

THE WAY OF IMPROVING PUBLIC RELATIONS  
PROGRAMS IN VIETNAM'S *DOI MOI* AS EMPLOYED  
BY THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF KOREAN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

The primary purpose of comparative public relations is to identify more or less universal problems that challenge many or all nations, and to search for generic principles that apply widely (Culbertson et al., 1996, p.2). Historically, there are some theoretical frameworks to approach public relations in international contexts. Among them, Culbertson (1993) highlighted the social, political and economic contexts (SPE model) to public relations while Vercic et al. (1996) identified nine generic principles and five environmental variables that can be used to design public relations strategies in a specific country. Although these environmental variables have a significant impact on public relations, few studies have empirically linked environmental variables with public relations except culture (Sriramesh et al., 2003, p.2). Sriramesh et al. (2003) proposed a three-factor framework for studying global public relations. The first factor is infrastructure, which includes political system, level of economic development, activism, and legal system. The second factor is culture with societal dimensions and corporate culture. The last factor is media environment which focuses on analysis of media control, media outreach and media

access. Especially, this theoretical framework offered specific criteria for examining each of its factors, such as seven types of political system (p.4). Base on this model, public relations practice in numerous countries across the global have been unveiled, including Korea (Sriramesh et al., 2003, Sriramesh, 2004).

Korea and Vietnam are two Asian countries, which share many similarities especially in social and culture aspects. Since the official relationship has been renormalized in 1992, Korea and Vietnam continuously have been exchanging cooperation in many areas. In terms of political relations, Vietnam and Korea frequently exchange visits by high-level delegations, contributing to improving mutual understanding and cooperation. In economics, Korea has been an important economic partner of Vietnam. For 15 years, Korea has been one of the top five biggest partners of Vietnam. As of July 2007, Korea ranks first in terms of direct investment in Vietnam with a total registered capital of US\$ 9.4 billion and over 1,400 projects (Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007). Although public relations in Vietnam is still a new concept while Korean public relations is far more developed, public relations practice in both countries have some resemblances. Studying Korean public relations can benefit Vietnam in a way that it may offer a model for Vietnamese public relations in the coming years. In addition, the close relationship between two countries recently created more needs for public relations practice and suggested a chance for the field's cooperation in the near future.

In this study, we will base on Sriramesh's theoretical framework to analyze and compare public relations practice in Korea and Vietnam. Firstly, each country's background and public relations will be analyzed. Secondly, we compare the differences in characteristics and level of development of public relations in two countries. Lastly, we will identify the ways that makes Korean public relations successful and discuss the suggestions can be applied to the success of Doi Moi policy in Vietnam. Understanding the background of public relations practice also helps Vietnam to achieve more success in cooperative activities.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### *Research participants*

Since there have been numerous research of Korean public relations, the development of Korean public relations is discussed through secondary research. Meanwhile, public relations in Vietnam will be described mainly by in-depth interviews with Vietnamese public relations practitioners. Based on Sriramesh's interview guide (2003), fifteen Vietnamese public relations professionals including four leading public relations agencies' directors, two senior university's public relations lecturers, one public relations practitioner in an agency, six in-house public relations managers, one marketing researcher, and one journalist from a biggest newspaper had been interviewed. Nine persons are female and six are male who aged from early twenty to early seventy. All of them have at least one bachelor degree, two of them have master degree and two others earned Ph.D degree from abroad. Participants have experienced in public relations from 5 to 30 years. Among them, eight persons are from the North (Hanoi) and the others are from the South (Hochiminh City) of the country. We selected interviewees from these locations because geographically Vietnam as a thin and long country has two economic, political, cultural centers in two parts of its mainland. Although it is suggested for qualitative research project that "eight respondents will be perfectly sufficient" (Grant McCracken, 1988, p.17), we tried to interview as many as possible because we want to search for a detail snap of public relations in Vietnam as a whole. Since there are not any official lists of public relations agency in Vietnam, these interviewees were selected based on the "Top Line Report Marketing Service Assessment" reported by the FTA research company (2006). More than a half of the interviewees had been known to one of the researcher through previous working relationship, while the others had been introduced for this study.

### *Interview Procedure and Analysis of Finding*

An interview guide containing developed by Sriramesh (2003) and used to discover the public relations practice in dozens of countries has been re-applied in this research. The interview session gradually move from specific to general questions, allowing the interviewees to express their personal experiences and opinions. It started with some brief descriptive questions of participants' job, organizations, types of clients, services and their educational background. The follow-up questions are divided into three areas: (a) How participants and their clients' managers think of public relations' roles and purposes; (b) How political, economic and cultural factors affect public relations activities; and (c) What are current images or highlighted characteristics or issues of local public relations profession?

Before the interview, participants were provided information about our study, interview guided questions along with an oral statement of confidentiality. Each interview had been lasted for one hour to three hours. Because all interviewees are Vietnamese, we use Vietnamese as language for communication. The interviews were recorded, then transcribed in Vietnamese and later translated into English. The analysis begun by noting each statement, illustration and anecdote provided by interviewees. The researcher repeatedly read through the interview notes and transcriptions to observe and mark each unit of meaning. For example, when the interviewee said "The most obstacle of public relations in Vietnam is the lack of human resource", this counted as a "unit of meaning". From this continuous observation, the themes and insights have been emerged to analysis.

## **III. PUBLIC RELATIONS IN KOREA**

### **1. Infrastructure and Public Relation**

#### *Political system*

In the first part of the twentieth century, Korea was colonized by Japan for several decades. Although many Koreans fought for

independence from Japanese rule, Korea's liberation in 1945 was brought about not by Korean efforts but by the Allied victory over Japan, resulting in the division of Korea into two zones of North and South by the 38 parallel (Library of Congress, 1992). While the Republic of Korea was found in the southern half of the Korean peninsula, a communist government was installed in the north. Separate and antagonistic states lasted between the north and south until 1948. In 1950, the Korean Civil War occurred when North Korea attacked South Korea. During the war, United States and UN forces intervened to defend South Korea. An armistice was signed in 1953 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2000).

South Korea's subsequent history is marked by alternating periods of democratic and autocratic rule. Civilian governments are conventionally numbered from the First Republic of Syngman Rhee to the contemporary Sixth Republic. The First Republic, arguably democratic at its inception, became increasingly autocratic until its collapse in 1960. The Second Republic was strongly democratic, but was overthrown in less than a year and replaced by an autocratic military regime. The Third, Fourth, and Fifth Republics were nominally democratic, but were widely regarded as the continuation of military rule. Therefore, under the military-based governments, for several decades (1961-1987), Korean peoples' freedom, including freedom of speech and press had to be limited. With the Sixth Republic since 1987, the country has gradually stabilized into a liberal democracy (wikipedia). Since then, democratization of Korean society have been expanded to every sector of the Korean society, leading drastic changes in government politics, the power structure, business and management practices (Shin, 2007). Elections in South Korea are held on a national level to select the President and the National Assembly. The president is directly elected for a single five-year term. The National Assembly has 299 members elected for a four-year term, 243 in single-seat constituencies and 46 members by proportional representation. South Korea has a multi-party system, with numerous parties. Since 1987, opposition parties can have forum to criticize and inspect the government. In Map of Freedom 2007 (Freedomhouse, 2007), South Korea has free status.

Also, among seven types of political systems classified by Freedom House (Sriramesh, 2003), South Korean political system is democracy. The replacement of dictatorship with social democracy has contributed to the development of public relations in Korea (Kim, 2003).

#### *Level of economic development*

Since its inception, South Korea has seen substantial development especially in economy. The country has developed from one of Asia's poorest since the 1960's to one of the continents most well-off. This success through the late 1980s was achieved by the *Chaebol* system, which consists of a small group of business conglomerates, and by a system of close government/business relationships, including directed credit, import restrictions, sponsorship of specific industries, and a strong labor effort. The government promoted the import of raw materials and technology at the expense of consumer goods, and encouraged savings and investment over consumption. After Park Chung-Hee, who ruled Korea during 1961-1979, grasped political power in the 1960s, the Chaebol industries received inexpensive financing in exchange for illegal political contributions. The Chaebol could rapidly expand their business under the government's strong support (Sriamesh, Kim and Takasaki, 1999).

The 1986 Seoul Asian Games and the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games enabled Korean companies, such as Samsung Electronics and Hyundai Motors, to expand its business abroad. Under the comprehensive policy theme of globalization, in the 1990s the government took an active role in participating in international activities through the Uruguay round of trade talks, through launching of the World Trade Organization, and through its membership in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. The government's effort culminated in Korea's accession to the OECD in 1996, which seemed to signal Korea's entry into the rank of advanced countries. The public relations profession changed significantly during this time as the government hired some well-

known multinational public relations companies in their big projects (Choi, 1992).

