

Confucius and Relationship Marketing

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This paper explains the rule of reciprocity and five major principles of Confucianism: hsin (trust), jen (benevolence), zhong (loyalty), yi (righteousness), and li (propriety). Confucius' view of trust, benevolence, propriety, loyalty, and practicing reciprocity are closely knitted together. Modern relationship marketing views them in the similar fashion and takes trust to the center of the relationship marketing. The contribution of this paper is to demonstrate that the ancient Confucius' principles are consistent with the major constructs and concepts of modern relationship marketing.

Confucius (551BC-479BC), an influential ancient Chinese philosopher and educator, has many thoughts and theories about moral, practical ethics, and human behavior by which people may live together in harmony and good order. Marketing also links people in organizations and households into channels to create harmonious relationship. How could Confucius relate to marketing, especially relationship marketing, is what this paper seeks to explain.

During the Han Dynasty (220BC), the Confucian tradition broadly spread in China, thus Confucianism could collectively be called "School of the Literary". Because of its ideological congruence with Chinese socio-political system, Confucianism was adopted by most rulers in the political history of China as the official moral and political doctrine of the state (Stover 1974; Yang 1986; Chua 2002). The dominant ideological position of Confucianism society has ever since been deeply rooted in Chinese for the following two millennia. Therefore, Confucius has been termed as the founder of Chinese philosophy and "the man who molded China" (Martin & Shui, 1972). Confucianism was spread from China to other East Asian countries, especially Korea, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore. The East Asian countries were labeled by Herman Kahn as "neo-Confucian"—that is, rooted in the teachings of Confucius. Although, Confucianism is very important in China and other East Asian countries, little research can be found relating Confucianism to relationship marketing in the literature. Mostly, Confucius Theory has been discussed in management ethic, cultural, history, and anthropology studies. Hofstede (1988) studies Confucianism from a cultural perspective and defines "Confucian Dynamism" as one of his five cultural dimensions. According to Hofstede and Bond (1988), countries ranking high on Confucian

dynamism tend to be more future oriented while those ranking low would tend to be more present oriented. Furthermore, marketers from high Confucian dynamism regions would be more prudent and risk averse (Singhapakdi & Karande 2001).

Trust, benevolence, righteousness, loyalty and propriety are the five constant virtues in Confucianism societies. Overall, everybody in Confucian society is supposed to practice reciprocity-- to pay back favors. These virtues are called "guan xi", which means "relationships". The purpose of this study is to discuss the relation of Confucianism to modern relationship marketing.

CONFUCIANISM AND MARKETING

China, the birthplace of Confucianism, has looked deeply into the beauty of relationships and the embodiment of harmony in society. In this sense, it is also related to relationship marketing in today's world. During the last few decades, trust, reciprocity and mutual benefit have been emphasized to reduce uncertainty, governance cost, and transaction cost in marketing relationships (Romar 2004). The paradigm of marketing has shifted from seller's perspective to consumers' perspective in order to create content customers and establish longer relationships.

Based on thorough studies on classics of history and poetry, Confucius developed the philosophy of cardinal virtue and advocated the spirit of political governing. The Lun Yü (Analects), a work compiled by his disciples describing conversations with his students on all manner of subjects, is considered the most reliable source of his teaching.

The confucian ethical vocabulary include hsin (good faith, trust, sincerity), jen (humaneness), yi (righteousness), zhong (loyalty), li (ritual propriety), chung (true), zhi (knowledge and wisdom), de (virtue), and dao (way). Yi, li, jen, zhong, and hsin are the key principles. There are no exact equivalents in English for these terms. The philosophy behind them is discussed below.

Yi (righteousness)

Yi is one of the most frequently used ethical terms. It symbolizes "rightness" and the best way of doing things. Yi binds rulers, fathers, husbands, wives, brothers, and friends to their roles. As Confucius once said: "Let the ruler be a ruler, minister be a minister, father be a father, son be a son" (12:11). Knowing yi not only helps to achieve self-

fulfillment in each individual, but also provides insight into what is best in social relations.

