The principal–agent problem and its mitigation: a critical historical analysis

Tony Yan
Global Business Leadership Department,
College of St Benedict and St John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA, and
Michael R. Hyman
Institute for Marketing Futurology and Philosophy, Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA
and Department of Marketing, New Mexico State University College of Business,
Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical historical analysis of the business (mis)behaviors and influencing factors that discourage enduring cooperation between principals and agents, to introduce strategies that embrace the social values, economic motivation and institutional designs historically adopted to curtail dishonest acts in international business and to inform an improved principal–agent theory that reflects principal–agent reciprocity as shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, strategic and ideological forces
Design/methodology/approach – The critical historical research method is used to analyze Chinese compradors and the foreign companies they served in pre-1949 China.
Findings – Business practitioners can extend orthodox principal–agent theory by scrutinizing the complex interactions between local agents and foreign companies. Instead of agents pursuing their economic interests exclusively, as posited by principal–agent theory, they also may pursue principal-shared interests (as suggested by stewardship theory) because of social norms and cultural values that can affect business-related choices and the social bonds built between principals and agents.
Research limitations/implications – The behaviors of compradors and foreign companies in pre-1949 China suggest international business practices for shaping social bonds between principals and agents and foreign principals’ creative efforts to enhance shared interests with local agents.
Practical implications – Understanding principal–agent theory’s limitations can help international management scholars and practitioners mitigate transaction partners’ dishonest acts.
Originality/value – A critical historical analysis of intermediary businesspeople’s (mis)behavior in pre-1949 (1840–1949) China can inform the generalizability of principal–agent theory and contemporary business strategies for minimizing agents’ dishonest acts.
Keywords Foreign market entry, Formal and informal institutions, Building social bonds in business, Chinese compradors, Principal–agent problem
Paper type Conceptual paper

Summary statement of contribution
Based on the critical historical analysis of extensive historical data, this study informs the social construction of solutions to the principal–agent problem in non-Western
marketplaces. Many contemporary strategies related to synergistic relationship building, formal and informal institutional constraints or motivations and economic measures to minimize agents’ dishonest acts, have historical parallels. Conventional principal–agent and stewardship theories are extended to examine agents’ dishonest acts, principals behaving dishonestly toward agents and agents and principals colluding to behave dishonestly at a third party’s expense.

Introduction
Management scholars, economists, sociologists and political scientists have long studied the principal–agent problem (PAP) (Bolton and Dewatripont, 2005; Eisenhardt, 1989; Jensen and Meckling, 1976; Kiser, 1999; Laffont and Martimort, 2002; Pratt and Zeckhauser, 1991; Sappington, 1991; Tran et al., 2023). Typically, principals are property owners or parties legally authorized to dispose of property, and agents are company managers, employees or parties delegated to represent ownership. The PAP occurs when agents use information asymmetry dishonestly to advance their interests at the expense of principals’ interests (Akerlof, 1970). It pervades transactions characterized by the separate ownership and management of property, influences strategy and communication efficacy when owners’ and agents’ perceptions, interests and preferences diverge and often is worse in cross-cultural than domestic contexts because of exacerbated cultural, religious, economic and political ignorance (Ekanayake, 2004; Hewege, 2012; Johnson and Droege, 2004).

Principal–agent relationships exist under one of two orders. First-order principal–agent relationships arise between company managers and property owners, and second-order relationships exist between company managers and employees such as secretaries, drivers, salespeople, engineers and accountants. Information asymmetry can exist under any order. Monitoring concealed information and actions within this asymmetry, which complicates measuring and controlling agents’ power abuses, can create PAP-intensifying economic, social and psychological burdens (Arrow, 1971; Day and Montgomery, 1983; Jensen and Meckling, 1976).

The PAP and related mitigation efforts are context-sensitive. Despite the PAP’s frequent adverse effects on international business, it is often examined in socially stable contexts. Few studies have related principal–agent theory to the historical managerial innovations that encourage cross-culture cooperation and social bonds building between principals and agents in a tumultuous context; for example, pre-1949 China featured frequent civil wars, foreign political and economic pressures, divergent regional interests, regional inequality and conflicts, weak government leadership, frequent natural disasters, pervasive secret societies and thriving nationalistic activisms (SASS, 1983; Spence, 1991; Yan, 2013; Yan and Hyman, 2020). As a result, international business scholars have yet to vet the theory’s completeness or develop solutions to the PAP situated in irregular business contexts (Bergen et al., 1992; Chohan, 2019; Ekanayake, 2004; Hewege, 2012).

To fill this theoretical gap, this historical study relies on critical historical research method (CHRMs), which combines ontological realism and interpretative relativism to explain business phenomena that shape and are shaped by social context and human agency (Yan and Hyman, 2018), to answer these research questions. What are the PAP’s driving elements and how can it be (re)defined and solved in a changing socio-historical context filled with many social uncertainties? In which condition can the principal’s and agent’s interests be reconciled in pursuit of collective interests, as suggested by stewardship theory (Davis et al., 1997)? In the pre-1949 Chinese context, do conventional principal–agent and stewardship theories pertain to the PAP? What are
its implications for contemporary managers and marketers? Table 1 summarizes our subsequent argument.

CHRM is an analytic method that highlights historical contexts and can help scholars critically scrutinize the mechanisms, structures and other driving factors embedded in social contexts that shape business behaviors (Yan and Hyman, 2018). Researchers generally use CHRM to explore contextualized specificities rather than to seek regularities. Specifically, CHRM allows researchers to merge disparate and scattered historical information into comprehensive narratives about historical events. Here, CHRM helps revisit the principal–agent theory’s multiplicity by scrutinizing multilateral historical sources related to the principal–agent problem in pre-1949 China. This analysis reveals the socially embedded mechanisms and historical contexts that shaped foreign companies principals’ and local intermediaries agents’ intentions, perceptions and behaviors in a historically germane non-Western and relatively free-market-viable from 1840 to 1949.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three groups of strategies</th>
<th>Main measures</th>
<th>Business and market efficacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic motivations and restraints</td>
<td>Subsidies, financial rewards, pensions, formal business contracts and informal monetary rewards (e.g. processing fees, kickbacks and secret allowances)</td>
<td>Partly effective but still could not control many hidden actions by compradors with non-monetary interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourage dishonest acts with additional “Oversight and Control” institutions</td>
<td>Compradors required sponsorship by wealthy persons (Ren Bao) or successful Chinese retailers (Pu Bao)</td>
<td>Effective in curbing agency disloyalties by increasing disloyalty costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourage dishonest acts with additional “Oversight and Control” institutions</td>
<td>A central comprador to coordinate branch compradors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourage dishonest acts with additional “Oversight and Control” institutions</td>
<td>Independent accounting and auditing systems to monitor comprador transactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourage dishonest acts with additional “Oversight and Control” institutions</td>
<td>Filing lawsuit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigate the PAP by building social bonds</td>
<td>Compradors internalizing traditional Chinese values such as Zhong (loyalty), He (amicability), Ren (benevolence), Li (politeness and personal integrity), Yi (allegiance) and Xin (faithful to one’s promise) as behavioral guidelines</td>
<td>Discouraged compradors’ disloyalty by building symbiotic relationships between agents and principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigate the PAP by building social bonds</td>
<td>Social prestige and friendships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigate the PAP by building social bonds</td>
<td>Compradors seek economic interests or obtain political positions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigate the PAP by building social bonds</td>
<td>Forgiving some compradors’ misbehaviors or relaxing their obligations to contractual terms in exchange for their future loyalty or flexible but more productive performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** By authors
The conclusion: the contextualized economic measures, institutionalized oversight and control systems and social bonds that enhanced mutual interests among foreign principals and Chinese compradors in pre-1949 China support principal–agent and stewardship theories.

