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement. *American sociological review*, 25 (2), 161-178.

Gregory, A., & Halff, G. (2013). Divided we stand: Defying hegemony in global public relations theory and practice? *Public Relations Review*, 39 (5), 417-425.

Grunig, J. E. (2010). Paradigms of global public relations in an age of digitalization. *PRism* 6(2). Retrieved from http://www.prismjournal.org/fileadmin/Praxis/Files/globalPR/GRUNIG.pdf

Grunig, J. E., Grunig, L. A., Sriramesh, K., Yi-Hui, H., & Lyra, A. (1995). Models of public relations in an international setting. *Journal of public relations research*, 7 (3), 163-186.

Guillén, A. (1996). Balance de la privatización en México. *Iztapalapa*, 38, pp. 13-36.

Gupta, C., & Bartlett, J. L. (2007). Guanxi, astrology and symmetry: Asian business and its impact on public relations practice. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 8(1).

Hackley, C. A., & Dong, Q. (2001). American Public Relations Networking Encounters China's *Guanxi*. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 46(2), 16-19.

Halff, J., & Gregory, A. (2014). Toward an historically informed Asian model of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 40 (3), 397-407.

Hallin, D., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2002). Political clientelism and the media: Southern Europe and Latin America in comparative perspective. *Media, culture & Society*, 24 (2), 175-195.

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heritage Foundation. (2015). 2015 Index of Economic Freedom. Ranking the Countries. Retrieved April 10, 2016, from http://www.heritage.org/index/ranking

Hodges, C., & Daymon, C. (2008). 'Insiders' in Mexico: Researching the occupational culture of public relations. Paper presented to the Radical Roundatable conference, University of Stirling.

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors institutions, and organizations across nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hofstede, G., & Hofstede, G. J. (2005). *Cultures and organizations. Software of the mind*. New York: Mc Graw-Hill.

Hou, Z., & Zhu, Y. (2012). An institutional perspective of public relations practices in the Chinese cultural contexts. *Public Relations Review*, 38, 916-925.

Huang, Y. (2000). The Personal Influence Model and *Gao Guanxi* in Taiwan Chinese Public Relations. *Public Relations Review*, 26(2), 219-236.

Hughes, S. (2008). The media in Mexico: From authoritarian institution to hybrid System. In J. Lugo-Ocando (Ed.), *The media in Latin America*, (pp. 131-150). London: McGraw-Hill.

Jones, V. (2004), "The rythms of Latin America: A context and guide for qualitative research", in Marschan-Piekkari, R. and Welch, C. (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research methods for international business*, Edward Elgar, Cheltentham, pp. 439-457.

Kawata, J. (2006). *Comparing political corruption and clientelism*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Knight, A., & Pansters, W. (Eds.). (2005). *Caciquismo in Twenty-Century Mexico*. London, UK: Institute for the Study of Americas.

Lee, D., & Dawes, P. (2005). *Guanxi*, trust, and long-term orientation in Chinese business markets. *Journal of International Marketing*, 13 (2), 28-56.

Leung, K. (1997). Negotiation and reward allocations across cultures. In P. Earley and M. Erez (eds.), *New perspectives on international industrial and organizational psychology*, (640-675). San Francisco, CA: Lexington.

Lindsley, S., & Braithwaite, C. (2006). U.S. Americans and Mexicans working together: Five core concepts. In L. Samovar, R. Porter and E. McDaniel, *Intercultural communication. A reader*, (275-280). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Long, R. (2004). The other 'New' Mexico. In D. J. Tilson and E. Alozie (Eds.), *Toward the common good. Perspectives in international public relations*, (pp. 43-63). Boston, Massachussets: Allyn & Bacon.

Lovett, S., Simmons, L. C., & Kali, R. (1999). Guanxi versus the market: Ethics and efficiency. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 30, 231-247.

Lustig, M. & Koester, J. (2006). *Intercultural competence. Interpersonal communication across cultures*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological review*, 98(2), 224-253.

Martin, J. N., & Nakayama, T. K. (2013). *Intercultural communication in contexts*. New York: McGraw Hill.

McGregor, R. (2011, January/February). Five myths about the Chinese communist party. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved on April 10, 2016 from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/02/5_myths_about_the_chinese_communist_party

Middlebrook, K. (2009). Caciquismo and democracy: Mexico and beyond. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 28 (3), 411-427.

Montenegro, S. (2004), "Public relations in Latin America. A survey of professional practice of multinational firms", in Tilson, D. J. and Alozie, E. (Eds.), *Toward the common good. Perspectives in international public relations*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, Massachussets, pp. 102-126.