In Confucianism, mere profit gain and advantage are not a proper motive for actions affecting others. Confucius himself acknowledges that "wealth and high station are what men desire" (Analects 4:5), but he also warns against the temptation of mere profit. As he remarked, "What the superior man (chün-tzu) seeks is in himself. What the mean man seeks is in others" (15:20). Further, he suggested doing what is right instead of what is of advantage: "when he sees an opportunity for gain, he thinks of righteousness", and "when wealth is gained by unfair means, it will be lost in the same way" (Bahm 1977, 147). Righteousness is fundamental. Although wisdom is more important than courage, righteousness is more important than wisdom. "He should practice it [righteousness] according to the principles of *li* (propriety), and should complete it with *hsin* (sincerity and trust)" (15:17). Similarly, the article "Preventing the Premature Death of Relationship Marketing" (Founier et al. 1998) reviewed by Romar (2002, 44), suggests organizations should think from the customer's perspective of "how trust and intimacy factor into business relationships". If anyone selfishly looks at a customer merely as a source of revenue or information, he will undermine the most important business relationship in one way or another (Romar 2002, 121).

In a buyer and seller relationship, bounded rationality, uncertainty, and opportunistic behavior increases the transaction cost. Bounded rationality is defined as the limitation of a person to obtain or process all the information about a transaction (eg, Rindfleisch & Heide 1997). Opportunism is actions of self-interest seeking with guile (Williamson 1989). If both parties act according to the righteousness and look into a long-term relationship orientation, the transaction cost and uncertainty will be lowered in a great scale. Hence, a discrete transaction relationship would move toward a highly relational bond.

Li (propriety)

The original meaning of *li* is "sacrifice" which refers to the ritual used in sacrifice and later was extended to cover every sort of ceremony and the "courtesy" (Creel 1953). The conception of *li* was extremely important in Confucius' teaching. He used the term *li* to stand for the whole conventional and social complex with a moral connotation.

Li is propriety and the conventionally accepted style of action. Confucius regarded it as the appropriate manner of behavior to express one's inner thoughts or intentions (Bahm 1977). The best way of doing things not only lies in accordance with his own inner nature (*yi*), good will (*jen*), and sincere intention (*hsin*), but also reflects in right manner (*li*), so that his intentions will not be mistaken. Hence, *yi* (righteousness), *jen* (benevolence) and *hsin* (trust) require *li* (Bahm 1977, 42).

Where do *li* (propriety), *yi* (righteousness), and *zhong* (loyalty) arise? Desires are innate from birth. When desires

are not satisfied, people pursue satisfaction without restraint. This leads to chaos. The ancient kings therefore institute *li* (propriety), *yi* (righteousness), and *zhong* (loyalty) to limit them. In such a way, man's desires might be nourished and their pursuit gratified (Chai & Chai 1965). Therefore, these three virtues are closely related to each other.

The fundamental concept of *li* is "respect". In today's Chinese language, it still contains such a meaning. For example, the word "to practice *li*" means to "salute", which is of the same meaning as "respect" in Chinese. To understand *li* is essential as we are exposed to international marketing of different cultures and human behaviors. It reminds us to respect different ways of conducting business in different cultures. In Confucius' words, "If you feel strongly about your beliefs, respect the beliefs of others." Culture has been viewed in anthropological perspective as the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts which are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. Therefore, when relationships cross national borders, cultural differences will impact the nature of relationships (Ambler & Styles 2000). To respect different cultures is essentially important to conduct a success in international relationship marketing practice.

Zhong (loyalty)

Zhong (loyalty) is closely linked to *hsin* (trust). More than simple loyalty to one's superior, loyalty to family, friends and others is also promoted as conscientiousness in one's behavior. Rectitude, self-control, courtesy and moderation are also highly regarded. In Confucianism, what constitute the excellence of a gentleman are not his wealth, but his virtue and moral character. Based on trust, loyalty can consequently be established.

In marketing literature, loyalty and relationship marketing have been discussed extensively (eg, Kumar, Bohling, & Ladda 2003, Verhoef 2003, Naidu et al. 1999). Relationships lead to loyalty, and loyalty leads to profitability and market share. Guenzi & Pelloni (2004) find that interpersonal relationships between customers and employees contribute to the development of customer loyalty. On one hand, relationship build up loyalty; on the other hand, the loyalty incentives enhance such a relationship. Similarly, Naidu, et al.(1999, 207) point out that "relationship marketing gains momentum to build up customer loyalty and continued patronage. Development and implementation of customer retention programs, partnering with customers, suppliers, and competitors, and other relationship marketing practices have become a way of life in the 1990s."