However, the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1999 exposed certain longstanding weaknesses in Korea's development model, including high debt/equity ratios, massive foreign borrowing, and an undisciplined financial sector. Responding to the precarious economic situation, the government launched the Presidential Commission for Financial Reform to begin a comprehensive reform of the financial market. In the labor market, a separate Labor Reform Commission was launched in early 1997. But such actions taken to prevent further economic deterioration failed. Finally, the Ministry of Finance and Economy's inadequate handling of the developing cycle of foreign exchange crisis, at last, brought in a bailout fund from the IMF. While responding decisively and with deft leadership to the crisis, the Korean government implemented countless reforms to stabilize the situation, especially economic structural reforms in finance, corporate governance, labor, liberalization and the public sector. By 1999, as a result, Korea had recovered its financial stability, turning decline in 1998 into strong growth in 2000 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2000). According to one of the best known models for classifying countries by stage of economic development which was proposed by Walt Rostow's in 1971 and suggested by Philip Kotler (1997), Korea can be positioned in between the technological maturity and high mass consumption stages. This implies that country's economy is in "developed" status and can provide a good condition for the public relations profession to take off.

### *Legal System*

The modern legal system of Korea was originally patterned after European civil law, transferred from the Japanese legal system. There are three levels of courts in Korea including District Courts, High Courts and Supreme Court. The District Courts and High Courts are divided into geographic districts. The Supreme Court Justices are appointed by the President on the

recommendation of the Chief Justice with the consent of the National Assembly (Jo and Kim, 2004).

### *Activism*

Korean society is embracing the advent of the civil activism era (Kim, 2003) which has been reinforced through the democracy movement since the military regime. Labor movement is also contributing for the better work conditions. As Korean society became politically and socially democratized and liberated in 1980s, social interest groups and activist group rapidly grew. By 1999, there were over 2,000 NGOs in Korea, with a total membership of 20,000 (Kim, 2003). Activists have unveiled series of political or economic cases in different levels, including National Assembly election in 2000 or unfair trading practices by media companies. The development of civil activism requires Korean organizations to have a new approach to management such as applying more public relations practice and define suitable strategic communication with activists and social interest groups.

## **2. Culture and Public Relations**

In terms of Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, Korea is relatively high in power-distance but low in individualism. Korea is also low in uncertainty avoidance but high in masculinity. That uncertainty avoidance is low means that members of a society do not endure uncertain and unknown situations. In addition, high in masculinity means that in Korea "men supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life" (Hofstede, 1991, p.82). Further more, "industrially developed masculine cultures have a competitive advantage in manufacturing, especially in large volume: doing things efficiently, well, and fast. They are good at the production of big and heavy equipment and in bulk chemistry." (Hofstede, 1991, p.95). Also, Korea belongs to high context culture as mentioned by Hall (1959). In this culture, people tend to have hierarchical, collectivistic,



relationship-oriented and past-oriented propensity. Younger people respect older people and family is considered as important.

Among different worldviews including the perspectives of Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity, Confucianism has had more influence on Korean culture than any other religion or philosophy (Koo and Nam, 1997; Rhee, 2002). It came to Korea from China in the fifth century and was adopted as an official philosophy by the late Yi dynasty during 500 years (1392-1910). Although modern Korea has undergone many changes through foreign cultural influences from Japan and the United States, the Confucian inheritance in Korean society remains strong, providing the basic for moral standards and social norms among Koreans. Confucianism has contributed to the establishment of collectivism as a traditional, cultural value of Korea. Korean society is a collectivistic culture where the people place a group above an individual and tend to be other-directed. This collectivism and other-directedness enervates pressure on the individual to conform to cultural norms and group demands (Shin, 2007). Under collectivistic Korean society, the relationship between people bases on various social networks such as school, hometown, family, and blood ties (Kim, 2000). Confucianism does affect public relations practices in many ways, such as employee's primary allegiance has been to their organizations, or relationship building often is related to personal bonds and group membership (Kim, 2003).

Korean national identity also can be seen through a *Cheong* culture (Choi and Cameron, 2005). *Cheong* can be conceptualized as a peculiar feeling of attachment to a person or object as a consequence of a long-term contact of intimacy, affection, and self-sacrifice for the other person or object (Choi and Cameron, 2005). According to Choi and Cameron (2005), there are three peculiar properties of *Cheong*. First, *Cheong* is not easily generated or perished. Second, *Cheong* is subjective, emotional and often not logical. Last, *Cheong* is created from considerate and sincere caring of others. Under the Confucian principles, relationships are viewed

as complementary and reciprocally obligatory. An individual does not calculate what he or she gives and receives (Shin, 2007). To calculate that is considered incongruent to the principle of mutual faithfulness, the practice of relationship based on complementary obligations produces “warm, lasting human relationship as well as the necessity to accept the obligations accompanying such relationships” (Yum, 1997, p.81). *Face-saving* and *avoidance of conflict* are also often touched upon when discussing about Korean culture (Jo, 2007). Public relations practitioners should consider all these main socio-cultural features in their practice.

### **3. Media and Public Relations**

The level of freedom of the press in Korea is increased significantly since the democratic movement of 1987. Although there is tension between the government and the press, the latter can criticize the former and take an independent stance free from retribution (Jo and Kim, 2004). The Freedom House in 2007 recognized Korea is in “free press” category (Freedom House, 2007). New technologies have fostered the diversity of Korean media and created more media options for public practitioners to choose. Although traditional medium such as newspapers and broadcasting still dominate in forming public opinion, new media started to be an effective tool since most of households have access to internet. Most of organizations and public relations practitioners use internet as a quick and convenient access to reach one of the new and important public often called as “netizen”.

### **4. Development of Public Relations**

The concept of public relations, as what we understand today, was first used after the US Army established an administrative operation in Korea (Oh, 1991). In the 1960s, public relations started to be practices widely in organizations and academic research began (Choi, 1992). Public relations was taught as a subset of advertising or journalism (Rhee, 2002). In the 1970s, public

relations in the private sectors began to flourish when organizations were faced with diverse and complicated publics. However, among four models proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), the public relations practice of the *Chaebol* was limited as ***press-agentry or publicity model***. Being interpreted as *Hong Bo* in Korean, public relations was widely understood as publicity that used to counter the public's criticism of their inappropriate activities (Kim, 1996). Since then, media relations have been traditionally the primary public relations activity of most business as well as non-profit organizations in Korea. Therefore, the operational jobs performed in Korean public relations departments or agencies focus on collecting and distributing of news materials (Park, 2001). The personal relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists influenced media coverage rather than professional relationship. The *Chaebol* system in the Korean economy, especially, demonstrates the efficacy of the personal influence as a key public relations tool (Shin, 2007). Korean public relations practitioners often send gifts and *Ddugab* (money to buy Korean cakes) to government officials and members of the media (Sriramesh, Kim and Takasaki, 1999) so they can solicit favors in return when client organizations need help (Park, 2001).

As Korean society became more democratic and liberalistic in 1980s and a number of multinational corporations began to enter Korean market, the new approach to public relations was required. The 1986 Seoul Asian Game and the 1988 Seoul Olympic Game brought opportunities for Korean public relations to become a managerial and proactive function. The interest in and necessity for public relations became extensive and thus public relations agencies have thrived. Even though it is still inclined to favor the organization, public relations practitioners have started to apply ***public information and two-way asymmetric models*** (Shin, 2007). While the craft one-way communication models still dominate, practitioners who used the two-way models were more satisfied with their jobs than those practicing traditional models (Kim, 1996). There are companies that started to approach public relations

more strategically by targeting different type of publics, rather than just use traditional approaches of personal influence (Jo and Kim, 2004).

In August 1989, 13 representatives of public relations agencies, media firms, private companies, public companies and academic institutions started the Korean Public Relations Association (KPRA). Since 2005, this association has implemented its accreditation system to promote for professionalism. In 1998, the Korea Academic Society of Public Relations (KASPR) was established for public relations scholars. KASPR has been publishing Journal of Public Relations Research since then. In 1999, public relations was officially classified as a profession by the government (Jo and Kim, 2004).

## **5. Status of Public Relations**

### *In-house public relations*

In 1970s, there were few independent public relations departments or practitioners within Korean organizations. However, as the society gradually interested in public relations, status of public relations became higher. Today, most Korean organizations have their own public relations department or related departments such as marketing or planning within them. Especially, large corporations such as Samsung Electronics, the Hyundai Motors Company, SK Telecom, Korea Telecom or Posco have large public relations department with about 40 staffs. The major duties of the departments are media relations, public affairs, and strategic public relations, managing public relations image and corporate identity, and managing exhibitions and presentations (Kim, 2002).

According to a survey by Korcom in 2002, the number of public relations staffs in Korean organizations ranged from 1-2 to maximum 65, averaging 10. Their primary functions are corporate image management, employee communication, internet PR, crisis management, and supportive functions of marketing. More than

half of the surveyed organizations (64%) reported indirectly via several steps to the senior management and only 27% report directly to them (Shin, 2007).

### *Public relations industry*

The structure and practice of Korean public relations industry resemble the Japanese system rather than that of the United States (Kim, 2002). Most of the public relations markets are dominated by several major advertising agencies, which have public relations divisions within them. All of the agencies are in-house advertising agencies of Korean Chaebols.