This analysis focuses on compradors – initially, a Portuguese term meaning “business middleman” that evolved into Maiban in Chinese – who served as “low-status intermediary businessmen buying goods for foreign businessmen.” [Later, comprador status extended to people offering information or selling products to foreign companies (Yan, 1986a, 1986b)]. It extends principal–agent theory via a critical history-oriented exploration of managing international business (mis)behaviors. By probing underlying mechanisms, cultural values, meanings and interactions in cross-cultural business management, it suggests scrutinizing certain texts (i.e. on business behaviors, strategies, interactions and the like) and context (i.e. socio-political, economic and cultural-historical milieus) together while complementing and enriching mainstream management and international business theory (Muldoon, 2021).

Multilevel primary and secondary historical sources – including corporate archives, government documents, newspapers, personal memoirs, narrative history, historical explorations and other relevant historical records (often scattered in large volumes of national and local Literature and History Materials) from China or elsewhere (e.g. the University of Chicago and Stanford University East Asian Studies libraries) – provided diverse contextualized data. Such data, often published before the early 1960s or reprinted after the Cultural Revolution to signify the Chinese regime’s political liberalization, encouraged “data triangulation” that minimized biased (re)interpretation of historical traces while avoiding presentism (i.e. interpretation via contemporary values and standards) and static interpretations (i.e. generalized interpretations disregard of contexts) (Yan and Hyman, 2018, 2021).

Historical analysis helps to explain “power relations, politics, institution building, and wider discursive and non-discursive factors” (Tadajewski, 2023, p. 744). Stressing the “historicity” of the principal–agent problem and its mitigation, this study’s main contributions are fourfold. First, it enhances management knowledge by revealing the contextualized meanings of business behaviors, strategies, interactions and processes across interests and cultures. Specifically, it broadens the PAP model to a non-Western context filled with many uncertainties and highlights the formal and informal institutions that discouraged comprador disloyalty and shaped the social bonds between principals and agents. Second, it encourages contemporary business practitioners to mitigate the PAP by adapting “softer” effective measures to address imperfect market-related information. Third, it showcases the contingent managerial, behavioral and economic issues perpetuated by compradors as self-interested businessmen who might not loyally serve their foreign principals. Fourth, it informs contemporary business practitioners and researchers about context-sensitive business strategies, power relations and behaviors in “Old China” – a domain characterized by its idiosyncratic socio-political origins, intellectual tradition and multilateral historical traces – by considering socially embedded comprador behaviors and Chinese-foreign business interactions through critical, historical and ethnographic lenses (Frost, 2022; Yan and Hyman, 2021).

**Principal–agent theory and the principal–agent problem**

Principal–agent theory examines the power relationship and strategic interactions between principals and agents defined by ownership structures and the rational pursuit of self-interest (Grossman and Hart, 1986; Hart, 1995; Hart and Moore, 1990). In modern companies
(or similar business organizations), company owners need not be company operators. Because of insufficient information or personal expertise, principals may rely on agents to execute business transactions. Hence, the theory posits that agents may behave dishonestly when business transactions separate ownership from valid onsite transaction control (Pratt and Zeckhauser, 1991). Such behaviors, which are difficult to observe or measure directly, create agency costs (e.g. adverse selection and moral hazard problems) that reduce business efficiency (Alchian and Demsetz, 1972; Donaldson, 1990; Jensen and Meckling, 1976).

Under conventional principal–agent theory, the PAP’s primary impetus is the divergent interests, beliefs and preferences between principals and agents, implying that agents may behave dishonestly to enhance their interests at the expense of principals’ interests. When such divergence occurs, or when detecting, assessing and monitoring agents’ behaviors is infeasible or cost-prohibitive, principals’ and agents’ inherently incomplete contracts may aggravate the PAP (Hart and Moore, 1990; Grossman and Hart, 1986). Contracts inherently are incomplete because principals cannot fully anticipate emergent ex ante and ex post contingencies and often grant agents unchecked authority (Hart and Holmström, 1987; Maskin and Tirole, 1999; Tirole, 1999). Artifacts of this shortfall include embezzling the principal’s funds, using the principal’s capacities to sell the agent’s products, transferring risks or costs to the principal, cooperating with the principal’s competitors at the principal’s expense, shirking assigned tasks, dealing passively with business opportunities, taking unnecessary risks and misinforming the principal (Akerlof, 1970; Cheung, 1969; Donaldson, 1990; Gailmard, 2009; Hart and Holmström, 1987; Laffont and Martimort, 2002; Prendergast, 1999; Stiglitz, 1974). The costliness and challenges of detecting and assessing agents’ dishonest acts may discourage principals from addressing hidden actions and hidden information problems (Arrow, 1971; Jensen and Meckling, 1976).