Jen (benevolence, kindness)

Jen has been termed variously as benevolence, charity, humanity, virtue, love, kindness, and man-hood. Over the centuries, translators have used "humanity", "benevolence",

and just a plain word "goodness" to explain jen (Reid 1999). Confucius defined it as "loving others" (Analects 12:22). Jen, as another fundamental virtue of Confucianism, designates a willingness to give oneself for the benefit of another person or group. It allows one to enter into relations with others on the basis of hsin (trust).

To understand jen, we should also understand the term of chün-tzu. Chün-tzu (translated variously as Superior Man, gentleman, moral gentleman) appears frequently in the Analects. Confucius portrays chün-tzu as a person who has made significant progress in the Way (Tao) of self-cultivation by practicing righteousness and by being honest, loyal and benevolent to others. It is a man who possesses various virtues pervaded by the ideal of jen. Confucius said, "If a superior man abandons jen (virtue), how can he fulfill the requirements of that name (chün-tzu)?" He also said that a man of jen practices gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, and kindness. His reasoning consists in a series of hypothetical propositions: "If you are grave, you will not be treated with disrespect. If you are generous, you will win them all. If you are sincere, people will repose trust in you. If you are earnest, you will accomplish much. If you are kind, this will enable you to employ the services of others." (17:6)

Benevolence is highly related to trust. In some literatures, benevolence is regarded as a sub-dimension of trust. For example, Wetzels et al (1998) claim that trust consists of two essential elements, trust in the partner's honesty and trust in the partner's benevolence: "Honesty is the belief that one's partner stands by its word. Benevolence is the belief that one's partner is interested in the company's welfare and will not take unexpected actions which will negatively impact the company" (also see Geyskens and Steenkamp 1995). Yousafzai, Pallister, and Foxall (2003) suggest that benevolence, integrity and competence are three dimensions of trustworthiness attributes. Strongly linked with trust, benevolence is also found to be connected with customer loyalty through affection (Selnes & Gonhaug 2000). In a study of 150 established buyer-seller relationships in telecommunication market, Selnes & Gonhaug (2000) found suppliers' benevolence behavior will create positive affection. High supplier benevolence creates positive affect, which consequently influence customer loyalty.

Overall, the fundamental issue of relationship marketing is "the welfare of their customers" (Buttle 1996, 8), which conveys a thought to be benevolent to customers and to maintain a good relationship.

Hsin (Trust, Good Faith)

Hsin, another Confucian principle, has generally focuses on the issue of trustworthiness and sincerity. It is the center of interpersonal relationship. Since all words and acts would eventually become public, hsin suggests that the actions should follow the words of promise. Rulers who can keep their own promises and follow their own words win

the trust of people; ministers earn the trust of their rulers by following orders and their commitments (Schaberg 2001). Confucius said, "Only the perfectly trustworthy person can actualize his own essence. Actualizing his own essence, he can fully actualize the essence of others. Fully actualizing the essence of others, he can fully actualize the essence of all things." Sincerity is the beginning and ending of all things. Without sincerity nothing can be achieved. That is to say, to perfect yourself and others, you need sincerity and trust, and fully actualized sincerity is ceaseless and eternal. In pursuit of trustworthiness and righteousness, one should set aside his personal considerations. As Confucius said, "The trustful man knows what is right. The lesser man knows what is lucrative" (4:16).

Relationship marketing is built on the foundation of trust, as accumulating research demonstrates (such as, Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Doney, Cannon and Mullen, 1998; Berry 2000; Buttle 1996, 8). Trust has been defined with stress upon the key words of "confidence" (Atuahene-Gima & Li 2002, 62), "credibility" (Doney & Cannon 1997) "reliability" (Schurr & Ozanne 1985, 940), and "benevolence" (Wetzel et al. 1998, Doney, Cannon & Mullun, 1998).

