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Reimagining a glocal framework

the search for academic legitimacy in Chinese public relations discipline from 1985 to 2018

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Abstract

This paper provides a national narrative of the rise of public relations (PR) as an academic discipline in China, particularly how the PR discipline has emerged and figured in global and local historical events and struggled for legitimacy throughout China's modernization from 1985 to 2018. Based on our historical review, five distinct periods in search for academic legitimacy have characterized the national modernization in China. Universal theoretical perspectives – PR's introduction as a discipline in a modernizing economy – are inadequate to explain this history. By showing divergent forces affecting academic legitimacy, this study contributes a historical perspective on understanding the PR discipline in China within a glocalization context. Our paper proposes a “glocal” framework to show the divergent historical stresses affecting PR's academic legitimacy in China's recent historical context.

Keywords: Public relations discipline, communication history, academic legitimacy, China

Reimagining a glocal framework:

The search for academic legitimacy in Chinese public relations discipline from 1985 to 2018

Scholars have long debated whether and how applied disciplines should seek legitimate status as an academic field. Legitimacy fundamentally refers to the justified right to exist (Wæraas, 2018). In its extended meaning in social sciences, academic legitimacy points to whether a particular discipline receives support and endorsement as worthy of its existence (Weber, 1978; Yu, 2004). Many academic disciplines such as business administration, information science and futurology have gone through the process of legitimization. The debate over communication's academic status dates back to the 1990s in China (excluding the three economies of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan), when scholars centered on the core evaluation criterion of whether the field of communication has gained and preserved external permission and approval to be a legitimate academic discipline: the epistemology, ontology, research methods and differentiating nature from other disciplines (e.g. Shoemaker & Reese, 1990; Xu & Chen, 1996).

To define an academic discipline is to theorize its object of research and the set of rules surrounding its disciplinary assumptions (Edwards, 2012). Two characteristics of legitimate academic disciplines are observed: an enduring group of adherents sufficiently distinct from adherents of other academic disciplines and sufficient depth to allow for different sorts of research problems and inquiry (Kuhn, 1962). Disciplinary legitimacy is communicated and reinforced by explicit specifications of what constitutes specific disciplines and how far each discipline's jurisdiction, so to speak, reaches (Hoyningen-Huene, 1993). Various academic outlets, including journal articles, textbooks, and related publication, convey the assumptions of a discipline (Edwards, 2012).

Whether public relations (PR) should be regarded as a legitimate sub-discipline under communication studies has started to be placed under a worldwide academic spotlight. For instance, American and European PR scholars and historians including Botan and Taylor (2004), L' Etang (2001), Merckelsen (2011), Xifra and Heath (2015), and Asian scholars such as Huang (1999), Liao and Xiong (2005), Sriramesh (2004), and Zang (2001) have raised similar issues about the academic legitimacy of PR. Their discussion has converged into an overarching research agenda of the interplay and theoretical implications of PR discipline and practices, its academic independence and connections with other disciplines, the academic community and professional recognition, and the discipline's theoretical and methodological orientation.

Significance of the study: PR history in a global-local context

Existing literature on academic legitimacy of PR discipline has predominantly taken a national history and case study approach (Chen, 1999; Hung & Chen, 2004; L' Etang, 2001; Sriramesh; 2004). Most of the studies conducted in different cultural contexts describe how PR legitimacy has been negotiated and obtained at the meso level (i.e., PR as a legitimate profession and PR as a legitimate academic discipline) in light of significant events or personalities (e.g. Hu, Huang, & Zhang, 2015). These studies have contributed to the knowledge of PR legitimacy from the perspectives of professional standards and ethics (Kruckeberg, 1993) and institutionalized certified training, education, and future sustainability (L' Etang & Pieczka, 2006). The articulation of the search for academic legitimacy of PR studies at both meso and macro levels requires further academic attention (Bowie, 1991; Boydell et. al., 2016; Ross et al., 2017; Spender, 2005).

Against this background, we provide a narrative account of how PR in China searched for legitimacy as an academic discipline. Then we analyze the search for academic legitimacy in

Chinese PR discipline between 1985 and 2018. By collecting our data set from different types of publications, we depict the object of research and set of rules that influenced the academic development of PR as a discipline in China (Edwards, 2012). This national historical account of the search for academic legitimacy in Chinese PR discipline contributes to an authentic approach to the ‘de-westernizing the history of public relations’ (Watson, 2015), responding to the call to hear “other” voices of the ‘locals’ from Asian context, situating the national narrative study of PR history in a global map (Edwards, 2018; L’ Etang, 2008; Watson, 2014).

The search for academic legitimacy of the PR discipline in China’s institutional context

PR is a relatively new and slow-growing academic discipline in China. This section examines the historical articulation of academic legitimacy and its embeddedness within Chinese institutions. Throughout the period from 1985 to 2018, historical events challenged PR’s academic legitimacy in two ways.

First, the development of PR curricula within Chinese institutions of higher education has lacked proactive official approval and sufficient policy support. The first university PR program began in 1985 in Shenzhen University. National Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou established the first undergraduate curriculum of the People’s Republic of China in 1994. It took another 20 years for the first Ph.D. program with official approval from the Ministry of Education, to begin at Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan in 2014. Until 2014, only five tertiary educational institutions offered PR as a major curriculum to postgraduate students and eight offered courses in PR research techniques and direction under other programs. Despite these historical developments, the academic legitimacy of PR is far from accepted. In 2010, China’s Ministry of Education officially suspended approval for tertiary institutions to set up PR

undergraduate programs. Secondly, the official discourse on the institutionalization of PR as an academic discipline has remained ambiguous. On 20 April 2011, the Ministry of Education folded PR into business administration, according to the official document of “The Professional Catalogue of Undergraduate Program in Tertiary Educational Institutions”. The second edition of the catalogue published on 14 September 2011 accorded PR status as an independent discipline but excluded it from the catalogue of undergraduate programs. The academic legitimacy of PR in China was further challenged.