With the current democratization in the late 1980s and rapidly globalization in 1990s, many independent public relations agencies began to serve the business, especially to handle media relations and investor relations for their clients. Most of the leading public relations agencies have strategic alliances with western public relations agencies (Kim, 2002; Shin, 2007). In 2000, independent agencies established their own organization, named as the Korea Public Relations Consultancy Association (KPRCA). They also announced Code of Ethics for Public Relations Consultancy Firms. The development of public relations industry has promoted the specialization and professionalism of public relations in Korea. As a result, a number of specialized public relations agencies appeared and their service scope were expanded from basic publicity activities to other professional functions in order to serve different kind of clients (Kim, 2002).

It is estimated that there are about 200 public relations companies in Korea recently (Kim, 2001). From 1,400 to 1,700 people approximately estimate the number of practitioners working in public relations industry. The agencies employ public relations staffs from minimum 20 to maximum 70. Among 100 agencies, the 10 large-size agencies employ about 30-40 public relations staffs, the 30 middle-size agencies 15-20, and the 60 small-size agencies 10 or less (Shin, 2007).

Although there has been growing interest in public relations as a profession in Korea, the public relations of Korea is still in the formative stage (Kim, 2000; Shin, 2007). However, the public relations industry in Korea is expected to expand rapidly and steadily, due to the influx of foreign capital, increment of foreign corporations, influx of professionals into public relations industry and development of diverse public relations strategies and tactics.

#### *Public relations education*

The demand for public relations education in colleges and universities is rapidly increasing. Since 1960s, public relations classes have established in some universities within communication or journalism departments (Jo and Kim, 2003). Seoul University's graduate school of public administration was the first school to offer a public relations course. However, Chung-Ang University became the first university to install the department of advertising and public relations at the undergraduate level, but it merged with the department of mass communication and journalism. Several years later, the Hankook University of Foreign Studies also established the department of public relations, but it changed into the department of mass communications and journalism (Kim, 2002).

In the 1980s, many university including Yonsei University, Ewha Women's University and Sogang University have formed public relations specialty within department of mass communications and journalism. A few related courses such as public relations principles, publishing magazine, public relations and propaganda have been offered by these universities. Finally, in 1987, Chung-Ang University and Han-Yang University opened an independent public relations department at the undergraduate level. In the middle of 1990s, some other local universities in provinces began to establish new departments of advertising and public relations at the undergraduate level. Recently, 31 universities have departments of advertising and public relations at the undergraduate level. More than 4800 students majored in such programs, of whom

about 30% to 40% enrolls are public relations major (Kim, 2002). Korea now focuses in refining public relations education system (Jo et al., 2004) in order to foster professional ethics codes. Public relations scholars pay much attention to the development of structures that provide professional training to public relations practitioners as well as encouraging the use of scientific measurements to assess the efficacy of public relations effects (Shin, 1997).

According to Kim's (2001) survey, public relations education in Korea has faced at least two main problems. First, the training program at both undergraduate and graduate level lacks of diversity in their curriculum that enables them to cover various aspects of public relations practice rather than focusing in advertising. Reasons relate to the fact that public relations have been treated as a subsidiary field within advertising and there are not enough faculties to teach the field. Second, public relations education in Korea lacks of practice-oriented programs, focusing only on theory-base curriculums. This makes it difficult for students when they enter the professional market. On the other hand, public relations education also has not been strong enough in quality and quantity to respond to social demand of the field. As found in a study by Rhee (2002), knowledge is a key factor for Korean public relations to be excellent. Therefore, public relations education is very important for the future development of the field.

#### **IV. PUBLIC RELATIONS IN VIETNAM**

##### **1. Infrastructure and Public Relations**

###### *Political system*

Vietnam's history is characterized by a nearly continuous struggle for autonomy. First came with an entire millennium of Chinese domination, which was finally thrown off in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. External control was imposed once again in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was occupied by France. French rule lasted

until World War II, when Japan invaded the country. At the war's end the predominantly Communist Viet Minh, which had led the resistance movement against the Japanese, declared the country's independence in September 1945. Just one year later, the French Indochina War ensued, until France admitted defeat in 1954, and the Geneva Accords left Vietnam divided into two parts and waited for general election in next two years.

However, by this time, the United States had replaced the French as the primary sponsor of the anti-communist government in the south. Tension between north and south mounted over the next few years, until in 1964 full-scale war erupted. The conflict involved hundreds of thousands of troops from the U.S. and other countries. Until 1973, a cease-fire agreement allowed the United States the opportunity to withdraw its troops. In 1975, the southern capital of Saigon fell. The country was reunified and officially named as Socialist Republic of Vietnam with Hanoi is capital. Since then, the unified Vietnam has ushered into a new era of peace, unification and national construction.

In the first ten years of this period, many socio-economic targets were not achieved due to both internal and external reasons. Vietnam's economy fell into crisis and stagnation and people's lives were difficult. At the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party in 1986, the *Doi Moi* (reform or renovation) policy was launched with focus on economic reform. To put it simply, this policy abandoned doctrinaire socialist theories, introduced a market economy, and opened the country to the global economy (csuchico.edu). This marked an important milestone in the new stage of development of the Vietnamese nation. The *Doi Moi* policy was consistently reaffirmed throughout the later Party Congresses. From a food importing country, Vietnam became the second largest rice exporter in the world within few years. Vietnam also exports many other commodities with well-known brands. The economy attained high growth rate continuously, people's lives have been significantly improved; social policy received greater attention, the



legal system has become increasingly complete and social management based on the rule of law put into place.

Vietnam officially established diplomatic relations with almost all other countries in the world. In 1995, Vietnam and the United States re-established their diplomatic and economic relationship. In October of 2007, Vietnam was elected to become non-permanent member of the UN Security Council from 1 January 2008.

Communist Party has been the only ruling party in Vietnam. All media outlets are owned by or are under the control of the party, government, and social organizations. As in other communist systems, the party and the government fund most of the newspapers and broadcasts. Hence, among seven types of political systems suggested by Freedom House (Sriramesh, 2004), Vietnam can be put as totalitarian regimes. Also, in Map of freedom 2007, Vietnam's status is not free (Freedom house, 2007).

Even though the legal and other infrastructure has been inadequate to sustain the needs of a complex market economy and economic liberalization has not been followed by the same degree of political liberalization (Spencer, 1997), there are signs that the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam is allowing a higher degree of political diversification in the country. The latest indication of this was the numbers of self-nominated and non-party candidates have risen in the elections for the National Assembly on May 20 of 2007 (Global Insight, 2007). Also, the WTO membership will create more changes in Vietnamese political environment in order to be in concord with main international trends.

#### *Level of economic development*

Since 1986, with the Doi Moi policy, Vietnam has seen dramatic changes, primarily in the economic thinking. The centrally planned economy was replaced by the socialist-oriented market economy; national industrialization and modernization were initiated together with the policy of multilateralization and

diversification of external economic relations, openness and international integration. The *Doi Moi* process helped Vietnam rapidly escape hunger and poverty and lay the initial foundation for an industrialized economy, as well as maintaining a high growth rate and a relatively equal society (Stephen, 1999).

Along with the law-making process, market economy institutions have also been established. It is government policy to eliminate the central planning mechanism, emphasize monetary - market relations, focus on economic management measures and establish an array of financial institutions, banks and basic markets for money, labor, goods and land, etc. The administrative reform was promoted to improve economic competitiveness and to help create a more favorable business environment and mobilize all resources for economic growth.

Overall, economic reforms taking place over nearly two decades have yielded encouraging results. GDP of Vietnam saw a sustained growth, which stood at 8.2% in 1991-1995 as compared to 3.9% in 1986-1990. This rate dropped to 7.5% in 1996-2000 due to the impacts of the Asian financial crisis (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006). Since 2001, GDP growth recovered on a year-on-year basis, reaching 6.9%, 7.1%, 7.3%, 7.7%, 8.4%, 8.2% for 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 respectively (Business Monitor International, 2007). The figure for the year 2007 is 8.5%, highest over the past 10 years and expects to grow between 8.5% and 9% next year with the shift to the increased industry and service (Vietnam Business Forum, 2007). Vietnam emerged as one of the *fastest growing economies* in the world (Business Monitor International, 2007).

Economic growth is combined with the improvement of life quality and development of health care and education. The Human Development Index of Vietnam increased from 0.583 in 1994 with a rank of 120/174 to 108/177 in 2005. The average life expectancy was raised from around 50 in the 1960s to 70.5 at present. The poor household ratio dropped from 70% in 1980 to below 7% in 2005 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007).

Vietnam has drawn increasing inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) over the past years. Indeed, FDI approvals surged by nearly 50% in 2005 in compared with a year earlier (Global Insight, 2007). Upon the amendment of the Enterprise Law in 2000, private businesses have enjoyed strong encouragement for development. This Law institutionalized the freedom of all individuals including members of the Communist Party to do business in areas not prohibited by law.

