

**Workplaces During the Covid-19 Pandemic and Beyond:  
Insights from Strategic Human Resource Management in Mainland China**

**Abstract**

We show the relevance of strategic human resource management (SHRM) in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic's challenges to the workplace in the context of Mainland China. In particular, we discuss the insights of prevalent areas of SHRM for navigating the pandemic at the organisational and individual levels. These are the contextual factors that affect the relationship between human resource (HR) practices and work outcomes in organisations and the development of HR practices during the pandemic. Looking forward to the future with uncertainties and other possible crises, we discuss research directions for SHRM in the post-pandemic reality. These include resilience-oriented HPWS, contextualised SHRM and horizontal fit of SHRM in the 'new normal'.

**Key words:**

Strategic human resource management, contextual factors, new normal, crisis, Mainland China

## **Introduction**

The year 2020 is destined to be an ‘uncommon year’, in which people's work and lives were interrupted and affected by the emergence of COVID-19 and the resultant pandemic. As the basic unit of society, organisations have borne the brunt of the impact. In countries with different political systems, organisations have suffered similar negative effects. Many countries have invested a lot of manpower and material resources in supporting organisations. For example, the British government pay the wages of the employees of some small and medium-sized enterprises that cannot afford the expense and provided discounts for customers to encourage them to dine in restaurants. Furlough is a practice adopted in many UK organisations (Stuart et al., 2021). In France, the government do not punish enterprises for delayed government procurement due to the epidemic. In China the government also take measures to maintain stability and promote people's livelihoods, e.g., to support weak enterprises, reducing or delaying taxes enterprises have to pay, providing preferential insurance policies, and increasing business income.

There are many new changes in the workplace brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, as a kind of crisis, the pandemic has brought many uncertainties and challenges to organisational performance and survival (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). On the other hand, it has caused the inequities in the labour market (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021), and those workers who are ‘merchandised’ have been affected badly. For example, project workers are more likely to be affected by the pandemic as they cannot complete the tasks on time which will lead to emotional exhaustion. These impact directly on human resource management (HRM) practices and systems.

As a result, the core characteristics of strategic HRM (SHRM) need to be more contextualised. For instance, a modification of the HRM systems, differential management towards diverse worker groups, managing the virtual workforce, an emphasis of the impact of cultural and organisational ideologies on HRM practices, and rapid responses to the crises has been recommended (Collings, McMackin, Nyberg & Wright, 2021). In the meanwhile, Collings et al (2021) called for a stakeholder perspective to be employed by organisations and the positioning of health and safety to an important status. To respond the challenges brought by the pandemic, Caligiuri et al. (2020) survey the international HRM perspective, and apply

the theories and practices in cross-border problems and intra-firm distancing challenges to the workplace in the time of the pandemic.

China has accumulated abundant experience and dealt with many crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Under these circumstances, it is of important reference value and significance to explore the SHRM approach adopted by Chinese<sup>1</sup> organisations during the pandemic. That being said, the purpose of our paper is not to conduct a comprehensive and systematic literature review of the SHRM research in Mainland China, not to mention the quantity of publications in English and Chinese journals (e.g., Chang, Jia, Takeuchi & Cai, 2014; Ma, Silva, Callan & Trigo, 2015; Paillé, Chen, Boiral, & Jin, 2014). The objective of our paper is to focus on the challenges brought by the pandemic and use it as an opportunity to re-examine the current situation of SHRM in Mainland China. We particularly discuss the areas of SHRM that are encouraged to be developed in the ‘new normal’ and the new directions for future research in order to shed light on the practical world and overcome various crises in the ever-changing global environment. These crises are not restricted to the pandemic only, but also include the unknown challenges in the future as well. If we could equip Chinese organisations with proper investment in HRM, and take preventive measures of SHRM, we would eventually create a resilient and sustainable workplace in the dynamic and fluid business world.

In the following sections, we first briefly review the literature on the background of SHRM in Mainland China and derive our research questions, we then explore SHRM in the Chinese workplace that has been impacted on by the pandemic as highlighted in our research questions. Next we discuss several future research directions for SHRM in Mainland China in the ‘new normal’. Finally, we conclude with theoretical and practical implications.

## **Literature Review and Research Questions**

The market and social environment in China differ from those in other parts of the world. The development of HRM has witnessed an evolution of the three stages with the development of Chinese economy and society. During the first stage, under the early centrally planned economy, personnel management is characterised by four major characteristics, ‘the

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<sup>1</sup> Considering page limit, we mainly discuss the organisations in Mainland China.

four irons': full employment, centralised labor allocation, lifetime tenure and low labor mobility, which guarantees jobs for life and cradle-to-grave welfare protection (Warner, 1995; Warner, 1996; Zhu & Dowling, 1994; Zhu & Dowling, 2002). For example, recruitment and selection is considered as part of an administrative function to be directed by the central government (Warner, 1996). The purpose of performance appraisal is commonly used for promotion and transfer of cadres. The style of appraisal is the superior-rating-subordinate system, which lacks specified criteria and appraisal techniques used in Western economies (Zhu, De Cieri & Dowling, 1998). At this stage, HRM is not specially connected with organisational performance but largely influenced by government policies and institutions.