In considering PR academic legitimacy in China, lagging in comparison to its global counterparts, we have moved beyond describing a national history into analyzing the interaction of local political, economic, and social forces. We take into account the inseparable relationship among legitimacy, power and professionalization (L’ Etang, 2008; Merkelsen, 2009). We responded to Watson’s (2015) theoretical call that national history should also identify the contextual factors of social, cultural, and political forces, the major sources of power that can act and be acted upon by the academic legitimization of PR. The legitimization of PR does not only contain an internal dimension for academia. It also involves an external dimension that requires institutional power to recognize the academic status by legitimizing PR with political and educational policies, funding support, and social recognition by its stakeholders.

Conceptualizing the dialectical nature of the internal-external dimensions of PR academic legitimacy, we aim to fill the research gap by contextualizing academic legitimacy crises in Chinese PR education history in light of historical events where institutional forces came into play. Responding to the call by Watson (2015) to theorize a contextualized framework of PR historiography, we emphasize the role of local system in response to globalization of PR history.

We propose a glocal framework to place the evolving interpretation of PR academic legitimacy in the history of Chinese PR education on the world map of PR historiography.

Research Objectives

Deriving from the previous discussion, our major research objectives in this study were threefold. First, we aimed to describe the how PR as an academic discipline searched for legitimacy in the national history for the period of Chinese modernization from 1985 to 2018 in RQ 1. Then, we analyzed the national history by contextualizing it within Chinese PR academia with local political, economic, and social forces in RQ 2. Finally, we evaluated the academic legitimacy of PR in a glocal framework in RQ 3.

RQ 1: When and how did the search of academic legitimacy emerge in the academic context of China?

RQ 2: How did the search of PR academic legitimacy shape and was shaped by a particular historical event in relation to contextual forces?

RQ 3: How should the understandings of local PR academic legitimacy in China be situated in a global history of PR?

Research Method

The Historian's Craft

To make sense of the search for academic legitimacy in China, we drew on Bloch's notion (1954) of 'crafting history' to interpret, analyze, and evaluate events. According to his book *The Historian's Craft*, Bloch (1954) conceptualized that the methodological foundation for writing about history was to craft analysis of a social practice in an informed manner. Employing an

interpretive approach, crafting history is methodologically linked to chronological thinking, historical analysis and interpretation and research capabilities (Watson, 2014). A national narrative account of PR history therefore attempts to ensure that the historical story is as truthful and close to the facts as possible; to understand why past events happened.

Thus, a PR historical theory or framework should manifest the purposes of historiography; to ensure that the historical story is as truthful and close to the facts as possible; to analyze and explain why past events happened; and to evaluate the ethical and political questions of which individual, groups, society, or culture as a whole benefited or lost from the particular historical event. PR historian L' Etang (2008) adopted this methodological approach to conduct significant interdisciplinary research in the emerging field of PR history. For instance, L' Etang (2008, p. 323) explained that in Bloch's (1954) crafting history approach, "craft" denotes "the delivery of interpretation that goes beyond the recounting of 'facts' to explain what happened and why", based on making sense of multiple sources of records. As L' Etang (2008) commented, methodological issues were central to making sense of the nature and constraints of historical paradigms and methods in PR, situated in "defining the scope and politics and history of ideas about public relations as a discipline" (p.320). This matched the research goal of our study.

A reflexive crafting of PR history

In our study, we adopted Bloch's (2004) approach to data collection, analysis, and synthesis to reach an original conclusion. History writing is an act of story-telling and social construction (L' Etang, 2008) and requires awareness of the role of language to both "shape meanings and permit intersubjectivity" for the writer to create and maintain meaningful worlds (Dawson & Prus, 1993, p. 166). In other words, crafting PR histories is a social construction that is

embedded with the writer's own selectivity, interpretation, contextualization to cope with the imagined target readers, and own decision to whether or not retain or explicate certain historical ambiguity. As interpretive researchers are the "instruments" in qualitative research (Sha, 2018, p. 123), being reflexive in our narrative historical account therefore means constantly reflecting upon in order to reveal the macro and micro forces that influence our data collection and analysis. By identifying our position as reflexive researchers who came from the tertiary educational sector in the Chinese cultural context, our data interpretation may be influenced by our own experiences of how Chinese PR academic legitimacy interacts with the larger global influence. Therefore, we triangulate different sources of historical evidence to ensure consistency of our interpretation of the historical context.

Historical review

A historical review is a qualitative research method to study the development of an academic field (Leavy, 2014). The objective of a historical review study is to interpret phenomena of a particular field of study. By analyzing literature in the historical context of China, we situate explanations for the development of PR discipline within different historical forces, such as educational policy, societal development, and global influence.

We considered a historical review appropriate for this study based on two rationales. First, because historical review organizes extensive literature and archives on a specific field of study, it is useful to depict chronologically and narratively both the macro (contextual and global) and meso (PR as an academic discipline and profession) historical events to answer RQ 1. Second, a historical review concerns the explanations for educational phenomena within the historical forces (Leavy, 2014). The strength of historical review fits our research objectives to identify the

important forces affecting PR academic legitimacy in China in response to RQ 2. Finally, we evaluated the development of academic legitimacy to map the interrelationship under a global framework to provide directions for RQ 3.