With the success of the Doi Moi, Vietnam can be positioned as somehow between the second and third stage of economic development proposed by Rostow (1971). It is still underdeveloped stage but there is a way heading to the takeoff stage in the near future. WTO membership that was recognized recently will give Vietnam access to both foreign markets and capital, meanwhile making Vietnamese enterprises stronger through increased competition. The new picture of Vietnam economy shows high need for public relations professional practices at present as well as the near future.

### *Legal System*

Vietnam belongs to the socialist legal system. There are many similarities to the laws of former socialist countries. Some French influence also remains due to a long colonial period from the 19<sup>th</sup> into the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the end of the 1980s, the Vietnamese legal system has undergone important changes following the country's economic reform. One important purport of the legislation in Vietnam is to cope with international standards in order to promote international transactions from and into Vietnam.

The leading role of the Communist Party is stated in Article 4 of the Constitution. According to the Constitution has Vietnam a parliamentary system. The National Assembly is the highest legislative power and the supreme body of power of the country. The legislation period of the National Assembly is 5 years. The National Assembly appoints the head of State, the President, and the Vice-President. The highest administrative body is the

Government as executive body of the National Assembly. The Government is composed of the Prime Minister, the Vice Prime Ministers, Ministers and other members.

The People's Courts are organized into Criminal, Civil, Labour, Economic and Administrative Divisions. In addition to the normal and military courts, the National Assembly may establish extraordinary courts. The People's Courts are organized into three levels. In the lower level, the People's District Courts are in charge for civil, family and labor disputes as well as for minor criminal cases. In the upper level, People's Provincial or City Courts are in charge for appeals against as well as revisions and cassations of decisions of the lower level's courts. They are first instance courts in economic and complex civil disputes as well as serious criminal cases. At the highest level, the People's Supreme Court is responsible for the uniform application of laws in Vietnam (<http://www.thna.com/legalsys.htm>).

### *Activism*

Characterized by many wars with foreign countries, social activism historically played a vital role in Vietnamese society. During the war with America in 1960 – 1970s, most of all social groups including religions, students, workers, women, etc. participated in anti-war movements throughout the country. People's desires for peace, unification, independence were among the most wanted themes during this time. However, since the country was unified in 1975, the salary and working conditions are prevalent purposes in the nature of activism in Vietnam currently. Therefore, labor unions are major forces in the society, along with women union and youth union.

## **2. Culture and Public Relations**

According to Kaplan and Manners (1972), there are four determinants of social culture: technoeconomics, social structure, ideology, and personality. In terms of technoeconomics, which refers to the level of economic development of a society, Vietnam

is an agricultural country. Situated in the center of South East Asia with a rice growing tradition, Vietnamese have been living mainly base on agricultural economy. Being hot, humid and having a high rainfall rate annually, Vietnamese can grow three to four rice harvests in a year. Therefore, Vietnamese culture is called “*typical wet - rice planting culture*” (Tran, 1999). The Mekong river delta in southern part of the country provides 2/3 of all rice production. Currently, about 70% of population is living in the agricultural sector. Depending heavily on the weather during cultivating, collective thinking is a main feature in Vietnamese world perception. This collectivity of thought helps to embrace all aspects of a phenomenon. It also brings about dialecticism in which people are not attentive to separate elements but the relationship between elements of a phenomenon (Tran, 1999).

In terms of social structure, Vietnamese have been living under many different structures such as primitive commune, feudal, capital, communist structures in its history. This resulted by being the meeting-place of many different cultural streams. In about 4000 years of history, South East Asian, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Western including the French, American, Russian and East European cultures respectively have influenced Vietnamese culture. According to Tran (1999) and Tran (1997), Chinese culture marked a strongest effect that many people mistakenly thought that Vietnamese culture is just a produce of Chinese culture. In fact, Vietnamese native culture of wet-rice planting through out its history is so strong that distinguish Vietnamese culture with others. To do agriculture manually, they need many labors and it is better to live closely in order to share the work. Hence, in its social structure, some generations of a family are harmoniously living in one family in village. This makes *village culture* (harmony, affection) and *trong tinh* (loving or kind respect) are particular traits of Vietnamese (Tran, 1997;Tran, 1999). The Vietnamese word *Tinh* is very similar to *Cheong* in Korean in its meaning. *Village culture* and *trong tinh* do influence most of people’s attitude and behavior in their daily lives (Tran, 1999). For example,

it was found that the two following factors seemed to have the strongest impact on Vietnamese workers' enthusiasm: high level of income (including salary), good internal relations, and friendly atmosphere (Peter et al, 2000). Because of *trong tinh* and the desire of living in harmony and peace, face-saving and avoidance of conflict are also some noticeable characteristics of Vietnamese (Tran, 1999; Bruce, 2000).

Personal relationship is prominent in Vietnamese society. "*Blood is thicker than water*" - this Vietnamese proverb implies that the blood-based relationship is the most important relationship in society. This closely relates to kinship. Most of Vietnamese are living in villages, which compose by some kin. Apart from kinship, relationship between people from same village or hometown relatively is closer than other types. Relationship is also based on various other social networks such as schools, working places, clubs, communities, etc. In building and maintaining relationship, *Tinh* between people is most important.

Another feature that differ Vietnamese culture from other Asian cultures is the *women's role*. Traditionally, Vietnam followed matriarchy, which is quite popular in Southeast Asia. Vietnamese women also have affirmed their social role especially during long wartime (Tran, 2004). Although Confucian dynamism, which looks down on women, does exist within the social culture of Vietnam but it was fading out since the French colonial period in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, Vietnamese culture is inclining to femininity (Tran, 2004; Tran, 1996). According to G. Hofstede (1991), feminine cultures have a relative advantage in service industries (p.95) which public relations is a part of it. Additionally, most of Vietnamese were born after the war finished in 1975. Recently, about 60% of about 85 millions Vietnamese population is below 30 years old. Living style of the nation has been changed drastically as the young people tend to open to the world more than the old generations. These characteristics of human resource give a hope for a bright future of public relations industry in Vietnam.

In terms of ideology, Vietnamese seem to have a *diverse spiritual world*. Despite considerable foreign influences, Vietnamese have managed to retain many distinct native customs, which have always played a vital role in daily life throughout the millennia. The country is the land where many religions exist together in a harmony. Besides the "triple religion", a mixture between Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, Vietnamese life was also profoundly influenced by the practice of ancestor worship as well as native animism. Most Vietnamese people, regardless of religious denomination, practice ancestor worship and have an ancestor altar at their home or business, a testament to the emphasis Vietnamese culture places on filial duty. Therefore, peace loving and tolerance (Tran, 1999) can characterize national spirit.

In terms of personality, living in an agricultural culture where lives depend on the nature along with effects of many foreign influences, *flexibility* and *improvisation* are characters that may describe Vietnamese (Tran, 1999). These characters give advantages that help people to achieve their goals in complex environment but also bring some disadvantages to society in other cases. For example, people tend to worm their own way through the laws by using interpersonal communication or other influences such as using "behind the scene" or "guerilla" tactics to obtain their goals (Tran, 2004).

### **3. Media and Public Relations**

Despite Vietnamese government funds almost all media organizations, things are changing quickly as the demand of opening and economic growth. Over 100 out of about 620 media organizations have attempted to become financially sustainable and to stop relying on state subsidies (Truong, 2007). Televisions, radios started to buy programs that private producers created. Although journalists still have limitation in covering sensitive political or economic matters, they can report on crime and official corruption, and such reports have become increasingly common

(freedom house, 2006). The national information strategy until 2015 classified media organization into two parts: information and propaganda division and commercial division (Hong, 2007). This will allow media organization to also work as a media business group, which never existed before. The media environment in Vietnam has been changing gradually as more open and more professional (Truong, 2007). Access to satellite television broadcasts and the internet is growing. Use of the internet has grown sharply in 2007, as 17.5% of populations are internet users, a high rate in the region (internetworldstats.com). Since the beginning of this year 2006, the President, the Prime Minister, the Chairman of Parliament and some other ministers started to have online conversations with citizens. Many university researchers and lecturers in the field of journalism, communication and public relations studies are encouraged to go abroad for further study in so-called “capitalism” countries. This similar chance was very rare in the past.

As recognized by the top Vietnamese leaders of media industry, one of the biggest media problems now is *commercialization* (To, 2007; Truong, 2007). While Vietnam media law and regulation are unclear and often stay behind the field development, media relations practice is very unlike in other western countries. Receiving gift or money from news sources becomes a normal practice of many journalists. Objectivity and media professional ethics therefore are extremely affected. As communication is one of the key foundations for public relations growth, the media in Vietnam still needs to be more opened, professional standardized and active.

#### **4. Public Relations’ starting point**

*When did public relations start to exist in Vietnam?* Bruce C. McKinney (2000) stated that public relations is in its *infancy* in Vietnam, unlike China and Russia where public relations have fairly well developed. He was perfectly correct when he regarded public relations as a profession. However, in search for gems of



public relations practices there, we can find many evidences years earlier.