During the second stage, following the economic reform and opening up policy that accelerates worldwide co-ordination and competition among Chinese enterprises, HR practices become more decentralised. For example, selection criteria gradually become more performance driven (Zhu & Dowling, 2002). Performance appraisal is more widely used (Easterby-Smith et al., 1995; Zhao, 1994), which includes procedures of self-assessment, group discussion of peers and superior's final comments (Zhu & Dowling, 1998). Accordingly, the industrial compensation and welfare system, as part of the three-system reforms, transforms rapidly from *egalitarian* (meaning state-fixed and non-performance-linked) to *equalitarian* (meaning enterprise-determined, performance-related and incentive-oriented) (e.g. Chen, 1995; Jackson, 1992; Warner, 1995; Zhu, De Cieri & Dowling, 1998). Incentive-based compensation (or pay for performance) is fostered, along with the introduction of performance-based bonuses and the wage-plus-bonus system, which becomes the most frequently adopted pay scheme in Chinese enterprises (Meng, 2000). At this stage, HRM in China become more functional while each HR practice is still operating separately and a HRM system is not formed.

In the third stage which is the new era of the knowledge economy, Chinese enterprises have high demand for managerial talent and knowledge workers and are thus motivated to invest in staffing. Employee training, sometimes termed as human resource development (Benson & Zhu, 2002), serves as a fundamental HR practice to ensure and enhance employees' knowledge, skills and abilities to meet organisational and team goals. Corporate employee training is playing an increasingly important role in corporate management, talent

development and the overall corporate benefits scenario (Zhao, 2008). Also, firms need to actively manage knowledge and expertise to develop innovative products and service through organisational learning (Srinivasan et al., 2007).

During this stage, many countries including China look to adopt SHRM (Liang, Marler & Cui, 2002) to link HRM with organisational performance. SHRM includes activities that are able to improve organisational performance through developing employees to enable them to have the capacity that meets organisational long-term goals and creating the core competence for the organisation. Similarly, for the management of multinational companies (MNCs), utilising effective HR practices adds a superior position in the global competitive environment. Strategic international HRM can then be an effective means to manage the mix of staff who come from different nations in MNCs.

As an important component of SHRM research, the concept of high-performance work systems<sup>2</sup> (HPWSs) gains wider popularity in China at this stage as well. Despite this, diversity remains on what HPWSs stand for in Chinese companies (Liang, Marler & Cui, 2012). Meanwhile, as indicated by Kim et al. (2010), many HR practices in the HPWS originated from the Western context cannot be fully adopted and implemented in China given the varying historical backgrounds. Of course the institutional and cultural differences retain their salience.

Under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the nature and characteristics of SHRM have been debated by scholars (e.g., Caligiuri et al., 2020; Collings et al., 2021). Given the unique research context in Mainland China and its pandemic controls, we are keen to explore the SHRM approach adopted by Chinese organisations during the pandemic. First, as Collings (2021) stated, SHRM research needs to be more contextualized. So, what contextual factors in the Chinese society affect the implementation of HR practices? In particular, under the influence of the pandemic, how can we make sure that HR practices do not take up excessive organisational resources and costs but motivate employees and enhance organisational performance? Thus:

*Research Question 1: What are the contextual factors of SHRM research in Mainland*

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<sup>2</sup> A HPWS is defined as a series of HR practices, such as employee selection, training and development, job security, incentive rewards, and employee participation that contribute to individual and organisational performance (Huselid 1995; Delery and Doty 1996).

*China that affect the relationship between HR practices and performance under the impact of the pandemic?*

Above is the strategic response to the navigation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the pandemic also highlights the need to rethink the balance between the tactical and strategical roles of HR (Collings et al., 2021). Research has highlighted the positive effect of HR's unique operational competencies, such as short-term retrenchment measures, in helping organisations to navigate the earlier 'Great Recession' (Roche & Teague, 2012). So, our second key research question serves as the tactical response to navigate the pandemic:

*Research Question 2: What aspects of HR practices should be paid attention to in order to respond the pandemic in the workplace of Mainland China? In other terms, what are the added and/or modified activities in the HR practices influenced by the pandemic?*

### **Context Factors of SHRM in Mainland China: The Impact of the pandemic**

In examining the relationship between HR practices and outcomes, the contextual factors under which HR practices affect performance in Chinese organisations have been debated. We find that these contextual factors may promote or hamper the influence of HR practices on performance. Under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is of vital importance to study these contextual factors. Of course, the pandemic itself and its associated factors serve as significant contexts as well. We discuss the contextual factors that should be examined during the pandemic in the Chinese context at organisational and individual levels as follows.