Conventional principal–agent theory assumes agents are self-interest maximizers who may pursue their interests at principals’ and other people’s expense. Although this assumption explains many transactional (mis)behaviors, further scrutiny suggests expanding the principal–agent theory’s interpretive scope for five reasons. First, the theory focuses on material interests (e.g. profit, promotion and personal welfare) that agents may not pursue exclusively. However, agents’ social interests (e.g. social prestige or nationalistic goals) may dominate their personal interests (Yan and Hyman, 2019, 2020). Second, several strategies can align agents’ and principals’ interests; for example, well-designed and implemented reward systems and participatory management can spur agents’ productivity (Becker, 1974, 1976; Bolton and Dewatripont, 2005; Dahl, 1985). Third, the theory is grounded in static models that ignore shifts in agency relationships related to changes in socioeconomic conditions, cultural dispositions, values, norms or the power balance between principals and agents (Bergen et al., 1992). Because these shifts may modify the PAP, agents are likelier to behave honestly if they anticipate lucrative repeated transactions and behave dishonestly if they believe a principal is unlikely to discover their misbehaviors. Fourth, scholars have focused on agents’ dishonest acts rather than principals’ or principals’ and agents’ dishonest acts at a third party’s expense. Any party to a transaction may behave dishonestly. Fifth, scholars have recommended using formal contracts but ignored ineffective contractual regulation and informal or unconventional measures for curbing the PAP.

Because of difficulties identifying the “right” agents or business partners and accurately defining the “right” contractual terms (i.e. ex-ante contractual contingencies), contracts may be inefficient in protecting foreign companies from losses (Grossman and Hart, 1986; Hart, 1995; Hart and Holmström, 1987). Local agents’ undetected dishonest behaviors may impede ex-post-contract enforceability in foreign contexts (Pratt and Zeckhauser, 1991). High
switching costs – shaped by resource mobility, strategy flexibility and cost recoverability – to alternate channels may intensify the PAP by increasing principals’ dependence on agents (Shin et al., 2020). However, formal and informal institutions are more than the background entities shaping business entry strategies (Meyer et al., 2009; North, 1990). For example, fostering long-term social and psychological bonds between agents and principals and enhancing agents’ self-control can dampen agents’ dishonest acts.

In pre-1949 China, formal institutions (e.g. contracts, laws, official monitoring systems and other formal oversight arrangements) and informal institutions (i.e. social norms, religious dogma and socio-cultural values such as Zhong [loyalty], Yi [allegiance to other societal members], Xin [faithful to one’s promise], Lian [personal integrity], He [amicability] and Ren [benevolence]):

- discouraged dishonest acts by molding agents’ interests, perceptions, preferences and behaviors; and
- encouraged positive Guanxi building between principals and agents (Confucius and his disciples, 1960; Sima, 2009; White, 1991; Yan, 2013; Yang et al., 1993; Zhu, 1983).

Although neither formal rules nor laws, these values, when internalized via formal education or social learning, functioned as implicitly accepted codes that regulated businesspeople’s social behaviors, determined the social appropriateness of business strategies, connoted consumer values and cultures, signified managers’ social reputations and shaped personal relationships (Arnould et al., 2021; Grace, 2021). People resisted “doing business with” anyone who violated these values. For example, Xin- or Yi-deficient businesspeople rarely received long-run contracts, and companies rarely hired job applicants judged as Bu-Zhong (i.e. disloyalty to others, especially leaders).

The PAP may arise in international markets when compradors’ interests differ or conflict with principals’ interests. Moreover, cross-cultural differences in values, norms and language barriers may intensify the PAP by widening the principal–agent information or interest gap. However, the PAP was muted in pre-1949 China because principals innovated strategies – such as building mutual trust, institutionalizing bonding costs and indoctrinating specific cultural values – to mitigate it. Thus, orthodox principal–agent theory partly captures disloyal behavior among business parties and urges scrutinizing the underlying mechanisms, influencing elements and dynamic interactions of principals and agents in international markets.

In summary, principal–agent theory highlights the role of personal interest-seeking in conditioning business parties’ behaviors. It acknowledges challenges in detecting and measuring hidden information and hidden actions. Principals’ beliefs about the problem’s type or severity and agents’ beliefs about the seriousness or effects of those responses may condition effective responses to a PAP. Although contracts often define punishment and reward systems, definitional and enforcement uncertainties may cause principals to adopt complementary strategies (i.e. interpreting, justifying, dismissing and regulating behaviors based on cultural values, social norms, meanings and relational ties) to minimize the PAP (Arnould et al., 2021; Aulakh and Gencturk, 2000; Grace, 2021). The ethnographic specificities of non-Western socio-historical contexts demand an in-depth examination of the underlying socio-cultural mechanisms and dynamic processes that shape the PAP. The strategies that sustained the symbiotic relationship between compradors and foreign companies in pre-1949 China show the PAP’s contextualized connotations and suggest ways to sustain cross-cultural cooperation.
Embedding compradors in pre-1949 China

This review of Chinese compradors and foreign companies in pre-1949 China (i.e. 1840–1949, an era characterized by extensive cross-border business transactions consummated in a relatively free market) relies on scrutinizing multilevel historical materials such as old newspapers (e.g. Shen Bao and Xinwen Bao) and magazines published before 1949, national and local archives, businessmen’s oral historical records, compradors’ memoirs and in-house journals from Chinese and non-Chinese sources (e.g. Chinese Literature and History Materials, Economic History Materials of Wuhan Industry and Commerce, Materials of Shanghai Local History, Library of Historical Materials of Shanghai in the 21st Century and Anhui Literature and History Materials, various issues; SASS, 1983; Shen Bao, 1872-1949; SHERI, 1960; Xinwen Bao, 1893-1949). These under-utilized multilateral materials by non-Eastern scholars were mainly published before the early 1960s or (re)generated after the Cultural Revolution, two relatively open periods (Yan and Hyman, 2021). Although generally trustworthy, they may be incomplete or ambiguous because of social or political pressures on information providers (e.g. withholding negative information about elders, respected societal members and family members). Ensuring these materials’ correct interpretation entails:

- identifying and understanding their historical context;
- assessing their authenticity and creators’ trustworthiness; and

Given compradors’ differing socio-historically anchored connotations, data triangulation and contextualization enhanced interpretative validity (Muldoon, 2021).

Chinese compradors’ connotations and social influences shifted in pre-1949 China as the sociopolitical and economic environment evolved (Huang et al., 1982; Yan, 2013). Scrutinizing such shifts broadens insights into the PAP. Compradors’ ever-increasing wealth and close relationships with government officials and foreign companies steadily boosted their social standing. Although occasionally criticized by Chinese nationalists, compradors were adored in coastal cities such as Shanghai or Tianjin, and their conspicuous consumption behaviors were widely envied and imitated (Shen Bao, 1872-1949; Xinwen Bao, 1893-1949).

Chinese compradors first appeared in the 15th century as official brokers for the Ming government (1368–1644) (Hao, 1970). However, they did not become an influential socioeconomic institution until the East and West initiated extensive contact in the early 1840s (Hao, 1970). Previously, the Chinese Government limited international trade to the Shisanhang (or the “thirteen factories”), and Canton (or Guangzhou) was the only international trading port (Abe, 2017). Minimal and highly regulated international trade meant compradors were less essential.