For instance, since Vietnam had been just independent from Japan in 1945, the newly established government had developed some big campaigns for solving social issues as well as for fundraising. Within a few months, millions of people had donated money and properties to secure the empty national budget, which was inherited from Japan. A campaign named “Exterminate Ignorance” was implemented throughout the country to reduce illiteracy rate. From 95% illiterate people at that time, thanks to this initial effort, now the literacy rate in Vietnam is 95% (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006).

In 1954, Vietnam was divided into 2 parts: North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Until the Vietnam War (it was American War in Vietnamese language) ended in 1975, the North followed Communism with a central-planned economy. Government distributed all products and there was no competition in economy. The government controlled all media and the media was a propaganda tool of the regime. The term “public relations” did not exist in any reports during this time in Vietnam. However, by using the four models of public relations suggested by Grunig and Grunig (1992), it is reasonable to infer that public relations practices were implemented there at least in some levels. For example, in order to assist the front line fighting for country reunion, the North government and the army did many campaigns in order to encourage people to contribute both property and human resource as to the war of resistance. Not only internal publics but also external publics were targeted that created an anti-war internationally. In “the people’s war of resistance against American empire” (Giap, 2005), the main reason for victory was the “collective power of all nation” (Giap, 2005). That collective power may have been resulted from public relations practices that need to study further in future. Meanwhile, government in the South held a close relationship with the United States and public relations had been started since American troops came here. In our interview, one of the participants affirmed:

*“Public relations started to grow in the South of Vietnam during 1960s along with the existence of American troops. Public relations had been taught widely at undergraduate level since the beginning of 1970s in many universities, including National Administration University (Dai Hoc Hanh Chanh Quoc Gia), An Giang University, Van Hanh University, Da Lat University, Hoa Hao University, etc. Public relations programs were mostly underneath Literature and Journalism/ Administration/ Business/ Commerce/ and Banking department of business schools. Most public relations lecturers were graduated from the United States or France. Public relations practices were mainly media relations, internal relations and corporate social responsibilities”*

Since that time, “public relations” had been converted into Vietnamese as *Giao Te Nhan Su*, widely understood as “all practices relate to communication between people” or “Human communication’s activities” (Huynh, 1994). The Saigon government also paid a quite strong attention to public affairs as often held press briefings about war situations at 5 o’clock everyday (Daniel Hallin) or regularly propagated anti-communist campaigns. Public relations principles and practice was mentioned in some translated communication or journalism books (Hien dai thu xa, 1968; Huynh, 1975).

In 1975, the reunion Vietnam started to applied communism ideology all over the country. This change had badly affected the practices of public relations in the South. All public relations education programs had paused until 1993 when it was allowed to teach again firstly by Huynh Van Tong in an open university named *Dai Hoc Mo – Ban Cong Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh*. Since then public relations has been gradually known again in Vietnam when foreign investors returned to the country. They wanted to apply public relations in their business here but they almost could not recruit Vietnamese employees with some public relations knowledge. Hence, they hired Vietnamese with strong English language ability and trained them to do public relations gradually.

In 1994, Huynh Van Tong published the first book about public relations in Vietnamese language, titled as *Giao Te Nhan Su Trong Kinh Doanh* (translated into English as “Public Relations In Business”). However, since “*Giao Te Nhan Su*” sounds old dialect and unfamiliar to most young Vietnamese, the new translated term as “*Quan He Cong Chung*” has become widely accepted. It exactly means “*the relationship with publics*” or “*public relations*” and primarily used in the first public relations master’s theses (Nguyen, 2001). Recently, a handful of public relations books were published in Vietnamese. Most of them were translated from English and a few are written by Vietnamese authors. With the development of internet currently, Vietnamese people, especially the youngsters can approach to the world’s knowledge of public relations conveniently.

## **5. Status of Public Relations**

### *Public relations industry*

Foreign investment wave and the openness of market in Vietnam recently required more public relations practices. As a result, public relations returned to Vietnam by foreigners. According to Adarco Ltd. (Thailand), in the 1990s, some foreign advertising and public relations agencies started to open their activities in Vietnam. In 1994, Ogilvy & Mother was the first, followed by Hakuhodo Inc. (Japan). The JWT opened its branch office in 1995. In June 15, 2004, Advertising Support (ADS) and Total Quality PR Asia Pacific were awarded the first PR joint-venture license in Vietnam with 15-year duration. In 2003, Cheil Communication (Korea) established its branch office in order to serve its retainer clients in Vietnam market (Adarco, 2006).

In 1995, public relations service was offered by some first domestic agencies in Hanoi including PUBCOM (McKinney, 2000) and T&A Communications. PUBCOM specializes in media relations, staff management and cultural training, special event management, and information service (Bruce, 2000). T&A

Communication is one of the leading public relations agencies now in Vietnam with 45 full time managers and staffs. Since 2001, this agency has been the local partner for Ogilvy & Mother. From 2007, T&A Communications is a WPP Group's local associate. The company's expertise is in a range of services including corporate communications, public affairs, media relations, public relations/communication education initiatives, online communication, CSR, event management, etc (T&A Communications website, 2007).

It seems to be impossible to find the exact number of public relations agencies and practitioners in Vietnam now. Public relations have not been officially recognized as a profession (So ke hoach dau tu Hanoi, 2007). Bruce C. McKinney (2006) reported that there are 9 agencies in Ho Chi Minh City and 2 in Hanoi. Meanwhile, according to a directory by a Thailand market research company, Vietnam has about 40 independent public relations agencies and about 200 advertising agencies which also offer public relations related services (Adarco, 2006). Public relations agencies are *"still in booming stage"* as said by one of the interviewee. Most of the public relations agencies are owned and practice by Vietnamese. FTA Market Research Company estimated that the number of public relations firms is now on the rise, as the market grows by 30% per year on average (Vietnamnet, 2005). According to a current research, leading public relations agencies in Vietnam are all domestic agencies, such as Max Communications, Dat Viet, Venus, Galaxy, etc (FTA, 2006). Explained about this phenomenon, an interviewee who is a manager of a public relations agency said: *"Domestic agencies can better understand local environment, therefore we know how to find the suitable ways to meet client's demands. For example, we have more advantages to understand and approach Vietnamese media over foreign agencies"*

Different with Korea where public relations agencies mostly place their main offices in the capital city, more than two third of Vietnamese public relations agencies located in Ho Chi Minh city

as it is the most dynamic city there. Big agencies in Hanoi also have to open their branches there. According to Adarco's list, the range of public relations staffs in an agency is about 5 to 45 people, the average is 10 (Adarco, 2006). In estimate, there are about 500 public relations practitioners working in different agencies.

*In Vietnam, many people still do not know or misunderstand about public relations. The line between public relations and advertising is blurred at best (Bruce, 2006). Therefore, mainly serving foreign clients/ brands is one of the remarkable features of public relations agency in Vietnam presently. For example, T&A Communications now has only one domestic client out of its 18 retainer clients as total. Max Communications also has only one domestic retainer client among dozen of international ones. As explained by one of the interviewee:*

“Most of Vietnamese clients in our field do not really know what they want. I mean their objectives are not clear. They also just willing to pay for tangible services and don't understand about communication, even about Vietnamese media environment.”

*Another interviewee who also serves only one domestic client complained:*

“They do not understand public relations as well as the value of our services. We can't spend too much time and effort to explain about what public relations is for them. They always want to see the results in a short time, but you know, public relations need to be done with long and continuous efforts.”

One agency even denies domestic client because “*they always try to entice our staffs to work for them as PR in-house*”. However, most of the agencies could only provide clients' required services. The number of companies that can offer consulting services is very few. Limited qualification led some agencies even involving in unethical practices, such as create crisis for client's competitors. “*Most of crisis recently happened in Vietnam are arranged by competitors with the direction from public relations agencies*” said by Christine Jone, executive director in Asia-Pacific region for

Burson-Mateller (To Thanh, 2006). The requirement for profession's ethical standard has been emerged.

**Media relation** is one of the main practices of any public relations agency. However, the influence of authoritative style of government on media makes it difficult for international public relations agencies to build and maintain relationship with Vietnamese media. Local agencies have more advantages in media relations since they better understand the language and media style. However, even some big domestic agencies also have to cease media relation service because of many obstacles from both the clients and the media recently. Clients do not want to pay much and some journalists insist on money or gifts. For instance, one of the interviewee said:

*“Many Vietnamese clients do not understand how the media work so they always want their company's name or products showed on the news. Meanwhile, the media treat this kind of information as advertisement and ask for a fee. Therefore, advertorial is a solution, but it is often costly, and client doesn't want to pay. That is why many agencies have to give money to journalists directly and then journalists themselves arrange the information on their media vehicles. This way of payment is cheaper than advertising at least about 20% but obviously it's unethical. When I was a journalist few years ago, I did not see this phenomenon that much among journalists. Now it spreads widely. I really don't want to give them money, but we have to exist...”* - she explained and shrugged her shoulders.