#### *Contextual Factors at the Organisational Level*

External factors moderate the relationship between HPWS and outcomes, among which the institutional environment plays an important role. First of all, the pandemic and its associated uncertainties, brings not only challenges but also opportunities. For example, they can promote the relationship between HR practices and organisational learning and strategic flexibility. That is because higher task environment uncertainty augments the relationship between HR practices and organisational learning, although task environment uncertainty is negatively related to organisational learning (Hu *et al.* 2016). In a similar vein, higher environmental uncertainty augments the positive relationship between network-building HR

practices and strategy flexibility (Lin and Zhao 2013). In addition, the pandemic can trigger environmental dynamism, which then enhances the relationship between HPWS and organisational innovation (Sun *et al.* 2018), although the moderation effect only exists at the later stage of company operation.

Governmental coordination and support plays a critical role during the pandemic. Without government intervention, unfair competition would hinder the effects of HR practices on firm performance, while government support would strengthen the positive influence of HR practices on firm performance (Li and Jiang 2011).

It is worthy of our attention that organisational strategy is still an important contextual factor during the pandemic. Innovation strategy is an important weapon for many organisations. During the pandemic, organisations need to take different measures from the past. Yet, innovation strategy is not itself enough, as the strategy has a cancelling-out effect in the relationship between normalised HPWS and firm performance (Zhang & Li, 2009). Only when HPWS is aligned with innovation strategy can the relationship between HPWS and financial performance become positive (Liu *et al.*, 2008). Not only that, the relationship between HPWS and performance is not significant when the HPWS is aligned with a cost reduction strategy (Liu *et al.*, 2008). That is to say, if the organisation blindly pursues cost reduction, but also reduces the cost of HR measures, such as reducing the investment of HR functions, the implementation of HPWS will not improve organisational performance.

This also provides a new idea for management: although the pandemic causes the organisation to be more frugal in operational costs, the investment in human capital cannot be compressed. Not only that, the human capital of employees and managers in the organisation and the HR professionals' competencies need to be developed (Zhao & Sun 2016). Employees' adaptive capability and the intensity of knowledge-sharing from middle management to the top management team augment the relationship between the HRM system and organisational performance and ambidexterity (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Wang & Wang, 2008). HR professionals' political skills need to be enhanced as they contribute to the relationship between SHRM and devolved management (Tang *et al.*, 2015).

A sound organisational climate and culture should be developed during the pandemic. In general, a climate of creativity strengthens the relationship between HPWS and firm

performance (van Esch *et al.* 2018). When the organisation is seeking product innovation, a development culture would be helpful. In particular, a development culture and a flat structure could further strengthen the positive relationship between HR practices and product innovation (Wei *et al.* 2011).

### *Contextual Factors at the Individual Level*

The selection and retention of employees needs to be paid attention to under the impact of the pandemic. Moreover, the retention of females has especially been a challenge in Chinese organisations in recent years. The new childbirth policy in Mainland China in 2021 allows three children. Many working mothers have to sacrifice their career to fulfil their family responsibilities. Not only that, male and female employees have to be dealt with differently in the workplace. Gender moderates the relationship between HR practices and organisational performance. For example, male employees report a more salient relationship between HR practices and organisational outcomes such as organisational commitment and knowledge sharing (Qiao *et al.*, 2009; Tian, 2015). That means special HR practices need to be in place to motivate female employees during the pandemic.

Employees at special working occupations, such as those in the healthcare industry, draw more attention during the pandemic. The well-being of such employees at key positions should be looked after. It is important to recognise these employees' contributions as organisational-based self-esteem augments the positive relationship between HPWS and subjective well-being and the negative relationship between HPWS and workplace burnout in the healthcare sector (Fan *et al.*, 2014). Organisations should establish social exchanges with these employees instead of economic exchanges, as healthcare employees' perception of economic exchanges with employers augment the positive relationship between HPWS and emotional exhaustion, while their perception of social exchanges with employers weaken the positive relationship between HPWS and work engagement in hospitals (Zhang *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, a higher quality physician-nurse relationship can augment the positive relationship between HPWS and the employees' subjective well-being (Fan *et al.* 2014).

Employees' moral identity is another factor that should be developed during the pandemic to build trust and encourage voice behaviour, as it can augment the influence of

employee-oriented HR practices on trust in management, which will affect their voice behaviour further (Hu & Jiang, 2016). Again, a sound climate of HPWS should be sustained, as employees' perceptions of HPWS can augment the influence of the HRM system on employees' work attitudes, e.g., work satisfaction and intention to stay (Li *et al.* 2011).

### **Development of HR Practices in China: The Impact of the Pandemic**

To contextualise the contents of the HRM system in the Chinese context during the pandemic, we particularly examine the key development of the HR practices that should be adopted. We discuss the development of the HR practices at organisational and individual levels respectively as follows.

#### *Development of HR practices at the Organisational level*

In terms of work arrangement, new job competencies for occupations should be developed during the pandemic, e.g., working under uncertainties, and these should be designed in consideration of organisational differences, such as industry, ownership, region and culture (Li *et al.*, 2007; Xiao, 2006). A competency model in Chinese organisations during the pandemic can be developed, regardless of the organisational differences. For example, the contents of job specification and qualification should be re-evaluated in the 'new normal' and a balance of job-specific information and political factors should be sought (Zhu & Dowling, 2002).

Flexible work arrangements can be a direction in job design, as it can be seen as a contributor to employee creativity and organisational innovation (Jiang *et al.*, 2012). This can be achieved through autonomy, feedback, significance, variety and identity.