Trust is an important ingredient in measure of the strength of relationships (Schell 1996, 95). When information is asymmetrical, trust is fundamental to maintain a relationship. On the other hand, trust requires information sharing between organizations, or/and individuals. Ouchi (1979, 846) argues that people must either be able to trust each other or closely monitor each other in cooperative activities. This view is in consistent with the economical view, the transaction cost analysis (TCA). One of the major assumptions of TCA is there exists opportunism, and subsequently, governance cost is required to prevent such opportunistic behavior. When the chance permits, opportunistic parties in the exchange relationships weigh the costs and benefits of violations of trust. However, social exchange theorists such as Blau (1964) suggest that the behaviors in an exchange relationship cannot be explained merely through economic exchange. Similarly, Rindfleisch & Heide (1997, 48) also express their concerns about behavioral issues surrounding opportunism. Social exchange perspectives, such as interaction frequencies (Doney & Cannon 1997), long term relationship expectations, and shared values (Anderson & Weitz 1989) and congruent goals have all been viewed as antecedents of trust (Doney & Cannon 1997). In summary, TCA views that untrustworthy behavior, i.e., opportunism behaviors, can be prevented by controls. In contrast, social exchange theory suggests that opportunism can be prevented by the social relationships, such as trust. Williamson (1993, 1994), a neoclassic economist, recently reviewed relationship behavior and trust, suggests that "real trust originates from the social context of a particular relationship through social norms, such as reciprocity (Gouldner 1960)". Furthermore, Berry (1993, 1) stresses that "trust is the basis for loyalty" (Morgan & Hunt 1994).

THE FUTURE OF MARKETING'S PAST

From the literature discussed above, it is apparent that similar to Confucius principles, relationship marketing also sees trust as the core of relationships in a social context, and further, it has a close link to benevolence, righteousness, loyalty and propriety.

Reciprocity

Based on the above five Confucian principles, the practice of reciprocity is required to fulfill and complete virtue.

The understanding of Confucius' principles, including a willingness to treat others reciprocally, is a fundamental human virtue. To practice reciprocity itself is the best way of doing things socially and appropriately, "Treating others as one would like to be treated", having long been regarded as the golden rule in Confucianism, is a concept that can be taken as guide for the actions of a whole life. Similarly, Analect (6:28) says, "The humane man, wishing himself to be established, sees that others are established, and, wishing himself to be successful, sees that others are successful." "To establish yourself, also establish others" is also consistent with the modern statement of "mutual profitability" or "win-win partnership". This "golden rule" of reciprocity principle is inherent in other Confucian virtues. Here are some examples: "If you feel strongly about your beliefs, respect the beliefs of others" (li); "To respect and appreciate my father as I wish my son to respect and appreciate me; to serve my superior officers as I desire my subordinate officials to serve me; to be as considerate of friends as I would like to have my friends be considerate of me" (jen). Hsin, zhong, yi, and jen are intimately linked to the relationship between people, and general reciprocal good faith, sincerity, and respect among men are stressed.

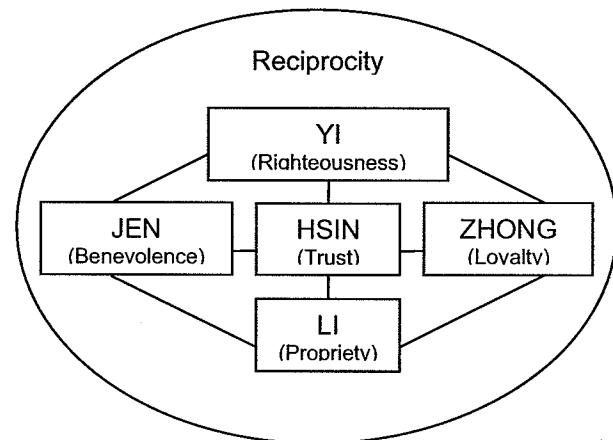
Macneil's theory on the types of commercial exchange, reviewed by Kaufmann and Stern (1988, 535), forms a continuum from discrete transaction (one shot transaction) to relational exchange (long term, continuous relationship). Based on Macneil's theory, Kaufmann and Stern (1988) developed three important contracting norms: solidarity, role integrity, and mutuality. Mutuality is essentially useful in solving conflict settings. Conflicts and disputes are not unusual, especially in the current fast changing business environment. In a relational exchange, a dispute will be observed and judged as to whether it is destructive to the relationship rather than whether it is a loss of a single transaction. Reflecting in Confucian thought, reciprocity is to "treat others (well) as you would like to be treated." For a strong relationship being long lasting, there must be mutual benefits.