Another interviewee also confirmed that about 10 years ago, this money given practice was very strange in media environment. “Now many things changed. Everything has prices. For example, if I want my short news appeared on a middle ranking newspaper, I should give them at least 800,000 Vietnam Dong, which equivalent to US\$ 50.” In case the company's information is almost similar to advertisement, about 20% more than advertising fee is needed, she added. Many journalists themselves also expect public relations

agency to give them money to exchange for their positive news reports. Once journalists are invited to press conference, enveloped money (about 20 USD) pay-off is expected, said by one of the interviewee. "If the organization does not follow this practice, he or she will face a room of empty chairs" (Bruce, 2006). Many public relations practitioners complained about this give - and - take practice but they cannot do better because it has become a "habit" of two subjects of the relationship as an interviewee commented.

However, there is a comment that as Vietnam media become more professional, the big and mainstream newspapers even show more respect toward public relations. *"As I know, one of the big newspapers has forbidden their journalists to receive any kind of gift from news sources since many years ago. They are also becoming more professional as they only valued the information from us. Therefore, we are prone to advice our clients to buy media sponsorship in lieu of fake advertisement"*, one interviewee spoke about his agency's alternative way to deal with media. *Fake advertisement*, as defined by him, is the paid-news which arranged by public relations agency and journalists personally. As introduced by him, we interviewed one journalist from such newspaper. The journalist confirmed that her newspaper will dismiss their reporter if they are found involving in taking money from news source. She added:

"The abnormal thing nowadays is receiving money or gifts are so normal among journalists here. However, my colleagues from other media organizations often complain that they were pushed by PR practitioners to report positively. You see, this relationship is not pure. We don't have to face similar situation, but sometimes we feel that PR people think we play high and mighty as we refuse gifts."

Obviously the give-and-take practice is somehow badly affect the relationship and working result of media people and public relations practitioners because it makes both sides are not fully satisfied about each other. The journalists are not happy in either

taking or refusing the gifts, while PR practitioners are not confident if they do not give anything to media people.

### *In-house public relations*

In-house public relations are practiced widely in Vietnam recently. While almost all foreign companies (including foreign joint ventures) have a public relations department or at least one person in charge of public relations, the state-run companies have just started to pay attention to this practice. However, there is a sign that public relations begin to be valued in all kind of business sectors. Below are some examples for each sector.

**Foreign company:** The A. Bank<sup>1</sup> in Vietnam has 4 staffs in public relations unit under Marketing Department. All staffs are experienced in public relations at least some years and they practice almost all programs by themselves without hiring outside public relations agency. *“As embedded staffs, we better understand our organization and more actively do our job”*, said by interviewee. She explained that public relations activities of the bank require banking knowledge and confidence that not many public relations agencies can provide. Every month, this unit has to do at least three regional and local projects, mostly making events, internal communications or corporate social responsibility (CSR). In media relations, A. Bank maintains close relationship with local news media base on Vietnamese perception of *Tinh*. *“We sometimes give our bank’s gifts which have our logo to journalists, but not money. The way you give often touches the receiver’s heart more than what you give. We also often invite journalists to attend our trainings about basic banking services so they can understand us better”* – she added that public relations agencies often have many clients that they cannot care for each journalist as carefully as the company desired if the bank hire them. The bank has recently been named

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<sup>1</sup> From here, the name of company is abridged notation as researchers keep confidential for our interviewees.



The Best Foreign Bank in Vietnam 2007 by a leading financial publication.

Coca-Cola is also another example of successful in-house public relations practice in Vietnam (Bruce, 2006). “Perhaps because Coke is an American company, it understands the need for involvement in the local community that presents the company and its product in a positive manner. Coke practices proactive public relations” (Bruce, 2006).

**State-run company:** “Until Vietnam’s market economy is free from state run organizations, public relations in Vietnam will be vastly different from the West” (Bruce, 2006). Bruce McKinney took Vietnam Airlines case as an example for this statement. Vietnam Airlines, a state-owned enterprise recently faces a large public distrust and negative media coverage due to its various mismanagements and wrongdoings. However, while the enterprise is ignoring the public, it is still receiving government’s support. This case will be treated differently in Western context as Bruce McKinney commented. According to our recent personal interview, Vietnam Airlines has started to arrange in-house public relations unit in order to respond to many crisis. According to one of our interviewee, this unit provisionally has 3 staffs and is underneath Planning - Marketing Department. Most of the staff does not have much experience in public relations. Even though the corporation involves many kinds of publics, the PR unit only focused on media relations, image and event management.

However, Vietnam Airlines is just a case. There are state-run companies, which quite well apply in-house public relations. For instance, Vietnam B. Corporation has realized the value of public relations since the beginning of 2000s. Being the pioneer and biggest internet service provider, it was the first state-run companies to establish its own website. In-house public relations unit contains 20 staffs, practicing from media relations to reputation management, corporate communications, CSR, etc. Public relations unit belongs to the company’s online newspaper but PR staffs can report directly to highest manager in many cases. *“We have thousands of employees*

*and millions of customers, therefore, in-house public relations is regarded as very important by the management board”,* said by company’s public relations manager in our interview.

During our field research, maybe the most impressive in-house public relations department in state-run company is from C. Travel Service Company. The company is one of the leading in growth rates and market share of domestic, inbound and outbound tours in Vietnam tourism industry. Started in 2003, in-house public relations unit began with only one staff and directly reported to the manager mainly about media relations and corporate communication. In 2005, the unit shifted to Marketing and Planning Department. From 2006, it employed 6 staffs to solve different tasks including internal and external relations, graphic design, online public relations, advertising, event management, etc. The most interesting is that they not only do all public relations practices by themselves but even offer their services to the market. *“Our manager was graduated in marketing and public relations abroad so he understands public relations very well. We are encouraged to not only fulfill our duties but also earn benefit by selling our PR services, such as organizing events, publicity and so on.”* – said by the head PR unit in our interview. In media relations, the company only honored high professional media organizations confidently because *“if we are newsworthy, journalists will follow us”*, and *“if they insist money or gift, I just simply ignore them, because I don’t value this kind of media”*, she explained. Everyday, the company sends at least two press releases to media organizations. A free beach tour for 400 blind students named “Lighten Belief” (*Thap Sang Niem Tin*) every year as a part of the company’s CSR is always attracted by news media practitioners.

**Private company:** The C. Corporation has established its Communication Department since 2003. This department consists of 25 experienced staffs, is closely attached to the highest management coalition. It has two divisions: public relations and brand management. Public relations division is responsible for all

PR practices, mainly media relations, community relations, sponsorship, and CSR. It also handles corporate communication with an intranet and a newsletter. Being one of the biggest high technology corporation in Vietnam, C. Corporation has about 7,000 employees inside and outside the country. Recently, it became partner of some world ranking corporations. Public relations has been recognized as contributed to the success of the corporation.

Not only big company, the small business also pay attention to public relations. D. Company which provides coating solutions has about 120 employees. Since 2006 when the company was established, it appointed a public relations in-house staff. *“Even though my salary is not that high but I think my job is stable. The company needs me, and I have many things to do as PR in-house here.”*, said the PR staff in our interview.

#### *Public relations education*

All issues related to public relations in Vietnam are causative by its freshman or starting point stage. Publics lack of correct cognition while practitioners lack of professional knowledge, skills and ethics. Among our interviewees, only one participant hold master degree majored in public relations from the United States. All others' background is in related subjects such as Media Communications, Marketing, and Journalism. Most of practitioners studied public relations by attending some short courses, or by themselves while working. These issues are mainly because education falls far behind the real demand of society.

The most common phrases used to describe the practitioners' public relations education were “I studied it by myself from internet”, “my boss taught me in the first week when I attend the agency”, “my friend sent me a PR book from abroad and I studied it”, “I studied in a 4 months course”, “I learned it basically from a 45-hours-course when I was a university student”, “main office of my company sent a PR person here to teach us for one week”, etc. Therefore, regarding research in public relations, one interviewee said: “I never do any public relations research because I don't know

how to do” while another shared that she has tried to do research once but she found it is very difficult to make use from the research results. Most of other practicing participants said they do not have enough budgets to do research. “Big clients have their own researched database. They provide it for us to refer. We don’t need to do research by ourselves”, a manager of a public relations agency said. “We often evaluate through indirect ways such as look at media clip or client’s company’s online poll”, he added.

Public relations has been given as an elective course since 1994 at journalism or marketing departments in some universities such as Ho Chi Minh City Open University, Ho Chi Minh City Economic University. In 2005, for the first time, public relations became a regular course in Department of Journalism, College of Social Sciences and Humanities (member of Hanoi National University). At the same time, Thames Business School in Hanoi has offered regularly related short courses. Some public relations agencies are offering ice-breaking courses such as T&A Communications and Marcom companies. Due to the lack of trained lecturers, textbooks, and other obstacles, these courses could only provide limited number of students some basic knowledge about the field.