Data collection

We collected journal articles on the topic of Chinese PR theory from SSCI-and CSSCI-indexed journals from 1985 to 2018. Using the keywords “public relations” (公共关系), “PR” (公关), “public relations scholarship” (公共关系学), “China” (中国), “Chinese public relations”, we sampled 1) a total of 208 journal articles collected from the two SSCI-indexed journals specialized in the field of PR and 2) a total of 1,826 articles published in the four leading CSSCI-indexed journalism and communication journals in China with the CNKI Database at www.cnki.net. The two SSCI-indexed journals include Public Relations Review and the Journal of Public Relations Research (formerly known as Public Relations Research Annual). The four CSSCI-indexed journals include Journalism & Communication (新闻与传播研究), Journalism Quarterly (新闻大学), Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication (国际新闻界), and Modern Communication (现代传播). Table 1 summarizes the list of sampled journals.

We start the data collection since 1984 or since the year the journal was found. The data covers journal articles in English and Chinese that have theorized PR in the Chinese context using theory or concept such as ‘*Guanxi*’, ‘clientelism’, ‘personal influence model’, ‘Chinese public relations practice’, and ‘Chinese crisis communication’. Multiple sources of evidence are sampled to cross validate our findings (Yin, 1994). Using a historical review, we based on the data to describe, analyze, and interpret the development of PR discipline in China until "saturation" that the data did not contribute to new patterns of findings (Charmaz, 2014).

Table 1.

The list of sampled journals

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Integrating historical event-oriented and model -based approaches of historiography

We designed an integrative three-step methodological approach using the two historiographic approaches put forward by Watson (2015). First, by adopting a fact/event-oriented historiography approach for historical description (Fuchs & Raab, 1990), we introduced a Chinese national perspective to interpret the significant events along the historical track and challenges of PR as an academic discipline from 1985 to 2018, following the historiographic approach of organizing past events in chronological and sense-making order. Using periodization provides a clear structure to history writing based on the classification of developmental stages of a social phenomenon within a chronology of national political and economic events. Then, we moved forward to a model and theory-based approach to uncover the macro structural factors underlying the historical processes (Wehler, 1985). We analyzed the national history by contextualizing how the historical development has acted upon and been acted upon by local political, economic, and social forces. Finally, we theorized the dialectical relationship in a glocal framework to evaluate how the search for academic legitimacy of PR shaped and has been shaped by the global-local and context-academia negotiation of the meaning of ‘PR legitimacy’ in the history of PR in China.

Validity and reliability

As Carbaugh (2007) has noted, it is impossible to gain a complete understanding of cultural and communication practice we as researchers of this study can only have an interpretation that is an appropriation of the grounded historical perspective. In this regard, we strive to ensure the validity and reliability of this historical study based on the principles proposed by LeCompte and Goetz (1982) and Baym (2006). We attempted to achieve validity by sampling both primary and secondary historical evidence along the whole studied historical period. To ensure internal validity here, we focused on understanding how the involved persons as social actors shaped or were shaped by the search of academic legitimacy, instead of using our own interpretation in order to mitigate possible influence on the data. For reliability, we looked for recurring patterns for each of the historical event by triangulating multiple evidence from different social actors who have described Chinese PR academic legitimacy in their accounts (Baym, 2006).

As LeCompte & Goetz (1982) pointed out, identifying replicable findings with similar social actors and researcher situated in similar political, social, and cultural context helps to ensure reliability in qualitative research. By accounting for the validity and reliability of this study, we aimed to produce knowledge by performing historiography chronologically, narratively, systematically and analytically (Hoy, Raaz, & Wehmeier, 2007). Rather than merely recounting past events, we have aimed to make sense of the dialectical relationship in the historical crises of PR academic legitimacy in China.

Periodization of PR's academic legitimacy

Based on the data, we start the historical review in 1985 when PR education was introduced into China. We found that five distinct turmoils characterize the rise of Chinese PR scholarship from 1985 to 2018. It is worth noting that these divisions do not necessarily entail

clean breaks from one to the other; in the evolution of PR in China, the trends and issues of these periods overlap. The periodic timeline summarized in Figure 1 depicts how the academic legitimacy of PR in China has struggled internally to gain theoretical rigor and sustainability as an academic community and externally to be recognized by political, economic, and social stakeholders.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1. Periodic timeline of the search for PR academic legitimacy in China (1985-2018)

Mid-1980s - 1994: The search for political correctness and identity legitimacy

Upon introduction in the mid-1980s, PR was initially regarded as the inflowing of Western influence. In 1985, Shenzhen University was the first university to establish a PR academic discipline. Between 1985 and 1994, university textbooks served as the major channel to promote PR knowledge, including the first PR textbook titled “The Art of Building Image – An Overview of Public Relations” published in November 1986, and the two other textbooks similarly named “Public Relations” authored by Professor Ju Yanan and Professor Hung Yuanwei (Chen, Guo, & Yin, 2005). This historical period manifested the enlightenment of applied PR practices. In this historical period, the US-rooted PR theories played an enlightenment and leading role in PR education in China (Hu, Huang, & Zhang, 2015). The Chinese PR academia and practitioners were actively engaged in dialogue with Western theories, providing fundamental theoretical resources and references to Chinese PR textbooks (Hu, 2014).