OECD (2012), *Latin American economic outlook 2013*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Ogawa, A. (2006). Anti-fraud politics in the European Union: Multi-level disjuncture of legitimacy and effectiveness. In J. Kawata (Ed.), *Comparing political corruption and clientelism*, (pp. 63-77). Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Pan, P., & Xu, J. (2009). Online strategic communication: A cross-cultural analysis ofU.S. and Chinese corporate websites. *Public Relations Review*, 35 (3), 251-253.

Pritchard, C. (2006). Global politics, academic dispositions, and the tilting of organizational communication. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 19 4), 638 644.

Protheroe, J., Rogers, A., Kennedy, A. P., MacDonald, W., & Lee, V. (2008). Promoting patient engagement with self-management support information: A qualitative meta synthesis of processes influencing uptake. *Implementation Science*, 3(44).

Rebeil, M. A., Montoya, A., & Hidalgo, J. A. (2009). The public relations industry in Mexico: From amateurship to the construction of a discipline. In S. Krishnamurthy and D. Verčič (Eds.), *The global public relations handbook*, *Theory, research and practice*, (676-703). New York: Routledge.

Roniger, L., & Gunes-Ayata, A. (1984). *Democracy, clientelism and civil society*. Boulder: CO: Lynne Rienner.

Servaes, J. (2014). Guanxi in intercultural communication and public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 2014 (on proof).

So, Y. L. & Walker, A. (2006). *Explaining guanxi*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Sriramesh, K. (2010). Globalisation and public relations: An overview looking into the future. *Prism*, 6(2). Retrieved on January 4, 2012, from http://www.prismjournal.org/fileadmin/Praxis/Files/globalPR/SRIRAMESH.pdf

Sriramesh, K., & Enxi, L. (2004). Public relations practice and socio-economic actors: A case study of different organizational types in Shangai. *Journal of Communication Studies*, 3(4), 44-77.

Sriramesh, K., & Verčič, D. (2009). *The global public relations handbook*. New York: Routledge.

Sriramesh, K., & Verčič, D. (2012). *Culture and public relations. Links and implications*. New York: Routledge.

Taylor, M. (2000). Cultural variance as a challenge to global public relations: A case study of Coca-Cola scare in Europe. *Public Relations Review*, 26 (3), 277-293.

Toledano, M., & Avidar, R. (2016). Public relations, ethics and social media: A cross national study of PR practitioners. *Public Relations Review*, 42 (1), 161-169.

The Hofstede Centre. (2016). Mexico. It can be retrieved on http://geert-hofstede.com/mexico.html

Triandis, H. C., & Suh, E. (2002). Cultural influences on personality. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 133-160.

United Nations. (2015). World population prospects. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations. Retrieved on http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/publications/files/key_findings_wpp_2015.pdf

Verčič, D., Grunig, L. A., and Grunig, J. (1996). Global and specific principles of public relations: Evidence from Slovenia. In H. Culbertson and N. Chen (Eds.), *International Public Relations: A comparative analysis*, (pp. 31-66). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Wakefield, R. (2013). Personal influence and pre-industrial United States: An early relationship model that needs resurgence in U.S. public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 39, 2, 131-138.

Wank, D. (1996). The Institutional Process of Market Clientelism: Guanxi and Private Business in a South China City. *The China Quarterly*, 147, 820-838.

Wank, D. (2002). Business-state Clientelism in China: Decline or Evolution? In T. Gold, D. Guthrie and D. Wank (Eds.), *Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture and the Social Changing Nature of Guanxi. Challenges for the Next Generation, (*pp. 507-526). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Yan, Y. (1996). *The flow of gifts. Reciprocity and social networks in a Chinese village*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Yang, C. F. (1989). A conception of Chinese consumer behaviour. In C. F. Yang, S. C. Ho, H. M. Yau (Eds.), *Hong Kong marketing management at the crossroads: A case analysis approach*, (317-342). Hong Kong: The Commercial Press.

Yang, A., & Taylor, M. (2013). The relationship between the professionalization of public relations, societal social capital and democracy: Evidence from a cross-national study. *Public Relations Review*, 39 (4), 257-270.

Zaharna, R.S. (2001). An "in-awareness" approach to international public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 27, 135-148.

Zhang, A. (2010). *Understanding Chinese public relations education: A critical and cultural perspective*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, Washington D. C., United States.

Zhang, A., Hongmei, S., & Jiang, H. (2009). Culture and Chinese public relations: A multi-method "inside out" approach. *Public Relations Review*, 35, 226-231.

Zhang, L., & Xia, W. (2014). Integrating small and medium-size enterprises into global trade flows: the case of China. In M. Jansen, M. Jallab and M. Smeets (Eds.), *Connecting to global markets. Challenges and opportunities: case studies presented by WTO chair-holders*, (pp. 41-53). Geneva, Switzerland: World Trade Organization Publications.

Zhao, Y. (2012). Understanding China's media system in a world historical context. In D. Hallin, and P. Mancini (Eds.), *Comparing media systems beyond the Western world*, (pp. 143-177). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.