In terms of recruitment and selection, there has been a shortage of staffing during the pandemic. To respond, network-based recruiting practices should be encouraged, with unique advantages in finding highly competent candidates efficiently and effectively, especially in large and state-owned enterprises (Han & Han, 2009). Another factor that should be encouraged is to allocate the autonomy of staffing to Chinese employers (Wei & Lau, 2008), which would decrease the institutional constraint from the government and enhance firm performance.

In terms of training and development, as perceived vocational education and training system deficiencies trigger collaborative programmes to improve the quality of training (Li & Sheldon, 2010), the emergent need for organisational resilience and health and safety during the pandemic will enable organisations to enhance corporate training and organisational learning in relevant knowledge, skills and abilities. Due to the reducing size of the skilled workforce and overall experiences of recruitment difficulties caused by the pandemic, heavier investment should be made to predict training effectiveness. Internal and external social networks should be relied on as they positively influence HRM capabilities and marketing knowledge creation and sharing (Luo & Hassan, 2009; Sumelius et al., 2008). It should also be noted that the effectiveness of employee training can be manifested in employees' sustainable development performance and the firm's performance in sustainable development (Li et al., 2012), which accord with the key strategic objectives of Chinese organisations during the pandemic.

In terms of performance management, its importance has been recognised in the middle of crisis, e.g., the 2007-09 global financial crisis, as firms adjust performance targets and frequency of performance appraisals during the crisis period (Shen & Netto, 2012). The continuing dominance of Chinese cultural values, such as higher power distance, makes people less likely to conduct appraisal interviews and provide coaching to subordinates compared with in Western countries (Huo & Von Glinow, 1995). To respond, contacts with MNCs in China can help companies implement and maintain appropriate performance appraisal systems (Sumelius, Björkman, & Smale, 2008), which highlights the importance of internal and external social networks. Coincidentally, performance management can also lead to higher globalness of firms, which may further improve organisational performance (Li et al., 2008). Adaptive capability should also be developed during the pandemic, as it facilitates the positive influence of performance management on firm performance (Wang & Wang, 2008).

In terms of compensation, institutional theorists suggest that salient institutional characteristics, such as social and political systems, legislation and the power of trade unions and trade associations, could account for compensation differences in Chinese organisations (Chow, 2004). Thus central and local government policies, e.g., government aid regulations,

have an important say on the compensation level and structure during the pandemic. Not only that, ownership, firm age, location and industrial sectors have significant impact on Chinese managerial employees' compensation level and structure (Ding, Akhtar & Ge, 2006).

#### *Development of HR Practices at the Individual Level*

HR professionals' roles have been highlighted in work arrangements. The Economist (2020) notes that just as the financial crisis in 2007-2009 highlights the role of talented Chief Financial Officers, the COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting the role of Chief Human Resource Officers. Based on the job competency model for HR professionals in China (Zhang et al., 2012), the expert role is the most fundamental quality for HR professionals to possess, which means that HR professionals should be able to provide expert advice and solutions to better aid employees to function well during the pandemic.

In terms of job arrangement, need-supply fit and demand-ability fit are met in employees' jobs, as the two forms of fits mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and task performance (Chi & Pan, 2012). Also, when constructing work arrangements, knowledge and manual workers should be managed differently. Job enrichment has a positive effect on job satisfaction and task performance for knowledge workers, while it negatively affects job outcomes for manual workers (Yan, Peng & Francesco, 2011). The healthcare sector is heavily relied on during the pandemic and its employees may encounter job burnout. In particular, the social context in the workplace is worthy of more attention. Compared with job content, the social context has stronger effect on emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment (Lee & Akhtar, 2011).

In terms of staffing, recruitment and selection, going online is a trend as virtual work is encouraged during the pandemic. Organisational websites can be used as a vital tool for recruitment, so employers need to pay attention to the contents of recruitment websites, e.g., organisational culture, compensation, and job preview and stylistic features, e.g., aesthetics and navigational usability (Chen, Lin & Chen, 2012). Social networks should be considered carefully as a critical tool to attract potential candidates. Strong ties through which companies are introduced to job applicants has positive impact on applicant attraction to firms (Han & Han, 2009), and it is profitable to hire candidates with stakeholder ties (Liu, Keller & Hong,

2015). In addition to social networks, applicants' conscientiousness is an ideal quality among all personality traits for effective performance in the Chinese context (Moy, 2006).

In terms of training and development, it also requires HR professionals to exert strong influence in the design process, similar to work arrangements. HR professionals' current abilities are related to their educational level, years of work experience in HR related jobs and experience in designing training programmes (Lin & Jacobs, 2008). HR professionals in China should make sure that younger employees recognise the effect of training as the youngsters are less likely to report that training provides them with better treatment at work compared with the rest of the workforce (Hutchings et al., 2009). Not only that, knowledge-sharing mechanisms should be fostered to assist training development programs as learning is not a purely individual process, but a social, collaborative and even organisational process (Wang-Cowham, 2011).