Despite the professional and academic enlightenment brought by the introduction of PR, its advocacy of open discussion and competition for public opinion was controversial under the de-

westernization and de-liberalization discourse in that historical period. In late 1980s, the idea of PR was accused by the government as “the poisonous seeds of capitalism” (Hu, 2014, p. 27). As a national historical background, the Economic Reform policy was put forwarded by the state leader Deng Xiaoping in 1992, with the national goal to establish a market economy system. On one hand, this relieved the question of the PR legitimacy by opening up China to the formation of professional PR consultancy industry with multinational PR agencies and emerging local companies. PR started to professionalize with growing emphasis to bridge the global market for economic opportunities. On the other hand, the political issue of Western PR remained a sensitive topic in China, such as the emphasis on PR as an intervention in democratic political election and multiple political parties’ competition. Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the country adopted the one-party authoritarian rule with the Chinese Communist Party as the only legitimate political party to rule over political branches, media, social, and educational policies. The relationship between PR and politics has been “difficult to talk”, “uneasy to touch upon”, and “risky” (Hu, 2014, p. 30). Even though PR was entering academic curricula during this period, its legitimacy and appropriateness in China’s national context remained suspect.

Late 1980s - present: The search for moral legitimacy and professional stigmatization

The enlightenment of PR in the previous historical period paved the way for the early development of PR as a young discipline in Chinese universities. The development of PR as an academic discipline in this following historical period was closely related to whether the social environment recognized its professional status despite the search for political correctness and identity legitimacy. PR in China from the late 1980s started to diverge from its imported Western model due to the influences of economic crisis, political instability, and utilitarianism. In the state-

controlled media discourse, the mass television program “Miss Public Relations” misapprehended the definition of professional PR of open dialogue and symmetrical communication into *Guanxi*-work conducted by pretty women (Hung & Chen, 2004). The concept of *Guanxi* refers to a traditional Chinese form of personal influence that scholars have folded into a model of Chinese PR (Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2013). *Guanxi* consists of performing favors for strategic individuals in order to build interpersonal relationships and elicit favors in return. As far as Chinese PR is concerned, strategic individuals might be journalists or government officials. *Guanxi* practices are an integral component of Chinese PR practices (Wu, Chen, & Cui, 2018).

As Hu (2014) commented, the Chinese PR industry during this historical period suffered from collective anxiety -- a crisis of legitimacy -- in terms of professional image, ethics, social needs, core values, political recognition, and identity legitimacy. The search for professional moral and ethics remains today and continues to challenge the development of PR as a legitimate academic discipline. PR was seen as transgressing normal procedures by unduly relying on *Guanxi* and buying rather than earning publicity; and PR’s environment of conflicting interests and moral challenges fit poorly in the Chinese cultural context of *Guanxi*, face and favor, and Confucian ethics. Although the PR profession and academia have sought legitimacy since the 1990s, they have not made significant progress in searching for moral legitimacy and professional stigmatization.

Late 1990 - 2003: The search for fragmentation in the practitioner community

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, China witnessed a fragmentation of the PR community, limited academic publication channels, a talent deficit in academia and the suspension of university courses. In the earlier historical periods from the 1980s to early 1990s, there was no

clear distinction between Chinese PR academics, associations, and practitioners. Benefitting from the official Chinese focus on building a market economy, a number of multinational ~~public relations companies~~ and local PR consultancies formed a professional PR service market in China, contributing to the industry's professionalization. This PR community used to be a collective union in terms of PR theory research and participated actively in academic conferences and professional journals and magazines. The PR dialogue during the period enthusiastically embraced Western theories. For instance, the textbook "Public Relations" published in 1999 provided new insight into the knowledge system of PR in China by proposing three main goals of PR (recognition, reputation, social harmony) using three strategies (image building, communication management, and *Guanxi* coordination) (Chen, Guo, & Yin, 2005).

Although this textbook highlighted major conceptual breakthroughs in Chinese PR, the content primarily focused on PR practitioners. The cultural differences between Chinese and Western higher education institutions might explain the application-oriented focus of Chinese PR textbooks. In contrast to the Western model of liberal studies that promotes development of the whole person and conveys pedagogy through so-called "big ideas" and historical concepts, the practical emphasis of Chinese PR textbooks stems from the adoption of Soviet models of higher education that stressed technical specialization (Chen, 2014). Adopting a socialist academic model helped boost modernization in China and nurtured an industrial workforce capable of meeting the country's needs in the 1990s. The community of Chinese PR professionals and academics began to split apart in the late 1990s as the focus of each group increasingly diverged. Coupled with the search for moral legitimacy and professional stigmatization, the PR academic community declined in prominence and influence (Zhang, Jiang, & Luo, 2012; Hu, Huang, & Zhang, 2015).

Major structural challenges fomented the continuous search for academic legitimacy. First, the lack of financial support from PR practitioners forced PR professional magazines to cease. Starting from late 1990s, a number of professional PR associations started to decline for the same reason (Chen & Culbertson, 2003). Second, some universities started to suspend their PR courses and the academic community of PR discipline in China drastically reduced from 200 to 300 scholars in mid-1990s to only 20 to 30 active scholars by 2003 (Hu, Huang, & Zhang, 2015). The majority of PR scholars in China were from disciplines such as sociology and literary studies. Seeing the declining trend of PR as profession and academic discipline, these leading scholars returned to their original expertise (Hu, 2014). Thirdly, there is no academic association (a condition which persisted until 2015, when the Public Relations Society of History has established as a second-class academic association under the Chinese Society of Journalism History – The Public Relations Society of China registered as the only national academic organization in PR under the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs) (Zhao & Sun, 2018).