After the First Opium War (1839–1842), when the Treaty of Nanking forced China to welcome other countries, foreign companies entered China (Hao, 1970; Spence, 1991). Because of ignorance about China, local business competition and intensifying nationalistic resistance, these companies solicited aid from local intermediaries. Compradors emerged to help foreign companies break into major Chinese coastal and inland cities (Du, 1984; Yan, 1986a, 1986b). Some Chinese, often from wealthy local families, received a Western education from Western schools or churches in cities such as Hankou, Shanghai and Tianjin. Their familiarity with Chinese norms, Western values and Western lifestyles enabled them to excel as compradors (Dong, 1965; Huang et al., 1982; Yong, 1965).
Most compradors were Chinese nationals (Yamafuji, 2017; Yan, 1986a, 1986b). Many foreign companies’ former employees (e.g. translators, secretaries, house stewards, janitors and bodyguards), intermediaries who provided necessities, local businessmen (e.g. old-style bankers or grocery store owners) and former business partners (e.g. contractors, agents, brokers and dealers) with close ties to foreign companies, become compradors (Cochran, 1980, 2000; Du, 1984; Hao, 1970; Li and Zhu, 1983; Ruan, 1964; Yan, 1964; Yan, 1986a, 1986b). Foreign companies retained former Chinese officials as compradors to lower government-imposed competitive barriers or secure government purchasing contracts (Cochran, 1980, 2000; Gao, 1963; Jiang and Chen, 1964; Lu, 1999; Ruan, 1964).

Partly because traditional Chinese culture was family- and community-focused and partly because soon-to-retire compradors wanted to extend their influence, they often suggested family members, relatives and friends as replacements (Huang, 2007; Yang et al., 1993; Yan, 1986a, 1986b). Both recommenders and foreign companies took these suggestions seriously, as a rejection or acceptance affected a recommender’s social reputation and related societal members’ attitudes toward the foreign company. Thus, companies such as Asiatic Oil, BAT, Butterfield and Swire, Gibb Livingston, HSBC, Melchers, Mobil and Texaco often followed these suggestions (Cochran, 1980, 2000; Huang, 1963; Jin, 1963; Li, 1984; Miao, 1999; SASS, 1983; SHERI, 1960). Conversely, some compradors could become high-ranking employees of foreign companies because of their profound social influence or well-entrenched social networks (Cochran, 1980; Yamafuji, 2017).

Whether relying on employees or local agents to initiate or expand their Chinese business, foreign companies chose between corporate hierarchies and the market to allocate resources (Cochran, 2000). To ease market entry and support foreign companies’ value-creation efforts (e.g. collecting relevant information, identifying suitable partners, buying raw materials and selling products), compradors promoted novel consumption styles or tastes, new consumer cultures, select social values and their business networks (Bi, 1963; Chua, 2020; Hao, 1970; Xu and Lin, 1964; Yan, 1986a, 1986b). In long-time-experience-based “know-how” intensive business, where special skills are needed to identify the actual quality of products or services, compradors helped foreign companies to procure or sell products such as tea, seafood, tobacco leaves or tung oil (Li, 1962; Wu, 1984). For example, compradors were vital to BAT collecting tobacco leaves and selling cigarettes throughout China, Asiatic (the UK) marketing oil lamps and kerosene oil to millions of Chinese families, Melchers (Germany) securing tung oil, soldiers obtaining food rations and Arnhold Brothers (the UK) acquiring raw hides, herbs, silk, tung oil, sesame and eggs in remote rural areas (Chen, 1964; Jin, 1963; Liu, 1984; SASS, 1983; SHERI, 1960; Xu and Lin, 1964). In addition to securing local selling networks with Chinese compradors’ help, Dollar (the USA) hired local informants to collect and transmit local business information, via its telegraph offices in Shanghai and Tianjin, to its US headquarters (Ruan, 1964). Before and during First World War, compradors helped Russian buyers import tea from the Hubei province (Guo, 1984; Jin, 1963).

**Principal–agent problem in pre-1949 China**

Discrepant (shared) interests and goals among international business parties can exacerbate (mitigate) the PAP. Although principals generally expect agents to be disinterested in the strategies that best serve principals’ interests, agents’ preferences can distort strategy implementation (Clark, 1991).

Principals and agents, especially in cross-cultural settings, may rely on different codes of conduct to evaluate personal interests and goals, leading to divergent behaviors and their interpretations. Hence, insufficient or ineffective communication may undermine mutual
trust, complicating cooperation between principals and agents. Long-term cooperation fostered by ad hoc contracts or partnerships that passed small-scale transaction tests can restrain principals’ and agents’ dishonest behaviors (Cochran, 1980, 2000; Samiee et al., 2015; Sappington, 1991).

Multiple mechanisms and factors shaped power relations between foreign companies and local compradors in pre-1949 China. Under orthodox principal–agent theory, asymmetric information between a principal and an agent may encourage dishonest acts by the more informed party (Akerlof, 1970). Relative to foreign companies, compradors with well-established social networks better understood local norms, transaction rules, managerial styles and marketing channels (SASS, 1983; SHERI, 1960; Yan, 1986a, 1986b). According to former compradors’ memoirs, compradors’ shared knowledge helped foreign companies circumvent government controls, yet the information gap between foreign companies and compradors obscured the latter’s dishonest acts (Lu, 1984; local Literature and History Materials, various issues).

Principals’ and agents’ strategic options can shape the PAP. Bandwagoning compradors (i.e. affiliated with foreign companies to enhance long-term personal interests) were less likely to behave dishonestly (Lu, 1999). In contrast, distancing compradors working for shunned foreign companies, especially when nationalistic movements and related foreign brand boycotts peaked from 1904 to 1949, imposed social pressures to erode open rapprochement between foreign companies and local agents (SASS, 1983; SHERI, 1960; Spence, 1991; Tian and Dong, 2013; Wang, 2002; Wang, 1981; Yan and Hyman, 2020).