In terms of performance management, appraisal criteria should include unique elements during the pandemic, e.g., crisis management capabilities etc. Specifically, political attitudes and understanding can be included in the appraisal criteria for both executives and ordinary employees in Chinese organisations (Chan, 2000; Shen, 2004). In addition, group-oriented appraisal systems are preferred by Chinese managers in order to preserve harmonious relationships (Chow, 2004; Entekin & Chung, 2001), which should be considered during the pandemic. The appraisal process should be refined during the pandemic and transparency and feedback should be strengthened in the virtual environment. More interactions between the appraiser and appraisee is encouraged, as interactions can exert a positive influence on performance ratings (Chen & Fang, 2008). The new performance management systems should be utilised in a proper way during the pandemic, for example, to promote knowledge-sharing behaviors (Liu & Liu, 2011) and overcome the barriers they used to have in fostering employee creativity (Jiang et al., 2012).

In terms of compensation, it is useful to adopt performance related pay in Chinese organisations (Du & Choi, 2010), and it should be distributed fairly regardless of gender and types of work (Lam & Dreher, 2004; Xiu & Gunderson, 2013). In order to retain key staff during the pandemic, it is necessary to maintain the full benefits that are regarded as important, such as mortgage load, housing provision, profit sharing, annual leave and

overtime allowances. The practice of special bonuses or allowances for staff in important positions or places (e.g., expatriates in areas where the pandemic is continuing) deserve more attention, so that the compensation advantages increase their compensation fairness perception and satisfaction (Choi & Chen, 2007; Leung, Lin & Lu, 2014). New forms of compensation policies and practices can be worked out during the pandemic, e.g., team reward and reward to encourage compliance to safety and health requirements. Networks matter in the allocation of compensation as in other HR practices. For example, the interpersonal relationship between coworkers and managers has an important impact on the level of individual wages and bonus allocation (Zhou & Martocchio, 2001). And the power of workers' informal collective bargaining can be exercised to influence the level of individual wages (Li & Edwards, 2008).

Another key trend of compensation level during the pandemic is the group incentive system. Although individual rate plans are claimed to be more effective in determining individual performance (Chiu, Luk & Tang, 2002; Du & Choi, 2010), the trend of department cooperation and teamwork requires employees to work collectively towards departmental or group goals. As such, collective incentive schemes can be adopted to facilitate workers to help their peers and foster peer interactions (Chan, Li & Pierce, 2014), which are critical considerations in designing broader firm strategy during the pandemic.

### **Future Research of SHRM in Mainland China: Looking beyond the pandemic**

In the previous section, we have drawn attention to several key insights from SHRM in China for understanding, interpreting, and addressing COVID-19 related workplace challenges. These insights could serve to guide and support senior managers and HR managers in China to deal with people-related issues in their organisations. However, the pandemic has also highlighted some gaps in our research. We have to refine our workplace in the 'new normal', whereby the pandemic will still last for some time, and there are other unknown crises that might take place in the future. Below we focus especially on suggestions and recommendations for future SHRM scholarship in China in the post-pandemic reality (the 'new normal').

### *Resilience-oriented HPWS in the 'New Normal'*

The effect of organisational resilience on recovery and growth has been supported (Herbane, 2019; Wicker, Filo & Cuskelly, 2013). For an organisation, being strategically resilient can be treated as a complex mindset, which is valuable, rare and imperfectly imitable by competitors. Whether for managers or employees, the ability to show resilience needs to be built through a HPWS and an organisational social climate that can boost resilience, and the reasons stated below.

First, according to the resource-based view (Barney 1991; Wright, Dunford & Snell 2001), the HPWS can unite relevant human resources in the organisation to resist external uncertainties and unstable factors. Aiming at the three characteristics of organisational resilience, namely flexibility, problem-solving, and interpersonal/social relationships, the HPWS will work towards organisational positivity. Second, the HPWS can advance employee resilience at the individual level through the abilities, motivation and opportunities to perform (AMO) mechanism (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg & Kalleberg, 2000). This has been supported by recent studies (e.g., Cooke, Cooper, Bartram, Wang & Mei, 2019). As teamwork is emphasised in the HPWS, it can be inferred that employee resilience can be aggregated to organisational resilience under a sound social climate in the organisation. Third, under special conditions such as adverse events and crises, organisations are more vulnerable than in normal conditions. Organisational imprinting is more likely to take place during such sensitive periods, and the implementation of the HPWS could shape certain characteristics and behaviours, in terms of resilience, for the organisation. The organisational resilience shaped would have a lasting influence on the future development of the organisation (Johnson, 2007).

As such, given the importance of HPWS in determining organisational resilience, we call for future research to examine a set of HPWS that is beneficial for organisational recovery and growth in the 'new normal' in the Chinese context. The research can be built on existing HPWS studies in China (e.g., Cai, 2020; Chang, Jia, Takeuchi & Cai, 2014; Fan et al., 2014) and studies on highly resilient organisations in various occupational contexts (e.g., Bardoel, Pettit, De Cieri & McMillan, 2014; Khan, Rao-Nicholson, Akhtar, Tarba, Ahammad & Vorley, 2019). Except for work practices such as flexible work arrangements, adequate staffing,

extensive training and development, developmental performance management, and competitive compensation and extensive benefits that have been discussed in the previous section, other work practices that exist in the normalised HPWSs and high-involvement work systems (e.g., Batt, 2002) can be included in the Chinese context. These include encouraging employee involvement, teamwork and information sharing. In addition, there are some work practices that should be especially helpful in building resilience in the post-pandemic reality.