It took the SARS in 2003, the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, and the rise of new social media, to stem the decline. The struggle for symmetrical communication during public crises such as natural or man-made disasters and constant cultural exchange under globalization generated a public realization of a need for PR education in crisis communication, new media publicity, government PR (Hu, Huang, & Zhang, 2015; Zhang, Jiang, & Luo, 2012).

Early 2010s - present: The search for educational policies and academic curriculum

As previously mentioned, the first Ph.D. program only appeared in 2014 at Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, almost 30 years from the establishment of the

first university PR program began in 1985 in Shenzhen University. Until 2014, only five tertiary educational institutions offered PR as a major curriculum to postgraduate students and eight offered courses in PR research techniques and direction under other programs. Despite these historical developments, the academic legitimacy of PR in terms of educational policies and academic curriculum is far from officially and socially accepted. The search for educational policies and academic curriculum started when the state-led Ministry of Education announced in 2010 that no official approval would be granted for tertiary education institutions to set up an undergraduate PR curriculum. The next year on 20 April 2011, the Ministry of Education folded PR into business administration, according to the official document of “The Professional Catalogue of Undergraduate Program in Tertiary Educational Institutions”. The second edition of the catalogue published on 14 September 2011 accorded PR status as an independent discipline but excluded it from the catalogue of undergraduate programs. With the non- recognition of PR as a legitimate academic discipline, students seeking higher education in the field went abroad. Their departure reduced the number of academic talents in developing Chinese PR education as an academic discipline. Even when the students returned to the country after studying overseas, they were trained in the Western model of tertiary education in terms of research topics and methodology. The academic legitimacy of PR discipline was further challenged in the history of China.

In view of the search for educational policies and academic curriculum, the current Chinese scholarship community has three camps for where academic PR should belong (Hu, Huang, & Zhang, 2015): 1) as an independent academic discipline, led by Professor Ju Yanan; 2) PR as a sub-discipline of management studies, led by Professor Xu Mengheng; and PR as a sub-discipline of communication studies, led by Professor Liao Weijian. The official announcement that there

would be no independent undergraduate curriculum for PR and the integration of PR as a sub-discipline under business administration have exacerbated the challenges facing proponents who believe PR deserves to be a legitimate, independent academic discipline with its own theoretical frameworks and research.

1985 - present: The search for academic and theoretical rigor

The year 1995 was a turning point in the development of PR as an academic discipline. PR research in China began to appear in the mid-1990s in an increasing number of PR-related journals in the journalism and communication fields. The number of journal articles in area of PR increased from approximately 100 articles in late 1990s to more than 500 articles by 2018. For instance, the six core journals in the field of journalism and communication (e.g. “*Journalism and Communication Research*”, “*Modern Communication*”, “*International Journalism*”, “*Journalism University*”, “*Contemporary Communication*”, and “*Journalism and Communication*”) published around 100 articles on PR between 1994 and 2003. This trend of [what trend? Multiple-fold increase or just the number?] was repeated in the number of CSSCI-indexed articles on PR between 1999 and 2008. There were a total of 271 PR journal articles published in the 2007 (Xue & Yu, 2009). Research by Lu (2012) showed that the number of PR research articles between 2005 and 2010 on the CSSCI index database surpassed 500 each year. The top 10 PR research areas were: industrial PR (22%), PR management (14%), fundamental theoretical research (12%), school PR (11%), government PR (9%), police PR (7%), PR branding (4%), PR and social progress (3%) at 2008 (Xue & Yu, 2009).

Despite the growing number of published PR research articles and the diversity of research topics, most PR research was still application oriented. Between 1999 and 2003, application-

oriented articles took up 74% (606 articles) in the CSSCI database; theory-driven articles took up 21% (174 articles) (Chen, Guo, & Yin, 2005). From 1999 to 2008, application-oriented articles made up 54.2% (486 articles); theory-driven articles composed of 12.7% (174 articles) (Liu, 2010). The articles were also predominately qualitative, with little footprints of quantitative PR research. In 1999-2008, published PR articles totaled 1,450, of which only 15 (or 1%) used quantitative research method. Of these 15, one was published between 1999 and 2003, and 14 published in 2004-2008 (Xu & Yu, 2009).

In reviewing the past 30 years of PR research in China, we found a certain tunnel vision in research orientation that has caused a lag in PR theories and creativity. The central controversy of Chinese PR studies has been whether the discipline has a sufficient level of theoretical rigor (Chen, 1999). Although PR as an academic discipline began to emerge in China in 1985, and theoretical construction began in the 1990s, substantial PR research only appeared in publication starting in the mid-1990s. Up to 2003, rigorous theoretical studies of PR in China substantially lagged similar output in the global west for about 25–30 years (Chen, Guo, & Yin, 2005). Existing literature summarized the outcome as the results from: (1) the constant adoption of qualitative conceptual writings (rather than diversifying methods and incorporating empirical evidence), (2) the preference for a practical focus in research (rather than theory-driven research), and (3) the frequent adoption of the organizational perspective (rather than public or integrative perspective); (4) the redundancy of research that revisits basic definitions of PR (rather than theoretical construction); and (5) the constraints of theoretical context, which have led many scholars to adopt Western theories in their attempt to explain phenomena in a politically, economically, and socially different China (Yang & Di, 1991; Zhang, Jiang, & Luo, 2012; Hu, Huang & Zhang, 2015; Zhao & Sun, 2018).

