

# Book Review

Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly  
2023, Vol. 100(1) 1–3  
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## ***The Global Foundations of Public Relations: Humanism, China, and the West.***

Robert E. Brown, Burton St. John III, and Jenny Zhengye Hou (Eds.). Abington & New York, New York: Routledge, 2022. 216 pp. \$160 hbk.

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DOI: 10.1177/10776990221121607

Today, public relations (PR) research faces two major issues. Since being defined in the early 20th century, PR has been entrenched as Anglocentric terrain overwhelmingly built upon Euro-American practitioners with researchers' intellectual intervention focusing on Western capitalist experiences (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Second, while having facilitated the maturation of the subject area, James E. Grunig's theorization of PR as organizational behavior has simultaneously led to positivism and quantitative measurement being unreflectively accepted by a large cohort of researchers until today (Sison, 2016). Such a situation reflects the need to decolonize PR. The anthology, edited by Robert E. Brown, a professor emeritus at Salem State University, Burton St. John III, Professor of Public Relations at the University of Colorado-Boulder, and Jenny Zhengye Hou, Senior Lecturer in Strategic Communication at the Queensland University of Technology, represents one of the innovative projects addressing the long-standing discipline "silo" via a humanistic lens rooted in both Western and Chinese philosophies.

As an edited volume, the project reflects 13 chapters and the 14 scholars from around the globe who scrutinize specific areas of PR, which either have been developed within or directly/indirectly concern China. These scholars share the humanistic rubric under which their critical accounts and reflections are articulated.

As Brown, St. John III, and Hou identified in Chapter 1, humanism offers both an epistemological lens and a conceptual framework to move beyond the positivist nature and the Eurocentric thesis of existing PR literature. Their intellectual quest absorbs philosophical ideas from China's indigenous Confucianism. In their words, the notions of "ren" (仁), including "'humanity', 'humanness', 'goodness', 'benevolence', [and] 'love'" are also guiding principles for PR professionals (Brown et al., 2022, p. 1). Such a humanistic turn tackles the decolonization objective by fully appreciating non-Western theorists' contributions to PR thinking and reflects the need to understand public opinion through engaging people's subjective experiences.

The introductory chapter is followed by Chapter 2 tracing the historical development of PR as a subject area in the West, Chapter 3 examining indigenous PR thinking in Chinese society, as well as Chapter 4 exploring the foundations of public opinion theories in Euro-American societies. Building on such historical accounts, Chapters 5 and 6, respectively, analyze how the shift toward a humanistic approach in Chinese PR can be traced through observing the process of China's modernization and articulate how the development of such a shift can be unpacked through a comparative analysis of Medieval Europe and Middle-period China.

From Chapter 7 onwards, contributors' attention is primarily focused on the intersectionality of PR theories in relation to broader socioeconomic practices and political processes. This trajectory of scholarly analysis is underpinned by how PR plays out in charity and benevolence initiatives, observations of crisis communication in China and Nigeria, the theorization of PR through the scope of symbolic interactionism, application of PR concepts in geopolitical contexts, as well as the deterritorialization of place branding from a marketing practice toward a PR effort.

The most interesting aspect of the anthology is the concluding chapter, which is not provided in a traditional academic format but based on the editors' interview with the veteran humanitarian, Robin Low, who participated in a series of disaster relief projects concerning the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear reactor meltdown. Using the veteran humanitarian's on-the-ground crisis communication and PR training experiences, the anthology points toward the future employment of the humanistic approach to inform industrial practices and real-life projects. The chapter showcases the editors and contributors' efforts to connect theory and practice in PR research.

Today, China represents a major powerhouse in the global economy. However, PR, like most other subject areas within communication studies, is dominated by Western scholars with Anglocentric research perspectives. The present project emerges as an ideal-type case, which elucidates how such Anglocentrism can be challenged by a humanistic approach that benefits from China's ancient philosophers, sociocultural norms, and contemporary theorists and practitioners' contributions to the field. However, rather than rejecting the interconnectedness between the Global South and North, the book takes both an inside-out and outside-in approach to foreground the dynamics in Sino-Western knowledge exchanges. While acknowledging that aspects of PR emerge as a Euro-American experience of capitalism, this anthology grounds its critiques of Anglocentrism on an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of existing scholarship. In this way, it offers a critical account of the past and present of humanistic thinking in PR by highlighting a historically marginalized Chinese outlook. The anthology makes a significant extension to the current academic domain and is a very interesting read. It is highly recommended to fellow researchers, students, as well as entrepreneurs and members of the public, who are interested in the latest debates in the field.

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