In 2006, Department of Public Relations and Advertising in Academy of Journalism and Information (Hanoi) implemented the first regular undergraduate program in public relations with 40 students’ quota every year. The department, which consists of seven full-time lecturers and some visiting lecturers, provides principle theories and practices of public relations. Students are encouraged to do an internship. However, its curriculum which is controlled by the Ministry of Education and Training is mainly theoretical oriented and still far from the demand of real practice. In 2008, a graduate program will be installed with the support from University of Sydney, Australia. In the department, well-experienced practitioners also participate in short courses several times a year.

Speaking about the difficulties in public relations education, one interviewee who is director of a public relations training institution said:

*“We do not have enough qualified lecturers. We often have to invite practitioners from PR agencies to teach. They are experienced but sometimes they don’t teach thoroughly dutiful because they are often very busy”.*

Regarding training of trainers, she said the institution is sending some lecturers to study public relations abroad, but it will take some more years from now for them to fulfill their study and return back to the country.

Obviously, public relations education is very necessary for Vietnamese practitioners as well as the public. “Educating public relations for both practitioners and clients are major tasks for making public relations in Vietnam to be professional. This is the only way to help people understand and value public relations” – said one of the interviewee. “However, public relations can not be totally imported, especially human resource. We have to train our own people”, he added.

Public relations as a profession is still in its shaping stage in Vietnam. The high economic growth currently and in the coming years (Simona Mocuta, 2007) shows a dire need for human resource in this field. Public relations education and training therefore become the best solution to solve this issue. To deal with this, training of trainers needs to be considered as an urgent requirement of the society.

## **V. COMPARISON BETWEEN PUBLIC RELATIONS OF KOREA AND VIETNAM**

### **1. Comparison between Korea and Vietnam background**

Although differing in political system and level of economic development, Korea and Vietnam share quite many similarities in their socio-cultural aspects as being Asian countries (See table 1).

Historically, the two countries had been divided as North and South since 1950s. These two regions in both countries followed different idealisms and political systems. In 1975, Vietnam became reunification after more than 20 years of devastating war and started to apply Communist system in the whole country. Meanwhile, Korea remains the only divided country in the world. South Korean political system is more close to western model. In terms of economics, Korea is far better developed and has become one of the world biggest economies while Vietnam is still among one of the poorest countries. However, both countries are having high growth rates continuously. With the WTO membership and the on progress *Doi Moi* policy, Vietnam is trying hard to follow the economical model of Korea in order to get out of poor status in its economy. Having differences in political system, the mass media in two countries are vastly differed as Vietnamese media is controlled and there is no private media. The social activism in both countries has proved their strength in history while Korean activism recently can enjoy somewhat balance with different kinds and levels of organizations including government, corporations, etc.; Vietnamese activism mainly focuses in labor affairs. This is understandable, because the level of economic development directly influences the level of activism (Sriramesh, 2004). In a developing country like Vietnam, people are busy with earning the next square of meal for their family, which leaves them little time to participate in other activities (Sriramesh, 2004).

However, having most influences by China, especially the Confucianism, the two countries' socio-cultural features are high collectivistic and hierarchical systems. In this culture, people tend to leave in a harmony in which *cheong* or *trong tinh* are most respectful. Therefore, face-saving and avoidance of conflict also stand out in relief in society. In building and maintaining relationships, personal influence often brings parties closer more easily and effectively. There is only one slightly difference in the two countries' culture, that is the role of women in society.

Vietnamese women seem to enjoy higher role in society due to the Southeast Asian native culture of matriarchy and the gender equality in current communism system. This characteristic leads the way to make Vietnamese culture to become feminine, emotional and it influences the nature of all other human relationship in this society. Meanwhile, Korean culture is more masculine, which brings about authoritarianism (Jo, 2007).

## **2. Comparison between Public Relations of Korea and Vietnam**

Being adopted from the United States since 1960s, public relations practice in both countries was quite similar in its beginning (See table 2). However, because of socio-political changes, public relations in Vietnam is now just at starting-point while Korean public relations has been far better developed. In Korea, public relations education and practice have been continuously developing and becoming more professional. Meanwhile, due to the change of political system after reunification, public relations of Vietnam has been paused for nearly 20 years and just restarted since the beginning of 1990s with the *Doi Moi* policy. Therefore, mathematically we can estimate that public relations industry in Vietnam is behind Korean public relations at least 20 years. If considering other social and economic factors, the gap maybe even bigger. While Korean public relations industry has already started to merge and more specialize, Vietnamese public relations is only in forming stage. Public relations is more widely understood and applied in different kind of organizations in Korea while in Vietnam, it is still new and often misunderstood as paid-communication. This leads to the fact that one of the main jobs of Vietnamese practitioners has to do is to educate their clients about what public relations is and how it can help.

Public relations in Korea has become a profession with recognition by the government but yet in Vietnam. Many related

professional associations and a big number of well-trained practitioners also help public relations to play important roles in society in Korea as well as in the Asian region. Level of democracy along with media freedom and a participative society policy also create more advantage condition for practicing public relations with diverse strategies. Meanwhile, Vietnam do not have many trained public relations, as a result, not any association for public relations professional has been established.

In Korea, in-house public relations has been applied in most organizations. Even though crafted models such as press-agentry, public information models are dominate, there are sign that two-way scientific persuasion model become prevalent. Vietnamese public relations has focused in press-agentry or publicity models. Only one similarity in using public relations models is that both countries incline to personal influence model, which is popular in the Eastern culture.

In terms of education, Korean public relations education is also far better organized and implicated than Vietnamese counterpart. The diversification in programs, subjects with attention to research do help to narrow the gap between education and practice and meet the demand of Korean society.

Generally speaking, Korean public relations is far better developed than Vietnamese public relations. It proves that the differences in infrastructure factors such as political system, level of socio-economic development, and activism along with media freedom, etc. are influencing the development level of public relations. Although it is not surprising that different countries practice different public relations, since Vietnam and Korea are sharing many cultural similarities and all levels of cooperation are promising currently, it is obvious that Vietnamese public relations can learn from Korean public relations experiences in order to be professional in the near future.



**Table 1. Comparison between Korea and Vietnam background**

	<b>Korea</b>	<b>Vietnam</b>
<b>Political system</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- democracy</li> <li>- multi parties</li> <li>- divided as North and South since 1953.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- totalitarian regime</li> <li>- single party</li> <li>- divided as North and South since 1954, reunified in 1975.</li> </ul>
<b>Economy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- developed stage</li> <li>- world's 11<sup>th</sup> largest economy - dynamic</li> <li>- globalization stage</li> <li>- high growing rate (about 5% currently)</li> <li>- WTO membership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- underdeveloped stage</li> <li>- world's poorest countries</li> <li>- <i>Doi Moi</i> (innovative)</li> <li>- privatization stage</li> <li>- high, continuous growing rate (about 9% currently)</li> <li>- WTO membership</li> </ul>
<b>Media</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- free media</li> <li>- government media, private media</li> <li>- diverse medium</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- controlled media</li> <li>- party, government, social organization's media. No private media</li> <li>- diverse medium</li> </ul>
<b>Activism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- diverse activism groups</li> <li>- state funded</li> <li>- strong</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- labor, women, youth unions are major</li> <li>- state funded</li> <li>- not so strong</li> </ul>
<b>Socio-Culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- about 49 million population, youthful nation</li> <li>- masculine</li> <li>- collectivism</li> <li>- <i>cheong</i></li> <li>- avoidance of conflict</li> <li>- face-saving</li> <li>- personal influence</li> <li>- Confucianism</li> <li>- hierarchical</li> <li>- Influenced by China, Japan, and the USA.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- about 84 million population, youthful nation</li> <li>- feminine</li> <li>- collectivism</li> <li>- <i>trong tinh</i></li> <li>- avoidance of conflict</li> <li>- face-saving</li> <li>- personal influence</li> <li>- Confucianism, Communism</li> <li>- hierarchical</li> <li>- Influence by China, France, Japan, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia.</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Comparison between Public Relations of Korea and Vietnam**

	<b>Korea</b>	<b>Vietnam</b>
<b>Beginning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- since 1960s by the USA</li> <li>- widely trained since late 1960s</li> <li>- continuously developing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- since 1960s by the USA</li> <li>- widely trained since 1970s</li> <li>- stopped developing since 1975 and restarted in 1990s.</li> </ul>
<b>Industry</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- emerging, specialization stage</li> <li>- professionalism, officially recognized as a profession</li> <li>- well skilled human resource</li> <li>- global professional standard</li> <li>- professional associated</li> <li>- strategic PR</li> <li>- serve diverse clients</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- starting point, forming stage</li> <li>- unprofessional, not yet recognized as profession officially</li> <li>- unskilled human resource</li> <li>- not standardized</li> <li>- no professional associated</li> <li>- media relations focused</li> <li>- mainly serve foreign clients</li> </ul>
<b>In-house</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- PR department in almost all organizations</li> <li>- PR in managerial role</li> <li>- press-agentry, public information, two-way asymmetric models; personal influence model.</li> <li>- bigger employee size</li> <li>- more professional, skillful staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- few PR department in organizations</li> <li>- PR in technician role</li> <li>- press-agentry/publicity models; personal influence model</li> <li>- smaller employee size</li> <li>- unprofessional, unskillful staff</li> </ul>
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- widely teach in university</li> <li>- diversified programs and subjects</li> <li>- professional associated</li> <li>- PR research is strong</li> <li>- more textbooks and resources</li> <li>- theory- based oriented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- few programs in university</li> <li>- monotonous programs and subjects</li> <li>- no professional associated</li> <li>- Rare PR research</li> <li>- few textbooks and resources</li> <li>- very theory-based oriented</li> </ul>
<b>General</b>	Far better developed	Less developed

## **VI. PR SUGGESTIONS FOR VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT IN THE *DOI MOI***

Since the unification in 1975, Vietnam has embraced socialist political system which theoretically is combined by three elements as “the abolition of private ownership system”, a “planned economy”, and a “communist political system”. Since 1986, Doi Moi (Reform/ Change/ Transition to a new) policy has been taken place in the situation when Vietnam faced many difficulties both domestically and internationally. The country which was vastly destroyed during the war could not achieve many national post-war target objectives that even make some parts of its face famine. Having relationship with only socialist countries, Vietnam was almost isolated from others, including among regional countries.