Discussion

In considering the lag in academic legitimacy in China in comparison to its global PR counterparts, we have moved beyond describing a national history into analyzing the interaction of local political, economic, and social forces. Our analysis has demonstrated the inseparable relationship among legitimacy, power and professionalization (L' Etang, 2008; Merkelsen, 2009). We responded to Watson's (2015) theoretical call that national history should also identify the contextual forces of social, cultural, and political forces, the major sources of power that can act and be acted upon by the academic legitimization of PR.

Directions for theorizing the development of PR discipline in global-local history

This study situates Chinese PR history in a global map. In the era of globalization, the crafting of PR history is no longer bounded by geographical territories (Hoy, Raaz, & Wehmeier, 2007; L' Etang, 2001; 2008; Sriramesh, 2004). In other words, globalization has influenced the PR discipline to consider what is "legitimate" with reference to the global history of PR. When a discipline is introduced in a new context, the local authority, practitioners, and academia join to construct and negotiate how that imported discipline can fit local context and social needs. The concept of glocalization was first introduced to the PR history in China by Hung and Chen (2004) in their book chapter in *Public Relations in Asia: An Anthology*. Our study extends their work by theorizing the contextual effects of Chinese culture, media and economic reform change on reacting to global PR development in China.

To provide future directions to understand "glocal" development of the PR discipline in other context, we interpret the search for PR academic legitimacy in China to include the concept

of glocalization. Understanding the search for academic legitimacy of PR in China through a “glocal” lens requires examining not only the macro perspective of PR history in a globalized context, but also interactions between global and local contexts within that history. Situating the search for PR academic legitimacy in China within the history of PR practice as it developed in China and globally, we provide an analysis of contextual influences on the historical development of PR as an academic discipline. Within the local context is the negotiation between the two dimensions of academic legitimacy of PR discipline in China.

This study extends Hung and Chen (2004)’s case study approach to the analysis of the search for PR academic legitimacy in China to include the concept of glocalization, to incorporate the Chinese experience into the conceptualization of what is PR discipline and academic legitimacy. This framework encompasses the strength to look at not only a macro perspective of PR history in a globalization world map, but also provided the opportunity to shed light on how global-local interacts in crafting PR history. We specifically raised the notion of other by crafting PR history beyond a politically democratic, economically capitalist, and socially liberal and individualistic context (L’ Etang, 2008). Responding to the call by Watson (2015) to theorize a contextualized framework of PR historiography, we propose a glocal framework (Figure 2) to organize our analysis to place the evolving interpretation of PR academic legitimacy in the history of Chinese PR on the world map of PR historiography in a globalization context.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 2. Proposed glocal framework of the search for PR academic legitimacy in China

Toward a “glocal” framework

Building toward a contextualized framework of PR historiography, we emphasize the role of local system in response to globalization of PR history. We propose a glocal framework to place the evolving interpretation of PR academic legitimacy in the history of Chinese PR education on the world map of PR historiography. As the proposed framework states, PR academic legitimacy roots itself in a constant negotiation among external political and media recognition, social recognition, and academic recognition from other fields. Internally, PR scholars in China struggle among themselves to identify general research trends, methodological patterns, publication channels and funding sources, definitions of theoretical rigor, and general concerns related to the academic community. We argue that such negotiation in the Chinese history of PR is a glocal product of PR history and (re)conceptualizations of PR's academic legitimacy. Although Chinese scholars have faced questions about the legitimacy of PR research, we can see from the history of Chinese PR that it is not often discussed in the historical context of globalization.

We conceptualized internal academic legitimacy as how an academic discipline should contain a series of core research questions, epistemology, and ontology to differentiate it from other disciplines to gain and preserve support to justify its existence (Kuhn, 1962; Wæraas, 2018). In this study, the search for internal PR academic legitimacy was manifested in the five distinctive periods of turmoil in the history of Chinese PR; did there really exist the basic theoretical assumptions and research paradigm (Kuhn, 1962). In other words, the PR academic legitimacy in China during all five historical periods has been internally negotiating the common social phenomenon of PR research in China and whether the research method(s) can describe, interpret, evaluate or predict the core set of research questions. Another internal academic legitimacy concern as noted by Yin (2003) is also whether this academic community possesses a general pattern of citation among itself regarding its scholarship.

External academic legitimacy refers the concept of legitimacy being constituted not only of internal legitimacy within the PR academic community, but also socially constituted by external political, economic, and social forces (Edwards, 2012; L' Etang, 2008; Watson, 2015). Extending the existing literature that brings the notion of the external material condition and social recognition of the concept of legitimacy (e.g. Benbasat & Zmud, 2003), we conceptualized external academic legitimacy to mean whether an academic discipline enjoys the external environmental conditions and institutional support to allow academic development, such as the rise of educational institutions. As noted by Giddens (2013), the exchange and interaction between institutions is the prerequisite for institutional operation in social structure. Therefore, in the history of Chinese PR discipline, we understand the notion of external academic legitimacy to encompass the specific research institutions such as universities and their material support for research, the presence of intellectual talent with professional backgrounds to facilitate the accumulation and production of knowledge in academic research, the academic curriculum in universities to provide institutionalized academic training, and establishment of the academic community as the foundation for an externally legitimize PR discipline.

Conclusion

Our study extends the scope of historical review of PR discipline by understanding the search for academic legitimacy in China's PR discipline. Building toward a contextualized framework of PR historiography, this study identifies the social, cultural, and political contexts that can act and be acted upon by PR's academic legitimation. We also explore divergent forces affecting PR's academic legitimacy in China within a narrative framework of national history and identify directions for "glocal" development of the discipline in other contexts.