Traditional Chinese society often deprecated businesspeople as greedy, snobbish, incompetent and immoral servants of personal interests (Huang, 2007; Yang et al., 1993). Hence, the first few foreign companies might suffer from adverse selection (i.e. initially retaining less competent local agents) (Hart and Holmström, 1987; Laffont and Martimort, 2002). To attract more competent Chinese as compradors, foreign companies gave the first few Chinese willing to serve as compradors relatively high commissions (Huang, 2007). Once compradors’ rags-to-riches stories circulated widely, more talented Chinese aspired to become compradors, improving foreign companies’ candidate pools (Chua, 2020). Subsequently, intense competition among potential compradors discouraged them from behaving dishonestly toward foreign principals. Formal and informal social networks were essential in smoothing business in pre-1949 China (Kong and Ploeckl, 2020; Yan and Hyman, 2021). Many compradors formed guild-like associations (industry- or hometown-based) to share resources (e.g. marketing channels, business information, financial services and salesforce) and regulate members’ business behaviors (Xu, 2000; Yan, 1964).

Sustaining stewardship relationships in pre-1949 China
Stewardship theory contends principals’ and agents’ interests are alignable (Davis et al., 1997). The multilevel historical analysis described here supports this contention. Despite the PAP’s extent in international markets, historical data indicate its absence from pre-1949 China. Nationally, many loyal Chinese compradors served foreign principals earnestly, including Li Rui (for a US tung oil company), Gao Xingqiao (for German coal mines and weaponry companies), Zheng Bozhao and Wu Tingsheng (for HSBC) (Cao, 1999; Chen, 1999; Gao, 1963; SASS, 1983; Shen, 1872-1949; SHERI, 1960; Xinwen Bao, 1893-1949; Xu, 1984). Although imperialistic privilege and political pressure partly explain compradors’ cooperation with foreign firms, these factors only weakly encouraged compradors’ sustained loyalty. Although foreign companies occasionally asked the pre-1949 Chinese Government to intervene when a PAP arose, such actions typically elicited nationalistic resistance (Yan and Hyman, 2020). Thus, factors such...
as economic incentives, institutionalizing social constraints and social bonds adopted by foreign companies better explain this loyalty and reflexive agency (Zincir, 2022).

Instilling economic motivations and restraints

Incentive structure – mainly the expected cost and payoff of specific behaviors – shapes people’s decision-making (Becker, 1974, 1976). Increasing a behavior’s bonding cost or reducing its expected payoff will minimize its adoption likelihood (Becker, 1974, 1976; Jensen and Meckling, 1976). Compradors’ loyalty to foreign companies in pre-1949 China largely stemmed from generous sales commissions and companies’ willingness to absorb losses caused by force majeures or unpredictable price vacillations (Chen, 1999; Gao, 1963; Li, 1962; Liu, 1984; Lu, 1999; Miao, 1999; Yan, 1986a, 1986b; Yang, 1984; Yong, 1965; Zhou and Huang, 1984). Former compradors indicated these companies also offered subsidies, financial rewards, pensions and informal monetary rewards (e.g. processing fees, kickbacks and secret allowances) (Yu and Wang, 1984; Zhou and Huang, 1984). Preferring one outstanding representative to several mediocre representatives, foreign companies often paid handsomely for compradors able to increase sales, befriend local officials and expand the business into inland markets (Yan, 1964). Whether compradors received a fixed or flexible share of net profits, as determined by a sharecropping-like system that defined relative profit share, depended on ad hoc arrangements with foreign companies (Cheung, 1968).

To align principals’ and compradors’ interests or to build a mutual steward relationship between principals and agents (Davis et al., 1997), foreign companies built a symbiotic business relationship to penetrate the Chinese market and secure long-term local assistance (Abe, 2017; Huang et al., 1982). Under a mutual-exclusivity arrangement, compradors were a foreign company’s sole agent within a local market and were limited to selling only its products (Ding, 1984; Li, 1962; Zhou and Huang, 1984). This arrangement avoided the multi-principal problem (i.e. competing principals overwhelming a shared agent) while reinforcing economic interdependency between compradors and foreign companies, discouraging compradors’ dishonest acts (Gailmard, 2009).

To discourage comprador disloyalty, foreign companies required compradors to deposit non-transferrable and non-withdrawable funds into assigned bank accounts before any transaction, which functioned as an exit cost for behaving dishonestly (Jiang and Chen, 1964). These funds would reimburse companies for losses caused by compradors’ dishonest behaviors.

Discouraging dishonest acts with institutionalized oversight and control systems

Market and economic control cannot provide adequate deterrence (Clark, 1991). Although pure economic measures worked in many cases, they were ineffective in curbing dishonest acts by agents with non-monetary interests. Thus, additional formal oversight and control institutions that boosted disloyalty costs or shrunk disloyalty payoffs were needed when the interests and goals of principals and agents diverged and agent performance was difficult to assess (Aulakh and Gencturk, 2000; Becker, 1974, 1976; Jensen and Meckling, 1976). By institutionalizing strategies for regulating their social relationships with compradors, foreign companies identified the “right” comprador, fostered competition among compradors and disciplined dishonest acts.

As prophylactic entities, foreign companies often set strict criteria for screening compradors (Hao, 1970; Yan, 1986a, 1986b). These criteria included social measures to influence social selling within targeted markets and well-entrenched social networks, an ability to sell foreign brands to potential customers, personal integrity and a favorable social reputation (Lu, 1984; Zhou and Huang, 1984). Foreign companies especially appreciated
compradors with close government ties; for example, BAT chose Wu Tingsheng, and HSBC chose Wu Youling and Wu Maoding, to develop their northern Chinese markets (Abe, 2017; SASS, 1983; Xu, 1984). Potential compradors competed based on their social reputation and ability to earn a partnership with foreign companies (Dong, 1984; Lu, 1999). Foreign companies initially engaged new compradors in trial low-value transactions to control losses, with successful compradors graduating to increasingly higher-value transactions.

Economic, psychological and social “bonding costs” can curb dishonest acts by increasing their expense (Donaldson, 1990; Jensen and Meckling, 1976). In pre-1949 China, foreign companies adopted measures meant to increase such costs. Notarization as a comprador required sponsorship by a wealthy person (Ren Bao) or a successful Chinese retailer (Pu Bao). Widely adopted as collateral in “Old China,” the Ren Bao or Pu Bao was liable for losses caused by disloyalty or mismanagement (Chen, 1999; Du, 1984; Lu, 1999). Because pre-1949 Chinese society was family and community-centric and preferred supporting friends or relatives via social obligation (Huang, 2007; Yang et al., 1993; Zheng and Wan, 2020), compradors refrained from disloyal behavior to avoid undermining friends or relatives. Ren Bao and Pu Bao systems typically set high social barriers to discourage comprador disloyalty.

