The history of Public Relations (PR) may seem irrelevant to the needs of contemporary practitioners, and we do not intend to provide a great deal of it here. However, much of the knowledge which successful PR people use to good effect is drawn from history, even if they have acquired the information informally and certainly do not think of it as “History.” There are few, if any, scientific laws in PR. Instead people learn from their own and others’ experience of PR work and acquire a knowledge of the industry based on hearing about its ups and downs. Much of what they do today and plan to do tomorrow is based on collective wisdom about what happened yesterday. Some significant themes emerge from PR’s history, and some of them are particularly important to understanding the way PR is developing in Asia today. So rather than present a story littered with names and dates, we will simply focus on issues which seem relevant and which will help you understand the present and plan for the future.

Many of the things which make up PR may be timeless, and have existed in Asian societies since the beginnings of human civilization. Businesses have always sought to further their interests, and political and religious leaders have always sought to win and retain support, so “PR” has been part of what people do from time immemorial. However, PR as a specialist field, in which people act in a planned and deliberate way, and to which they devote their working lives, is a relative newcomer. While there will always be important differences between Asia and the North American and European societies where PR as we now know it first emerged, the fact that modern PR developed many decades earlier, in countries like the USA and Britain, means that there may be lessons to learn.
for societies where PR is newer. No one needs to reinvent the wheel.

“Public Relations” first emerged, under that name, about a hundred years ago in the United States. There was already a well-established tradition of press agents creating publicity in the newspaper press for circuses and other forms of entertainment, but while PR drew on those skills it also represented something new, and something which has interesting parallels with contemporary Asia.

“Guanxi”

There is a natural overlap between Public Relations and the venerable and much older Chinese concept of “Guanxi,” which can be very loosely translated as relationships. Guanxi places great emphasis on personal relationships and friendship, and is closely associated with Confucian thought. In consequence it has been argued that Chinese PR people place a little less emphasis on the “public” part of “Public Relations,” and more on cultivating more direct, personal relationships. A similar importance is attached to personal relationships in some other countries in Asia. This subtle cultural difference is just one of many that PR practitioners need to bear in mind. It certainly has a great impact on tactical considerations when devising PR plans, although it could be argued that overall PR objectives and strategies tend to be more similar wherever one is in the world.

Source: Adapted from Yujie He’s University of Westminster MA thesis

PR and the growth of big business

The large new companies which emerged in the USA just over a century ago increasingly operated in large and growing markets, spread across the North American continent and beyond. The railway companies and mining and oil companies were not only big, with far-flung interests, but were prone to highly publicized crises as accidents occurred or workers took industrial action. Gone were