By placing the search for academic legitimacy of China's PR discipline in a glocal framework, we respond to existing PR history scholarship that suggests the story-telling of PR not only encompasses social structure and function, economic and political arrangements, and PR consultancies (Miller, 1999), but also transcends individual, organizational, societal, and international levels (L' Etang, 2008). L' Etang (2008) has pointed out the trickiness of crafting PR history to unveil the process of how a particular dominant line of PR history is supported with evidence and authentication. Taken into account the social scientific nature of history as L' Etang (2008) denoted regarding PR history as a social construction, history fundamentally consists of interpretations based on interpretations, meaning there is no universally right historical story.

In China's history of PR discipline, we responded to Le Poidevin and MacBeath (1993) as well as Watson's (2015) call, to include both global and local, and internal and external change, causation and possibility to PR academic legitimacy in the philosophy of time and both macro and meso processes of transformation. The major contribution of our study is proposing a dialectical understanding between structure-agency and global-local that fills the research gap in the existing two camps of PR historiography debate: historical inevitability and determinism versus particularism. The former has focused on understanding history as a series of overwhelming trends (L'Etang, 2008) while the later sees in historical approaches that interpret the past as a series of unique, significant events (Hamilton, 1996; Popper; 1957). Our original glocal framework maps out what PR historiography scholars have noted, namely that the historical development has no fixed pattern but a contextualized view pertaining to certain historical and cultural contexts (L' Etang, 2008; Sriramesh, 2004; Watson, 2015). The "glocal" forces identified in affecting PR academic legitimacy maps out what PR historiography scholars have noted, namely that the

historical development has no fixed pattern but a contextualized view pertaining to certain historical and cultural contexts (L' Etang, 2008; Sriramesh, 2004; Watson, 2015).

Limitation and directions for future studies

Despite the research's originality, this study unavoidably has limitations. The theoretical and methodological constraints remain in the lack of comparative data to explore similarities and differences among the different periods in different cultural contexts. We reflect upon our reliance on the historical review of the limited list of publication samples which are mostly secondary data and our own position and perspective as situated within a Chinese cultural context to draw our description, analysis and conclusion. Future study is encouraged to expand the list of journals and books in the data collection, use cross-cultural study to examine how other countries outside the dominant PR academia of the United States and Western European context situate their country in a globalization era. Qualitative interview and ethnography are also called upon to approach to provide understanding to how academic legitimacy evolves in the lens of the Chinese PR academic community.

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Table 1.

The list of sampled journals

	Title of the journal	Language	Indexed	Sampled period
1	Public Relations Review	English	SSCI	1985-2018
2	Journal of Public Relations Research <i>Formerly known as Public Relations Research Annual</i>	English	SSCI	1992-2018 1989-1991
3	Journalism & Communication (新闻与传播研究)	Chinese	CSSCI	1994-2018
4	Journalism Quarterly (新闻大学)	Chinese	CSSCI	1984-2018
5	Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication (国际新闻界)	Chinese	CSSCI	1984-2018

6 Modern Communication Chinese CSSCI 1984-2018

(现代传播)