What changes were made among the above three elements? General speaking, in the Doi Moi policy, the first two elements are major changes, but the last element is the one that remains intact (Tsuboi, 2005). From that time, Vietnam started to reintroduce private ownership system, abandon the planned economy and introduce market economy.

The Doi Moi policy brought in many improvements in Vietnamese people’s lives. Generally, after more than 20 years of the Doi Moi, Vietnam has completely integrated with the international society where globalize capitalism is the mainstream, in both good and bad ways (Tsuboi, 2007). Since the Doi Moi policy has been implemented, obviously it helps the living standard of people increase quickly. However, many other social problems are rising gravely such as the disparity between the urban and rural areas, the living gap between the rich and the poor, and the unemployment rate which is strongly related to the social unfairness. Especially, corruption within governmental high ranking officers has increased alarmingly without proper monitoring systems (Tsuboi, 2007). There is a dire need for earning money, which make most of the business be done without enough considering social responsibility, morality or even the laws. These

problems among many others brought about the distrust between public and all kinds of organizations whether they are governmental or private ones.

The Vietnamese word ‘quan he’ means ‘relationship’ has become a keyword for many different kinds of success. For instance, in order to be selected as a government officer or worker, the person is often advised to search for some “positive relationship” with someone in governmental office before taking examination. He or she somehow cannot have full self-confidence if not do so, as he or she would think that all other candidates also doing the same in the back door. In other hand, even he or she is selected after the examination without giving a bribe, it is difficult for others to believe in this fact.

The current situation of the Doi Moi in Vietnam reveals a great necessity for professional public relations in order to build and maintain the mutual understanding and trust between organization and the public. Public relations, which give prominence to transparency, can effectively be a solution to reduce the level of suspiciousness within the society.

In this research, we have observed the political, economic, socio-cultural backgrounds of Korea and Vietnam respectively and examined how public relations have evolved and been practiced in each country, based on Sriramesh’s (2003) model. Through this study, we could ascertain that public relations practitioners of a country and its evolution are closely related to the country’s social, cultural, economic, and political environments, as previous literature suggested. Korea’s unique social, cultural, economic, and political background produced the different level of public relations practices and education than those of Vietnam, vice versa.

However, Vietnam and Korea share many similarities, especially in social and cultural aspects, such as collectivism, emotionalism, personal influence, etc. Therefore, the experiences and lessons of Korean public relations development will be useful and partially applicable for Vietnamese in the Doi Moi period.

Vietnamese government should understand and apply public relations as one of the most important strategy for enhancing the success of the Doi Moi. In order to do so, a grand strategy in public relations for the Doi Moi should be made with the following considerations:

*First*, the whole publics should be segmented into target groups (Shin, 1998). Each group then will be analyzed in order to design appropriate public relations strategies and tactics which help them better understand and contribute for the Doi Moi. Why do we need the public segmentation? It is because reformation is not just about the system or regulation itself but also the people. People are determinants of the success or failure of a revolution. The main target publics should be considered including the principle groups, pro-reform force, media, the general publics, and even the anti-reform (conservative) groups.

*Second*, government should design and run middle to long-term public relations plans. If short-term plan is just a one year plan as a whole, the long-term plan needs 5 years in which one year to prepare and the other four years to execute and evaluate it. These plans must base on the situation's analysis and research about publics carefully. For each public segment, the goal, strategies, detailed execution information, the evaluation of public relations plan should be included (Shin, 1998). The following public relations grand program for the Doi Moi which contains these categories would be desirable:

- 1) Problem setting: Check the reform situation, problem diagnosis, and PR program.
- 2) Public opinion analysis: News analysis and pre-poll
- 3) Set goals: to determine the issue, segment publics, set goals for each of the target publics
- 4) Strategy Development: communication strategy development, communication tools, and message development for each of the target publics

#### 5) Details Planning

- Mission: Statement of the mission
- Grand purpose: the success of the Doi Moi
- Objectives: number and name of public relations projects for each publics.
- Political, economic and social situation, the relevant characteristics of the publics
- Survey results
- Public segmentation, and priority
- Goals and strategies of public relations program for each of public segmentations
- Tactics of public relations program for each of public segmentations
- Specific messages and media relations tactics for each programs.
- Tactics for implementation (specific details: the information, schedules, personnel, budget, time, programming, etc.)
- Statement of how to evaluate a program

6) Executing: to perform the PR program for the Doi Moi simultaneously

7) Evaluation: PR program evaluation, post-poll, questionnaires, etc.

*Third*, effective communications strategies and tactics should be selected and applied throughout all public relations programs, to each of the public segmentations (Shin, 1998). The messages must be consistent and honest; the media channels must be diverse in order to reach all kind of publics from many different approaches.

*Fourth*, a national public relations policy should be formulated and promulgated. The national public relations policy is processed in 4 phases including the policy formulating steps, decision-making steps, implementation of policy steps, and assessment steps (Shin et

al, 2006). Depending on the national public relations policy, we can analyze details of public relations activities at each of the phases. The detail of each phase is as following:

1) Policy formulating step: This is the national public relations policy to solve social problems. Therefore the government has to analyze the national situation, social issues through variety of pre-investigation including asking the public opinions in order to adopt social issues into the policy. At the same time, it's advised that the government should plan a public relations strategy for promoting this policy.

2) Decision-making step: The most important thing is to forecast and analysis potential social issues after the policy is promulgated. Therefore, government should help the key public as well as general public to understand the policy while prepare reaction strategies to respond to any conflict that may occurs.

3) Implementation step: With the sufficient preparation of public relations program, the policy can be enforced after clearly reviewing or adjustment. Then, the policy must be presented base on the "One Voice" principle in which the interior ministry enforces the civil servants upon any public statement, and other related departments need to discuss every related issues before making announcement. As soon as the government officially announces the national public relations policy, diverse and various public relations programs at the same time also have to run in earnest manner. In this whole step, the policy is promoted by effective communications strategies to all target publics.

4) Evaluation step: During and after the policy implementation step, government must evaluate the effect of the policy. The evaluation can be done by internal assessment meetings and related public opinion polls to determine the performance of the programs, to analysis successful points of the policy, the process of progress, as well as the lessons that future programs should take into account.

*Fifth*, government should establish a public relations system which activates base on the national public relations policy and the

national long-term public relations plan (Shin, 1999). Information and communication systems also need to be reorganized and opened in order to create advantage environment for development of public relations.

*Additionally*, as knowledge is the key factor for developing public relations, Vietnam should train public relations faculties and practitioners abroad in the way Korea did some decades ago and is still doing. These knowledgeable and skillful people then can dedicate their professional when they comeback. In addition, diverse and practical public relations curriculums, programs should be installed in universities as soon as possible. Good public relations education will strengthen the role of public relations in society.

In order to upgrade their role, quality, quantity as well as ethics, Vietnamese public relations practitioners and educators should be gathered in professional associations as Korean did many years ago. The professional association will be an ideal place for sharing, exchanging ideas and raising ethical practice within its members.

Both countries have been using personal influence model and *Cheong* or *Trong Tinh* cultures in public relations practice. Vietnamese practitioners should learn from Korean experience of reducing the negative effect of *Cheong* in order to gain better public trust. In addition, planning and implementing diverse public relations strategies and tactics rather than media relations would give more benefit to the organizations in the long-term view. Korean organizations are practicing this way and this would be a good lesson for Vietnamese public relations practitioners.

One of the limitations of this study is it doesn't compare public relations in some other areas such as government public relations, community relations, etc. due to limited resources. We also cannot perfectly predict how public relations will evolve in both countries in future, but it is certain that the demand of public relations will increase in every sector of each society. Being more developed,



Korean public relations has been playing an important role in the Asian – Pacific region. Since the relationship between Korea and Vietnam is well maintaining and developing, cooperation in public relations also can be a fruitful destination for mutual benefits.

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