Work-life balance management needs to draw more attention as the boundary between work and life is more ambiguous in the virtual environment under working from home schemes. Special practices need to be enacted so that employees are not working over time and their emotions and feelings are considered. Due to the new birth policy in China, the retention of female employees is an issue, so diversity management should be included in the HPWS to provide support to those employees who are under-represented. Organisational support and family-supportive supervisor behaviour is encouraged to alleviate work stress (Duan, Xu & Cai, 2022) and the negative impacts of the pandemic.

Practical assistance should be provided to employees, e.g., adequate safety protection. Organisational and social support should be in place to guide employees' behaviour in times of crisis. Local government needs to safeguard employees' rights and interests. In addition, a crisis management scheme should be included in the work practices so that emergency response plans and key responsible personnel are fixed. All these work practices should be made complementary and mutually reinforcing so that they form a whole system to develop organisational resilience.

Not only that, in uncertain times, the content of the HPWS should accord with the requirements of the time. In the battle with the pandemic, we find out how important responsible national leaders and business managers are. A good employer can make an organisation go further, be better and stronger and achieve more sustainable development (Carvalho & Areal, 2016). At the same time, organisations should not put business interests ahead of the safety and health of employees. The right way is to target employee well-being in the HPWS. This is also evidenced by the fact that employee resilience can be enhanced through the intervention of well-being (Tonkin, Malinen, Näswall & Kuntz, 2018). Therefore, the efficient and humane use of the HPWS can make the organisation more resilient, agile

and inclusive in the battle against various challenges, which is important in both extreme events and everyday managerial activities.

### *Contextualised SHRM in the 'New Normal'*

Future research should also unpack the contextual factors that affect the relationship between HR practices and organisational outcomes in the post-pandemic reality. These contextual factors include institutional environments, government relations, market orientations, firm characteristics, employee demographics and perceptions, among which industry would be worthy of more discussion in future studies to evaluate the cross-country validity of the HPWS in the Chinese context. Organisational tolerance with crises and uncertainties varies among different sectors. To date, researchers have compared the different organisational and HR patterns in several industries, for example, Wei et al. (2008) compare the different organisational cultures and HRM systems in manufacturing and service industries. Su & Wright (2012) divide three types of industries to classify their research findings, namely manufacturing, service and high-tech. Chang, Jia, Takeuchi & Cai (2014) choose the service and technology industries to explore the influence of HPWSs on enterprise creativity in particular. Many other studies focus on one industry, such as pharmaceuticals (Zhang & Li, 2008), healthcare (Zhang, Zhu, Dowling & Bartram, 2013), education (Shen, Benson & Huang, 2014) and so on.

Within each specific industry, its unique features may carry out the HPWS-performance relationship differently, so needs to be discovered in more detail in future research. For instance, the physician-nurse relationship and doctor-patient relationship are unique variables in the healthcare industry and can be looked into deeply to examine the impact of HPWSs on individual- and organisational-level outcomes. Not only that, it is imperative to focus on knowledge-intensive employees in Chinese organisations as their working pattern differs from manual workers and a series of government policies are in place to support knowledge-intensive workers to gain some degree of autonomy in the workplace.

Firm ownership is another contextual factor that deserves more examination in the future. Although attempts are made in China-based SHRM literature to discover whether firm ownership type (e.g., state-owned, foreign-invested, private-owned, and collective-owned)

would better predict the efficiency of the HPWS, no uniformed conclusion has been drawn (Ngo et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2011; Zhang & Morris, 2014). The ratios of return on investment might be a factor to explain the variances among different ownerships. Usually it costs the firm heavily to transfer or utilise an HPWS, considering the high compensation in recruiting senior managers, extensive training and retaining employees for development in the HPWS and it costs even more in the ‘new normal’ as organisations have to additionally invest in health and safety, crises management, etc. There are some side effects of the HPWS as well, e.g., work intensification and job strain, which may link to absenteeism and employee turnover and raise labour costs. Thus, although the HPWS is primarily a Western concept, foreign-invested firms in China may not predict the efficiency of HPWS better than firms in other ownership due to the return on investment considerations.

Thus it would be wise to study the associate factors with firm ownership, such as decision-making, leadership and operation mechanisms to decide the contextual role of firm ownership. These factors alone have also been proved to influence the workplace. For example, operational agility has been shown to be important in helping small- and medium-sized enterprises to deal with turbulent situations, as has being in a state of strategic readiness (Ismail, Poolton & Sharifi, 2011). Transformational leadership has been found to augment the relationship between the HPWS and service recovery performance for volunteers in mega-events (Cai, Han, Peng & Sun, 2016). Future studies can also explore the role of organisational culture, climate and structure in affecting the implementation of HPWSs or other HRM systems.