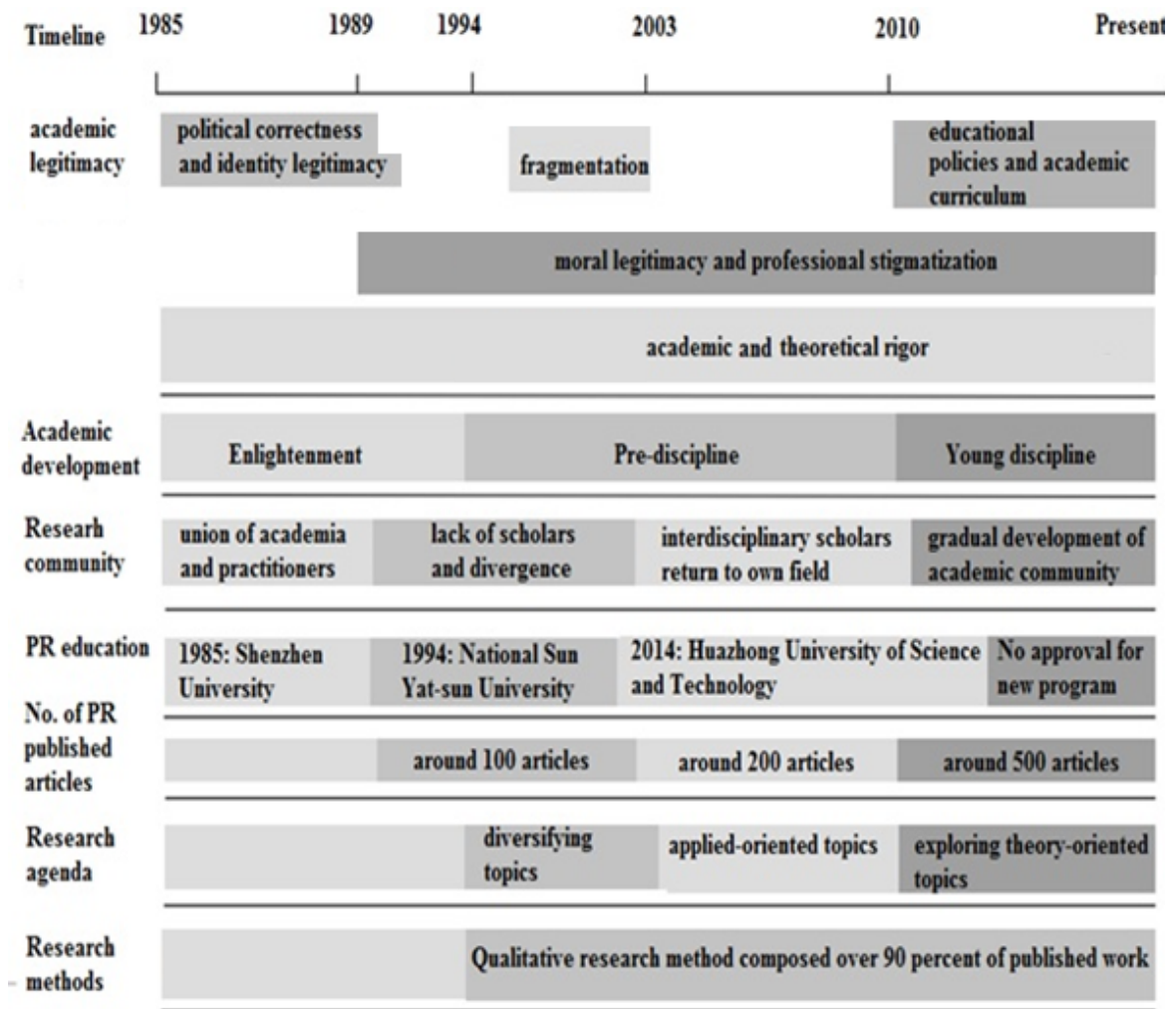


Figure 1. Periodic timeline of the search for PR academic legitimacy in China (1985-2018)

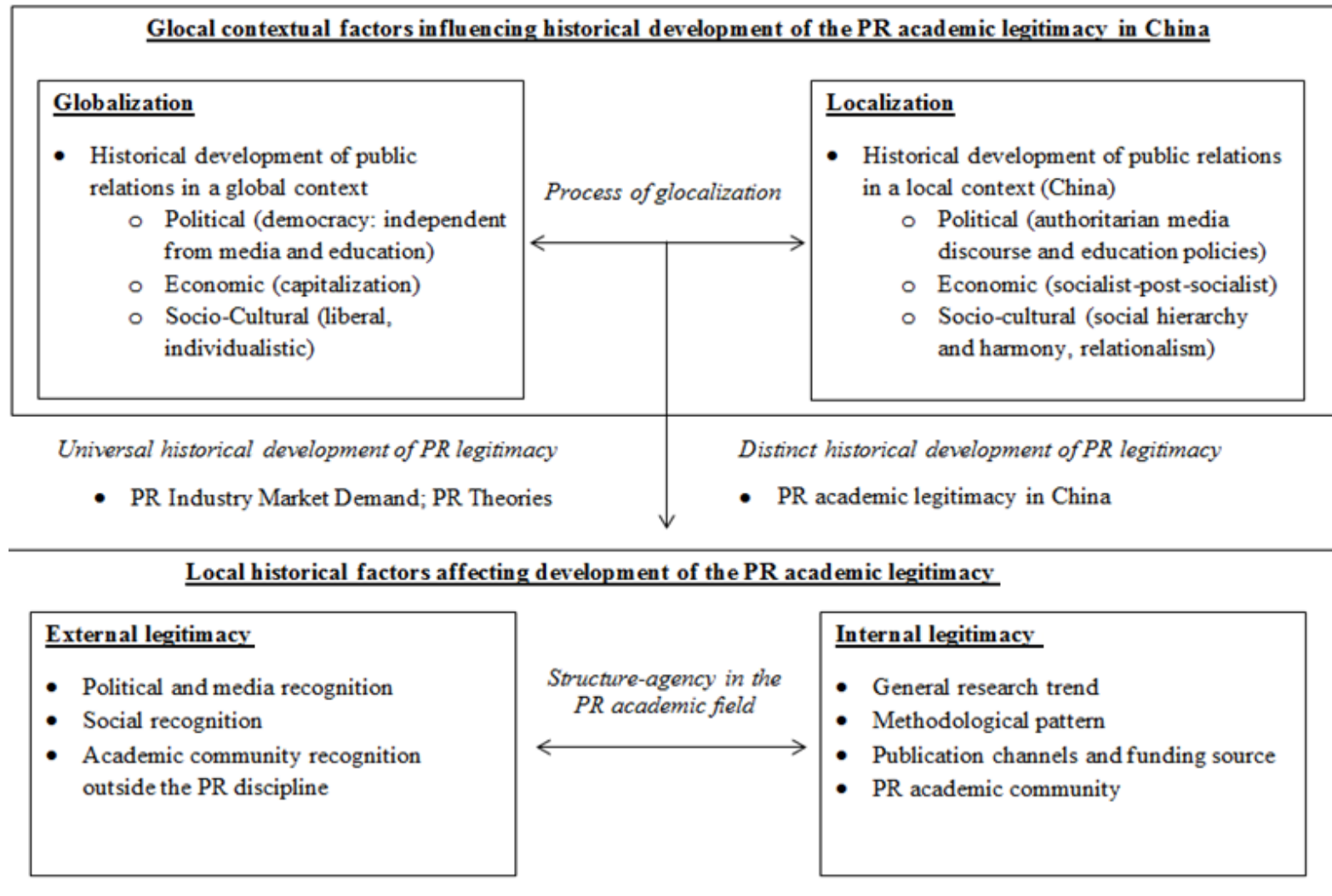


Figure 2. Proposed glocal framework of the search for PR academic legitimacy in China