Historical records show that foreign companies such as BAT, Asiatic Oil, Riqing Steamship, Texaco and Mobil Oil divided China into many regional markets. These companies avoided monopolistic compradors through “divide and control,” with a unique agent responsible for each region and any cross-regional collusion prohibited (Chen, 1984; Ding, 1984; Liu, 1984; Yu and Wang, 1984; Zhou and Huang, 1984). They created decentralized monitoring systems by hiring a central comprador to coordinate – but not lead – branch compradors (Jiang and Chen, 1964; Lu, 1999). These systems helped foreign companies cut administrative costs while restricting compradors from exchanging information and building business alliances among themselves, constraining their collective disloyalty [Shanghai Democratic National Construction Association (SDNCA), 1999; Yu and Wang, 1984].

Foreign companies developed independent accounting and auditing systems to monitor comprador transactions (Cochran, 2000; Yang, 1984; Zhou and Huang, 1984). Companies immediately and severely punished compradors believed guilty of dishonest acts or ineffective business performance. For example, the Swire Group (the UK) stipulated misbehaving compradors must reimburse companies for resulting losses (Yang, 1984). Likewise, Asiatic Oil and Dollar (the USA) sued or expelled immoral or incompetent compradors (Liu, 1984; Ruan, 1964).

**Mitigating the principal–agent problem with social bonds**

Informal institutions may shape corporate strategy-making in international markets when formal rules inaccurately or insufficiently reflect transaction complexity (Meyer et al., 2009; Samiee et al., 2015; Tran et al., 2023). Influenced by China’s informal institutions (e.g. norms and values), foreign companies in pre-1949 China built social bonds to control Chinese compradors’ discretionary power and secure comprador loyalty, thus minimizing the PAP (Aulakh and Gencturk, 2000). Embedded in a Chinese cultural context, the values that shaped Chinese compradors’ interactions with foreign companies also shaped foreign companies’ business strategies and social bonds with Chinese partners. Instead of regulating people’s behaviors with formal rules or contracts, business strategies can rely on internalized values that shape preferences, identification and strategic choices (Yan, 2013; Yan and Hyman, 2019). For example, relationship building can help retain and satisfy customers by building personal trust, mutual understanding and long-term cooperation (Gillet, 2016). Some values enshrined in consumer cultures may also define meanings and influence managers’ strategic choices (Arnould et al., 2021; Grace, 2021). Akin to “strategic
ignorance,” a foreign principal might intentionally forgive some compradors’ (especially those with strong capabilities or local networks) misbehaviors or relax their obligations to contractual terms, which in pre-1949 China meant to give them a face in exchange for their future loyalty or flexible but more productive performance [SASS, 1983; Shanghai Literature and History Materials Committee (SHLHMC), 1986; Xu, 1984].

Although thoroughly assessing transaction processes and performance may reduce the PAP (Pratt and Zeckhauser, 1991), it also creates negative externalities. For example, monitoring can disillusion the overseen, and performance assessments often neglect compromises to social reputation induced by pursuing performance goals. However, social control can minimize the PAP without incurring costs attendant to economic incentives, formal contracts and accounting rules. Thus, the social bonds built by foreign companies encouraged compradors to internalize traditional Chinese values such as Zhong (loyalty), He (amicability), Ren (benevolence), Li (politeness and personal integrity), Yi (allegiance) and Xin (faithful to one’s promise) as behavioral guidelines (Chen, 1999; Yang et al., 2023). These values discourage dishonest behavior by reinforcing loyalty to authorities, family members, friends, community members and business partners. Companies also borrowed religious values from Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity that encouraged honesty, abstinence, diligence and self-sacrifice. Hence, compradors were inculcated to behave honestly regardless of external monitoring (Dong, 1984; Li, 1962; Yong, 1965).

In pre-1949 China, personal friendships between foreign managers and compradors partly bridged cross-culture divides (Chen, 1999; Gao, 1963; Hao, 1970; Ruan, 1964). A close relationship with a foreign company signaled a local manager’s political privilege, economic power and social capital, which tended to induce interpersonal admiration and discourage government harassment (Lu, 1984; Yan, 1986a, 1986b). As attested by former compradors, long-term friendships with foreign managers encouraged compradors’ loyalty to these managers and their companies (Huang, 1963; Li, 1962). BAT archives also reveal that when foreign managers were dismissed or retired, compradors would also quit out of loyalty to them and distrust of new managers (SASS, 1983).

Embedded in a social context curious about foreign elements, compradors promoted their business interests and enhanced their social prestige by identifying with a foreign company’s brand (Abe, 2017; Hao, 1970; Ruan, 1964; Yang, 1964). Foreign companies often provided social support to compradors, which helped them avoid government harassment while boosting their future business prospects. For example, the German Government during WWI knighted Gao Xingqiao to reward his loyalty, furthering Gao’s business and social prestige (Gao, 1963). Similarly, US and UK companies helped some Chinese compradors obtain political positions in Shanghai and Jiangsu, enhancing these compradors’ business power and socio-political status while smoothing these companies’ market entry (Shen Bao, 1872-1949; Yan, 1986a, 1986b). Some foreign companies created joint ventures with compradors that eased market entry and curbed their members’ dishonest or fraudulent activities (Hao, 1970; Yan, 1986a, 1986b).

The symbiotic relationship between agents and principals helped to build their amicable interactions. For example, many compradors and foreign principals deemed their long-term cooperation requisite to maintaining their economic, political and other interests (Gao, 1963; Wang, 1981), which mitigated the PAP.

**Market and business efficacy of mitigating the principal–agent problem in pre-1949 China**

A strong sense of nationalistic resentment toward foreign elements existed in pre-1949 China (Spence, 1991). However, historical records show the formal institutional
arrangements and social bonds in pre-1949 China pertain to current business practices globally (Hao, 1970; Yan, 1986a, 1986b; Yan, 2013). These strategies allowed foreign companies to enter industries strongly regulated by the Chinese Government (e.g. inland shipping, coal mining, banking and real estate) (Chen, 1999; Miao, 1999; Yang, 1984). Besides building conventional personal friendships, foreign companies focused on building political relationships. Hence, compradors who maintained close relationships with Chinese government officials were employed to help foreign companies acquire otherwise unobtainable insider information about tax policy changes, shape exchange rate adjustments and secure preferential international commercial treaty terms for foreign principals (Huang et al., 1982; SASS, 1983; Yan, 1986a, 1986b; Zhou and Huang, 1984). To enter remote markets filled with many social uncertainties (e.g. turf wars between local warlords or different local customs) and flexibilities (e.g. many types of socio-economic organizations, including Tongxianghui [village clan associations], Tongyegonghui [guild], Huiguan [guild hall], Shangbang [business cliques], Shanghui [the chamber of commerce] and local cooperatives), compradors often relied on compatriots or village clans with strong families and local connections to facilitate and sustain foreign companies’ long-term business transactions (SASS, 1983; SHERI, 1960; Xu, 2000; Yang, 1984). Often an unintended by-product of their business activities in pre-1949 China, compradors generally secured political and economic privileges for foreign companies (e.g. lower taxes, police protection against nationalistic attacks, government contracts, local market information, professional advice and elimination of government-set foreign trade barriers) (SASS, 1983; SDNCA, 1999; Shen Bao, 1872-1949; SHERI, 1960; Yan, 1986a, 1986b).

