

PR is the same all around the world – Wrong!

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I'm often asked what history tells us about PR. It's a question often slyly posed with the implication that there is nothing to be learned and, anyway, PR is practiced in a universal Anglo-American model.

Let's consider what 'Asian Perspectives on the Development of Public Relations' has found. From its 11 chapters, written by national authors, it is immediately evident there is neither an 'Asian model' nor an 'international model' of PR, although there are some shared cultural influences. PR has been shaped in several Asian countries – India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam – by publicity and propaganda applied in struggles and post-colonial adjustment.

In Australia and New Zealand, PR began as governmental information dissemination in the late 19th century. Thailand, never colonised, created a unique form of PR closely related to the monarchy which led its modernisation in a similar period. Japan first used the term, kouhou (meaning 'widely notify') in the 1870s. It has become synonymous with PR and identifies national practice as predominantly informational, with media relations (in a Japanese style) being the most common form.

The major theme that emerged was the central role of personal networking within Asian PR practice. Personal networks, referred to as guanxi in China and quan hệ in Vietnam, are also found in India, Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, in Japan. This relationship leads to collaboration between journalists and PR practitioners in ways not found in the West and, as the Vietnam chapter notes, "PR is thus different to the way that PR is practiced in Anglo countries".

In countries which have close relations with China, the influence of Confucianism and related philosophies, which include notions of "the people", reputation, interpersonal relationships and strategic behaviours, shaped PR practices. These led to PR being thought of as a two-way communication activity which Vietnam author Loan Van calls "a shared perspective." This is quite different from Anglo-American "two-way symmetrical communication" which means equal two-way dialogue.

India came to personal networking or the personal influence model of PR from a different cultural basis and it is the 'dominant historical model of PR' in the world's second-most populous nation. Thailand has historically practiced a two-way approach, although governmental PR has been largely propagandist or informational since 1932. Chapter author Napawan Tantivejakul commented that "understanding Thai society's personality alongside cultural aspects like monarchical institution respect, Buddhist orientation, and relationship orientation [are] important issues involved in successful Thai PR practice."

Each Asian chapter showed the strong link between the establishment of nation states and PR's development, although in the past 30 years it has been economic growth rather than political and social changes that supported PR's regional expansion. The post-colonial era since World War 2 has also led to strong governmental informational approaches to PR, which often verge on propaganda aided by controls over media. These are different to the Anglo-American experience, including Australasia, which works under fewer controls over media and other communication channels.

That's what history tells us about PR in Asia – it has evolved very differently to Anglo-American practice.

Tom Watson, Author, [Asian Perspectives on the Development of Public Relations](#)