Firm region is a noteworthy contextual factor in SHRM research. The relationship between HRM system and firm competitiveness has been found to be stronger in Eastern regions than that in central and Western regions in China, and the relationship between HRM system and firm profitability is stronger in Eastern regions than in Central regions (Wang and Wang 2008). In the post-pandemic reality, we may examine whether geographical factors associated with the pandemic and other crises are connected with SHRM outcomes, e.g., will the experience of combating against the pandemic help build resilience in organisations? Are HPWSs more likely to predict better firm performance at regions where the pandemic hit for

several rounds? Also, in an era when the crisis management agenda is enhanced all over China, will the implementation of HPWS become convergent in all regions?

The pandemic has led to increased distancing problems and boundary challenges in the workplace. Many of the distancing challenges have also been the focus on international HRM research, e.g., managing subsidiaries and intra-firm distancing challenges (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Thus the approaches that are used to manage MNCs can have insights on managing domestic firms in the ‘new normal’. Under these circumstances, it is interesting to examine the HPWSs adopted in MNCs and domestic firms in China, e.g., commitment-oriented or control-oriented HPWSs studied by Ma et al. (2016) and whether these HPWSs have similar or different impacts on individual and organisational outcomes in these two kinds of firms in the ‘new normal’.

Employment relations can be treated as a factor of the national business systems that have institutional influence on business operations (Whitley, 1999, 2007). A healthy employment relationship offers important support for the positive influence of the HPWS on organisational positivity. Since the outbreak of the epidemic, China has provided a great deal of labour and social security to employees, especially front-line workers, including sending them to work sites by special buses/cars, ensuring their safety and health is the first priority during work, and providing comprehensive social welfare to alleviate the corporate burden. It is due to the support of labour relations that the role of the HPWS is maximised.

On the contrary, if labour relations could not be guaranteed, the HPWS may become an unnecessary burden on employees and even enhance their emotional exhaustion through its controlling nature. Not only that, improper and inadequate employment relations can be disastrous in the ‘new normal’. In 2021, a rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus in Xi’an City, China prompted the late December lockdown and the very first local case caused was a quarantine hotel worker who contracted the virus on the job. This case highlights the importance of health and safety measures and employment protection (China Labour Bulletin, 2022). We call for future SHRM studies to have intersection between HRM and industrial relations subjects, and focus more on worker-level outcomes, such as wages and job security and quality. For example, a Chinese characteristic variable *hukou*, the household registration system (Li & Frenkel, 2017), can be studied to verify whether it is an important factor

influencing the effectiveness of HRM system on workers' efficiency, equity and voice.

### *Horizontal Fit of SHRM in the 'New Normal'*

Horizontal fit in the SHRM literature refers to the coherent configuration of individual HR practices that support each other (Becker et al., 1997; Delery, 1998) and the arrangement of HRM activities, e.g., HR policies and practices, that work in concert (Delery and Doty, 1996; Boxall, 2012). We encourage future research to explore the horizontal fit of SHRM in the Chinese context under the new circumstances in the post-pandemic reality.

On the one hand, the complementary effect between the HR practices has been examined in SHRM research in the Chinese context. These HR practices are inter-related. For example, job search effect can be a determinant of remuneration packages. There is national variance in such a way that job search effort is more likely to influence starting wages in the US than in China (Werbel, Song & Yan, 2008). Employees' satisfaction with performance appraisal moderates the relationship between pay for performance and affective commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour, in such a way that the positive relationship only exists when employees are satisfied with performance appraisal (Du & Choi, 2010). According to Shen (2004), firms with different staffing approaches adopt different performance appraisal systems with the purpose of rewarding employees and personal development. Training is a factor to promote employees' acceptance of performance appraisal criteria (Taormina & Gao, 2009). Training also facilitates employees to earn salary increases and greater opportunities for promotion, especially for older employees (Hutchings et al., 2009).

Future research should continue to bridge HR practices and present a way through which all HR practices are positively promoting each other, especially at turbulent times when organisations have to cope with challenges caused by unknown crises. For example, job descriptions and performance goals can work together to help employees understand their new responsibilities in the changing environment. Organisational selection should accord with job analysis, performance and even organisational strategies. Firms may use attractive compensation programmes, e.g., flex benefit plans (Lin, Kely & Trenberth, 2011), to increase organisational recruitment capacity in challenging times. Staffing shortages can be supplemented by vocational education, training programmes and recruitment promotion. To

increase the acceptance of new performance management systems among employees, training, mentoring and co-worker support should be enhanced.

On the other hand, the arrangement of HRM activities in China should also work in concert, which means the HR practices should be consistent in future development so that they can be integrated in a HRM system. Contextual factors should be evaluated for all HR practices together. For example, institutional characteristics should be explored further as they could account for the differences in HRM systems. Future research should evaluate questions such as: how would environmental factors, organisational characteristics and institutional norms affect applicant attraction and recruitment practices and outcomes in China? How could the national educational system and the labour supply and demand situation influence training and development programmes and the training-performance relationship? What improvement can be made in the national education investment policy, health policy and human capital measurement to respond the need of corporate training and organisational learning in the ‘new normal’?