Summary

To summarize, each Confucian principle names an orientation that is necessary to maintain a good relationship. To reflect the interaction of these principles, a diagram is drawn as following (Figure 1).

Yi (righteousness) determines how much an individual or organization must give, and how much it is entitled to receive. Zhong (loyalty) describes extraordinary effort on the part of the giver, and jen (good will, benevolence) relates to the noble character of giving (Schaberg 2001), and li defines a set of rules for action and the pattern of behaviors. Hsin ensures both the continuity of individual and particular performances being matched with the relevant prescriptions. Hsin (trust) is in the center position, given its fundamental and eternity characteristics. The five Confucius principles together with reciprocal practice ensure the maintenance of long-term relationships.

FIGURE 1: INTERACTION OF THE CONFUCIAN PRINCIPLES



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Interestingly, as viewed by Confucius, trust, benevolence, loyalty, and practicing reciprocity are closely knit together. Modern relationship marketing views them in a similar fashion, and puts trust in the center of relationship marketing.

Sheth (1994, 2) describes relationship marketing as the "understanding, explanation and management of the ongoing collaborative business relationship between suppliers and customers." Jackson (1985, 2) argued relationship marketing from an industrial marketing point of view: "attracting, developing and retaining customer relationships." Both of them focus on the customer retention and relationship maintaining. It has long been recognized by both academia and marketing practitioners that to win a new customer is more expensive than to retain an existing one, because the different sunk costs, such as information search cost, credit-checking cost, negotiation and legal cost, are all fairly high in the early stage of getting a customer. Therefore, relationship marketing is gradually gaining attention along with the awareness of the long-term value of a customer. The focus of customer acquisition has been shifted to customer

retention. Some other new trends in marketing are also noticeable. In addition to market share, marketers begin to focus on customer share, which is represented by "the percentage of an individual's annual or lifetime purchases that is won by a company" (Buttle 1996, 4). Instead of brand loyalty, marketers are now looking at customer loyalty. Sales representative are now renamed "relationship associates" or "account managers". All these development demonstrate that relationship marketing is valued more than ever before.

Trust is a foundation of relationship marketing (Buttle 1996, 8). Many researchers (such as Morgan & Hunt 1994, Gamesan 1994) study the role of trust in developing successful relationship. As reviewed by Buttle (1996, 9), "confidence is associated with the partner's consistency, competence, honesty, fairness, willingness to make sacrifices, responsibility, helpfulness and benevolence," and "trust is the cornerstone of relationship commitment... [trust] brings about a feeling of security and reduces uncertainty". Uncertainty, a consequence of the possible opportunistic behavior by another party, can be reduced by mutual goal and long-term cooperation.

In addition to trust, loyalty has also drawn great attention. Payne (2000, 63) suggested that the area of customer loyalty has much potential, "in particular, segmentation on the basis of loyalty has particular appeal".

Beyond trust, benevolence, loyalty and right conduction, Frenzen and Davis (1990) characterized marketing relationships as rules of reciprocity. Heide and John (1992) found that mutual information exchange between partners facilitate the relationship itself. All these good intentions are serving for the long term relationship purposes. The philosophy that long term gains from the relationship exceeds the short term payoffs from opportunism (Eisenhardt 1985, Ganesan 1994, Wathne & Heide 2004) is reflected in an old Chinese saying, "If you cast a long fishing thread, you will get bigger fish."

In conclusion, doing things right (yi), being trustworthy (hsin), proper (li), benevolence (jen), loyal (zhong), and practicing reciprocity could be a key issue for keeping long term relationships. Therefore, ancient Confucian principles anticipate and provide a framework for modern concept of relationship marketing. If this is the case, we might have to recognize that the concept of relationship marketing isn't really all that novel, even though the term has only appeared in our literature in the past two decades. We as marketers and marketing academia need to expand our scope of horizon to other fields, so that we do not risk "reinventing old concepts" or filling old wines with new bottles. Instead, we should focus our energy and efforts on truly new innovations.

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