Evidence from former compradors and their family members reveals that inculcated traditional values (e.g. allegiance and loyalty), friendship with foreign managers and previous help from those companies primarily drove compradors’ loyalty to foreign companies. Chinese society has long criticized Guohe Chaiqiao (dismantling the bridge after crossing the river) behavior as highly immoral. Thus, positive reciprocity from Chinese compradors often helped foreign businessmen in China out of economic distress. For example, Gao Xingqiao relied on his social connections with Chinese Government officials to help German-owned coal and weaponry companies register as Chinese companies during WWI, thus avoiding government reprisals. After WWI, Gao donated extensively to the family of a German manager in financial distress (Gao, 1963). Gao’s efforts reciprocated assistance he once received from German businessman Constantin von Hanneken, suggesting personal relationships and reciprocity can mitigate the PAP. Li Rui, who partnered with a US company to purchase tung oil, returned excess profits to his US principal – which he was permitted to retain – caused by a sudden decline in tung oil price (Li, 1962). Li’s friendship with a company manager and belief that sustained cooperation with US principals mandated long-term contracts motivated his actions. Yong Jianqiu, who worked for German companies and was motivated by his deep gratitude for favors he once received from foreign companies, assisted foreign principals in seeking political and economic assistance from the Chinese government (Yong, 1965). Wu Tingsheng, a US-sponsored-college graduate, and Zheng Bozhao, a Cantonese deeply influenced by traditional Chinese values [e.g. Zhong (loyalty), Xin (faithfulness), Jian (frugality) and Qing (diligence)], helped BAT develop distribution channels throughout China (Chen, 1999; Cochran, 2000; Cox, 1997; SASS, 1983).

Historical records (e.g. personal memoirs, local gazetteers, newspapers and oral history records) show these values’ adoption encouraged local luminaries to help foreign principals extend foreign business into remote Chinese rural markets (Jiang and Chen, 1964; Jin, 1963;
Li and Zhu, 1983), an act often castigated by Chinese leftists as traitorous (Huang et al., 1982; Yan, 1986a, 1986b).

Secret gangs such as Paoge (Brother Pao), San Hehui (the Triad) or Qing Bang (the Green Gang) thrived and deeply affected daily lives in pre-1949 China (SHLHMC, 1986). Because gang members were especially influenced by values such as Zhong, Yi and Xin, foreign principals would ask these members to serve as compradors focused on inland Chinese market entry (SHLHMC, 1986; Zhao, 1990). Although some influential members opposed becoming compradors, foreign principals sought their help to disband boycotts or address disputes between foreign companies and Chinese workers (SHLHMC, 1986). Foreign principals joined these underground entities to smooth operations in a context filled with intense nationalistic resistance against foreign business (Yan and Hyman, 2020; Zhao, 1990).

However, formal institutional arrangements and social bonds asymmetrically curbed compradors’ but not principals’ dishonest acts. As depicted by stewardship theory, principals may behave opportunistically toward compradors (Davis et al., 1997). Foreign companies often dismissed compradors after entering the pre-1949 Chinese market. For example, despite its moral behavior and excellent performance, Mobil Oil fired its compradors once it dominated a local market (Zhou and Huang, 1984). BAT behaved similarly once its local business networks became well-entrenched (Cochran, 2000; SASS, 1983). Some foreign companies stole or speculated with compradors’ deposits (Yan, 1964).

Although certain Chinese values served as normative benchmarks for guiding business behaviors, they did not guarantee ethical commercial cultures in pre-1949 China, especially when some compradors predominantly pursued selfish economic interests. For example, compradors occasionally disregarded a principal’s interests to extend their own business (Hao, 1970). Foreign principals and Chinese compradors might collude to market socially unacceptable products such as opium, gambling, dog or horse racing, prostitution and contraband (Shenbao, various issues; SHLHMC, 1986; Zhao, 1990).

Moreover, principals and compradors occasionally developed a special mutual stewardship relationship by behaving dishonestly to undermine third parties’ interests (Davis et al., 1997). Mobile Oil used compradors to recruit Chinese employees (not compradors) working for Texaco and Asiatic Oil to reveal proprietary information, and Asiatic Oil acted similarly toward Mobil Oil and Texaco (Liu, 1984; Zhou and Huang, 1984). With its Chinese compradors’ assistance, BAT snatched market share from its main rival Lopato (Russian) in Manchuria and destroyed the reputation of its main Chinese competitor, Nanyang Brothers (Cox, 1997; Ding, 1984; SASS, 1983). BAT exploited Chinese peasants in Henan and Anhui by giving them Virginia tobacco seeds in the spring and collecting harvested tobacco leaves later through Chinese compradors’ local networks that avoided local government regulation. Because BAT was the primary buyer and local peasants had minimal facilities for storing tobacco leaves, BAT artificially depressed these leaves’ price (Jiang and Chen, 1964; Jin, 1963; Li, 1962; SASS, 1983; SHERI, 1960; SDNCA, 1999). To pressure tea farmers to cut prices, foreign companies collecting tea in Shanghai asked Chashi (tea inspectors) to intentionally slow inspection efforts, as such procrastination would lower tea quality (SDNCA, 1999).

Foreign companies did not limit themselves to building social bonds. Instead, they relied on alternate intermediaries to suppress compradors’ dishonest acts. For example, BAT and the Swire Group relied on compradors and employees to preclude either group from monopolizing business procedures (Cochran, 1980, 2000; SHERI, 1960; Yang, 1984). After establishing their Chinese business, foreign companies pressured compradors to work honestly and effectively via more formalized controls. Hence, adopting formal institutional arrangements or building social bonds also relies on the perceived power balance between
foreign companies and local agents. Foreign companies believing local agents could work with local businesses more effectively tended to build social bonds. In contrast, foreign companies well-entrenched in China tended to adopt formal institutional arrangements like rigid corporate hierarchies or formal contracts (Cochran, 2000).