The instrumentality of the HR practices is also a direction of future research. The improvement of instrumentality should be made consistently among the HR activities in the ‘new normal’. For example, the effectiveness of recruitment practices and tactics employers offered in China should be examined. In particular, a job applicant’s perspective can be employed to examine the dynamic cognitive process during which the job seeker makes decisions. Appropriate instruments and selection criteria should be identified by employers to select candidates to compete in the changing environment. Questions in developing performance management instrumentality include: what are the subjective factors that influence the performance ratings from the perspective of the appraisee and appraiser? How can organisations deal with the challenges to implement multi-source evaluation systems considering managerial support and the politics of evaluations? How can organisations maintain transparency and encourage feedback in the performance management process? More research should be undertaken on compensation components and structures in China which is less studied than compensation amounts and disparities. The determinants and consequences of compensation components should be evaluated too. All these will collectively contribute to the horizontal fit of SHRM in the Chinese context.

## **Implications for Theory**

This paper responds to the recent call for SHRM responses to COVID-19 (Collings et al., 2021) by examining the Chinese context in particular. The pandemic and other unknown crises have brought a new research arena in Chinese SHRM research.

First, our paper has enriched the SHRM model by examining various contextual factors that would affect the relationship between HR practices and organisational performance, especially during and after the pandemic. This is consistent with the contingency perspective of SHRM research which argues that an organisation's HR practices should accord with other aspects of the organisation, e.g., strategic positions (Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1992). Our paper has highlighted the role of strategic resilience for organisational survival and growth so we discussed a set of HPWS that aims at enhancing organisational resilience. Naturally the resilience-oriented HPWS would make the organisation more resilient, agile and inclusive in both unknown challenges and everyday managerial activities.

Second, findings in our paper have implications for SHRM research in the rest of the world. We can see that many measures have been taken to support enterprises in various economies to recover from the pandemic, whether they are liberal market economies, coordinated market economies or even emerging market economies. The strength and degree of measures may differ somewhat, which is related to the national business systems of different societies (Whitley, 1999, 2007). However, as suggested by Katz & Darbishire (2000), although increased variation is spreading in employment systems within countries through the expansion of various patterns of workplace practices, countries are becoming less distinct in terms of their employment practices. It can then be inferred that the contextual factors and tactic updates in the China-based SHRM research can also be applied to other national contexts in the 'new normal'.

Third, our paper has validated the horizontal fit in SHRM research in the 'new normal'. It was found that the internal consistency of the HRM system was suggested to maximise the tactical role of SHRM. In particular, we examined the complementary effect between the HR practices based on China-based SHRM research and evaluated the future development for the HRM activities to work in concert. By doing so we have evaluated the validity of HRM

practices instead of simply describing organisational phenomena (Dunnette, 1990). By studying the strategic and tactical role of SHRM, we have also bridged macro and micro HRM studies. For example, we encouraged the use of employee perceived HRM practices, and employee-centred SHRM research aimed at employee loyalty and commitment (Cardy et al., 2007).

### **Business Implications**

This paper has brought great value to the practical world in the workplace. First, many detailed HRM recommendations have been made for Chinese organisations (and the world) to combat against the pandemic in the short run and achieve growth in the long run. These include flexible work arrangements, adequate staffing, extensive training and development, developmental performance management, competitive compensation and extensive benefits, encouraging employee involvement, teamwork and information sharing, work-life balance management, practical assistance, a crisis management scheme, and so on.

Second, the strategic and tactical role of HR should be highlighted at the same time. On the one hand, HR should target a cooperative strategy and other associated factors in order to influence the business operations actively. On the other hand, HR professionals should possess the expert role in navigating the ‘new normal’, which is the most fundamental quality for HR managers. Moreover, since a solely operational focus cannot guarantee sustainable outcomes for the organisation, the most effective leaders should balance the tactical role with a strategic influence (Collings et al., 2021), e.g., institutional characteristics should be considered as they could account for the differences between HRM systems.

Third, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for more dialogues between academics and the practice of SHRM in the ‘new normal’. It has been argued for a long time by HR professionals that HRM research could not enhance the practical understanding and application due to the many gaps between academics and practice (Wright & Boswell, 2002). Scholars and professionals have different aspects of interest in SHRM as well (Deadrick & Gibson, 2007). This paper tackles the gaps between academics and practice by ensuring the simplicity of science and complexity of practice. In addition, we opened more dialogues between both parties to realise the unique requirements from each side and accept opinions

from each side.

## **Conclusion**

We use the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to re-examine the current situation of SHRM in the context of Mainland China and focus on the strategic and tactical role of HR. In particular, we examined the contextual factors that affect the HRM-performance relationship during the pandemic and the development of HR practices under the influence of the pandemic. To respond the post-pandemic reality which may include other possible unknown crises, we discuss future research directions in the domain of SHRM in Mainland China, including a high-performance work system that can enhance organisational resilience, contextualised SHRM and horizontal fit of SHRM in the ‘new normal’.

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