The PAP could extend past China when foreign managers acted as their home company’s agents. For example, US and UK companies’ managers colluded with Chinese compradors to smuggle opium and other contraband into China without concern about undermining their companies’ reputations (Haddad, 2014; Yan, 1986a, 1986b). The Hankou-based branch managers of a Japanese company colluded with its compradors to embezzle Japanese government funds (Zheng, 1984).

Discussion
A historically sensitive (re)examination of business events embedded in past contexts can inform theory and methodology development in management (Van Lent and Durepos, 2019). This study contemplates Western-based principal–agent theory’s applicability to a non-Western context by examining the PAP and trust-building between compradors and foreign companies in pre-1949 China, a context characterized by wars, regional conflicts and foreign economic pressures and political invasions (SASS, 1983; Spence, 1991). Although traditional principal–agent theory helps explain many cross-cultural business behaviors, the proposed extension indicates how certain contextualized strategies shape the PAP, its solutions and principals’ and agents’ strategic business behaviors in socio-politically chaotic marketplaces. As this historical study shows, principals and agents can align their interests. Thus, scrutinizing principal–agent relationships in non-Western socio-historical contexts can elucidate business (mis)behaviors across borders and boost conventional principal–agent theory’s generalizability.

This study supersedes conventional principal–agent theory’s focus on agents’ dishonest acts by considering principal dishonesty toward agents, mutual principal–agent stewardship and principal–agent collusion to enrich themselves at a third party’s expense. Rather than debunk conventional principal–agent theory, it shows that principals’ and agents’ interests can be aligned, conforming to stewardship theory (Davis et al., 1997). For example, conventional principal–agent theory maintains that PAP-related measurement and implementation costs are challenging to minimize. In contrast, historical data shows that principals in pre-1949 China circumvented direct measurement of agents’ behaviors by examining compradors’ overall performance (e.g. market share, cash inflow and net profit). Capping transaction costs helped to minimize implementation costs. Moreover, managers can sustain fruitful partnerships or coalitions by internalizing values such as compliance, loyalty, allegiance and rapprochement (Zheng and Wan, 2020).

Historical insight into strategies adopted by foreign companies in pre-1949 China may inform contemporary companies’ business entry strategies. The main managerial implication entails securing successful international market entry by shrinking the information, interest and interpretive gaps between local agents and foreign companies. Formal contracts cannot guarantee the effective implementation of contractual obligations when one party cannot detect or assess the other party’s behaviors (Bolton and Dewatripont, 2005; Hart, 1995). Hence, in addition to adopting well-known measures such as creating personal trust, Guanxi and monetary incentives, foreign companies should augment conventional approaches by espousing specific cultural values or offering political or social rewards to sustain long-term symbiotic relationships between principals and agents. That is, institutionalizing formal or informal constraints or incentives can counter misbehaviors.
Limitations and future research
This historical study is limited in four ways. First, it applied CHRM to the elements and mechanisms shaping strategic interactions between principals and agents. Foreign principals’ differing cultural backgrounds were ignored. Hence, future research could probe for varying interactions between Chinese compradors and Russian, American, British, Japanese and overseas Chinese principals.

Second, the nonlinear relationship between local agents’ preferences and economic changes was ignored. Although this study assumed stable principal–agent relationships, they may shift after agents accumulate sufficient economic and social power. Hence, future research could:

- explore how foreign companies can avoid powerful future competitors by constraining local agency development; or
- identify complementary or replacement strategies to a share-cropping-like commission system when local agents’ monetary pursuits subside.

Third, focusing on pre-1949 (1840–1949) China limited this study’s external validity. Hence, a comparative historical analysis of the PAP in other socio-economic contexts is needed.

Fourth, positing that structural, cultural and personal emergent properties in international business are best understood collectively (Zincir, 2022), efforts to broaden principal–agent theory and deepen related insights into business strategies and managerial styles could examine these research questions through a socio-historical lens:

RQ1. How can dynamic interactions and changing power structures between foreign companies and local agencies (e.g. for retailing, franchising, procuring or advertising) sustain entry into international markets and enhance stakeholders’ welfare? How do such interactions relate to business ethics and consumer culture?

RQ2. If values discouraging agents’ dishonest behavior in pre-1949 China fail in other political, cultural and economic business contexts, then how can adaptive and ecological rationality evolve for future foreign principals and local partners?

RQ3. How do principal–agent and stewardship theory apply to business-to-consumer and business-to-business strategies, advertising agency-client relationships and co-branding across borders and cultures (Bergen et al., 1992; Lee and Decker, 2016; Paswan and Panda, 2020)?

Conclusions and implications
What are the PAP’s driving elements and participants in changing socio-historical contexts? How the PAP is (re) defined and how can it be solved? What are its implications for contemporary managers and marketers? Drawing on the critical historical analysis of multilateral historical data, this study answers these questions by showing economic, cultural and psychological elements can shape the PAP. It indicates principal–agent interests can be reconciled, as suggested by stewardship theory, which extends insights into the PAP’s interactive elements, underlying mechanisms and mitigating measures.

References


Confucius and his disciples (1960), *The Analects of Confucius*, Zhonghua Shuju Press, Shanghai, CN.


Huang, R. (2007), *Broaden the Horizon of History*, Sanlian Press, Hong Kong, CN.


Qi, L. (2010), *Long Wei’s Reflexive Thoughts on His Readings (Long Wei Du Shu Lu)*, Guangling Press, Shangyu, CN.


Shen Bao (1872-1949), “(shanghai news), various issues (1872-1949)”.

SHERI (1960), “(shanghai economic research institute) at shanghai academy of social sciences”, Historical Documents of BAT in China.

Shanghai Literature and History Materials Committee (SHLHMC) (1986), *Shanghai Literature and History Materials: Gangs in Old Shanghai*, 54 Shanghai People’s Press, Shanghai, CN.


The principal–agent problem and its mitigation


Zhao, Q. (1990), Paoge (Brother Pao) and Bandits, Tianjin People’s Press, Tianjin, CN.

About the authors


Dr Michael R. Hyman is the President of the Institute for Marketing Futurology and Philosophy in Las Cruces, New Mexico. He is also a Distinguished Achievement Professor of Marketing at New Mexico State University. His roughly 130 academic journal articles, 60 conference papers, 4 co-authored/co-edited books, 30 other academic contributions and 50 non-academic works attest to his writing compulsion. He has served on 16 editorial review boards and as a journal co-editor and associate editor. His research interests include marketing theory, marketing ethics, consumer advertising, survey research methods, philosophical analyses in marketing and marketing futurology. Michael R. Hyman is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: imktgfp1@gmail.com

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com